Swedish consular reports as a source of business information, 1700-1800

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Introduction

Consular service had and still has primarily two purposes: (1) to promote and facilitate business contacts between the consul’s home (appointing) country and the consular district (port, region or state); and (2) to collect and forward home important information, mainly of business character. This essay will focus on the consular service as supplier of business information. The examined case is Swedish consuls and their reporting during the eighteenth century.

In the introduction to this volume we discuss the institutional and technological approaches to topic of business information. The consular service, undoubtedly, should be studied in the institutional perspective. It is an institution tentatively reducing transaction costs—and specifically information costs—of economic actors.¹ In this essay I will examine if and how Swedish consuls made the available business information for Swedish merchants, shipowners and other businessmen “better, faster and cheaper”.

Three issues are central: contents, transmission and distribution of information produced by consuls. In spite of the inconsistency in the reporting we can trace some common features of consular reporting. For example, the economic issues of general character (prices, market for Swedish export products, etc.) dominated. Rather large attention was also paid to the political conditions and their effect on commerce. The issue of transmission of reports is important because of the irregularity and slowness of mail connections. The third issue is perhaps the most interesting, nonetheless the most troublesome to answer. How were the reports distributed and did they really make a difference? We will look at who in Sweden had the access to the reports and could exploit them in business. This question is closely connected with the Swedish organization of consular service and, in particular, the unique role of the Stockholm mercantile community within it. However, before we look closely at the reports of Swedish consuls we should explain the origins of the consular service and its role in southern Europe.

The consular service origins, as many other parts of the early modern business culture, in the Mediterranean. As early as in the Middle Ages, consulates in the area functioned as tribunals for setting of conflicts between merchants, and between merchants and local authorities. Thus, already at its beginnings, the consular service partly had a diplomatic function. From the sixteenth century, the consular service also became a part of northern European business culture, with English, Dutch and French consuls first settling in important Mediterranean ports.² The

² On the history of consulate tribunals see Carmen Salvo, “Il ruolo instituzionale e la composizione sociale del Consolato del Mare di Messina tra Medio Evo ed Età Moderna”, in Carmel Vassallo (ed.), Consolati di Mare and
Swedish consular service, in the focus of this paper, was established later, by the late seventeenth century, and the expansion of the service started after 1721, when Sweden lost its Baltic empire and great power status. By the end of the eighteenth century, there were Swedish consuls in almost 70 cities, mainly ports. In similarity with other northern European states, the first Swedish consuls appeared in the Mediterranean, Spain and Portugal, because this was the way of doing business in the area.

We have to point out that the consular service, in spite of the same titles, was not a unified system. Consuls of different states had often quite different roles. For example, Venetian consuls appeared to play important diplomatic role in the republic’s foreign policy while their commercial function was rather limited. Whereas northern European consuls appeared to have primarily commercial functions; the diplomacy was carried out by professional diplomatic corps.

There were also large differences between consular duties in the different consular districts. For example, the Swedish consular service during the eighteenth century had two very different parts. Swedish consuls appointed to the Barbary states in North Africa principally had diplomatic functions. The commodity exchange between these principalities and Sweden was insignificant, but by appointing consul Sweden gave the Barbary states a kind of diplomatic recognition. The consul’s presence also played a role as status marker, and issues of hierarchy and status were very important in the semi-diplomatic game between Barbary and European states. Moreover, the consuls organized the exchanges of ‘gifts’ that were necessary for keeping peace between Sweden and the Barbary states.

In France, Spain, the Netherlands and Britain Swedish consuls had very different role. There were Swedish embassies in these states and consuls appointed had no diplomatic functions. However, Sweden had very intensive and expanding commodity exchange with the countries and the consuls appointed at the major ports played an important role in facilitating this trade.

The Swedish consular service lacked until 1793 regulations of consular duties and so the conduct of the service depended very much on the consuls’ personality, their ambitions and preferences. Moreover, with exception of the Barbary states, all Swedish consuls were honorary consuls, thus doing their duties by side of their own business. Some consuls considered their duties very seriously and reported frequently, regularly and in detail about anything of value in their districts; others reported seldom and with varying quality of quality of reporting. This explains the decades-long lacunae in the consular reporting. But this varying quality of consular reporting makes it difficult to exploit the archives in a systematic way; most probably, this also is the reason why consular reports rarely have been used systematically.

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4 Almqvist (1912-15), p. 140.
Consular reports: contents

As mentioned, eighteenth-century consular reports are a source of widely varying quality, and hence rather unsuitable for a systematic analysis. Yet, the good side of the variance is the richness in detail and insight in the personality of consuls. It had been consul’s personality and the specific features of the district that shaped the contents of his reporting. We will examine some typical consular districts to see how the particular conditions and personality affected the contents of reporting. The first region under scrutiny are the consulates of North Africa. It is clear that Swedish consuls paid much attention to the local political conditions, which primarily mirror their semi-diplomatic function. Reports had also rather general character, indicating that consuls were writing for a broad audience.

George Logie was Sweden’s first consul in the Barbary coast. He was a merchant of Scottish origin, experienced in trade in the Mediterranean and North Africa. He was also appointed to negotiate peace and trade treaty between Sweden and Algiers in 1729. Nine years later, in 1738, Logie sent to the Swedish Board of Trade a short review of Algiers foreign trade and possible trade with Sweden. The report is worth to mention in detail. He noted that the volume of trade between Sweden and Algiers was negligible. For example, Algiers was able to purchase some 500 ship-pounds of iron annually, in addition some boards and gunpowder; during the same years Sweden exported about 300,000 ship-pounds iron annually. There were almost no commodities that Sweden could import from Algiers. As an interesting notice about the conditions of commerce in the city, Logie mentioned that profitability of the trade was so uncertain because Algerian corsairs were arriving with large quantities of captured cargoes that made market for legal commodity unpredictable. Logie concluded his report with stating:

I find not that Algier can be otherways beneficiall to Sweden than that by havinbg peace with them it gives free liberty to our Ships to go safely on the coasts of Spain and Portugalland to all ports of the Mediterranean with our own Cargoes and have the benefit of being employed and freighted by other Merchants with the same safety that they can ships of other nations and now I am on this subject I must begg leave to acquaint and inform your Lordships that I find no other method or possibility of keeping a firm and secure peace with the kingdom of Algier than now and then that is once in two or three years to give some handsome presents to the Dey and Leading men of the Gouvernment to keep them steadfast in our friendship which is what is practiced by the French by the Hollanders and all other nations in peace with them.⁶

Yet, in comparison with other Swedish consuls in North Africa Logie appeared to be interested in possible trade. Later on the interest of political conditions in the Barbary states prevailed. Much attention was also paid to the diplomatic game between foreign consuls and the local rulers, and the rivalries between consuls of different nations. Damaged relations between a consul (and his nation) and the local ruler entailed namely advantages for other consuls (and their nations). For example, in 1745, Johan Wijnberg, the consul to Tripoli, reported in detail about all gifts that the European consuls were sending to the Tripoli Pasha. Occasionally the Tripoli consular reports included lists of Swedish vessels visiting the port. They indicate that Swedish vessels were going in tramp shipping with salt cargoes.⁷ But this traffic did not change the view that Swedish-North African trade was insignificant.

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⁶George Logie to Board of Trade (BoT), Leghorn/Livorno 2/13 October 1738, Consular Reports, Livorno 1725-1822, E VI a 229, Board of Trade, Swedish National Archives, Stockholm (BoT SNA). The letter is dated at Livorno during Logie’s stay at the port.

⁷Shipping list of 1761, Consular Reports, Tripoli, E VI a 467, BoT SNA.
Consular reporting from Lisbon, Cadiz and Marseilles, three major destinations of Swedish trade in southern Europe, provided a very different kind of information. In particular Lisbon is interesting, due to the early-established consular contact and due to Portugal’s significance in Swedish foreign trade. The Portuguese salt was extremely important commodity, because it was necessity and major return cargo from southern Europe. In fact, after Baltic grain, Portuguese and Mediterranean salt was the second import commodity in Sweden’s trade. Sufficient salt supplies appear to be the primary motive of the Sweden’s active trade policy in southern Europe in the early eighteenth century. Therefore it is not surprising to find so much reporting from Lisbon dealing with conditions of salt production, prices and sales. Joachim de Besche (consul appointed 1704-1721) reported in detail about price movements, royal regulations affecting prices, even about impact of weather on the salt production and estimated supplies. Rain in particular had bad impact on salt production.8

However, Portugal was also an important destination of Swedish export products, iron and steel, and naval stores. Portugal accounted for about half of Swedish iron exports to southern Europe, and a significant part of this iron went to the Portuguese colonies. More surprisingly, perhaps, the Swedish consuls in Lisbon owned much interest to the Brazilian return fleets with cargoes of sugar, tobacco, leather and gold. It is difficult to see how the market for these commodities affected Swedish trade; the domestic demand was very limited. Most probably the transatlantic trade was interesting because it generated demand in tramp shipping in southern Europe and this market became important for Swedish shipowners in the course of the century.

Also Swedish consuls from Cadiz reported about the city’s colonial trade, reflecting Cadiz’ entrepot function in Spanish trade with the American colonies. Swedish consuls were also interested in the changes in the Spanish colonial rule. For example, the plans of setting the American trade free from the 1770s were closely followed by the consul Hans Jacob Gahn. He reported in detail on the Spanish plans and considered probable outcomes of the reform for Swedish shipping.9

Price and market developments for Swedish export products attracted attention of consuls in Cadiz, Marseilles and Livorno. In particular, they reported on iron, Sweden’s major export product. The European markets for iron were, in fact, much more free and competitive than expected. There were protected markets. For example, Spain and France were large iron-producing countries with varying degree of protection. Consequently, the consuls were reporting not only on prices and market conditions but also on the trade and manufacturing policies of the states; they informed about customs duties on foreign iron. Moreover, there was a large international market for iron, in spite of the mainly local that iron production is and the state protection. Swedish iron exporters were acting on this international market and hence very interested in information about conditions of iron trade and production in other countries. There is a voluminous literature of Swedish travellers visiting both iron-producing areas and important iron markets all around Europe.10 Yet, consuls were reporting about local competition between Swedish and foreign iron.

Especially, the Russian iron attracted attention. For example, de Besche noticed already in 1718 the import price of Russian iron in Lisbon. The attention paid to Russian imports increased in the same path as the Russian iron was taking market shares from the Swedes. Another unexpected

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8 Joachim de Besche to BoT, 1709-1720, Consular Reports, Lisbon, E VI a 223, BoT SNA.
9 Hans Jacob Gahn to BoT, Consular Reports, Cadiz 1719-1802, E VI a 67, BoT SNA.
competition was foreigners selling Swedish iron below Swedish prices. In particular, the Dutch were able to carry Swedish iron as ballast and so freight-free, which destroyed market for Swedish iron traders.\footnote{Müller (2004), p. 116.} Also the British imports of Russian iron appeared to start in this way. In the 1730s British merchants began to import Russian iron as ballast in vessels loaded with hemp.\footnote{Jonas Alströmer to BoT, 14 March 1735, Consular Reports, London, E VI a 231, BoT SNA.} Markets for Swedish tar, pitch and sawn timber appeared being more stable, but export values were low.

Levant trade was another area that captured Swedish attention and rose large expectations. There were plans to open a Levant trade during Charles XII stay in the Ottoman Empire (1709-1714). However, the decisive moment came in the late 1730s, with a new political situation in Sweden. In 1738 the Swedish Levant Company was founded in connection to the establishment of Swedish diplomatic relations with the Ottoman Empire, and consuls did play an important role in this development.

In particular Swedish consulate in Marseilles became engaged due to the port’s role in the French Levant trade. All consuls on French territory had to be French citizens and Swedish consuls in Marseilles were members of the Marseilles leading merchant families, Butini and Fölsch, with large interests in the Levant trade. Already in the mid-1730s, before the establishing of the Swedish Levant Company, the Marseilles consul proposed to Swedish shipowners to charter vessels for transports between Marseilles and the Levant. The proposal was to carry French trade on Swedish vessels. Later on Swedish consul in Smyrna suggested the same thing. The Smyrna consulate was established in connection to the foundation of the Swedish Levant Company and consul was salaried by the Company. In 1744, the acting consul Johan Henrik Kierman wrote from Smyrna about the profitable opportunities of chartering Swedish vessels. He mentioned that, in the course of the war (War of Austrian Succession), the Swedish flag was one of the few still in respect in the eastern Mediterranean, and both merchants from Smyrna, Thessaloniki and Alexandria wished to charter the Swedes. He mentioned the low insurance premiums as the reason. According to his report the cargoes chartered for Swedish vessels were insured for between 3 and 4 per cent, while those chartered for Venetian vessels paid between 6 and 10 per cent.\footnote{Johan Hinrik Kiermans letters to the Levant Company, Smyrna 9/20 September 1744, Skrivelser från Levantiska kompaniet 1741-54, E XVIIaa: 1, BoT SNA.}

Marseilles became an important centre of Swedish commercial activities in western Mediterranean and one of the most frequented ports in the area.\footnote{Charles Carrière, \textit{Négociants marseillais au XVIIIe siècle}. (Marseilles 1973), p 1061.} As mentioned above, in addition to commodity trade tramp shipping became important activity and more and more consular reports concerned it. This reflected the shift of Swedish economic activities from commodity trade to tramp shipping. In this business Swedes had two important advantages in comparison with their competitors. First, Sweden had peace and trade treaties with the Barbary states and it was successful in avoiding war with those principalities during the rest of the century. This reduced tentatively the protection costs of Swedish vessels, and insurance premiums paid by merchants. Second, Sweden kept neutral in Anglo-French wars of the century, which opened for a wartime exploitation of the Swedish flag. Not least the ship arrivals from Marseilles unveils indirect correlation between English and Swedish shipping patterns.

Due to the role of Cadiz, Lisbon and Marseilles as the centres for shipping in southern Europe conditions of tramp shipping received more and more attention. For example, the Lisbon consul, Arvid Arfwedson already in autumn 1739 reported on profitable shipping opportunities that followed the outbreak of the war between France and Britain (War of Austrian Succession).\footnote{Arvid Arfwedson to BoT, 1739, Consular Reports, Lisbon 1731-1778, E VI a 224, BoT SNA.} In
1745, the Cadiz consul, Martin Bellman, was again reporting on the wartime conditions of shipping and opportunity to exploit Sweden’s neutral flag. The Marseilles consul Butini, as well, paid much attention to the war.

Attention paid to wartime conditions grew as the Swedish neutral shipping increased during the wars the 1756-63, 1776-83 and 1793-1800. Yet, the lucrative wartime business also entailed high risks. There is an odd discrepancy between consuls’ urgent requests to send out more Swedish vessels, to better exploit wartime boom, on the one hand, and their reporting on cases of seized and condemned cargoes, on the other hand. In particular between 1778 and 1780, consular reports from southern Europe included many cases concerning seized Swedish ships.

Another kind of ‘business’ information were rumours about imminent danger of war. For example, in September 1779, there were rumours circulated in the Mediterranean about a Swedish war with Morocco. According to the Cadiz consul, rumours about forestalling wars Sweden and the Barbary states were spread by Sweden’s competitors.

Sweden’s situation improved in 1780, first, because of the League of Armed Neutrality between Russia, Sweden and Denmark and, second, due to the British declaration of war on the Dutch Republic by the end of the year. The Dutch entry into the war left the Swedish and Danish merchant marines as the only sizeable neutral carriers.

Conditions of neutral shipping did not attract only attention of consuls in European waters. In the years 1793-1800, even the Swedish consul in the United States reported about profitable conditions of neutral shipping. Again, Sweden was one of the few nations that evaded engagement in the French Revolutionary Wars, and this increased demand for Swedish flag. In October 1793, the first Swedish consul to the United States, Richard Söderström, reported from Philadelphia that the Swedish vessels were in high esteem and could get profitable charter contracts. But he also warned about French privateer activities. Swedish shipowners were requested to avoid cargoes owned by belligerents. According to Söderström the freights paid in the United States were much higher than that in Spain or Portugal—many Swedish vessels employed in shipping to North America were chartered on the Iberian Peninsula. In March 1794 Söderström again commented on the lack of Swedish vessels for chartering in the US and was wondering why Swedish consuls in Portugal and Spain did not inform the Swedish shipowners about the much more profitable conditions in the US.

Reporting from the Swedish consulates in Europe and the US by the late 1790s shows that shipping became the predominant issue in consular activities. In a long-term perspective this reflected the fact that tramp shipping became economically much more important than at the beginning of the century. Yet, the consuls did not exclusively report on general conditions of the business, produced for merchants and shipowners. One of their tasks was to collect data on Swedish shipping and trade in their districts. Thus consular reports occasionally included shipping lists of all Swedish vessels in the area, and balance sheets of commodity exchange between the consular district (country) and Sweden. The data apparently was used by the Board of Trade in calculations of Sweden’s balance of trade. Unfortunately, very few of the districts’ shipping lists and sheets of balance of trade are in extant.

Commodity trade, both export and import, and conditions of tramp shipping were two large subject of economic importance that consuls paid their attention to. Yet, in addition to such

16 Martin Bellman to BoT, 1745, Consular Reports, Cadiz 1719-1802, E VI a 67, BoT SNA.
17 Butini to BoT, 1739 and 1740, Consular Reports, Marseilles 1732-1814, E VI a 331, BoT SNA.
18 Hans Jacob Gahn to BoT, 18 May 1780, Consular Reports, Cadiz 1719-1802, E VI a 67, BoT SNA.
19 Hans Jacob Gahn to BoT, 14 September 1779, Consular Reports, Cadiz 1719-1802, E VI a 67, BoT SNA.
20 Richard Söderström to BoT, 2 October 1793, Richard Söderström’s Reports 1789-1799. Diplomatica, Americana, vol. 1, SNA.
typical business information consular reports might include varying types of information that indirectly had an economic impact. Reports on health conditions and epidemic diseases in consular districts belongs to such information. It is apparent that in the late eighteenth century consuls began to pay more attention to this issue. In 1793 and 1796, for example, Richard Söderström informed about epidemics in Philadelphia and New York and we would find many more similar notices. Another often commented issue were escaping seamen.

The sketch of reporting by Swedish consuls shows clearly that gathering of useful business information was the key duty of their office. It is also clear that they attempted to collect relevant information, from a business point of view.

In 1768, Johan Westerman (Liljencrantz) published a treatise on the competitive situation of Swedish shipping. Two aspects of the treatise are interesting in the context of this essay. First, there is the awareness of highly competitive situation in European tramp shipping. This does not fit well with the present understanding of eighteenth-century shipping and trade as regulated and protectionist. Westerman in detail described all the competitive advantages and disadvantages that Swedish vessels and shipowners had in southern Europe. Also his specific focus on southern Europe confirms the area’s crucial role in tramp shipping. Second, Westerman paid significant attention to the role of consular service, which he saw as a crucial factor in the rise of Swedish shipping. His recommendations included a duty to report on behaviour of Swedish vessels, to strengthen the ‘credibility’ of Swedish flag, and requirement of an annual report on the state of Swedish trade in the consular district. As mentioned above Swedish consuls lacked a general regulation of their duties until 1793.

Westerman’s treatise indicates well how the Swedish authorities looked at the role of consular service, and it shows clearly that they recognised the significance of information forwarded by consuls. Westerman became Sweden’s minister of ‘finance’ during Gustav III’s reign and he directed the country’s trade policy during the profitable years of the American war of independence. Yet the assessment of business information by politicians still does not say much about how the information was transmitted, used and who were able to use it. These issues are examined in the following section.

Consular reports: transmission and distribution

Traditional postal service was the most usual transport means of consuls’ correspondence. In eighteenth-century Europe the overland postal services already were well-established and more rapid than slow and unreliable sea line connections. An analysis of dispatch times between southern European cities and Stockholm indicates how rapid the land connections were and it also shows the difference between sailing times of vessels and the dispatch times of correspondence. For examples, the dispatch times of letters from Livorno were significantly shorter than the times of letters from Cadiz; and dispatch times from Cadiz were shorter than

23 “…2:do, At Sveriges utrikes vistande Agenter och Consuler må få en särskild Instruction, at noga underrätta sig om de i Utländske farvatten seglande Svenske Skeppares upförande, samt at vid ansvar gifva tillkänna, då något dervid förelöper, som på något sätt kan skada Svenska Flaggans Credit […] 5:to, At Svenske Consulerne må blifva förbundne, at vid hvarje års slut insända en omständelig berättelse om Svenske Frakt-fartens tilstånd i den ort de vistas, samt då tillika anmärka, hvad hinder och svårigheter för den samme ligga i vägen, och huru de kunna afhjelpas.
24 See Heiko Droste’s and Seija-Riutta Laakso’s contributions in this volume.
times from Lisbon. A letter dispatched from Lisbon arrived at Stockholm in over 40 days, in about 35 days if dispatched from Cadiz, and in less than 30 days if dispatched from Livorno (see Appendix). As regards the sailing times between these ports and Sweden the situation was opposite.

The appendix data shows that wars had an impact on dispatch times. In the beginning of the century, during the wartime years, some letters from Lisbon reached Stockholm after between four and five months. Most probably these letters were sent by sea. Normally, the letters from Lisbon were received in Sweden in about 40 days. In the course of the century the dispatch times were reduced, but the development is neither especially rapid nor representative. The scattered data on the dispatch times from the US does not indicate any change.

The postal connections with Cadiz, Lisbon, Livorno—as well as with London, Rouen or Amsterdam—were well established and reliable. This was not the case of the Barbary states. The postal connections with Tunis, Tripoli and Algiers were more complicated. First, consuls’ letters were sent to large Mediterranean centres, for example Marseilles and Livorno; then, from there they continued the usual overland way. To make the dispatch of the letter safe consuls frequently sent copies of letters via different postal channels. The same technique, sending of copies via two independent mail channels, was used during wartime periods. Seija-Riitta Laakso shows in her contribution in this volume that the practice was widely used by all correspondents.

Another technique possibly in use was sending letters ‘undercover’. The proper letter was put into an additional envelope and sent to addressee, who then forwarded the letter to the proper addressee. The technique might be in use in transatlantic correspondence during the French Revolutionary Wars. In 1794 Richard Söderström, the Swedish consuls to the US, complained about the missing letters, dispatched directly to him and he noted that privateers used to open and seize such letters. To make the delivery of letters more reliable, he suggested sending them to his partner Robert Morris in Philadelphia, who was expected to forward them to Söderström.

To conclude, the dispatch times of the consular reports sent from European commercial centres were short in comparison with sailing times, an outcome of use of well-functioning overland mail connections. The inquiry of dispatch times from Lisbon, Cadiz and Livorno indicate that there was a clear decline in dispatch times. However, as regards the frequency and reliability of reporting, the consul’s personality and determinants out of his control, such as wars, epidemics, natural preconditions, et cetera, appears to be more important factors of information transmission than institutions.

As Westerman’s treatise from 1768 shows there was demand for business information, and by that time the situation was perceived as unsatisfactory. Better and more systematic information was required to develop Swedish trade and shipping. However, we know rather little about the distribution and use of consular reports in Sweden. Formally consular service was a part of the Board of Trade and consequently the board was the addressee of consular reports. However, there are also few consular reports in extent in Sweden’s Foreign Office archives (Diplomatica), which indicates that they either were sent directly to the Foreign Office, or were forwarded there from the Board of Trade.

It seems that the major channel of information distribution from the Board of Trade was the link between this institution and the Stockholm Merchant Association (Grosshandelssocteten). This

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25 The dispatch times in the appendix are extracted from consular reports in the archives of the Board of Trade (BoT SNA). The data collection is not systematic, yet useful for the long-term development of dispatch times.
26 Richard Söderström to BoT, 28 February 1794, Richard Söderströms depescher 1789-1799. Diplomatica, Americana, vol 1, SNA.
27 Almqvist (1912-15), pp. 28-30. For example, Richard Söderström’s correspondence is divided between the collection Diplomatica, Americana, and Consular Reports, Philadelphia 1798-1826, E vol. 374
Association was a guild of Stockholm’s wholesale merchants and it represented Sweden’s true mercantile elite. The group was politically influential not only because of its links with important state institutions, such as the Board of Trade, but also due the Stockholm merchants’ position in the estate of burghers. In the period 1719-1772, the Age of Liberty, the Swedish parliament (riksdag) dominated the kingdom’s political life and the estate of burghers was one of the most influential and most active political arenas. This gave the mercantile elite opportunity to shape Sweden’s economic policy and exploit it for own benefit.28

As regards the consular service, the Stockholm Merchant Association was consulted frequently, for example, in appointment policy. Applications for consular service had to be sent to the Board of Trade that appointed consuls and established new consulates. However, the Board of Trade always requested the Stockholm Merchant Association for a statement on the applications, and it usually followed the Association’s recommendation. The Association kept this exclusive right to comment on applicants until 1813.29 First then it became possible even for other port towns and other Swedish mercantile communities to comment on appointments and other consular affairs. The Association’s grip of appointment policy explains why so many consuls had tight commercial and family contacts with the members of Stockholm mercantile elite and—if this was not the case—why such consuls frequently got in troubles with Stockholm merchants.

One such a consul was Anders Bachmanson (Nordencrantz), the consul in Lisbon between 1727 and 1738. Bachmanson’s appointment to Lisbon was a political reward of the parliament; it had not been backed by the powerful Stockholm Association. Hence, Bachmanson lacked useful commercial connections to the Stockholm merchant elite. This made his situation in Lisbon difficult. As honorary consul he was dependent on consulate fees and his firm’s business. Yet, as he lacked the contacts with leading Swedish merchant houses his capability to carry out profitable trade and require fees were limited. His reports to the Board of Trade include many suggestions how to make his position in Lisbon stronger. For example, he proposed to monopolise all Swedish trade with Portugal in a new trading company, under the consul’s (his) leadership. And he required an increase in consulate fees. After a few years he got in drawn-out conflict with the Stockholm merchant elite, concerning fees and salt prices and in 1738 he was forced to leave his consulate. He was replaced by Arvid Arfwedson, a member of the old Stockholm merchant family.30

Another illustration of the internal rivalries in Swedish consular service was the career of Richard Söderström, Sweden’s first consul to the United States. Söderström was a member a known Gothenburg merchant family with significant commercial interest in Atlantic trade. This probably was the reason why he was, already in 1780, in Boston and why he was three years later appointed a Swedish consul at that port. Yet he lacked the connections with the Stockholm Merchant Association, which sought to develop the Swedish Atlantic trade in different mode; the Swedish West India Company founded in 1786 was a Stockholm based company. The conflict between Söderström on the one hand and the Stockholm Merchant Association on the other hand became apparent in 1792, when the consul applied for an extension of his consulate into a general consulate for the United States. Then, in its reply to Söderström’s application, the

Association questioned his ability to conduct his consular duties, and necessity of a Swedish consul in the United States in general.31

The contacts between the Stockholm Merchant Association and the Board of Trade show that the Association’s members had impact on important decisions concerning the consular service (appointment issues, extension of consulate districts, consulate fees and similar). Another less evident indicator of the connection was Stockholm’s position in Sweden’s trade in southern Europe. For example, between 50 and 80 per cent of Stockholm’s exports of sawn timber were destined for southern Europe, in spite of the fact that there were nearer markets and in spite of the bad economy of the timber-carrying business.32 This inconsistency might be explained by the link between timber exports and tramp shipping. Timber trading merchants were often also shipowners of vessels carrying the timber. Most probably this was a way of covering the comparatively high freight costs in timber trade, and at the same time employing vessels’ carrying capacity. Such combination was typical for Stockholm. Other Swedish ports exported sawn timber mainly to the Baltic and to Britain, in other words to the areas with very few Swedish consuls. It reveals that Stockholm merchants and shipowners benefited from consular services more than merchants from other towns.

However, the connections between the Stockholm Merchant Association, the Board of Trade and consuls were not exclusive and they changed during the time. There is plenty of evidence that the Swedish consuls in southern Europe did facilitate Sweden’s overall commerce. And it seems also that, especially after the fall of the Hat regime in 1765/66 and during the Gustavian period (1772-1809), the consular service was used by many more Swedish actors.

Another way to distribute the information from consular reports was print, but this kind of prints appeared in Sweden first in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1858 the first extracts from the consular reports were published in the annual reports of the Swedish Board of Trade.33

It is difficult to find direct evidence of the use of consular reports in everyday business of Swedish merchants and shipowners. Nevertheless, there is an apparent connection between establishment of consular services in southern Europe in the first half of the eighteenth century and the rising activities of Swedish merchants and shipowners in that area.34 In this development the information forwarded by consuls, both in their position as commission agents and representatives of the state, did play an important role.

Conclusion

Reporting from Swedish consuls embodied a large amount of business information. This information had basically two purposes: first, to provide the Swedish Board of Trade with information about conditions of trade, mainly market situation for Swedish commodities and services abroad; and second, to provide Swedish merchants, shipowners and other actors in foreign trade with serviceable information. In the first case, information became an important tool in the Board of Trade’s work, and a tool in shaping Sweden’s trade policy. In the second case, it is more difficult to assess the practical impact of the information, yet it seems that the information reached mainly the Swedish actors with special interest in trade and shipping in

31 Richard Söderström to BoT, 20 December 1792, Stockholm Merchant Association to BoT, 6 August 1793. Boston, E VI a 54, BoT SNA.
southern Europe. Stockholm’s unique position within this trade indicates that information was aimed for the members of the Stockholm Merchant Association.

This information was not for free. The establishment and maintenance of the consular service in southern Europe and North Africa were upheld at substantial expenditure and merchants and shipowners were supposed to pay it via foreign trade duties (so-called extra licenten) and consulade fees. The consular system in the Barbary States, in particular, was a costly institution. Gifts to the Barbary rulers, convoying and salaried consular service required large amount of money. In reality, the collected duties and fees had never been adequate for the system’s expenditure, and time after time the state had made up for the deficiency.35

Because the group of merchants who benefited from the system was limited to the merchants and shipowners trading in southern Europe but all merchants involved in foreign trade had to pay duties (extra licenten), the system had been continuously criticised.36 Yet, in spite of the heavy criticism, the system continued to exist even during the nineteenth century. This indicates that the consular service had been perceived as a necessary institution, and consuls’ reporting was valued as an important source of business information.

35 Karl Åmark, Sveriges statsfinanser, 1719-1809, del 1-3, (Stockholm 1961), pp. 752-775.
36 Especially during the turbulent 1760s some political thinkers required the abolishment of the system, see Anders Chydenius, Källan till Rikets Wan-magt (Stockholm 1765).
Appendix: Dispatch times for consular reports, between Stockholm and Lisbon, Livorno, Cadiz, Boston/Philadelphia and London, 1711-1810

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<th>Year</th>
<th>Cadiz</th>
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| median | 45 | 28 | 37 | 97 | 18 |

Source: Consular reports, Swedish National Archives, Stockholm

Notes: The dispatch times between ports (consular districts) and Stockholm are calculated from the differences between the dates of writing of the report and the dates of the receipt at the Board of Trade in Stockholm, normally noted in the letter. Sweden moved to the Gregorian calendar first in 1753, which means that additional 11 days had to be added to the dispatch times before 1753. The selection of reports, employed in the Appendix, has been made for other purposes, therefore the appendix is not a systematic analysis of the consular archives in extent. In spite of this limitation, the table provides a useful picture of the dispatch times from different ports in the course of the eighteenth century, and it confirms the long-term decline in dispatch times. Wartime periods caused long dispatch times. There was also a marked seasonal variation in dispatch times. Reports dispatched in autumn or winter months reached Stockholm later than reports dispatched in spring or summer.