

# Imperial Asiatic Company in Trieste – The Last Attempt of the Habsburg Monarchy to Penetrate East Indian Trade 1781-1785

Michal Wanner

The history of the Central European Habsburg monarchy is, in the general sense, perceived and interpreted as the history of a continental power with a wide spectre of interests, reaching from the Western and Central Europe up to the Balkans. This opinion is doubtless justified though it does not mean that the ambitions did not exist, in the policies of the governing dynasty or of the Viennese governing circles, to overstep this framework of political and economic relations and, after the model of Western maritime powers, to penetrate the field of the overseas trade and colonial expansion as well. Quite the contrary. The effort to take a step in this direction was repeated several times in the development of the monarchy. As regards the relations with Asia, the plans of Johann Joachim Becher to establish an Indian company should be mentioned,<sup>1</sup> the existence of the Vienna Oriental Company for the Trade in South-East Europe in 1667-1683,<sup>2</sup> the negotiations with the electors, with the imperial cities and with Spain about the establishment of a joint East-India Company in 1660-1661<sup>3</sup>, the founding of Oriental Company in 1719, or the activities of the Ostend Company in 1722-1731,<sup>3</sup> sacrificed to ensure the British

---

<sup>1</sup> Krüger H., Plans for the Foundation of an East India Company in Brandenburg-Prussia in the Second Half of the Seventeenth Century, in: Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Orientforschung der Deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin 63 (1968), p. 126

<sup>2</sup> Fajkmajer K., Zur Geschichte der ersten orientalischen Kompagnie, MIÖG 30, 1909, p. 654-658

<sup>3</sup> Baels J. E., De Oostendse Compagnie, Oostende 1972; de Burbure de Wesembeek A., Grandeur et Décadence de la Compagnie Impériale et Royale des Indes, dite Compagnie d'Ostende, Oostende 1956; Crokaert J., La Compagnie d'Ostende, Oostende 1918; Hertz G. B., England and the Ostend Company, English Historical Review 22/1907, p. 255-279; Huisman M., La Belgique Commerciale sous l'Empereur Charles VI: La Compagnie d'Ostende, Bruxelles-Paris 1902; Lanoye R., l'Épopée Ostendaise, Oostende 1964; Lefèvre G., De Indische Compagnie van Oostende, Oostende 1925; Mertens L., La Compagnie d'Ostende, in: Bulletin de la Société Royale de Géographie d'Anvers, VI/1881; Parmentier J., Degryse K., Maritime Aspects of the Ostend Trade to Mocha, India and China 1715-1732, in: Bruijn J., Gaastra F., Ships, Sailors and Spices. East India Companies and their

recognition of the pragmatic sanction. The very success of the Ostend Company remained an example worth following in Vienna, but it was necessary to take into account the second Vienna Treaty of 16<sup>th</sup> March 1731 wherein Austria contractually undertook to send no expeditions to Asia from the Netherlands.<sup>4</sup> A new initiative towards the establishment of an Austrian import company specialized in Asian products took place during the reign of Maria Theresa.

In Vienna large quantities were sold of Indian and Chinese merchandise. Influential statesmen around the Empress such as Chancellor Duke Kaunitz, President of the Privy Commercial Council Count Leopold Kolowrat (Krakovský), Privy Councillors Binder and Raab and later Vice-chancellor Count Philip Cobenzl considered the overseas trade very profitable and beneficial to the country. They believed the overseas trade would distinctly support the development of Trieste as the largest seaport of the monarchy. The emphasis on development of this seaport was determined by the fact that the main commercial routes of the monarchy were oriented northwards and northwestwards, and Hamburg served as the main seaport for the countries of Austria. But these routes were more and more blocked by the policies of Prussia.<sup>5</sup>

The initiators of this project were from the beginning aware of a number of obstacles. The problem was in the inconvenient geographical position and in the imminent danger to Austrian ships by North Africa pirates. They did not pin their hopes to a large, state supported commercial company as the establishment of such

---

Shipping in the 16.-18.Centuries, Amsterdam 1993; Parmentier J., *De holle compagnie. Smokkel en legale handel onder Zuidnederlandse vlag in Bengalen, ca. 1720-1744*, Hilversum 1992; Pergameni H., *La compagnie d'Ostende*, Bruxelles 1902; Wanner M., *The Ostend Company as Phenomenon of International politics in 1722-1731*, in: Prague PHIR 2006, s. 29-63; Wanner M., *The Establishment of the General Company in Ostend in the Context of the Habsburg Maritime Plans 1714-1723*, in: Prague PHIR 2007, s. 33-62

<sup>4</sup> Horn B., Ransome M. (ed.), *English Historical Documents*, vol. X, 1714-1783, London 1957, p. 224

<sup>5</sup> Faber E., *Trieste and the Austrian Littoral 1700-1850*, in: Luc F., Isaacs A. K., (ed.), *The Sea in European History*, Pisa 2001, p. 57-70

an entity might have provoked negative reactions of Great Britain and France. Austria was moreover one of the main buyers for the colonial merchandise of the English East India Company and the English might thus lose a lucrative business. These factors evoked a prudential approach in Vienna followed by indecisiveness, whenever a concrete proposal was put on the table.<sup>6</sup>

In 1744 an Englishman, James Mill, presented an unusual plan to Franz Stephan of Lorraine. The plan calculated with seizing a former Austrian factory at Bankibazar in Bengal, followed by the capture of the whole province with a force of 1500 to 2000 soldiers. At that time the English had only several factories in the area; other European settlements were also too poor armed to venture a conflict with the administrator of Bengal. Franz Stephan of Lorraine, Grand Duke of Tuscany, accepted the proposal. Three ships were dispatched from Leghorn and returned with the news that Bankibazar is occupied by a faujdar (police officer) of Hugli. As a consequence of this the idea was judged too risky and Franz Stephan let the project fall. Undoubtedly a very risky adventure was involved, in addition directed at establishing colonies in grand style, what was contrary to the objectives of the Viennese circles.<sup>7</sup>

In October 1774 William Bolts, a former official of the English East India Company, turned up at Count Belgiojoso, Austrian ambassador in London. He offered to set up direct trade between Trieste and East Asia and asked for nothing more than shipping documents and several letters of recommendation to Indian princes. The Austrian ambassador, who exerted a strong influence on the Vienna Court, yielded to Bolts' arguments. He informed Vienna and Chancellor Kaunitz fell

---

<sup>6</sup> Horvath M., Zimmermann H., *Österreich maritim, Die frühen Jahre*, Wien 1995, p. 6

<sup>7</sup> Zechlin E., *Völker und Mere*, Leipzig 1944, p. 213

for the idea. He invited Bolts to Vienna on condition that he travel secretly, under a false name, to arise no suspicion in England.<sup>8</sup>

Bolts was born in 1740 in Amsterdam, the son of German parents. The family lived in Lisbon where in 1755 an earthquake deprived them of all property. With 19 years of age Bolts joined the English East India Company. At first he worked in Benares, later in Dhaka. Thanks to his commercial and organizational capabilities he soon acquired a considerable property, but for his rash and thoughtless behaviour he soon became very unpopular. He got into conflict with the management in Calcutta, which tried to restrict the exorbitant economic independence of the Company employees. Bolts was sacked but did not wish to leave India and so long hesitated with the sale of his property until this was confiscated. Bolts was forcibly transferred to Europe and in London further conducted his lawsuit for damages against the East India Company. We can only speculate about the real motives of Bolts' entry in the Austrian service. Bolts for sure knew the Bengal plans of James Mill and utilized the readiness of Vienna to establish an East India Company. His motive might have been to get back to Calcutta in this way and try to recover his lost property.<sup>9</sup>

Bolts undoubtedly knew the drawbacks of Triest position but it was clear to him that Vienna's primary desire was to boost the trade in this city. From 1766 on the East India Company (Ostindische Compagnie) existed there, entitled to issue export licenses for domestic products. In 1771 it was renamed Triestier Compagnie. But

---

<sup>8</sup> Pollack-Parnau F. von, Eine österr.-ostindische Handelskompagnie 1775-1785, Beiträge zur österreichischen Wirtschaftsgeschichte unter Maria Theresia und Joseph II, in: Vierteljahresschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte, XII Beiheft, Stuttgart 1927, p. 8-9

<sup>9</sup> Langendorf J. J., Die Grosse Fahrt, Forscher und Entdecker der Monarchie 1400-1918, Wien 1996, p. 37-38

Bolts was at that time the only person who succeeded in establishing a commercial company and making it to the dreamed-of India.<sup>10</sup>

At the beginning of May 1775 Bolts turned up in Vienna as Lopez, a Portuguese trader. The negotiations with the Austrian authorities and Chancellor Kaunitz took a whole month but passed very positively for Bolts. Most of the above mentioned ministers and officials supported the project. Only Count Franz Anton Kolowrat (Novohradský), President of Commercial Concessions in Mintage and Montane Affairs, and Count Blümegen, President of the Czech-Austrian Privy Council, took a negative stance. Maria Theresa declared: "*It would be a great achievement, if successful*",<sup>11</sup> but the Emperor and Co-ruler Joseph II took a more sceptical attitude. Bolts obtained Austrian citizenship, the rank of colonel and on 5<sup>th</sup> June 1775 also the official licence to conduct direct trade between the Adriatic seaports of the monarchy and India, Persia and China. Via Triest the merchandise from the hereditary countries should have been exported and tea, spice, rice and chinaware imported. To finance the Austrian exports Bolts wanted to obtain bank guarantees in the Netherlands, as his resources were depleted by the purchase of a single English ship at 28 000 £. With a recommendation from Duke Heinrich Adam Starhemberg Bolts approached the Antwerp banker Karl Proli, whose father was one of the main shareholders of the Ostend Company.<sup>12</sup>

Proli entered the offered venture at once and enabled, together with two other Antwerp partners Borrokens and Nagel, the financing of the expedition. Since the ship purchased was still in England and any delay was costly, Bolts abandoned the idea to load the merchandise in Triest and chose Leghorn as the main strategic point

---

<sup>10</sup> Horvath M., Zimmermann H., op. cit., p. 66

<sup>11</sup> Quoted by Randa A., Maria Theresias Asienkompagnie, in: Österreich in Übersee, Wien-München 1966, p. 74

<sup>12</sup> Huisman M., op. cit., p. 180, 200

for the venture, as it was on the territory of Grand Duke Leopold of Tuscany, the second son of Maria Theresa. Banker Proli and the Chancellery viewed this project as highly risky. Proli now tried to remove Bolts from managing the business, but the voyage could not be realized without him. When William Bolts mediated proposals for securities from English banks, Proli prevented the acceptance thereof. He tried to push through the establishment of a larger East India Company. But this objective did not coincide with the intentions of Vienna. Chancellor Kaunitz did not accept the bankers' proposals for a larger company. Thus an adverse atmosphere among the participants arose just at the beginning of the journey.<sup>13</sup>

On 14<sup>th</sup> March 1776 the ship *Earl of Lincoln* sailed from London under the English flag. When on the open sea, the ship's name was changed to *Joseph und Theresia* and the Austrian flag hoisted. The crew sensed the voyage was not bound just for Leghorn and started to rebel. But Bolts mastered the situation. The worse thing was that with the change of name and flag the ship also lost its English insurance. In the meantime Austrian authorities caused problems on account of the unresolved issue of securities. Only when banker Proli took the uncovered 121 000 guldens security upon himself, the rifles, guns and copper were sent to Leghorn. Finally in April 1776 everything was collected in Leghorn including the 20 required soldiers though these were, at the express wish of Emperor Josef II, Protestants and not "*subjects from the hereditary countries*", because "*native human resources*" are not destined for tricks.<sup>14</sup> Josef II actually considered Bolts' activities worthless. Though he signed the letters of recommendation to the Chinese emperor, Shah of Persia and several Indian princes that Bolts asked for,<sup>15</sup> the prudent attitude of

---

<sup>13</sup> Pollack-Parnau F. von, op. cit., p. 25-28

<sup>14</sup> Quoted by Horvath M., Zimmermann H., op. cit., p. 67

<sup>15</sup> Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv (further only HHStA), Kompagnie in Triest und Antwerpen 1775-1792, Kart. 3, Note der Hofkanzlei an die Staatskanzlei mit Rückstellung von 12 von Wilhelm Bolts

Vienna was evidenced by the issue of placatory messages spread abroad by Austrian diplomats which gave assurance that: *“the objective (of the expedition) is to cut the losses incurred upon us each year by trade with India. It is not launched from the Flanders as the Treaties prohibit this. The first unloading and sale will take place in seaports on the coast of Austria.”*<sup>16</sup>

In the meantime two months passed in Leghorn by reloading the cargo and hiring the sailors. On 24<sup>th</sup> September 1776 everything was ready. With the protective escort of Tuscan frigate Etruria and the Grand Duke on board, ship *Joseph und Theresia* left Leghorn. By the log of ship doctor Nicolaus Fontana 155 men were on board. At the last minute Bolts yielded to the enticement of his business partner Proli and signed an agreement where he undertook to stay in India for 3 ½ years, whereas Proli should have dispatched three ships within this time. These clauses in the contract enabled Proli to breach the contract, to require the same state concessions as Bolts asked for, and to send ships to India regardless of Bolts. He could thus for his own ends exploit all the benefits negotiated by Bolts in Vienna.<sup>17</sup>

The ship *Joseph und Theresia* sailed through the Strait of Gibraltar. On Madeira the local Portuguese governor, very likely on English initiative, tried to ban Bolts from buying wine. After a short diplomatic shoot-out the ship disappeared for more than a year from the European horizon. It set the course for Rio de Janeiro where the crew celebrated Christmas. The voyage continued through South Atlantic, around Tristan da Cunha Archipelago towards the Cape of Good Hope.<sup>18</sup>

---

uneröffnet zurückgestellten Empfehlungsschreiben Kaiserin Maria Theresias an ostindische Fürsten aus den Jahren 1776/1777

<sup>16</sup> Quoted by Langendorf J. J., op. cit., p. 39

<sup>17</sup> Horvath M., Zimmermann H., op. cit., p. 68

<sup>18</sup> Pollack-Parnau F. von, op. cit., p. 36

In March 1777 Delagoa Bay was reached on the coast of Mozambique. While moving into the river mouth the ship ran aground due to sudden calm. It took 12 days to unload it, remove the rigging, tow it back to the sea and make it seaworthy again. William Bolts was aware of the cost of his involuntary stop. Since the Dutch Cape Town was off limits as an intermediate station for the Austrians, Delagoa Bay was accepted as an ideal strategic point on the journey to India. Once a Portuguese settlement existed here named after its Portuguese discoverer, Lorenzo Marquese, but at the time only African natives lived here. Bolts therefore purchased, on behalf of Maria Theresa, the area on both banks of Maputo River from the local chiefs Raja Muchar Kapel of Tembe, Raja Chibanzan Matol and Raja Bilen Mafum.<sup>19</sup> The ship's crew built St. Joseph and St. Maria forts on both river banks and a settlement on the Iniac Island. Bolts wanted to found gardens to grow indigo, coffee, pepper, wheat, spices, orange trees, coconut palms and opium here, and to have 200 colonists from Austria brought. He asked Vienna in writing for 50 soldiers as well as for tailors, millers, master builders, carpenters, a physician and a priest who would be subject to one governor and three clerks. His request to this date lies unresolved in the proceedings of the Privy Council. William Bolts was able to leave on the place 10 men only, under the leadership of a German, Andreas Daniel Pollet.<sup>20</sup>

On 6<sup>th</sup> September 1777, exactly after a year since the ship set sail from Leghorn, *Joseph und Theresia* reached the West-Indian town of Surat. After initial difficulties Bolts sold the whole cargo here, except for the rifles. The trade nevertheless ended with an essential loss both from the financial and good reputation

---

<sup>19</sup> HHStA, Kompagnie in Triest und Antwerpen 1775-1792, Kart. 2, Verträge mit Negerfürsten über die Abtretung von Macowa und Capell/Fort Joseph, 1777 Mai 7; Arneth A., Geschichte Maria Teresias, Bd. IX, Wien 1879, p. 612

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, Kart. 2, Bericht Bolts' über die Niederlassung in der Delagoabai, 1777 Oktober 18; Kart. 1, Konv. E; Vortrag Bolts's über die Niederlassung am Fluss Mafumo auf der Insel Iniac in der Delagoabai (Ostafrika), 1782 August 20

aspects. Trader Williams evaporated after the first instalment was paid, having covered none of the remaining obligations. It is noteworthy that Bolts did not make any moves in this important matter though he at other times, in rather less important issues, acted with far greater consistency. Thus a suspicion exists that the runaway Williams acted in agreement with Bolts, but there is also a hypothesis that Williams, under orders from a third party, should have delayed and discredited Bolts in Vienna.<sup>21</sup>

The war footing between France and Britain during the war for independence of the American colonies benefited the Austrian enterprise since the Austrian flag utilized the advantage of neutrality in these latitudes. In Goa Bolts signed a trade agreement with the Portuguese. He bought another ship that he called Fürst Kaunitz and sent it to Canton. The ship indeed, after a long voyage with a Chinese cargo, reached Europe. Bolts in the meantime established contacts with the Indian Prince Haidar Ali, ruler of Maisur State situated southwest of the coast of Malabar. Bolts thus built the foundation of Austrian factories on a strong regional position of Haidar Ali, from whom he in August 1778 obtained license to establish unfortified trade factories in three seaports on the Malabar coast: in Karvar, Mangalore and on the Balliapatam Island. Haidar Ali welcomed the help of a new partner in his fight with the British. This policy nevertheless contained the risk that in the case of Haidar Ali's defeat all the factories would be lost.<sup>22</sup>

Only on May 20<sup>th</sup> 1778 did the ship *Joseph and Theresia* leave the Malabar Coast, heading eastwards. It should have built a strategic point on the Nicobar Islands. The extraordinarily favourable strategic position between India and China

---

<sup>21</sup> Horvath M., Zimmermann H., op. cit., p. 70

<sup>22</sup> HHStA, Kompagnie in Triest und Antwerpen 1775-1792, Kart. 1, Konv. G; Memorandum Wilhelm Bolts', der am 5. Juni 1775 eine kaiserrliche Bewilligung zur Einrichtung des Handels nach Ostindien erhalten hatte, 1785 Oktober 4

justified the colonisation attempt on climatically unhealthy islands. The natural harbour on Naukari Island could accommodate 100 ships. Log cabin was built there and Gottfried Stahl, an Austrian, was left on the site with five other men. Since the Nicobar Islands lie on the same geographical latitude as Ceylon, similar fertile soil and successful plantation farming was expected. The islands should also have become a strategic point for trade with China.<sup>23</sup> The islands were at that time in the possession of the Danish Asiatic Company, which after several unsuccessful attempts to populate it brought here in 1760 a group of Moravian Church missionaries from Hernhutt (Ochranov) in Lusatia. When on 6<sup>th</sup> June 1778 the ship *Joseph und Theresia* turned up here, captain Bennet assured the missionaries that Denmark abandoned the islands and that he assumed it on behalf of Empress Maria Theresa.<sup>24</sup> But the settlers refused to be tricked. They rejected their new ruler and sent a message to the Danish government. Danish government raised a protest and Bolts had to defend his good intentions.<sup>25</sup>

On return to the Malabar Coast Bolts heard about the first reactions of other European states to his activities. In Goa, the most important Portuguese seaport in India, protests were gathering against the forts in the Delagoa Bay and stations on the Malabar Coast. Bolts did not get in a stew about it and sailed for Bengal. On the way he also visited the site of a former Komblom (also Kobelon) colony on the Coromandel Coast, founded long ago by the Ostend Company. Except for the church, a priest and one Italian missionary nothing remained there at the time.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Randa A., op. cit., p. 76

<sup>24</sup> HHStA, Kompagnie in Triest und Antwerpen 1775-1792, Kart. 1, Konv. B; Auftrag an Obersleutnant Wilhelm Bolts über die von ihm errichteten Niederlassungen auf der Nikobaren zu berichten, 1782 Juli 8; Konv. C; Memorandum C. T. Brocktorffs über die Nikobaren, 1782 Juli 8; Konv. D; Vortrag Wilhelm Bolts an Kaunitz über die Niederlassung auf der Nikobaren, 1782 August 14

<sup>25</sup> Krieger M.: Kaufleute, Seeräuber und Diplomaten, Der dänische Handel auf dem Indischen Ozean (1620-1868), Wirtschafts- und Sozialhistorische Studien, sv. 8, Köln-Weimar-Wien 1998, p. 227

<sup>26</sup> Horvath M., Zimmermann H., op. cit., p. 71

In Calcutta Bolts pursued his outstanding private affairs for most of the time. He had to pay a considerable bail of 40 000 guildens to avoid jail. Bolts' damaged reputation with the East India Company Board in Calcutta caused a considerable damage to the expedition. English authorities behaved unfriendly, customs office stopped the loading of tropical woods on the Austrian ship. The expedition sailed to Madras where Bolts also bought tropical woods and tea and then set out for the return journey. Due to the bad shape of the ship he was forced to land on the island of Mauritius. Here he bought three ships, sent one back to India and the other two were to accompany him to Europe. In addition he hired several traders to stock the settlement on the Nicobar Islands with goods, but this illusory agreement was never implemented.<sup>27</sup>

Two years passed and nothing was heard of the expedition in Vienna. In the meantime banker Poli worked to improve his position. He was elevated to the rank of count and negotiated and with the Privy Council the granting of monopoly to mine copper and mercury in all the Austrian Netherlands. Finally the news came about Bolts, that he was shipwrecked off Delagoa Bay. Many already considered Bolts lost when finally the news came of the expedition's arrival to India. Bolts' Antwerp partners smelled an opportunity for closing rather great deals in the course of the Anglo-French sea warfare. They did not want to get engaged in the build-up of factories, they only wanted to exploit the existing boom to their advantage. From the Lorient seaport in Brittany they dispatched a ship to China in spite of the fact that the Viennese government had not been informed about it. This ship was also christened Duke Kaunitz. In July 1779 the first ship from Asia arrived to Leghorn. It was *Kaunitz* (so-called small one), sent by Bolts back from India. Grand Duke Leopold personally

---

<sup>27</sup> Pollack-Parnau F. von, op. cit., p. 48-49

turned up in the harbour to examine the exotic cargo – tea, spices, silk and superb textiles. Both the crew and the captain were English and were not keen on proceeding in the long journey to Trieste. They therefore had the ship anchored in Leghorn.<sup>28</sup>

With the arrival of the first ship from India the issue of the establishment of a trade company emerged. Proli and Kaunitz succeeded in convincing Emperor Joseph II about it. In the meantime the news spread of the Bolts' affair with trader Williams. Also the negative balance of the first expedition was beyond doubt because Bolts spent on ships all the funds for which he could have bought goods. But the news of the establishment of factories sounded exceedingly positively and convinced Kaunitz to support the dispatch of further ships to India, with the aim of maintaining the new factories there. The ships should have been dispatched from Trieste but Proli found no suitable vessel in the town, and further problems appeared with the financing of cargo. Kaunitz himself was already in September 1779 of the opinion that only Dutch traders are able to accomplish such a far-reaching venture with success. But this did not coincide with the requirement that the trade be conducted from Trieste. No unity also prevailed regarding the legal status of the new company. The Trieste group, headed by the city governor Count Zinzendorf, a booster of free trade, gave preference to a small company without privileges, quite the contrary to Karl Proli's views. The hidden reason was the protection of local traders' personal interests.<sup>29</sup>

In autumn 1780 Proli's ship *Kaunitz* (so-called big one) arrived from India to Trieste. It was the first arrival of a ship from Asia in this seaport. The unusual size of this 1200-ton ship and its remarkable cargo attracted great attention: tea, 200 cases

---

<sup>28</sup> Horvath M., Zimmermann H., op. cit., p. 75

<sup>29</sup> Kaltenstadler W., Der österreichische Seehandel über Trieste im 18. Jahrhundert, Bd. 55, 1968, Bd. 56, 1969; quotation Bd. 55, p. 54

of raw silk, 40 cases of cinnamon, spices, tropical woods, blue and multicoloured chinaware. In May 1781 Bolts' ships arrived in Leghorn – *Joseph und Theresia* and smaller ships *Binder* and *Kollowrath*. Bolts was open to sharp criticism by his partner Proli for not sending any other ships and hesitated over proceeding to Triest. William Bolts at long last realized that Triest was not large enough for the sale there of a major quantity of colonial merchandise within realistic period and with reasonable profit.<sup>30</sup>

In his power struggle against Proli Bolts gained the support of Leopold, Grand Duke of Tuscany who, as it seemed, wanted to wage a prestige struggle with his brother, Emperor Joseph II. Bolts was more acceptable for him as he preferred Leghorn while Proli favoured Triest. Both Bolts and Proli wanted to proceed in the business but had not sufficient funds, and creditors even seized their three ships.<sup>31</sup>

But the Emperor in the meantime revised his opinion on the maritime trade, based on the events of the American war for independence and his visit in the Austrian Netherlands, which took place in May to July 1781. The burghers of Antwerp headed by Count Proli welcomed Joseph II before the city and led his state shallop to Schelde. The Emperor was personally instrumental in reconciling Bolts with Proli. He held talks with both groups what eventually led to some conciliation. The Antwerp group paid all the debts incurred by Bolts on behalf of the Company both in Europe and in India, for which Bolts renounced his share of profit on the expedition. The Austrian Netherlands had an excellent starting position in neutral maritime trade, but its development was hampered by the clause about the closure of Schelde to foreign trade, in line with the agreement on the barriers dated November 15, 1715. The key

---

<sup>30</sup> Pavelka H., *English-österreichische Wirtschaftsbeziehungen in der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Wiener Forschungen zur Wirtschafts und Sozialgeschichte 1968, p. 51

<sup>31</sup> HHStA, *Kompagnie in Triest und Antwerpen 1775-1792*, Kart. 2; *Vorträge der Staatskanzlei und Handschreiben über die Vorschläge Bolts' und Prolis über eine Ostindische Handelsgesellschaft, den Handel nach Afrika, Ostindien und China, 1774-1784*

issue was therefore the annulment of this provision in November 1781, declared against Dutch opposition.<sup>32</sup>

In spite of that on 27<sup>th</sup> August a new public limited company was founded in Antwerp with the property interests of the Antwerp group, the Triest group and Bolts, called Société Imperiale Asiatique de Triest.<sup>33</sup> Bolts was to conduct the affairs concerning Triest, Leghorn and the Adriatic, the remaining business affairs should have remained in Antwerp. But the disputes between Bolts and the Antwerp group soon emerged again. Proli forbade his ships to stop at the Indian factories and strategic points in Africa and on the Nicobar Islands. The Antwerp traders moreover bought three new ships intended to conduct trade with Mauritius and Canton. In 1783 the Company already sent 12 ships to India, and the next year 5 of them returned to Ostend laden primarily with Chinese teas. Triest and Leghorn remained unaffected by such activities; the Company only utilized the Austrian flag for its own deals.<sup>34</sup>

The factories were declining under such circumstances. The Portuguese destroyed the forts in Delagoa Bay and took prisoner the Austrians present. Later an administrative centre of the Portuguese Mozambique arose on the site, the town of Lourenco-Marquez, now Maputo. The attempts to colonize the Nicobar Islands ended with disease and lack of food. In 1783 a Danish ship took the Austrian settlers away to India. Moravian Brethren followed them four years later.<sup>35</sup> The remnants of the Austrian fort could allegedly be seen until 1875. In Vienna the news of the doom of

---

<sup>32</sup> Fink H., Joseph II., Düsseldorf-Wien-New York 1990, p. 163

<sup>33</sup> HHStA, Kompagnie in Triest und Antwerpen 1775-1792, Kart. 1, Konv. A; Aktenstücke über die Verleihung des kaiserlichen Octrois für Graf Carlo Proli zur Errichtung einer Ostindischen Handelskompagnie, 17

<sup>34</sup> Ibidem, Kart. 3, Korrespondenz der Staatskanzlei mit Hofstellen und Gubernien in Angelegenheiten der Kompanis, 1774-1783; Korrespondenz der Staatskanzlei mit den Generalgouverneuren in Brüssel in Angelegenheiten der Kompagnie, 1781, 1787 (Ibidem); Korrespondenz der Staatskanzlei mit der Kompagnie 1782-1786 (Kart. 6, Konv. G-L)

<sup>35</sup> Ibidem, Kart. 1, Konv. H; Bericht des Kapitäns Wilhelm Immens über die kaiserlichen Niederlassungen in Ostindien, 1785 Dezember 18, Antwerpen

the settlement was accepted without comments. Ominous news spread to Vienna also from the Malabar Coast. The war between Haidar Ali and the English was a fait accompli. Kaunitz and Emperor Joseph II subsequently calmed down their interest in the East India Company. After James Cook's return from the voyage around the world Bolts bought a new ship in England, *Cobenzl*, and revelled in Utopian plans for a similar enterprise and founding of missionary posts in Alaska, but to no effect. In practice he was more and more pushed in the background. The Antwerp group lost three ships within a year and the Privy Council refused to decide about further credits. In Vienna itself the ministers became convinced that the maritime trade as pursued from Triest did not achieve its aim. After the 1783 Peace Treaty of Versailles the Company lost the advantage of neutrality and the drop in tea prices dealt it a severe blow.<sup>36</sup> The ten-year period of the imperial prerogative granted to Bolts was running out and the business balance was negative. In 1785 the Company showed a loss between 3 to 4 million guildens. Karl Proli committed suicide; a series of bankruptcies and judicial trials followed. Proli's art collection and ships were sold at auction in Ostend. The Emperor did nothing to save the Company though he was overheard to say that such a type of trade was interesting for the state. Now he blamed Proli for the bankruptcy. Bolts shared this view. He published a document wherein he vindicated himself by an artful description of events presented from his viewpoint and by a cunning selection of documents, which in most cases discharged him from liability. Bolts left for Paris, where he died in an almshouse in 1808.<sup>37</sup>

What happened to the Austrian factories on the Malabar Coast? Balliapatam was conquered and destroyed by Raja of Karaikkal during the war with Haidar's son, Sultan Tipu. Karvar and Mangalore were occupied by the British in the war with

---

<sup>36</sup> Pollack-Parnau F. von, op. cit., p. 73-89

<sup>37</sup> Ibidem, p. 89-102

Haidar Ali. The factories nevertheless remained intact and negotiations with the English showed that further conduct of business was possible. Fyfe, the resident in Mangalore, left for Europe to find out what should be done. The Government Office hesitated to adopt any decision. In Ostend a group of private entrepreneurs, headed by Viscount de Walkiers, succeeded in arranging a privately funded expedition. What a large public limited company could not achieve, now individual traders could accomplish. Soon a stable trade was established between Ostend and the factories in Karvar and Mangalore. The trade was limited to India, as Canton could not be visited because of the extensive debts of the Bolts' Company. Triest did not participate in the overseas trade any more and Austria did not initiate any further attempts in this direction.<sup>38</sup>

Why was this Austrian experiment with the overseas trade a failure? Triest's unfavourable position contributed to it, with difficult access from both the inland and the sea. Neither the Alpine countries nor Tuscany could serve as the outlet for major quantities of colonial merchandise; large centres of the monarchy lay behind the Alps only.<sup>39</sup>

Major consumers of this merchandise were the Austrian Netherlands, as evidenced by the profitable result of the Ostend expedition after 1785. From the Habsburg point of view the Austrian Netherlands nevertheless lay outside the heart of the realm, and were rather a territorial barter object in the power play than a primary base for commercial or colonial expansion. The indecisiveness of the state was also determined by the unwillingness to defend the interests of the Company face to face with the maritime powers. In addition Bolts' activities were too fragmented and his private war against the English created unfavourable conditions for the Company.

---

<sup>38</sup> Horvath M., Zimmermann H., op. cit., p. 80

<sup>39</sup> Faber E., op. cit., p. 60-61

Internal conflicts with the Antwerp group were of essential importance. Bolts moreover came late with his plan. The European competitors were too strong already, the financial basis and support of the bourgeois classes weak except for the Austrian Netherlands, and the state support, for the above reasons, too indecisive to meet with success.