NECESSITIES, DECENCIES, LUXURIES:

ESSAYS IN 18TH-CENTURY INTERNATIONAL COMMODITY TRADE.

The Indigo Trade.

By

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Essay: Master Original.

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The leaves of plants of the genus *Indigofera* contain a colourless glucoside which can be extracted and precipitated in the form of a dark blue pigment. Indian indigo was known from early times and it was imported into Europe by the overland route, hence the name *Indebaudias*, Indigo from Baghdad. . . . Another name used occasionally in early seventeenth-century sources is *anil*, or the abbreviation *nil*, which is associated with the Arabic word for indigo.

In the extraction of indigo from the indigo plant, the freshly cut plants were fermented under slightly warm water, when a yellowish solution was obtained. This was rendered alkaline and aerated by vigorous stirring, the indigo then settling out as a blue precipitate which was allowed to collect as a sludge at the bottom of the vat. The sludge was afterwards boiled with water, to prevent further fermentation, and filtered and dried, the dried product being made up into cakes for marketing.

More than six hundred years ago, artisans in India discovered the powerful coloring properties of indigo. Subsequently, Dutch, Venetian, French, English, Portuguese and Spanish merchants recognized the commercial value that indigo dye had for their cloth-makers. The cultivation of indigo in various qualities became a world-wide agricultural phenomenon: however, it was labor intensive and exploitative of indigenous natives and imported black slaves. The Americas, the Caribbean, Spain, France, and Great Britain became the principal producers and suppliers of the dye and they competed on the international marketplace with indigo from India.

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“Guatemalan indigo” appeared on the Amsterdam market in 1609, and England gained a source of indigo with the capture of Jamaica in 1655. Soon thereafter, the French introduced indigo plantation cultivation in Saint-Domingue and became the Western Hemisphere’s largest producer and exporter. By the end of the 18th century, the processes by which indigo and other dyes were applied to textiles were widely published.1 Indigo became the blue dye of choice in textile manufacturing centers in Great Britain and Ireland, continental Europe, and

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1See Jean Hellot et al. The Art of Dying Wool, Silk, and Cotton (Paris, 1785); Charles O’Brien: (1789-1792) and 1795); Beauvais-Raseau, de. A Treatise on Indigo [dedicated to “The Indigo Planters and Manufacturers of Bengal”] (Calcutta, 1794); and Asa Ellis, The Country Dyer’s Assistant (Brookfield, Massachusetts (1798).
Russia.\textsuperscript{2}  

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The international competition for colonial possessions and their commodity outputs during the 18\textsuperscript{th} century encouraged Great Britain and Spain to liberalize their overseas trade policies. The British Free Port Acts of 1766 and 1787 opened certain British West Indian island ports to imports from New Spain.\textsuperscript{3} The Spanish Crown’s decrees in 1765, the \textit{Reglamento para el comercio libre} of 1778, the decree of 1789, and the decree of 1797 opened dozens of new ports in Spain and Spanish America to international commerce. These acts helped diversify the export

\begin{itemize}
\end{itemize}
of commodities among which indigo played a significant role.\textsuperscript{4}

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There is well-established information regarding Spain’s “Guatemalan indigo.” The indigo was grown in the valleys of Honduras, along the Pacific slopes, from northwestern Guatemala and the coastal plain of El Salvador to Lake Nicaragua. In the 1770s and 1780s, indigo production expanded and economic and infra-structure reforms improved transportation routes to marketplaces. In 1782, an Indigo Growers’ Society came into existence and a new indigo fair was held in El Salvador (1782-1792). The opening of the free ports of Santo Tomás, Omoa and Trujillo, though vulnerable during wartime, gave Honduras and El Salvador access to direct trade to Spain. “Guatemalan indigo” also made its way overland to Veracruz for shipment to Spain.\textsuperscript{5} During the period 1782-1796, Cádiz garnered 84 percent of the total value of imports from Spanish America of which indigo comprised 5.4 per cent, the same as sugar.\textsuperscript{6} Thanks to the research of Robert S.


Smith and Troy S. Floyd, the estimated annual average volume of “Guatemalan indigo” exports for the period 1772–1802 was 889,000 pounds; and in 12 of those 31 years exports exceeded 1 million pounds.7

* * * *

The chapter of accidents that befell the French island of Saint-Domingue during the final decade of the 18th century ended its reputation as the “Jewel of the West Indies.” During the period 1760-1789, Saint-Domingue exported an annual average of slightly more than 1 million pounds of indigo.8 In 1790, exports rose to about 1,948,000 pounds; Martinique and Guadeloupe exported about 126,500 and 179,000 pounds, respectively, making a total about 2,253,500 pounds.9 However, following the slave insurrection on Saint-Domingue in 1791 and the outbreak of the war in 1793, exports of essential commodities declined significantly.

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9“Memoir, on the sugar-trade of the British colonies; with tables, of the quantity of sugar imported to, and exported from Great Britain, in the years 1774, 1775, 1788, 1789 -1790, and 1791; and the importation of West India products into France, in the year 1790,” (London: 1793), 30.
Until late in the 18th century, Great Britain had not been a major producer of printed cottons. This was owing to the fact that from the middle of the 17th century, England was inundated with Indian cottons, commonly called *piece goods*, calicoes, and muslins, which generally were finer in quality and cheaper than imported French printed cloths. However, fashions of women’s and men’s clothes were rapidly changing and the English wanted lighter and more elegant clothing. By the fourth quarter of the 18th century, English legislative prohibitions on the domestic manufacture of calico prints were repealed which had the effect of not only stimulating British productivity – from wood block printing, to copper plate printing, to cylinder machine printing – but also marketing entrepreneurship (exemplified by Robert Peel) to meet the growing consumer demand for British printed textiles. In the final decades of the 18th century, tens of millions of yards of printed cottons sold in Great Britain.10

For much of the second half of the 18th century, Great Britain had imported most of its indigo from South Carolina, even though its quality was inferior to indigo from Guatemala and Saint-Domingue. In 1763-1764, soon after peace was restored following the Seven Years’ War, exports from South Carolina were about four times greater than they had been in the decade prior to the war. In 1774, South Carolina’s indigo exports amounted to slightly more than 1 million pounds. However, following the conclusion of the American War of Independence, South Carolina failed to recapture its former level of indigo production and exports declined in 1785-1792 to an annual average of about 800,000 pounds.11

But by the end of the century, Great Britain imported more indigo than any other European country, most of which came from the East Indies. From 1785 to 1800, Britain imported about 42 million pounds of indigo, 55.73 percent came from East Indies; during 1793-1800, of the approximate 27 million pounds of indigo imported, 74.24 percent came from the East Indies (see Table 1).


Table 1. Great Britain’s Indigo Imports: 1785-1800.\(^{12}\)

(Minimum Estimates. Measured in lbs.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Imports</th>
<th>British East Indies</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>British West Indies</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>USA</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Spain</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Portugal</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1785-1800</td>
<td>41,765,617</td>
<td>23,275,609</td>
<td>55.73</td>
<td>1,540,661</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>9,338,156</td>
<td>22.36</td>
<td>4,085,635</td>
<td>9.79</td>
<td>1,135,522</td>
<td>2.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1793-1800</td>
<td>26,851,431</td>
<td>19,932,123</td>
<td>74.24</td>
<td>532,135</td>
<td>1.99</td>
<td>3,186,360</td>
<td>11.87</td>
<td>1,167,799</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>380,440</td>
<td>1.42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{12}\)Compiled and computed from Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons: “Accounts,” to the 5\(^{th}\) of January 1799, Nos. 5-6, 179 and 182, respectively; “Accounts,” in 1802-1803 (138(1), 138(2)) 2; 1808 (337) (1.), (338) (2), respectively; 1812-1813 (171), 10, and (191), 3; 1826-1827 (395), 2; “Imports and exports,” in 1830 (545), 4; and 1831-1832 (734), 378-379, and (735-II), Appendix 15, 640-641, respectively. Fire destroyed Custom records for 1780-1784.
The leading indigo importers were also the chief re-exporters of indigo to major markets, such as Amsterdam and Hamburg. In 1742, France and Spain supplied almost all of Amsterdam’s indigo (about 72 and 26 percent, respectively); in 1753, France’s supply diminished to about 60 percent and Spain increased its share to about 39 percent. A demonstrative reversal in the proportional supply of indigo took place during the period 1771-1787, when Spain accounted for 68 percent and France 22 percent of Amsterdam’s annual average imports of indigo. In the final decade of the 18th century (1789-1799), Spain led all other indigo suppliers – France, Great Britain, Hamburg and Portugal – with about 52 percent of Amsterdam’s annual average imports of about 372,000 pounds.13

The port of the Free City of Hamburg, the major transshipping entrepôt of northern Europe, had gained the deserving reputation as a major manufacturing center of printed textiles. Several years after the conclusion of the Seven Years’ War, Ralph Woodford, the British Resident in Hamburg, noted the importance of Hamburg’s importation of indigo and other dyestuffs: “The Exportation of plain

India Callicoes [sic] to This Port continue to increase, as They are arrived at great Perfection in printing them here; which occasions large Demands for them in Germany.”¹⁴ In the latter decades of the 18th century, Hamburg’s printed textile industry experienced significant prosperity, and dyestuffs were in great demand causing an uptick in indigo imports.¹⁵

The calculation of the volume and value of indigo entering Hamburg is challenging owing to the variety of containers in which it was shipped (fässer, barriques, casks, kisten, chests, zurrones et cetera). Nevertheless minimum estimates, measured in Hamburg pfund, can be computed. Thus, the declared annual average quantity of indigo imported into Hamburg during the period 1767-1789 from the ports of France and Great Britain amounted to about 241,000 Hamburg pfund. In terms of the declared value at the Hamburg Custom House, measured respectively in English pounds Sterling and Hamburg Marks Banco, imports of indigo from French ports were six times greater than from British ports.¹⁶

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¹⁴Woodford (Ham.) to Conway (Lon.) 6 Feb 1767, PROSP 82/85, 18-19. Italics added.

¹⁵See Pfister: (2012), 9, 13, 15, 23, 26, 33, 36, 49-54, 58 and 61, and Table 1; and (2015), 175-221, passim; and Mary Lindemann, Patriots and Paupers. Hamburg, 1712-1833 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 40-41.

¹⁶The usage from the ports of is meant to convey that the indigo imported into Hamburg may not necessarily have originated in the West Indian colonies of Great Britain and France.
Hamburg’s demand for indigo continued to increase. In 1789-1790, Hamburg imported an average of about 368,000 Hamburg pfund of indigo, about 75 percent of which came from French and British ports (about 163,000 and 110,000 pfund, respectively). In 1791, Hamburg’s indigo imports surged to about 448,000 pfund: the share from French ports slipped to about 137,000 pfund; the share from British ports increased to about 133,000 pounds; and Cádiz’s share rose to about 122,100 pounds slightly more than double of what it had been in 1790. Taken together, indigo from these ports represented about 88 per cent of Hamburg’s total imported indigo.

Rather, it reflects that ships carrying indigo to the port of Hamburg and other ports may have originated elsewhere, for example, in the East Indies, and that the indigo was subsequently transshipped via other ports to the port of Hamburg. The volume and value of indigo are compiled and computed from Hamburg Custom House in PROCO 388/95; PROSP 82/84-90 and 92-98; PROFO 33/1-3, 5-9 and 12, and PROFO 97/240; PROBT 6/141 and 147; AN/AE: Marine B7/349, 351 and 370; Marine B/7/438, ff. 70-71; and Marine B/7/439, 179; ADG, ChCG. Série C. 1639, 2395, 3691, 4387, 4388, 4390 and 4405; SA. Hamburg 371-2. Admiralitäts-Kollegium, F 10, Bd. 1-14, and F11; Köncke; and Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons. 1826-1827 (395), 2. Data for wartime year 1794 are not extant. The declared annual average value in Hamburg of the indigo imported during the period 1767-1789 from the ports of France was 760,000 Marks Banco and from the ports of Great Britain was 122,000 Marks Banco. One Hamburg pfund weighed 484.6094 grams, slightly heavier than the British pound avoirdupois at 453.5924 grams. The usage from the ports of is meant to convey that the indigo imported into Hamburg may not necessarily have originated in the West Indian colonies of Great Britain and France. Rather, it reflects that ships carrying indigo to the port of Hamburg and other ports may have originated elsewhere, for example, in the East Indies, and that the indigo was subsequently transshipped via other ports to the port of Hamburg.

17SA. Hamburg 371-2, Admiralität-Kollegium, F 10, Bd. 3-4 and F11; and Köncke.

18SA. Hamburg 371-2, Admiralität-Kollegium, F 10, Bd. 5; cf. F 11; and Hans Pohl, *Die Beziehungen Hamburgs zu Spanien und dem spanischen Amerika in der Zeit von 1740 bis*
But in the aftermath of the slave revolt in Saint-Domingue in 1791 and the outbreak of the war in 1793, France could no longer effectively compete in the indigo trade. During the period 1794-1800, Hamburg imported an estimated annual average of slightly more than 1.1 million Hamburg pfund of indigo from worldwide sources, of which about 75 per cent came from British ports; about 18 per cent came from the port of Cádiz; and only about 3 per cent was declared as coming from French ports.19

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The East India Company was largely responsible for this trading shift in the indigo trade. The Company had encouraged private trading investors in India to become involved in the cultivation, production and export of indigo. Probably the best known of these ambitious merchant entrepreneurs was the Englishman John Prinsep who, in 1780, claimed he had three plantations under cultivation and five years later had fourteen indigo factories operating. Private trading entrepreneurs and Agency houses followed Prinsep’s example.20

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19Compiled and computed from SA. Hamburg 371-2, Admiralität-Kollegium, F 10, Bd.8-14; and Köncke.

In the latter decades of the 18th century, an increased number of merchantmen sailed into the Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal, and the South China Sea in search of profit. Ships flying the American, Danish, Dutch, French, Imperial, Portuguese, Prussian, Savoyard, Spanish, and Tuscan flags sailed to and from the East Indies and China and frequently made these journeys on behalf of an English account. They not only circumvented the monopoly held by the English East India Company but also skirted the rules governing neutral shipping. Ships flying various flags departed India and purposely took circuitous routes to reach their intermediate or final destinations with their cargoes of indigo. This maneuver became more acute after the outbreak of the war in 1793 when enemy combatants and neutral shipping came into play.

The complexity of these shipping issues came to light at meetings of the East India Company in the early 1790s. The assembled proprietors were informed that foreigners and, in particular, Americans, under the flag of neutrality, had already established commercial agents on the coasts of India and it was “a notorious fact how much cheaper” the Americans and foreigners could ship goods home: “Foreigners were running away with our trade, owing to those two unfortunate

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impediments of high Freight and high Duty.”  

Years later, the complaints became more accusatory:

the clandestine and neutral Trade from India, in particular the Trade of America with that Country, has been most alarmingly increased, and even the Indian Trade of our Enemies, the French and Dutch, which a contrary Conduct might have extinguished, has been upheld; so that Great Britain is thus, by the preposterous Policy of the Company, in Danger of losing the Carrying Trade of India, and the maritime Ascendency she has obtained over other Nations.  

In particular, American entrepreneurs dispatched ships from Baltimore, Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Providence, and Salem with cargoes for sale in the East Indies and China. On their return voyages, they carried goods and commodities from Bengal, Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and Canton intended for American and European markets. They made these voyages either flying their own flag or of another neutral, either on their own account or that of a foreign national.

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21East India House. Debate on the expediency of cultivating sugar in the territories of the East India Company. With speeches of Randle Jackson, and George Dallas, Esqrs. For and against that important proposition (London, 1793), 8-9, 11 (for quote), 12; and Fiott, J. Comp. Three addresses to the proprietors of East-India stock, and the publick on the subject of the shipping concerns of the Company (London, 1795), 167 (for quote). See also, Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons. 1801 (122) III, 18-20, 53-55, 68, 98-99 and 103.

It was commonplace for these neutral American ships to export Indian goods marked for the United States but very often, without unloading their cargo at an American port, they simply proceeded to Europe where they disposed of their Indian cargoes. For example, in 1795-1797, the carrying trade to Hamburg was largely in the hands of the Americans.23

Danish activities were particularly prominent in the East Indies trade. It was indeed the “golden age” of Danish trade with India and China. There was “a close connection between the policy of neutrality and the extraordinary growth of commerce and shipping under Danish flag. . . . the East Indies carried with it a special prestige. The ships were the biggest, the cargoes were the richest, and the East India merchants and shipowners represented the aristocracy of trade.”24

The Danish Asiatic Company, Danish merchant houses and Danish ship

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owners exploited Denmark’s neutrality. Danish bottoms were commissioned out of Copenhagen and foreign ports under the guise of fictitious Danish owners and foreign accounts, in particular, English ones, to trade in commodities and goods of the East Indies. The Danish Kommercekollegium defined this policy: “it is for several reasons desirable and profitable, that the trade between Denmark and the East Indies should be carried on foreign account.”

As the war progressed, British Agency houses in Calcutta dispatched a large number of their ships under the neutral colors. The underlying motivation for doing so was clearly understood.

Although the Voyage by which the Produce of India is conveyed in Foreign Ships to Europe may occasionally be circuitous, the superior Advantages . . . enable the Proprietors of the Goods to dispose of them at a lower Price, than that which the same Descriptions of Goods can be brought to the Continental Markets of Europe, if exported from India by British Merchants under heavy Freight and other Incumbrances, to which the Trade is at present subject.26

In the closing years of the 18th century (1795-1799), indigo was one of India’s leading commodity exports (along with piece goods, sugar and raw silk)

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destined for America, Copenhagen, Hamburg, Leghorn, Lisbon, and London.27

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Russia, too, played an active role in the importation of indigo. In the reign of Catherine II (1762-1796), thousands of mercantile ships annually visited the northern ports of the Russian Empire laden with hundreds of different necessities, decencies, and luxuries. Among them were a variety of dyestuffs that would be used as coloring inputs in Russia’s domestically-produced textiles, crafts, and arts. Indigo and cochineal were two of the most desirable imported dyestuffs: the former produced a legendary blue, and the latter, a red whose properties excelled all other red dyes. Both dyes were among the ten most expensive Russian imports (see Table 2).28
Table 2. Comparison of Indigo and Cochineal Imports into St. Petersburg/Kronstadt: 1766/1796.  
(Minimum Estimates in *Poods*, Pounds, and Rubles.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Indigo <em>Poods</em></th>
<th>Rubles Per <em>Pood</em></th>
<th>Pounds @ 36.11</th>
<th>Cochineal <em>Poods</em></th>
<th>Rubles Per <em>Pood</em></th>
<th>Pounds @ 36.11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1766-1776*</td>
<td>4,446</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>160,545</td>
<td>655</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>23,652</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1783</td>
<td>5,615</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>202,758</td>
<td>1,240</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>44,777</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1787</td>
<td>5,714</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>206,333</td>
<td>2,336</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>84,353</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1789</td>
<td>6,105</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>220,452</td>
<td>745</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>26,902</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1792</td>
<td>5,201</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>187,809</td>
<td>1,510</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>54,527</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1796</td>
<td>10,287</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>371,464</td>
<td>1,989</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>71,823</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Annual Average