

AUSTRIAN NETHERLANDS, 1759-1791

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1. Coverage

This questionnaire discusses the Southern Netherlands during the Habsburg period. This overlaps more or less with the area of Belgium, but it leaves out the Prince-Bishopric of Liège. The included departments are: Brussels, St-Philippe (called Lillo, after 1785), Turnhout, Antwerp, Tienen, Ghent, Sint-Niklaas, Ypres, Bruges, Courtrai, Ostend, Newport, Chimay, Charleroi, Mons, Namur, Navagne (called Herve, after 1765), Luxembourg, Marche, Saint Vith and Roermond.

Because of political turmoil data collection ended in 1791. There is some fragmentary data available for the period 1792-1794, but afterwards this kind of statistical information has not been collected anymore.

2. Documents

The Austrian Netherlands's customs statistics contain for 3,000 alphabetically listed products handwritten tables with three columns (import, export and transit trade) and 22 rows.¹ The first 21 rows present the traded volumes per department; the final row identifies the calculated total volume for the Austrian Netherlands. Unfortunately, the statistics do not account for the origins and destinations of the trade flows. Each year's information is compiled in a cardboard volume; a more luxurious copy, with a decorative leather and gold-leaf cover, was delivered annually to the monarch. The goods are recorded in different units, including measures of length, weight, monetary value, and even a few units whose exact values are no longer known (namely a *lien* of glasses and a *wiege* of monkfish). Some goods were also recorded in several ways (for example partly in ells and partly in Brabantine guilders, depending on the practices of local customs bureaus).

1. Not every year contains exactly the same categories, therefore the total number of goods for the 33 years exceeds that of a single year. The year with the smallest amount of goods is 1779 (846); the year with the largest is 1759 (2001).

The so-called *Relevés Généraux Des Marchandises, Manufactures et Denrées Entrées, Sorties et Transitées*, include import, export and transit data for over a thousand products, rendering the calculation of a balance of trade possible. The originals are available at the National Archives in Brussels, Finance Council, nrs 5748-5805. The data has also been digitized by dr. Ann Coenen and was published in 2014.²

3. Institutional setting

The idea for the creation of the customs statistics was launched in 1754 by Patrice de Nény, general treasurer of the Austrian Netherlands and a member of the Finance Council.³ Following his suggestion, the government named Benoît-Marie Dupuy as the first secretary of the new customs bureau, the *bureau de la régie des droits d'entrée et de sortie*, which was responsible for the customs management. Dupuy was likely a former clerk of the French *Fermes Générales*. He had arrived in Brussels with the French army during its invasion of the Austrian Netherlands in the War of Austrian Succession; he had been appointed head of the *Régie général*, established by Louis XV to collect taxes in the territories he occupied. Dupuy worked so efficiently, however, that when the peace was signed, the Habsburgs offered him a position as a special advisor to the government. Dupuy's work to modernize and reform the tax administration – modelled mainly on the French accounting procedures of the *Fermes Générales* – was strongly supported by the minister plenipotentiary Karl von Cobenzl.⁴ The latter regarded the customs administration as a cornerstone of a mercantilist economic policy and thus staunchly advocated careful monitoring of import, export and transit trade.⁵ Already in the 1750s Dupuy had begun to collect data for a general trade record; de Nény,

2. Ann Coenen, *Carriers of Growth? International trade and economic development in the Austrian Netherlands* (Leiden, 2014).

3. Jan Blomme and Herman Van Der Wee, "The Belgian Economy in a Long-Term Historical Perspective: Economic Development in Flanders and Brabant, 1500-1812," *Workshop on Quantitative Economic History* (Leuven, 1993), Blomme and Van Der Wee, 'The Belgian Economy in a Long-Term Historical Perspective: Economic Development in Flanders and Brabant, 1500-1812', Cécile Douchamps-Lefèvre, "La Statistique Douanière Des Pays-Bas Autrichiens," *Annales Du Congrès De La Fédération Cah De Belgique* (Brussels, 1969), 123–30, 123.

4. On Dupuy and his career in the Austrian Netherlands' financial administration, see Marie-Laure Legay, "Un Français à Bruxelles: les réformes comptables de Benoît-Marie Dupuy (1746-1756)," *Comptabilités* (on line journal), 1, 2010, retrieved on 27th July 2011, <http://comptabilites.revues.org/> 156.

5. Herman Coppens, "Bureau Voor Het Beheer Van De Douanerechten (1737-1794)," in Erik Aerts (ed.), *De Centrale Overheidsinstellingen Van De Habsburgse Nederlanden (1482-1795)* (2; Brussels, 1995), 523–30, 526.

however, wary of the governor's councillor keeping tabs on him, severely criticized Dupuy's work and reforms. Dupuy was finally dismissed in July 1756 and departed the Low Countries in 1757.⁶ He was succeeded by Ferdinand Paradis, who produced the first complete annual record, for the year 1759, and later by Henri Delplancq (director during the period 1765-1787). It was especially under Delplancq's leadership that the bureau reached its full potential, providing not only data about external trade but also a more extensive expertise on economic and financial matters. The latter aspect likely explains why the bureau's workforce increased from a dozen clerks in the early 1750s to more than forty at the end of the 1780s.⁷

4. Motivations

Drawing up a *relevé général* (general record) of all goods that went across the border was part of a broader trade policy; such efforts were intended to render a clear overview of the state of trade and customs revenues so as to develop more efficient customs regulations. It was also used to map out the strengths and weaknesses of the domestic industries.

It probably achieved its goals. Customs and trade policy in the Austrian Netherlands was very much ad hoc. A custom-made approach to each different sector or even product was developed. As the customs bureau was able to compute its statistics remarkably quickly these probably served as an efficient tool for policy making.

5. Methods

The customs bureau left a large archive of information concerning the organization of its work, including regulations, personnel files, memoranda on the bureau's founding and numerous letters and decrees.⁸ These show that each of the 21 *départements* had a principal

6. Legay, "Un Français," 9.

7. Coppens, "Bureau Voor Het Beheer Van De Douanerechten (1737-1794)," at 526, Philippe Moureaux, "Un Organe Peu Connu Du Gouvernement Des Pays-Bas Autrichiens: Le Bureau de Régie des Droits D'entrée et de Sortie," *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Filologie en Geschiedenis*, 44 (1966), 479-99, 490-98.

8. National archive Brussels, Conseil des finances, *commerce et douanes*. The Finance Council contains detailed personnel files: NAB, FC, 8563-8576, reports on customs organisation: 4294 and countless other sources on the customs administration which are described in: Coppens, "Bureau Voor Het Beheer Van De Douanerechten (1737-1794)," Koen Dries, "Comité Voor De Wederzijdse Handel Tussen De Duitse Erflanden En De Nederlanden (1768-1777)," in Erik Aerts (ed.), *De Centrale Overheidsinstellingen Van De Habsburgse Nederlanden (1482-1795)* (2; Brussels, 1994), 793-98.

bureau and a variable number of subordinate bureaus.⁹ The latter were leased by the central administration to local officials. This arrangement, unfortunately, impacted the coherence of the customs registers: as noted below, products are noted alternately in monetary values and in various other units of measurement; however, it also meant that the local staff depended on thorough collecting of taxes to survive, which was an incentive for them to be meticulous. Moreover, the numerous regulations and inspections indicate the accuracy with which the sources were created.¹⁰ The government acknowledged that fraud was a serious problem, but took several steps to address it.¹¹ For example, every department included an auditor and guards who were controlled by the central administration, not by the local customs officers.¹² The bureau was able to compute its statistics remarkably quickly. The local customs administration forwarded their statistics, without compiling or arranging them, to the *Bureau de la Régie*, where a large staff was assigned to compose the overall statistics. The process usually took less than six months. In this way the bureau was able to produce a continuous series from 1759 to 1791.

An administrative source like the *relevé* obviously must be approached with great caution. Even though historians do not question the source's intrinsic value, the customs statistics present various shortcomings. These weaknesses have been discussed by Cécile Douchamps-Lefèvre, Jules Mees, Greta Devos and more recently Koen Dries and Ann Coenen.¹³ All the usual methodological suspects – under-registration, contraband, fraud, negligence – are present, and, as Mees and Douchamps-Lefèvre discovered, a number of tax-exempt goods were simply not included. (It is possible to determine which goods these were, by looking them up in the tariff books.¹⁴) Another concern is that local employees were not always up to the task. This is evidenced by the *Bureau de la Régie* including a considerable number of

9. A list of the secondary customs offices per department can be found in NAB, FC, 4294.

10. NAB, FC, 6399.

11. NAB, FC, 8576.

12. G. Bigwood, *Les Impôts Généraux Dans Les Pays-Bas Autrichiens. Étude Historique De Législation Financière* (Leuven, 1900), 280.

13. Greta Devos, "Oostenrijkse Douanestatistiek En De Oostendse Handel in De Tweede Helft Van De xviii^e Eeuw," *Colloquium: Economische Geschiedenis Van België* (Brussels, 1972), 335-50, Douchamps-Lefèvre, "La Statistique Douanière des Pays-Bas Autrichiens," Dries, "Comité Voor De Wederzijdse Handel Tussen De Duitse Erflanden En De Nederlanden (1768-1777)," Jules Mees, "La Statistique Douanière de la Belgique dans la Seconde Moitié du xviii^e Siècle," *Revue belge d'histoire*, 1 (1914), 72-97.

14. See below. NAB, FC, 8873-8874, "Estat ou Tarif des Droits D'entrée et Sortie sur les Marchandises," *Manufactures et Denrées*.

misspellings and miscalculations in the tables submitted from the local customs bureaus.¹⁵ In any case the statistics cannot be compared to contemporary administrative documents: before 1770 the staff in the regional offices was not even required to be able to read and write.¹⁶ Also, changing levels of taxation probably caused bias, since increasing taxes may have led to higher rates of tax evasion. It is even more difficult to establish whether this bias would have affected certain goods more than others (and which goods these would have been). Tax evasion was a problem the customs administration was well aware of (see for instance the chapter on the salt trade).¹⁷ Moreover, it is nearly impossible to assess how great the impact of changing tariffs was on this source. All in all, the amounts listed clearly tended to be minima, because when traders saw the chance to avoid customs controls and the accompanying taxes, they probably rarely hesitated to do so. Even though the figures from the source suggest an illusion of exactness, we must remain cognizant that in fact they are merely indications of the magnitude of traded volumes and of the trends in trade. In particular, one should not lose sight of the reality that these customs statistics – however systematic and accurate they may appear to be – were compiled by real persons and with a specific objective, thereby rendering them unavoidably far from exact.

In short, extreme caution is warranted when dealing with the quantitative information from the customs statistics. Nonetheless, if the source is used correctly, there are convincing arguments for not ignoring this goldmine of data. The statistics' eminent importance for uncovering trends and magnitudes in foreign trade is uncontested. That the evolutions do indeed make sense has been substantiated in the work of colleagues such as Dries Lyna, and are corroborated further in my own case studies.¹⁸ Moreover, in comparison with the statistical materials available for other countries – for example the Dutch Republic – it is no exaggeration to state that the Habsburg customs statistics are superior.¹⁹ This fact did not escape even critics of the

15. Mees, "La Statistique," (89-91).

16. Christine Piraux and M. Dorban, *Douane, Commerce Et Fraude Dans Le Sud De L'espace Belge Et Grand-Ducal Au XVIII^e Siècle* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Academia Bruylant, 1998), 136.

17. Smuggling received an enormous deal of attention within the sources of the *bureau de la régie*. Some more general texts can be found in NAB, FC, 4278, Consultation of August 27th 1753 by the *jointe pour le commerce avec les Pays Hérititaires*; 4284, memoir concerning smuggling (1780); 8576, notes by Delplancq (1786-1789).

18. Coenen, 2014, Dries Lyna, "The Cultural Construction of Value: Art Auctions in Antwerp and Brussels (1700-1794)," (UA, 2010).

19. Jan De Vries and A. Van Der Woude, *Nederland 1500-1815. De Eerste Ronde Van Moderne Economische Groei* (Amsterdam, 1995).

customs statistics.²⁰ These statistics, when their limitations are accounted for, provide highly valuable information not just for economic historians but also for researchers investigating material culture, social transformations and eighteenth-century society in general.

6. Information

The customs statistics contain import, export and transit volumes for about 3,000 products.²¹

The goods are recorded in different units, including measures of length, weight, sometimes monetary value (Brabantine guilders), and even a few units whose exact values are no longer known. Some goods were also recorded in several ways (for example partly in ells and partly in Brabantine guilders, depending on the practices of local customs bureaus). The fact that the statistics mainly include volumes, but rarely monetary values, renders aggregation much more complicated.

Prices are difficult to find. A very small number of commodity prices can be read directly from the customs statistics, for in a few cases both the volume and the corresponding value were recorded such that the price can be calculated. This is the case for *codde* (a type of fabric) and for woollen sheets. Apart from these two textile goods, a sample yielded no other examples. Fortunately, however, for about 170 other goods – mostly ones that were traded in small quantities – we do not have to look for prices, because the size of the trade flows was only recorded in monetary value and did not require conversion. Other prices were found in various primary and published sources. Commodity prices can be found scattered throughout the archive fund of the Finance Council and the Secretary of State and War, though it is not always apparent how representative these figures are.²² The customs administration itself also collected price data, in particular on grains and flax.²³ However, the largest part of the prices used here is taken from a

20. Mees, "La Statistique," Philippe Moureaux, "Le Commerce entre la France et les Pays-Bas Autrichiens dans la Seconde Moitié du XVIII^e Siècle. Une Première Approche des Sources Quantitatives," 144.

21. Not every year contains exactly the same categories, therefore the total number of goods for the 33 years exceeds that of a single year. The year with the smallest amount of goods is 1779 (846); the year with the largest is 1759 (2001).

22. It is also not entirely clear whether these were who sale or retail prices, but since they were used by the customs administration probably the former (and Cost, Insurance and Freight included). NAB, FC, 4289, 4305, 4564, 4571, 4597, 4828 and 5320. NAB, AO, 1266. NAB, SSW, 2153.

23. NAB, FC, 4837-4838 and 4951-4953. Materné, *De Prijzenadministratie*.

published work: “Nederlandsche Prijsgeschiedenis” by Nicolaas Posthumus.²⁴ Posthumus published annual wholesale prices from the Amsterdam stock market. Since our subject is cross-border trade, we can safely assume that the prices in Posthumus’s overview are largely similar to those used for wholesale commerce in the Austrian Netherlands. For grains, this hypothesis holds.²⁵ The prices are published in Dutch guilders though, so they evidently had to be converted to Brabantine guilders.²⁶ Lastly, data from the French trade statistics, which contain both volumes and prices, can also be used. This source includes the destinations and origins of traded goods, and so the bilateral trade flows between both regions can be filtered out. The ongoing digitisation of these statistics is a project led by Guillaume Daudin and Loïc Charles.

In the end, the trade balance can be calculated on the basis of data for 272 goods, including wool, wine, salt, cotton, spices, dyes, grain, linen, flax, coal and luxury goods such as fine decorations. In terms of volume these commodities definitely accounted for over 50 percent of total international trade (not surprisingly, goods for which prices have been published are goods that were traded most frequently); in terms of value they likely accounted for an even larger share, as they include a large portion of the most expensive goods (such as silk and spices). To be sure, extra price data would allow for inclusion of more goods and would thus greatly increase the accuracy of these estimations. The current selection, however, unquestionably offers an extensive enough sample of international trade in the eighteenth century to expose accurate trends.

The list of goods recorded by the *bureau de la régie* comprehends around 1,800 items per year. As there were small changes in the nomenclature between different years, even if the larger categories remain the same, the total number of commodities used throughout the 33 years is up to 3,000. The language used was French. The *bureau de la régie* decided on the designation of categories of goods.

Unfortunately, the statistics do not account for the origins and destinations of the trade flows. The department for which they were registered offers clues about the possible final destinations; however,

24. Nicolaas W. Posthumus, *Nederlandsche Prijsgeschiedenis*, vol. 1 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1943).

25. Materné, *De Prijzenadministratie*.

26. 1 Amsterdam guilder = 1,1 Brabantine guilder: C. Verlinden and E. Scholliers, *Dokumenten voor de Geschiedenis van Prijzen en Lonen in Vlaanderen en Brabant* (Bruges: 1959-1973), 14.

since goods were not necessarily registered at their points of entry or departure, such indications are far from certain.²⁷

7. Availability

The digital databank associated with my 2014 publication can be found here: see: <http://www.brill.com/products/book/carriers-growth>.

8. Research questions

I have used the data to look at the development of trade for 5 sectors (salt, coal, textiles, colonial products and grains), in this way revealing several new elements of the economic development of the Southern Netherlands. To illustrate the relative weight of the 5 chosen cases, I have also estimated the total balance of trade.

Because of the enormous variety of products included in this source, it will hopefully prove useful for many historians of the Early Modern period (for example those in the fields of material culture, agricultural and trade history).

9. Bibliography

9.1. Primary sources

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- Numbers 5749, 8912 and 8914: Relevé Général 1760.
- Numbers 5750 and 5751: Relevé Général 1761.
- Numbers 5752 and 5753: Relevé Général 1762.
- Numbers 5754 and 5755: Relevé Général 1763.
- Numbers 5756 and 5757: Relevé Général 1764.
- Numbers 5758 and 5759: Relevé Général 1765.
- Numbers 5760 and 5761: Relevé Général 1766.

27. Merchants could apply for a permit to register goods elsewhere, for example in the city where their activities were based. To establish the importance of different trading partners, the customs statistics can be supplemented by local customs data preserved in the National Archives in Brussels for 1791-1794: NAB, FC, 5830-5846: *Relevés généraux des marchandises entrées, sorties et Transitées par les différents départements avec l'indication de la provenance ou de la destination des produits*.

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- Numbers 5772 and 5773: Relevé Général 1772.
- Numbers 5774 and 5775: Relevé Général 1773.
- Numbers 5776 and 5777: Relevé Général 1774.
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- Number 5608: Copy of the 1680 tariff book.
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