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THE 'BACKBONE' OF THE SERENISSIMA: VENICE AND THE TRADE WITH THE HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE IN THE 18TH CENTURY*

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ABSTRACT: *Until quite recently, it was assumed that the German nation in Venice had suffered a substantial reduction in its economic importance during the 18th century. This was regarded as a typical part of the general history of Venice's decline in this century. The causes were attributed – among others – to the inability of the Republic's elites to reform, as they were no longer able to change traditional structures. Here, Venice's trade policy towards the "German nation" in the late 17th century is examined in detail and its effects in the 18th century are elaborated. It can be shown that the Republic was capable of coherent trade policies that departed from long-established patterns. As a result, Venice was able to maintain an important transalpine trade, which thus remained "somewhat the backbone" of the Serenissima, as it had been in the late Middle Ages.*

KEYWORDS: *German Nation in Venice, Fondaco dei Tedeschi, Transit, Transalpine Commerce, Decline of Venice.*

LA "SPINA DORSALE" DELLA SERENISSIMA: VENEZIA E IL COMMERCIO CON IL SACRO ROMANO IMPERO NEL XVIII SECOLO

SOMMARIO: *Fino a poco tempo fa, si riteneva che la nazione alemanna avesse subito un declino economico a Venezia nel XVIII secolo. Si trattava di un aspetto tipico della storia generale della decadenza di Venezia in quest'epoca. Le ragioni sono state attribuite all'incapacità di riforma delle élite della Repubblica, che non erano più in grado di riformare le strutture tradizionali. Qui si esamina in dettaglio la politica commerciale di Venezia nei confronti della "Nazione Alemanna" alla fine del XVII secolo e se ne elaborano gli effetti nel XVIII secolo. Si può dimostrare che la Repubblica era capace di politiche commerciali coerenti che si discostavano da strutture tradizionali. Di conseguenza, Venezia fu in grado di mantenere un importante commercio transalpino, che rimase così "un po' la spina dorsale" della Serenissima, come nel tardo Medioevo.*

PAROLE CHIAVE: *Nazione Alemanna a Venezia, Fondaco dei Tedeschi, Transito, Commercio transalpino, Declino di Venezia.*

1. State of Research

It is difficult to say how much, in the first thirty years of the [seventeenth] century, remained in Venice of the ancient transit trade between the Levant and the German countries, that trade which for centuries had constituted somewhat the backbone of the Rialto economy [the commercial core area of

* Abbreviations: Asv = Archivio di Stato di Venezia; Cs = Cinque Savi alla Mercanzia.

the city of Venice; MR], but which, since the early seventeenth century, had rapidly lost share as the French, English and Dutch had supplanted the Venetians as suppliers of silk and cotton to the German market¹.

With this lengthy statement, Domenico Sella summarised in 1994 the state of research on the German-Venetian trade relations in the decades around 1600. This trade had been before the 17th century “somewhat the backbone” of the Serenissima, but it contracted dramatically in the first decades of the following century. This mere fact cannot be doubted, as there have been numerous confirmations of this fact in recent years². One more addition from the German side of the Alps may be put forward here, to confirm Sella’s summary. Here (in table 1) we see in the city of Augsburg, the most important trading partner of Venice in Germany, an all-time peak in textile output from 1600 to 1610. It fell modestly to 1620, then rapidly to 1630.

Table 1: Annual turnover of Fustians in Augsburg in pieces

Years	Bleached	Dyed and Raw
1595-1599	102,634	378,362
1600-1604	108,715	413,464
1605-1609	106,497	405,984
1610-1614	92,273	347,502
1615-1619	91,616	300,405
1620-1624	82,960	277,513
1625-1629	52,735	238,327
1630-1634	19,355	107,949

Source: R. Hildebrandt, *Die wirtschaftlichen Beziehungen zwischen Oberdeutschland und Venedig um 1600. Konturen eines Gesamtbildes*, in B. Roeck (ed.), *Venedig und Oberdeutschland in der Renaissance: Beziehungen zwischen Kunst und Wirtschaft*, Thorbecke, Sigmaringen, 1993, pp. 277-288, here p. 281.

¹ D. Sella, *L'economia*, in P. Prodi, G. Cozzi (eds.), *Storia di Venezia. Dalle origini alla caduta della Serenissima, Vol. 6: Dal Rinascimento al Barocco*, Treccani, Rome, 1994, pp. 651-711, here p. 702: “Più difficile dire quanto, nel primo trentennio del [diciassettesimo] secolo, restasse a Venezia dell’antico commercio di transito tra il Levante e i paesi tedeschi, quel commercio che per secoli aveva costituito un po’ la spina dorsale dell’economia realtina, ma che, fin dai primi anni del Seicento, aveva rapidamente perso quota via che Francesi, Inglesi e Olandesi avevano soppiantato i Veneziani come fornitori di seta e di cotone al mercato tedesco.”

² See most recently: S. Backmann, *Der Fondaco dei Tedeschi in Venedig: Inklusion und Exklusion oberdeutscher Kaufleute in Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft (1550-1650)*, PhD-Ms., University of Zurich, 2018, Zurich, URL: <https://www.zora.uzh.ch/id/eprint/160593> [25.4.2022], p. 110-112. Very remarkable is Backmann’s summary of a Venetian opinion from the year 1607: «Among the five foreign nations that played an economic role in Venice, the Germans were weaker in importance compared to the Florentines, Genoese, Milanese, and Flemings», *ivi*, p. 133. On the Flemish/Dutch merchants around 1600 see: M. van Gelder, *Trading Places: The Netherlandish Merchants in Early Modern Venice*, Brill, Leiden, 2009, pp. 99-106.

We may presume with substantial likelihood – as did the author who put this data forward – that these numbers reflect to a large degree the German-Italian trade. The years until the end of the Thirty Years War saw no resurgence of the textile exports of Southern Germany. Such a picture of decline is reflected in the income of the toll of the *Fondaco dei Tedeschi* in Venice. Here, the revenues fell from 63,168 ducats in 1602 to just 24,661 ducats in 1640³. This all seems to verify the strong statement that Gerhard Rösch made in 1986: «La guerra di Trent'anni segna il definitivo arresto delle relazioni commerciali tra Germania e Venezia»⁴.

Despite the stance of previous research, we can now state with certainty that the bleak outlook for the future after the mid-17th century was an exaggeration, based on an extrapolation from the first half of the century. Such an interpretation led to the overlooking of a complex resurgence of German-Venetian trade relations that came about in the 1670s and which was to result in stable and at times flourishing trade relations that continued mostly unabated until the end of the 18th century⁵.

One of the greatest problems that hampered any analysis of the German Venetian trading relations from the German side was the lack of contextualisation into two important frameworks⁶. The first one was the overall transalpine trading relationship between Germany and Italy. Within this system, the German-Adriatic trade axis was, certainly until 1800, always the most important one. Yet, its dynamics can only be properly understood if looked at from a comparative perspective that includes what was happening on the other transalpine axes. The

³ M. Fusaro, *Uva passa: Una guerra commerciale tra Venezia e l'Inghilterra (1540-1640)*, Cardo, Venice, 1996, p. 135.

⁴ G. Rösch, *Il Fondaco dei Tedeschi*, in G. Cozzi (ed.), *Venezia e la Germania. Arte, politica, commercio, due civiltà a confronto*, Mondadori, Milan, 1986, pp. 51-72, here p. 72.

⁵ Admittedly, there was one dissenting voice that called for a reevaluation of German-Venetian trade relations in the 18th century: J. Georgelin, *Venise au siècle des Lumières*, Mouton, Paris, 1978, pp. 669-676. However, Georgelin's work did not find a strong reception neither in Germany nor in Italy and, also, he himself admitted that he could not come up with a coherent picture, as the evidence at hand was simply too contradicting. See especially pp. 72-98.

⁶ This holds especially true for two fundamental and oft-cited articles on the German nation: L. Beutin, *La décadence économique de Venise considérée du point de vue nord-européen*, in C. Cipolla (ed.), *Aspetti e cause della decadenza economica veneziana nel secolo XVII*, Istituto per la collaborazione culturale, Venice, 1961, pp. 87-108; H. Kellenbenz, *Le déclin de Venise et les relations économiques de Venise avec les marchés au nord des Alpes*, in *ivi*, pp. 109-183.

second one was the oceanic trade between the North Sea and the Mediterranean along the Iberian and French coasts. This system stood in competition with the transalpine trades but also complemented it. Here, too, the comparative perspective is crucial to understanding the developments of German Venetian trade.

A problem that is particularly evident in Italian research was the underestimation of Venice's potential to act proactively as a political entity with regard to trade with Germany. Especially Italian historians of the second half of the 20th century highlighted the ossified nature of the Venetian political system and its resulting incapacity to properly react to problems in the economic field. With such a conviction they stood among a long tradition of historians from the early 19th century onwards who regarded the Venetian state as having been incapable of fundamental reforms. A dysfunctional intensity and number of complex structures hindered decision-making and resulted in an overall paralysis⁷.

In the following, I shall attempt an overview that gives a coherent picture of the dynamics that characterised German-Venetian trade in the last century and a half of the Republic's existence, with an emphasis on the second half of the 17th century. As the topic is as vast as the time span covered, only a summary overview can be striven for. Highlighted shall be crucial aspects that shaped the further developments profoundly. The article is structured as follows: firstly, the fundamental aspects of the mid-17th century crisis of German-Italian trade shall be carved out. Afterwards follows an analysis of the measures put in place by the affected political entities to cope with the problems of this time span, with a focus on the Republic of Venice. The resulting developments of the 18th century shall be summarily indicated at in the following chapter. A conclusion binds the findings together and asks whether we can still speak of the German trade of Venice in the 18th century as "somewhat the backbone" of the Serenissima – and, if so, how much of this was due to its political activities in the economic sphere.

⁷ Exemplary for many writings in this vein may be the following citation: «La realtà sei-settecentesca della Dominante, esprime più l'ipotesi di uno stato economicamente legato ad aree che configurano una sorta di arcipelago e la cui autonomie si rinforza alla luce stessa di un ceto di governo, incapace a rinnovare se stesso e ad attuare concretamente quei programmi riformistici, che pura animavano il dibattito politico», P. Lanaro, *I mercati nella Repubblica veneta: Economie cittadine e stato territoriale (secoli XV-XVIII)*, Marsilio, Venice, 1999, p. 125.

2. The Crisis of the Mid-17th Century

In one of the most remarkable articles that was ever written on Venetian commercial and economic history of the 17th century, four of the most distinguished historians of their time, Fernand Braudel, Pierre Jeannin, Jean Meuvret, and Ruggiero Romano pooled their expertise together to produce a profound text of over 60 pages length. The article offers some striking contrasts. In the middle parts, it is complex, aware of nuances and trying to problematize substantial gaps in our knowledge. It has a sound sceptical undertone towards any easy conclusions that continues to make it a worthwhile read more than sixty years after its publication. The conclusion however, somewhat disconnected from the main part of the text and unfittingly moralizing, repeats again that the Republic reacted inadequately to the challenges of the century and thus deserved its own downfall⁸.

We shall look at one of the in-depth parts of that article. Regarding the trade with Germany, the authors were capable of putting some remarkable insights forward. They could illustrate with some Dutch sources that the land trade to Venice recovered to some degree in the 1620s as maritime trade to the Mediterranean was hampered by Spanish corsairs. It speaks for the authors that they remained cautious with regard to the developments after 1630 and gave some hints that speak to the continuation of solid trading relations⁹. For the development after the peace of Westphalia, they were able to cite from a specialised piece of secondary German literature and present a complex explanation:

In Leipzig, in 1650-1651, the total transit of cloth was three times greater towards Nuremberg than towards Hamburg; in 1678, Leipzig sent cloth worth 130,000 taler to Hamburg, and only 34,600 taler to Nuremberg, Augsburg and Frankfurt combined. Comparing this data, could we not, in the absence of a real series, see the sign of a new direction in the interior of Germany? A slow change, which in the third quarter of the century gave the advantage to west-east lines over north-south lines.¹⁰

⁸ F. Braudel, P. Jeannin, J. Meuvret, R. Ruggiero, *Le déclin de Venise au XVII^e siècle* in C. Cipolla (ed.), *Aspetti e cause della decadenza economica veneziana nel secolo XVII*, Istituto per la collaborazione culturale, Venice, 1961, pp. 23-86.

⁹ Such thoughts can be fleshed out more substantially nowadays. Recently, another work on entrepreneurs from Upper Germany in the 17th and 18th centuries has put forward some examples of German traders who even settled in Germany in the 1630s and 40s due to the ongoing situation of warfare north of the Alps: G. Seibold, *Wirtschaftlicher Erfolg in Zeiten des politischen Niedergangs. Augsburger und Nürnberger Unternehmer in den Jahren zwischen 1648 und 1806*, Wißner, Augsburg, 2014, pp. 73-74.

¹⁰ F. Braudel, P. Jeannin, J. Meuvret, R. Ruggiero, *Le déclin de Venise*, cit., p. 76: "À Leipzig, en 1650-1651, le transit total des toiles est trois fois plus important vers Nuremberg que vers Hambourg; en 1678, Leipzig expédie pour 130,000 taler à

The authors gave as an explanation the attraction of the markets around the North Sea, especially Amsterdam and London. In further pages, they also emphasised the increasing industrial potential of France, which was more and more able to produce the luxury textiles for Germany that had hitherto been furnished by Venice.

It seems, however, as if the empirical evidence is right in this case, but that the interpretation a bit lopsided. The authors concentrated on the export markets of the North Sea and regarded these as more absorptive than Venice and the Mediterranean. German textile production certainly found rapidly expanding markets in the North Sea, as this was the entry also to the henceforth continuously growing colonial and African markets, with their insatiable demand for Saxon and Silesian linen¹¹. However, this does not fully explain the shrinking of German trade with Italy. These trading relations had traditionally been characterised much more by a transit structure than by a bilateral exchange. The Germans had bought in Venice goods from the Levant and their products had been sold into the wider Mediterranean¹². Such a structure should have been more independent from the developments in Northern Europe. The specific problem had been succinctly identified by the Venetian authorities already in 1608, when they wrote:

The loss of customs revenue at the Fondaco dei Tedeschi is assumed to derive from the navigation undertaken by the Flemish, English and French, because they go with their own vessels to the Levant to buy silk, spices, cotton and other goods and then take them to Marseille, Flanders and England from where they are then taken to the fairs of Frankfurt and other places in Germany, where the merchants have a price advantage of twelve and more per cent when buying at these fairs in comparison of what they would get if they came to Venice as they did before.¹³

Hambourg, pour 34,600 taler seulement à Nuremberg, Augsbourg et Francfort réunies. Dans le rapprochement de ces données, à défaut de véritable série, ne pourrait-on voir le signe d'un changement d'orientation à l'intérieur de l'Allemagne? Changement lent, qui donne l'avantage, au cours du troisième quart du siècle seulement, aux lignes ouest-est sur les lignes nord-sud."

¹¹ On this vast topic see just the recent contribution of: K. Weber, A. Steffen, *Spinning and Weaving for the Slave Trade: Proto-industry in Eighteenth-Century Silesia*, in F. Brahm, E. Rosenhaft (eds.), *Slavery Hinterland: Transatlantic Slavery and Continental Europe, 1680-1850*, Boydell & Brewer, Woodbridge, 2016, pp. 87-107.

¹² S. Backmann, *Der Fondaco dei Tedeschi* cit., p. 106-110.

¹³ Domenico Sella, *Commerci e industrie a Venezia nel secolo XVII*, Cini, Venice, 1961, p. 26: "La Perdita del Datio del Fonteco dei Todeschi si stima derivi dalla navigazione presa da fiamenghi, inglesi e francesi, perché vanno con li proprij loro vascelli in Levante a comprar sedde, speciarie, gottoni et altre merci et quelle poi conducono a Marsilia, Fiandra et Inghilterra di dove sono poi condotte nelle fiere di Franco Forte et altri

Essentially the problem was that the Venetians, and especially the German merchants of Venice, were losing their roles as intermediaries between the Mediterranean and the central European markets due to the cheapness of sea transportation. This problem may have even been 'covered' to some degree by the Thirty Years War, as this had caused a substantial increase in the costs of maritime transportation. Some evidence from Cologne's long distance trade to Italy in these years speaks for this¹⁴.

When we look at the most important Alpine passes that were used for transit trade between Germany and Italy, we see on all four of them (from West to East: the Gotthard, the Splügen, the Brenner and the Tauern) a simultaneous development after 1648. We may present the example of the Gotthard: after the peace treaty, traffic went rapidly up, from 905.5 saum (1 saum = ca. 80 kg) in 1648 to 4,857.5 saum in 1653. Then it fell again to 1,240.5 saum in 1655¹⁵. The same pattern can be seen in all other transit passes, except for the Splügen, to which we shall come below¹⁶.

The simultaneity of this rapid succession of rise and fall shows us that trade relations between Germany and Italy over all passes were subject to the same basic conditions. With the fall of maritime transportation costs after the conclusion of peace agreements, the sea routes via Hamburg and Amsterdam to the Mediterranean could play out their structural advantage over land-based exchange between Germany and Italy. The fact that until 1653 we see a strong resurgence of trade on the Alpine passes proves that the damages of the Thirty Years War were presumably not structural, with regard to the German-Italian exchange over land. This was threatened far more by the cheapness of maritime transportation after the disappearance of the Spanish corsair threat.

lochi d'Alemagna, dove li mercanti con loro vantaggio de dodici et più per cento si vanno a servire in esse fiere, che non farebbero se venissero a Venetia sì come facevano di prima."

¹⁴ S. Gramulla, *Handelsbeziehungen Kölner Kaufleute zwischen 1500 und 1650*, Böhlau, Cologne, 1972, p. 277.

¹⁵ F. Glauser, *Der Gotthardtransit von 1500 bis 1660: seine Stellung im Alpen transit*, «Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte», A. 29 (1979), p. 49.

¹⁶ C. Redolfi Bragagna, *Die Finanzgebarung des Bozner Merkantilmagistrates 1633/35-1850*, PhD-Ms., University of Innsbruck, Innsbruck 1988, pp. 85-86; W. Bodmer, *Ursachen der Veränderungen des Verkehrsvolumens auf der Wasserstrasse Walenstadt-Zürich von 1600 bis 1800*, «Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte», A. 27, n. 1/2 (1977), p. 58; H. Hassinger, *Geschichte des Zollwesens, Handels und Verkehrs in den östlichen Alpenländern vom Spätmittelalter bis in die zweite Hälfte des 18. Jahrhunderts*, Steiner, Stuttgart, 1987, p. 325.

One more aspect gives us an even sharper picture of the fundamental problem for all German long-distance merchants at the time. If we compare shipping from Hamburg to the Mediterranean with that of its Dutch competitors after the Thirty Years war, we can specify more clearly who specifically caused the principal problem for German-Italian trading relations. While Hamburg sent out 4 ships to the Mediterranean in 1647, this grew to 20 in 1648, only to shrink again to 7 in 1649 and 2 in 1650¹⁷. This extremely short-lived boom of just one year stands in stark contrast to the development of Dutch shipping into the Mediterranean. Looking at ship arrivals in Livorno, we see 79 Dutch ships arriving in the years from 1642-1646, while from 1647 to 1651, the number rose to 217¹⁸. When liberated from the strains of warfare, the Dutch were obviously able to simultaneously push back the German competitors on the sea and on the land routes via their shipping alone.

In the case of Hamburg, it seems likely that its lack of an industrial hinterland comparable to that of the Dutch ports and the absence of substantial German merchant colonies in the Mediterranean were the root causes of its inability to maintain substantial shipping traffic towards Italy when faced with the full brunt of Dutch competition¹⁹. This, however, was not the case for the actors from Upper Germany who traded with the Mediterranean over the transalpine routes. The competition between them and the Dutch merchants active in the Mediterranean trades was, due to the very different transportation media and the geographical distance and generally different circumstances, less direct than that between Hamburg and Dutch or English shipping. The potential for a resurgence of transalpine traffic was thus certainly higher than was the potential for Hamburg to regain substantial trade via shipping into the Mediterranean.

However, the routes over the Alps were simply too expensive in an age where sailing ships under the Dutch flag could easily connect very faraway places, especially in European waters, and from the Levant to Archangelsk. In the second half of the 16th century, the Habsburgs had significantly increased the tolls along the Alpine passes, and we may presume that this structure remained substantially unchanged

¹⁷ M. Reißmann, *Die Hamburgische Kaufmannschaft des 17. Jahrhunderts in sozialgeschichtlicher Sicht*, Christians, Hamburg, 1975, p. 371.

¹⁸ R. Ghezzi, *Livorno e l'Atlantico: I commerci olandesi nel Mediterraneo del Seicento*, Cacucci, Bari, 2011, p. 42.

¹⁹ M. Ressel, *The Global Presence of Merchants from the German Empire: Linking the Continental Overland and Seaborne Trade*, in H. Knortz, M. Schulte Beerbühl (eds.), *Migrationsforschung – interdisziplinär und diskursiv. Internationale Forschungserträge zu Migration in Wirtschaft, Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, V&R Unipress, Göttingen, 2021, pp. 239-270, here pp. 253-254.

until and during the Thirty Years War, when the monarchy was under strong pressure to finance the war effort²⁰.

This necessarily had to be a great problem for Venice and its German merchant colony. The Venetians were engulfed in an intense war with the Ottoman Empire from 1645 to 1669 and thus needed a strong trading position more than ever. The war did in fact even help the Dutch, as they were now conducting the shipping services between Venice and the Ottoman Empire²¹. All the more it was important to strengthen the role of the city as a place for permanent turnover between the Mediterranean and Central Europe. The Venetian politicians of the age were up to the task, as shall be shown in the following.

3. Getting Back on Track in the Second Half of the 17th Century

The Venetians and the authorities in Tyrol were very much aware of the loss of transit in the early 1650s. They also saw that the traffic along the Splügen in Grisons was doing rather well in the 1650s, despite the fact that the Spanish-governed Duchy of Milan was still embroiled in warfare with France and its allies. It seems as if the transalpine traffic of the Duchy of Milan was only hampered for one year, 1655, when Pavia was besieged²². By contrast, traffic along the Tyrolian passes was not satisfactory, as the Splügen was the only pass that retained a non-shrinking traffic in the 1650s²³. Under these circumstances, the Austrian government in Innsbruck approached the Republic of Venice in 1656 to enter into negotiations to facilitate trade along the Tyrolean routes. The goal was to attract merchants back to the Tyrolean routes and away from the *Stato di Milano*, which, according to the Austrians, was benefiting «mirabilmente» from the high tolls and charges between Augsburg and Venice²⁴. After some rather quick negotiations, it was agreed to reduce the transit duties by ¼, both in

²⁰ On the toll increases of the mid-16th century see: O. Stolz, *Die Verkehrsverbindungen des oberen Rhein- und Donaugebietes um die Mitte des 16. Jahrhunderts*, «Zeitschrift für die Geschichte des Oberrheins», A. 38 (1923), pp. 60-88; G. Bückling, *Die Bozener Märkte bis zum Dreissigjährigen Kriege*, Leipzig 1907, pp. 47-55.

²¹ J. Georgelin, *Venise cit.*, p. 66.

²² A. Segarizzi, *Per il dazio di Rovereto*, «Tridentum», A. 7 (1904), p. 122. Segarizzi has presumably transcribed the wrong year as he writes 1653 instead of 1655, when the siege actually took place.

²³ It may be that the Duchy of Milan needed many materials for the war effort and thus, the traffic was even helped by the continuation of the conflict between Spain and France after 1648. On the traffic via Grisons in the 1650s, see: S. Buč, *Beiträge zur Verkehrsgeschichte Graubündens: Der Churer Gütertransit im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert*, Eggerling, Chur, 1918, p. 73.

²⁴ Asv, Cs, II Ser., 73, 20. Dezember 1656.

Verona and in Rovereto. These changes came into force in March 1657. The Habsburgs also managed to enter into a favourable customs treaty with the Electorate of Bavaria a year later, which was especially aimed at facilitating the trade between Germany and Venice²⁵.

The success was soon visible in a slight increase in the customs revenues of Tyrol, whose rates had not changed – only in Rovereto had the Austrians reduced their charges²⁶. Thus, the Venetian and Tyrolean politicians had shown themselves capable of identifying a problem and solving it within a relatively short time span. Moreover, the Venetian decision-making structures had proven to be up to the challenge. The entire affair had been handled by the *Cinque Savi alla Mercanzia*, an influential board charged with economic politics²⁷. It seems that Verona, a relatively important city within the Republic of Venice with prerogatives for its tolls, was not asked for its opinion, let alone given a say in this matter of Veronese toll charges.

However, the states along the other alpine pass systems soon reacted towards the reinvigorated traffic along Tyrol. In the late 1650s, the city of Chur granted very substantial toll reductions to merchants from Zurich and Lindau. This did not result in growth of transalpine trade via the Splügen, but it did ensure a continuing competitiveness of traffic over this pass²⁸. Furthermore, maritime trade between the North Sea and the Mediterranean grew significantly in the late 1650s. While England had sent only 150 ships to Livorno between 1652 and 1656 and the Dutch Republic 125, the numbers were 259 English ships and 203 Dutch ships between 1657 and 1661²⁹. Even after significant cost reductions, trade over the Alps was still too expensive.

Tyrol fell to the Viennese line of the house of Habsburg in 1665. Soon after the takeover, some merchants and officials of Tyrol approached Vienna to help them stimulate trade between Augsburg and Venice. According to the Tyrolians, the traffic was still abandoning Tyrol to the benefit of the Gotthard and Grison passes. They asked the emperor as nominal head of Frankfurt and Augsburg as well as other territories in between, and especially as direct ruler of Tyrol, to ensure that the traffic from Naples, Sicily, Genoa, Florence, Bologna, and

²⁵ M. Ressel, *Protestantische Händlernetze im langen 18. Jahrhundert. Die deutschen Kaufmannsgruppierungen und ihre Korporationen in Venedig und Livorno von 1648 bis 1806*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 2021, pp. 110-111.

²⁶ C. Redolfi Bragagna, *Die Finanzgebarung* cit., pp. 66-67.

²⁷ On this magistracy see still: M. Borgherini-Scarabellin, *Il Magistrato dei Cinque Savi alla Mercanzia dalla istituzione alla caduta della Repubblica: Studi storico su documenti d'archivio*, Deputazione di storia patria, Venice, 1925.

²⁸ M. Ressel, *Protestantische Händlernetze* cit., pp. 112-114.

²⁹ R. Ghezzi, *Livorno e l'Atlantico* cit., p. 42.

Romagna would flow to Amsterdam and the Low Countries and vice versa, like it had in former times via Venice and Tyrol. The current situation with too much traffic on the other routes was to the great disadvantage of the Bolzano fairs. In spring 1666, the emperor invited delegates from the imperial cities of Frankfurt and Augsburg and the Republic of Venice to a conference to be held in Bolzano in June, to decide on measures to promote traffic through Tyrol. The conference, which was attended by authorised delegates from Augsburg, Venice, Verona, Upper Austria, and Bolzano explicitly noted the shift of long-distance trade from the Netherlands to Italy to the Swiss and Grison passes. A comprehensive package of measures taking action against this was decided on. This included a kind of advertising campaign in all trading centres in Italy and Germany for the Tyrolean routes. The participants promised each other to improve the roads, to revise the *Rodordnung* (the system of transportation over the Alps), to streamline the formal procedures of customs clearances, to remedy grievances, and to significantly reduce customs duties for a range of products, especially raw silk, glassware, cotton, and spices. Transit duties for wool and silk were again reduced by $\frac{1}{4}$ in Rovereto and Verona, as in 1656. The Venetian side was somewhat cautious here and demanded longer renegotiations in Venice. These took place in 1667. The reason for Venice's reluctance was that the tariff reductions of 1656 had allegedly not been sufficiently respected by the Austrians. Therefore, significant guarantees were now demanded. Only when the Austrian side gave these did Venice adopt the agreement³⁰.

The Venetians obviously knew where their interests lay and how to defend them during these long and protracted negotiations. This time, the negotiations had not simply been a bilateral affair, but had instead involved many different actors, and even the faraway city of Frankfurt had charged the Augsburg delegate with the defence of its interests. Within this complex web of actors, the Venetian side had also involved a delegate from Verona this time. The only reason the negotiations had become more difficult than in the 1650s, though, was the hard negotiation position of the Venetian side, which had some unfortunate experiences with the treaty of 1656 due to partial non-compliance on the Tyrolian side.

This was not yet enough. North-South traffic still preferred the sea routes, and the Venetian side consequently had to witness a weakening

³⁰ J. Hartung, *Eine Internationale Konferenz zur Wiederbelebung des italienisch-niederländischen Transitverkehrs durch Süddeutschland und Tyrol*, «Zeitschrift für Social- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte», A. 4 (1896), p. 224-236; M. Ressel, *Protestantische Händlernetze* cit., pp. 114-116.

of its cherished community of German merchants in the *Fondaco dei Tedeschi*. In a print from 1672, published in Cologne, it was explicitly stated with regard to its toll revenues that «hoggi trovandosi molto decaduti li negotij, il scutto non è molto»³¹. The German merchants in Venice, however, had good contacts within the government and could recommend themselves as the best partners for the Republic to reanimate the trade via the Alps.

This group, the *Nazione Alemana* was a very old corporation in Venice, the existence of which dated back at least to the first half of the 13th century; maybe even further³². Roughly speaking, this group had received in the Middle Ages the “privilege” that the Venetians did not trade in Germany themselves, but that, in exchange for this, the German merchants in Venice were prohibited to engage in any maritime trade. This was formally achieved via the explicit limitation of any trade to and from Germany to the *Fondaco*, which also served as a customs house. Only the Germans and some other subjects from the Emperor, most notably his subjects from Tyrol and the Trentino – mostly called *Grisolotti* – could trade here³³. From the early 16th century onwards, the privileges of the Germans had been extended, as the Portuguese had delivered more and more spices to the European market and had thus undermined a pillar of Venetian commercial standing within Europe. The privileges accumulated over the following one and a half centuries can be summed up for the mid-17th century as follows:

1. The treatment in customs procedures was favourable; the users could pay later and were less controlled
2. They had storage and rooms in the *Fondaco dei Tedeschi* at cheap prices
3. They were exempted from specific taxes
4. They got a discount of 10 % for the tolls they had to pay for imported as well as exported goods

Furthermore, the old prohibition to engage in maritime trade was lifted gradually. In 1582, the Germans acquired permission to conduct maritime trade, with the exception of within the Levant. This limitation

³¹ O.V., *Relazione della città e repubblica Venetia [...]*, Appresso Pietro del Martello, Cologne 1672.

³² On the origins of this corporation, see: K.-E. Lupprian, *Il Fondaco dei Tedeschi e la sua funzione di controllo del commercio tedesco a Venezia*, Centro Tedesco di Studi Veneziani, Venice, 1978.

³³ On the German merchants in Venice and their privileges as well as many other aspects, see still: H. Simonsfeld, *Der Fondaco dei Tedeschi in Venedig und die deutsch-venetianischen Handelsbeziehungen*, Vol. 2, Cotta, Stuttgart, 1887. On the *Grisolotti* in particular, see: p. 137.

was lifted temporarily in 1646 due to the war with the Ottoman Empire. In 1671, two years after the end of the Candian War, this was completely lifted, presumably as the old prohibition was no longer tenable after a quarter century of legal trade³⁴. Important too was an interpretation of "Germans", who could gain access to this nation in Venice with all its privileges that strongly helped the merchants of the Southern German imperial cities. With the help of their home cities and towns, these merchants – practically all Lutheran Protestants – were able to exclude Reformed Swiss and Lutheran North German merchants from the privileges of the *Fondaco* around 1650/60 and to keep the privileges of Italian-speaking imperial subjects from the Trentino a bit less nuanced than they were for themselves³⁵.

Thus, the German nation in Venice, in theory, had a solid standing around 1670. Its privileges were substantial and against these stood only the obligation that their trading operations had to take place in the capital and not in the *Terraferma*. Furthermore, they could only sell their products via official brokers, called *sensali*. With these obligations for the Germans, the Venetian state saw its core wishes heeded. Trade was centred on the *Dominante* and remained there under supervision of the state³⁶. Smuggling was for the German guests unattractive, as these had too much to lose in such a privileged position³⁷.

Despite such a convenient system of mutual benefit, the situation of the German nation in the third quarter of the 17th century was critical. The principal reason for this was the generally difficult circumstances for long-distance trade along the alpine routes. The German merchants in Venice, as a group that was principally earning its wealth via long distance trade towards Central Europe, were particularly exposed to the competition with Dutch and English shipping to and from the Mediterranean. There were some further complications as well. Despite being principally privileged in the customs system, they were at a disadvantage for some products. The value of mirrors,

³⁴ From this time onwards at the latest, the Venetians also received formal permission to trade in Germany as well. See: M. Ressel, *Protestantische Händlernetze* cit., p. 241.

³⁵ On the privileges of the Germans in Venice in detail: *ibidem*, pp. 243-280.

³⁶ On the *sensali* in regard to the German nation in Venice, see: J.F. LeBret, *Staatsgeschichte der Republik Venedig [...]*, Vol. 1, Hartknoch, Leipzig, Riga 1769, pp. 626-627; H. Simonsfeld, *Der Fondaco*, pp. 23-28.

³⁷ This does not contradict the fact of heavy smuggling in Venice, which is sufficiently confirmed by attentive contemporary witnesses: B. Hendrich, *Ein Wirtschaftsbild Genuas-Venedigs-Livornos um die Mitte des 18. Jahrhunderts nach den Reiseschilderungen des Grafen Karl von Zinzendorf* [unpublished PhD-Ms., Univ. Vienna], Vienna, 1964, 125. However, for the German guests in Venice, smuggling was very difficult as they could only enjoy their substantial privileges if the trade went via the *Fondaco* and was there constantly controlled by the *Visdomini del Fontego*. As the privileges were very attractive, smuggling made for the Germans economically hardly any sense.

for example, was set very high in the customs declarations for exportation and the fee to be paid was calculated on this basis. The corporation of mirror-makers, the *Arte degli Specchieri*, was opposed to any reduction in this price. Also, the value of cotton and drugs was too high in the customs lists for their exportation, presumably since the Republic did not want these products to be exported before having undergone several more production steps towards finished products. Problematically, the values of these three products had been reduced in the ordinary customs station, the *Uscita*, in 1662, in the wake of the first Venetian free-port declaration. The result was a disadvantage for the Germans against some Italian speaking *Grisolotti*, who usually used the *Fondaco* as privileged merchants for their exports, but for these specific products used the *Uscita*³⁸.

It was the Republic which approached its German guests. In 1667, most likely in connection to the successful negotiations with Tyrol, the Republic contacted the German nation in Venice and requested their proposals for a fundamental reform of the customs system. In the following years, complex negotiations were undertaken by the two sides. The Venetian goal was a general improvement of the trade volume with Germany. The Germans in Venice emphasised in their answers the unfair competition with the *Grisolotti*, who allegedly abused the privileges of the *Fondaco* with their option of altering it with the other toll stations.

We see thus the different goals of the Republic and the Germans. For the Republic, a possible solution to the problems could have been an overall reduction in tolls to Germany to the benefit of all traders involved. For the German nation in Venice, this would have been at best a half-success. Their goal was the weakening of the *Grisolotti* as competitors. Thus, they had to convince the Venetian government that rescinding the privileges from the *Grisolotti* would strengthen the trade of the Republic with Germany. The Republic was thus given a choice between the two groups. It may have been more inclined towards the wishes of the Germans in Venice as this also weakened the direct subjects of the Habsburgers and their ally, the Bishop of Trent, who, despite the accord of 1666/7, were also always political-economical competitors of the Serenissima.

In some complex manoeuvres in subsequent years, which cannot be presented here in full detail, the Germans were able to convince the Venetian government of their position. The Venetian state decreed in a law from July 15, 1671, that thenceforth the *Fondaco dei Tedeschi*

³⁸ Until the next footnote, all the following is based on: M. Ressel, *Protestantische Händlernetze* cit., pp. 279-298.

was to be used exclusively for any trade with Germany, regardless of the nationality of the trader. Thus, the old prohibition for Venetians to trade with Germany was formally abolished. As this only legalised a situation that had by then already existed *de facto* for a long time, this was hardly a problem for the Germans. Important to them was another clause of the decree. Only they were allowed to enjoy the privileges of the *Fondaco*, while all other users had to trade without the toll reductions and other advantages.

Strong protests from the Emperor, also Duke of Tyrol, and the Bishop of Trento followed. Both saw their subjects strongly discriminated against as they had hitherto traded with the privileges via the *Fondaco*. The Republic of Venice however withstood the protests of its neighbours. It had deliberately opted for strengthening the German nation in Venice. As the *Grisolotti* were traditionally active in the local trade, the Venetian authorities presumably saw no great problem in discriminating against these. The local trades of the Republic were not in a state of crisis but the long-distance trade over the Alps in fact were, thus the latter were strengthened at the expense of the former.

Emboldened by this success, the German nation began a strong campaign to enlarge its privileges from 1671 to 1675. Again, we cannot highlight in detail the following procedures, which saw complex negotiations and interactions over the next four years between the host state and its German guest. Here, we can note the giving of some substantial bribes from the German nation to key actors on the Venetian side. It would nevertheless be strongly exaggerated to see the favourable result for the German nation as having been achieved by corruption on the Venetian side. The Venetian state was finally convinced to give substantial help to its German merchant guests as a deliberate action to strengthen its long-distance trade via the Alps.

The following reforms were far-reaching. On 31 August 1675, the Germans obtained a massive enlargement of their privileges.

1. The duty rate on goods exported via the *Fondaco* was reduced by 20 % instead of the hitherto usual 10 %.
2. For imported goods, 2 % of the assessed value was deducted from the actual duty to be paid. In fact, this often meant a discount of well over 20 %.
3. Transit was approved for four years, so goods in transit only paid duty on entry.
4. The customs duty could be paid within four months of the declaration of the goods; all non-privileged users of the *Fondaco* had to pay the duty directly upon declaration of the goods.

The Venetian side had, however, also looked closely at its advantage when giving these strong privileges. Henceforth, only German residents as independent merchants in Venice were to enjoy them. Hitherto, so-called *Faktoren*, meaning employees of companies that had their headquarters in Germany had also benefited from the privileges of the German nation in Venice. Now the *Faktoren* lost access to the German nation in Venice. The Venetians thus gave a strong incentive for a “residentialisation” of Germans, which in fact soon happened in substantial numbers.

Over the next seven years, the Venetian state continued the enlargement of the privileges under further lobbying from the German nation in Venice, coupled with some external pressure. In 1672, the city of Lindau and the Austrian authorities in Vorarlberg had concluded the *Feldkircher Abred*, a kind of informal treaty, which eased the traffic from Lindau in the direction of the Splügen pass³⁹. And in 1676, Livorno formally declared itself a free-port, which resulted in a staggering growth of attractiveness⁴⁰. Thus, the Tyrolian routes remained under pressure from competitors over land (Splügen route) as well as over sea (Livorno). Finally, in 1682, the Germans were allowed to use the *Fondaco*, with its privileges for all trades with every part of Europe except for the imports from the seaside. Here, the Germans always had to use the *Stallaggio* custom, just like every other merchant of the city. For their exports over sea, they could use the privileged *Fondaco*⁴¹.

4. Glimpses into the 18th century

In a time span of 26 years, from 1656 to 1682, the Republic of Venice had substantially changed its toll system in the direction going over the Alps as well as the *Fondaco dei Tedeschi* and the German nation that resided inside it. The reforms had been far-reaching and profound; they had not just been simple toll reductions. They were connected to complex diplomatic negotiations with several partners along the transalpine routes. Within Venice, they had been fine-tuned, singling out the German nation and granting many of their wishes but at the same time moulding them to the interest of the Republic. The reforms with regard to the German nation had been made against a

³⁹ Stadtarchiv Lindau, A III, 100,2, Concept Schreibens an die geheimbe Rãth zu Innsprugg de dato 8. Juny 1696.

⁴⁰ C. Tazzara, *The free port of Livorno and the transformation of the Mediterranean world, 1574-1790*, OUP, Oxford, 2017, pp. 137-165.

⁴¹ M. Ressel, *Protestantische Hãndlernetze* cit., pp. 298-301.

hostile environment, as they had been met with substantial opposition within the state and from the immediate neighbours in the north, namely the county of Tyrol and the bishopric of Trent⁴².

The need for such reforms had been intense. Transalpine long-distance trade and the one group that was mostly responsible for it, the German nation in Venice, had been in some peril from the early 17th century onwards. The Thirty Years War had been problematic due to its destructiveness, and afterwards transalpine trade could only recover for a short time span, as Dutch and English shipping in the Mediterranean increased from the mid-century onwards to a degree hitherto unimaginable.

We may even presume that the reform package of the Republic of Venice would not have sufficed to turn the tides. However, geopolitical factors came to its aid. From 1688 to 1713, an intense corsair war was fought, interrupted for just four years, from 1697 to 1701. This pushed again a substantial amount of North-South trade on the transalpine routes. In these years we see also improvements of the logistics between the Netherlands and Italy, effectuated by several haulers in Germany. Trade over land was experiencing a structural resurgence as compared with trade over the oceans. This held especially true for valuable textile products⁴³.

Nevertheless, we seemingly see after the war a substantial decline in trade relations. As the corsair wars in the 18th century were rather mitigated by the activities of neutral shipping, especially Dutch or Scandinavian, trade over the Alps did not again receive such a boost as it did between 1688 and 1713 until the Revolutionary Wars. The result was apparently clear if we follow the customs revenues of the *Fondaco* along the 18th century (Diagram 1).

The overall impression is one of constant decline. The sudden rise in imports in 1751 can be explained by a toll reform that increased many Venetian tolls. This does not, then, reflect rising trade. The same holds true for rapidly sinking export values in 1736: these reflect a reduction in this toll and not a sudden drop in activity. Excluding these two external factors, we see a constantly decreasing yield. Thus, it may seem legitimate to conclude, like other authors who saw these figures did, that German-Venetian trading relations were shrinking during the 18th century, to eventually become marginal at its end⁴⁴.

⁴² On the opposition of the Venetian magistracy of the *Regolatori sopra li dazi*, not touched on here, see: *ibidem*, pp. 285-286, 298-301, 335-367.

⁴³ On these aspects see in detail: *ibidem*, pp. 121-129.

⁴⁴ One author who came to such a conclusion was: M. Costantini, *Commercio e marina*, in P. del Negro, P. Preto (eds.), *Storia di Venezia. Dalle origini alla caduta della Serenissima: L'ultima fase della Serenissima*, Treccani, Rome, pp. 555-612.

Diagram 1: Customs revenues of the *Fondaco dei Tedeschi* 1710-1770 in ducats



Source: G. Campos, *Il commercio esterno veneziano della seconda metà del '700 secondo le statistiche ufficiali*, «Archivio Veneto», A. 19 (1936), pp. 145-183.

However, this picture is in some regards misleading. A Venetian official, Marco Pianeti, wrote on June 3, 1730 to the *Cinque Savi alla Mercanzia* his opinion on why the revenues were falling:

The table of Grisloti, established by the wisdom of this Most Excellent Magistrate, has contributed to the growth of the customs revenues of the import tolls; it was ordered to be observed by the resolution from October, 2nd 1728, before which time, not safeguarded from abuse, these people [the Grisloti; MR] to whom it was necessary to import goods not coming from Germany imported these in arbitrarily via the Fondaco, now that the merchants are granted the right to this Customs Office, they find it less burdensome, and I see that this revenue, maybe not entirely legitimately, has increased in the past five years⁴⁵.

⁴⁵ Asv, Cs, II Ser., 72: “Ha contribuito ad accrescere il Dacio alla Dogana d’Intrada la Tavolella de Grisolotti instituita dalla sapienza di quest’Ecc(ellentissimo) Mag(istrato); è comandata da osservarsi con Terminatione delli 2 Ottobre 1728, prima del qual tempo non distinte dall’abuso le persone alle quali fosse permesso spedire per Fontico Merci non provenienti dalla Germania, concorevano con arbitrio li Mercanti a questa Dogana, quall’hora vi ritrovano meno pesante l’aggravio, e di tale provento se bene non legitimo vedo accresciuto il passato quinquenio.”

This sentence is only understandable when we consider its background. In the first three decades of the 18th century there had again been a strong quarrel between the *Grisolotti* and the German nation. In this litigation, the *Grisolotti* had found support from Swiss and Grison traders and even some South German *Faktoren*, who resented being excluded from the privileges of the *Fondaco*. In the end, it resulted in the Germans no longer being able to tax the *Grisolotti* as they had been doing since the late 15th century. However, the *Grisolotti* also lost in this litigation, as the Venetian Republic forced them to register in a specific list as a separate nation. Hitherto they had sometimes used the *Fondaco* (since 1671 without privileges) or the ordinary toll stations, depending on what was cheaper for the specific products. Once registered as a separate nation, the *Grisolotti* would have lost access to the ordinary toll stations and only the *Fondaco* would remain able to use them. Thus, many *Grisolotti*, who had hitherto used the *Fondaco* now formally became Venetians, and only used the ordinary toll stations. As the *Grisolotti* had contributed more than half of the income of the *Fondaco* in the 1720s, their abandoning of the *Fondaco* seriously impacted its revenues⁴⁶.

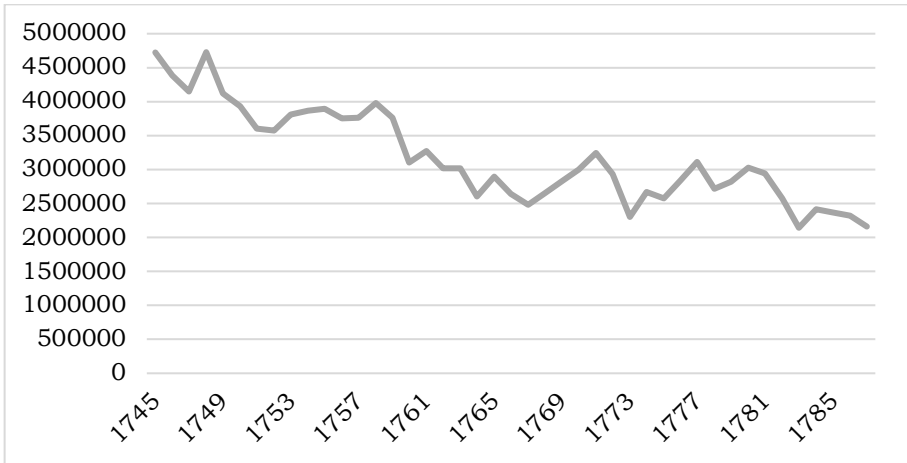
One further impact came in the 1760s, when Venice expelled a substantial number of Grison artisans from the territory of the Republic. As these were mostly Protestants, they could not become Venetians like the *Grisolotti*. They had in fact wandered seasonally to and from the Republic, with substantial toll exemptions due to a military alliance. However, this group had not just included artisans but also small merchants, who usually had to use the *Fondaco* for their exports fabricated in Venice. This explains why they hardly imported goods and thus why their expulsion led only to a fall in the exports via the *Fondaco*⁴⁷. The trade curve would look much more stable were it not for the losses of the *Grisolotti* and Grisons, who no longer were able to use the *Fondaco* toll especially after the 1730s and 1760s respectively. The question remains as to what happened after 1770, as this is not covered by the data assembled by Campos.

Looking at another diagram seemingly indicative of traffic from Germany to Venice, we again have a picture of decaying commercial relations. Along Verona, the goods weighed in the toll station of the *Stadella* halved in the second half of the 18th century (Diagram 2).

⁴⁶ M. Ressel, *Protestantische Händlernetze* cit., pp. 339-360.

⁴⁷ On the Grigioni and their expulsion in the 1760s, see: J. Jegerlehner, *Die politischen Beziehungen Venedigs zu den drei Bünden: vornehmlich im achtzehnten Jahrhundert*, «Jahrbuch für schweizerische Geschichte», A. 23 (1898), pp. 227-331.

Diagram 2: Goods shipped from Bolzano to Leifers/Bronzolo and from there onward on the Adige to Verona in Libbre (1 libbra = ca. 450 g)



Source: G. Canali, *I trasporti sull'Adige da Bronzolo a Verona e gli spedizionieri di Sacco*, «Archivio per l'Alto Adige», A. 34 (1939), p. 374.

Interpreting such curves, Bruno Caizzi wrote that Trieste almost completely snatched German trade away from Venice after 1750⁴⁸. He thus echoed voices of the late 18th century, who saw a policy of strangulation by the Habsburgs towards Venice as the cause of such a development. In Bolzano, the prevailing opinion in merchant circles around 1780 was that Viennese politics aimed to eliminate Venice as a trading emporium and therefore pursued a customs policy to the detriment of South Tyrol and the Republic of St. Mark⁴⁹. In Venice itself, it was believed that the Habsburgs had been successful: in 1783, the Venetian Senator Andrea Tron (1712-1785) made a famous speech arguing that trade with Germany was no longer of great relevance⁵⁰.

Despite such seemingly unequivocal evidence, I shall argue that German-Venetian trade relations did not decline in the late 18th century: to

⁴⁸ B. Caizzi, *Industria e commercio della Repubblica veneta nel XVIII secolo. Studi e ricerche di storia economica italiana nell'età del Risorgimento*, Banca commerciale italiana, Milan, 1965, p. 225.

⁴⁹ In 1780, it was written in Bolzano: «È massima generale [of the Habsburgs] di rovinare il commercio della Repubblica Veneta», cit. after: A. Bonoldi, *La fiera e il dazio. Economia e politica commerciale nel Tirolo del secondo settecento*, Società di Studi Trentini di Scienze Storiche, Trent, 1999, pp. 293-294.

⁵⁰ «Ne' Stati della Germania confinanti sono molto poche le spedizioni, perché mortificate da pesantissimi dazii. Qualche genere si manda nell'interno della medesima, ma di non molta rilevanza», cit. after: P. Gaspari, «*Serenissimo Principe...: Il discorso del 29 maggio 1784, davanti al Senato della Serenissima, come testamento morale dell'aristocrazia veneziana*», Istituto editoriale veneto friulano, Udine, 1994, p. 102.

the contrary. I thus follow up on Angelo Moioli, who expressed already in 1985 doubts about the reliability of Venetian customs statistics. Implicitly he sees them as largely detached from the reality of trade, probably due to intensive smuggling⁵¹. But even without assuming heavy smuggling, we can be sceptical on the representativeness of the *Stadella* of Verona for German-Venetian traffic in the 18th century.

A contemporary from the 18th century shall be quoted in more detail on this. The Tübingen professor Johann Friedrich LeBret (1732-1807), who himself lived in Venice for a few years (1757-1761) and who had particularly intensive contact with the German merchants in Venice, analysed in one of his historical works on Venice the three different routes of Venetian-German trade. He regarded the one about the Adige and Verona as relatively unimportant, which confirms the picture we got from the volumes handled at the *Stadella*. The route along Pontebba and Friuli he saw as weakened by the rise of Trieste and its hinterland trade. For the third route, LeBret drew a nuanced image:

The third pass, Primolano, received its goods from two sources. One was northern Germany [= north of the Alps; MR], from where they came to Mestre on wagons, where these were unloaded and loaded with other goods in return. The second was Bolzano and the annual fairs there. These goods went from there to Bassano via Primolano, and then to Treviso, Padova and other places. The second source has greatly decreased in our century. The first still exists and serves partly for internal traffic of [the Republic of] Venice, partly for shipments to Italy and the Levant⁵².

LeBret was certainly correct in his observation that traffic between Venice and Germany had become independent of the Bolzano fairs. The expression "still exists" for direct traffic, however, leaves a wide scope for interpretation. Also, LeBret was vague about the routes here. Of course, an important part of the direct traffic to Primolano came via Bolzano. Alternatively, however, it could go towards Venice from

⁵¹ A. Moioli, *Aspetti del commercio di transito nel Tirolo della seconda metà del Settecento*, in: G. Olmi, C. Mozzarelli (eds.), *Il Trentino nel settecento fra Sacro Romano Impero e antichi stati italiani*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1985, pp. 805-899, here pp. 831-832, 863-867.

⁵² LeBret, *Staatsgeschichte der Republik Venedig [...]*, Vol. 3, Hartknoch, Leipzig, Riga 1777, pp. 676-677: "Der dritte Paß Primolano empfieng seine Waaren aus einer gedoppelten Quelle. Die eine war das nördliche Deutschland, das sie auf Wagen bis nach Mestre brachte, sie auslud, und dagegen andere Waren einlud. Die zwote war Bozen und die dortigen Jahrmärkte. Diese Waaren giengen über Primolano nach Bassano, und breitete sich hernach nach Trevigi, Padova und andere Orte aus. Die zwote Quelle hat in unserm Jahrhundert sehr abgenommen. Die erste besteht noch, und dient theils zum innern Verkehr von Venedig, theils zu Versendungen nach Italien und der Levante."

Botestagno, either to Primolano and Bassano, or via Vittorio Veneto and Treviso.

In order to analyse this direct traffic, we must thus turn our attention to Treviso and Bassano. Selected data from the *Bilanci generali* of the Republic of Venice are helpful in this regard. We shall look at the custom revenues from the silk tariffs at Treviso and Bassano as well as the ones on freight wagons between Treviso and Mestre (Table 2). This shall be compared to the incidental data we have on the custom revenues of the *Fondaco dei Tedeschi* (Table 3).⁵³

Table 2: Income from customs offices of the Republic of Venice in ducats, 1760-1783

	Camera di Treviso, Cassa obbligata	
	Dacio seda Treviso e Trevisan, Bassan con Saraval	Dacio carri Treviso e Mestre
1760	3,620	526
1765	3,500	470
1775	4,962	677
1780	5,110	677
1783	5,530	782

Source: A. Ventura, *Bilanci generali della Repubblica di Venezia: Vol. 4. Bilanci dal 1753 al 1783*, Antoniana, Padua, 1972, pp. 10-11, 262-265.

These figures show that the trade in silk from the Treviso and Bassano areas clearly increased in these years. Customs on wagons between Treviso and Mestre also yielded growing returns, indicating increasingly dense traffic between the two locations after the 1760s. This may indicate a stronger traffic to Germany in these years but it is yet too shaky a base to directly conclude such a far reaching assertion. To get a clearer picture in this regard, we shall compare this data with the import statistics for goods between the city of Venice and Germany (Table 3).

Table 3: Import statistics of the official Venetian – Germany trade in ducats, 1772/73-1789/90

Registro Nr.	Years	Total trade	
		Importations	Exportations
13	1772/73	1262977	562074
18	1773/74	1035844	692015
23	1774/75	1091595	643782
29	1775/76	780003	1021553
35	1776/77	728023	727481

⁵³ The results here nuance, due to a better data set available to me now, some of my assertions made in: M. Ressel, *Protestantische Händlernetze* cit.

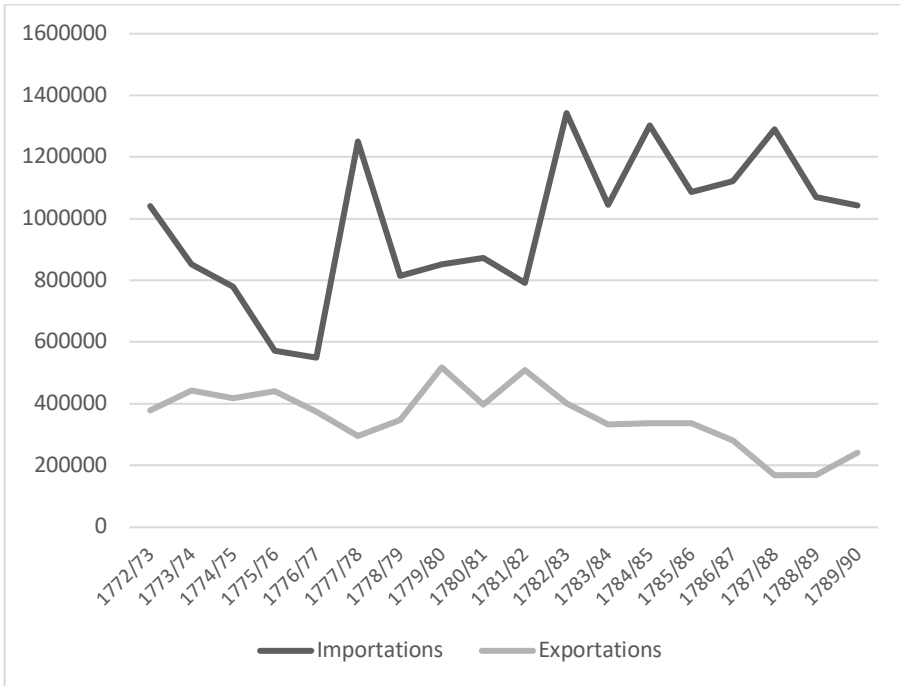
41	1777/78	1513031	693944
47	1778/79	940325	675754
52	1779/80	1011417	816963
57	1780/81	1259910	697880
63	1781/82	1253415	756782
		Trade without "generi non soggetti"⁵⁴	Trade without "generi non soggetti"
Registro Nr.	Years	Importations	Exportations
13	1772/73	1041231	378622
18	1773/74	852537	443451
23	1774/75	779717	418080
29	1775/76	571289	441379
35	1776/77	549548	375635
41	1777/78	1251315	295627
47	1778/79	813742	347944
52	1779/80	851986	518389
57	1780/81	872874	398328
63	1781/82	792761	509226
67	1782/83	1342618	402692
72	1783/84	1044108	333771
76	1784/85	1301496	337063
80	1785/86	1086263	336556
85	1786/87	1121437	280744
90	1787/88	1290733	168605
95	1788/89	1069101	169381
100	1789/90	1042395	241604

Source: ASV, Cinque Savi alla Mercanzia, Fondo e Serie. I wish to thank Pierre Nicolò Sofia very much for providing me with this data.

Before discussing the data, we shall visualize them (Diagram 3). Note: only the revenues that cover a longer time span will be visualized here, even though these sums do not cover all in- and outgoing merchandise. This is legitimized by the fact that the developments are in both data sets run roughly parallel and we shall only discuss in the following the specific ups and downs.

⁵⁴ Only for the time span from 1772/73 to 1781/82 we do have a list of all import and export products. In this table with a longer time span, the Venetians deduced the *generi non soggetti*, which are foodstuffs (wines, oil, meats, fish), some plant based goods, such as hemp, firewood, building materials, pitch, and finally those goods that formed the subject of a state monopoly (in the first line, tobacco). Exempt from export were, in addition to the former goods, the products of Venetian manufactures. See: G. Campos, *Il commercio*, cit., p. 152.

Diagram 3: Customs revenues of Venetian – German trade without goods not subjected to the tolls



Source: Table 3

We see two inverse curves, which makes the picture that emerged from table 2 a bit more complicated. Rather easy to explain are the importations: These decline until 1777 and then suddenly jump upwards. The shrinking before can be connected to a strong crisis in global linen exports during the 1770s, which most likely affected this traditional line of South German linen exportations⁵⁵. 1778 we see a strong rise, most likely by the outbreak of naval warfare, which increased the attraction of the alpine passes for trade between Northern Europe and the Mediterranean. The following stagnation on a slightly higher level than before can be attributed to a misplaced toll-reform of Joseph II on the Tyrolean passes⁵⁶. Once this was abolished in 1783, the importations reached a new level and stabilized there for the

⁵⁵ J. Kümmerlen, *Die Leinenweberei Leutkirchs*, «Württembergisches Jahrbuch für Statistik und Landeskunde», (1903), p. 172.

⁵⁶ On the impact of this tariff, see: A. Bonoldi, *La fiera* cit., pp. 252-337.

following years. The picture is thus overall one of a solid growth that fits well with the data from table 2⁵⁷.

However, the exportations stand in stark contradiction to table 2. While we saw there a rise in the silk trade, a trade that traditionally went over land and thus northwards, here, we see a constant shrinking, with a short-lived flicker of growth in the years of the war of American Independence. However, also this may be rather easily explained. Silk came only from the Terraferma and it went directly northwards without touching the city of Venice. Thus, we most likely see here the result of a substantial (proto-)industrial growth on the Terraferma while the city of Venice was less and less producing products in demand on the German market. This has to remain at the moment a likely hypothesis to which some indications can be added. Looking at the growth of transit traffic via Tyrol in the last quarter of the 18th century, we see a rise especially in silk products⁵⁸. And this came mostly from the territory of Venice. Andrea Bonoldi showed that in 1803 only 37 percent of the weight and 15 percent of the values of all goods transported on the Tyrolean routes came from Trieste; the rest came from the former Serenissima⁵⁹. Very likely these figures had probably been even more favourable for Venice before the fall of the Republic. Thus, also the exportations from the Republic of Venice towards Germany developed in most likelihood in a rather solid direction in the last third of the century, and only the city of Venice did here less well.

This brings us back to one important aspect mentioned at the beginning. Commerce between Germany and Venice always stood in close relation to maritime commerce. This relation changed from the 17th to the 18th centuries. While in the 17th century, the competition between both transportation media was more pronounced, in the 18th, the aspect of complementarity came more to the fore. Silk, a high value textile product, was exported via land northwards, while the cheaper textiles from Germany went over the Alps to the Italian harbour cities for their further re-exportation via the sea. The Venetian-German trade relations were now less threatened by cheap maritime transport, they were more integrated into the global circuits based on it.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ This is also confirmed by: A. Sambo, *La balance de commerce de la République de Venise: sources et méthodes*, «Cahiers de la Méditerranée», A. 84 (2012), pp. 396-399.

⁵⁸ A. Bonoldi, *La fiera* cit., pp. 382-394.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 365.

⁶⁰ I have treated the subject in: M. Ressel, *The Global Presence*, cit.

5. Conclusion

Was the traffic between Venice and Germany in the 18th century still “somewhat the backbone” of the Republic of St. Mark? At least this can be stated with some certainty: traffic between Venice and Germany was at times, during this century, certainly contracting or at least stagnating, but over the long term, growth was the overall tendency. This certainly stabilised the economic fabric of the Republic. It is, of course, difficult to estimate even roughly what the impact on the other economic sectors of the Republic of Venice was. However, the indices we have at our disposal speak for an overall healthy situation in terms of traffic that was certainly in some way connected to the solid trade over the Alps.

In 1786 the Venetian fleet was superior in volume to that of Trieste, Livorno or Genoa; in the case of Livorno even very clearly superior. In addition, the Venetian fleet continued to grow rapidly, reaching its largest volume in over 200 years in 1794, with almost 400 long-distance merchant ships and a carrying capacity of almost 37,000 tons⁶¹. Some historians speak even of a fleet that surpassed in the last decade of the Republic the number of 500 larger ships⁶². The Trieste fleet, which also had a large tonnage, consisted mostly of small vessels unsuited to long-distance trade across the Adriatic. It seems to have been used to connect Venice and Trieste, i.e. the Balkan markets, with Italy and Central Europe via Venice. The Venetian fleet was not intensely active in the maritime trade towards Hamburg, but was concentrated on the Levant. Between Trieste and Hamburg, however, was strong maritime trade (on Danish and Dutch ships), which speaks somewhat for the weaker transalpine connections of this port. This fact also points towards an overall situation in which Venice and Trieste were less competitors, but far more served different functions within the markets of the Adriatic and their continental hinterlands. Such a sharing of tasks may have been to the advantage of both principal cities of the Adriatic⁶³.

The overall favorable picture that Georgelin has drawn from the Venetian trading situation in its last decades can thus be confirmed with a look at the trading relations between Venice and Germany. Most

⁶¹ U. Tucci, *La marina mercantile veneziana nel Settecento*, «Bollettino dell'Istituto di Storia della Società e dello Stato Veneziano», A. 2 (1960), pp. 155-200; J. Georgelin, *Venise cit.*, p. 80-98.

⁶² A. Tamaro, *Storia di Trieste, Vol. 2*, Stock, Roma, 1924, pp. 192-193.

⁶³ M. Ressel, *Von reichsstädtischen Kommissionären zu europäischen Unternehmern. Die deutschen Händler in Venedig im 18. Jahrhundert*, «Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte», A. 107, n. 2 (2020), pp. 167-168.

remarkably, the overall positive situation for the Venetian Republic in this regard was strongly connected to the political actions of its elite. It could be shown that the Venetian politicians acted between 1656 and 1682 – and well beyond – with determination to overcome the crisis of its transalpine trading lanes. For this, the Republic negotiated on the international level several times and with several partners, principally the Habsburgs, but also Augsburg and other imperial cities. This was flanked by a benign politics of privileges to the German merchant colony in Venice. The wishes of this group were heeded to the detriment of merchants from the Alpine space, that is mostly from Trento, but also Grisons or Tyrol. Put more abstractly: the Venetians strengthened their foreign long-distance traders to the detriment of their foreign regional traders. This was a conscious move against substantial resistance from within as well as from outside of the Republic. As this gave the Germans within Venice some strong privileges even vis-à-vis the native Venetians, such a policy needed to be maintained for many years and pursued with determination. This the Venetian state could do, even though the actors responsible for trade politics regularly changed. Also, during the 18th century, the Venetian Republic retained such a political line of favouring its guests from Germany against resistance and thus maintained these privileges until the end of the Republic.

In a superficial analysis one could say that such a politics of leaving the system after 1682 mostly unchanged for more than 100 years shows conservatism or even inertia. Such an interpretation would fit a classical interpretation of the politically paralysed Republic. As the dominant belief was hitherto that the Venetians lost out in trade towards Germany and were overtaken by Trieste, such an interpretation would have seemed plausible. However, the fact that Venice retained substantial northward trade and knew well that its German guests were wealthy and successful must have served as a constant confirmation of the viability of such a commercial setting. Changing a framework that had been created between 1656 and 1682, which was obviously successful in its goal of connecting Venice to the markets north of the Alps via Tyrol, would have made no sense⁶⁴.

The Republic thus emerges here as a political entity that could make far-reaching and complex decisions in a complicated field, and push these through with determination. The board of the *Cinque Savi alla Mercanzia*, especially, was a magistracy that wielded a lot of in-

⁶⁴ There were some attempts in the 18th century to change this system but the *Cinque Savi alla Mercanzia* were able to defend the privileges of the German merchants, see M. Ressel, *Protestantische Händlernetze* cit., pp. 333-367.

fluence and could thus profoundly shape the commercial politics of the state. The perspective on the Republic of Venice as a too-conservative state with growing stagnation in its commercial-political realm seems from the point of view of the evidence here to be incorrect. Was the trade towards Germany in the 18th century thus still “somewhat the backbone” of the Serenissima? As Domenico Sella was careful when he had added the “somewhat” in his description of the transalpine trade situation in the Renaissance era, answering this statement in the affirmative seems legitimate.