

THE BRITISH NAVY,
RIJEKA AND
A. L. ADAMIĆ

*WAR AND TRADE IN THE
ADRIATIC 1800-25*

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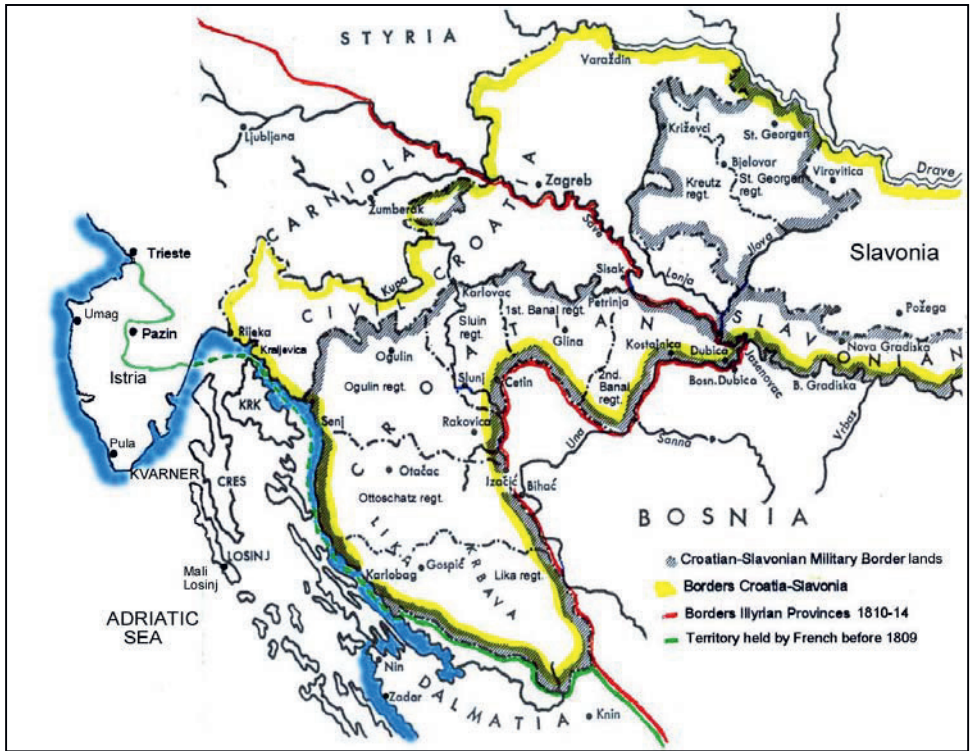
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CONTENTS

The Arrival of John Leard in Rijeka, 1802	1
Nelson, Convoys and Naval Supplies, 1803-04	4
The Oak Timber Project	10
The War of the Third Coalition	18
Trade War, 1806-9	23
The War of 1809	37
Travels, 1810-12	45
The Timber Contract of 1812	53
Adamić's Return to Rijeka, 1812	57
The Aborted Insurrection, February-April 1813	62
The British Attack on Rijeka, July 1813	65
Nugent liberates Rijeka, August 1813	72
Adamić's Return to Rijeka, Autumn 1813	78
The End of the War	84
Leard's Return to Rijeka, July 1814	86
The Last Timber Contract, 1818-20	93
Epilogue	97



Croatia 1809-14

THE ARRIVAL OF JOHN LEARD IN RIJEKA, 1802

Research in British archives yields a wealth of detailed documentation on British activity in the Adriatic during the Napoleonic wars and their aftermath. Although some link documents are lost or difficult to trace, it is possible to re-establish long sequences of correspondence. As far as Rijeka is concerned, what emerges is the long (from about 1800-1820) but not always happy or fortunate relationship between the merchant, A. L. Adamić, John Leard, and the British Navy Board, within the context of the ebb and flow of the wars, and the commercial, diplomatic and military activity of the British in the Adriatic.

To maintain the naval supremacy that guaranteed its survival, Great Britain needed timber and other products, such as hemp, canvas and tar, to build new warships in its dockyards at home, or to keep them seaworthy and in good repair when in service. Such naval stores usually came from the Baltic, but changing circumstances (especially when Russia was strictly neutral or an ally of France) could endanger this supply. In the Mediterranean, far away from the Baltic, the main British arsenal or dockyard at Malta needed constantly to look for closer sources of essential supplies to repair the fleet in the Mediterranean, which was almost constantly at sea, whether blockading enemy ports or guarding against further French expansion against Sicily or the Ottoman empire.

The British navy was governed by a committee of Lord Commissioners of the Admiralty, but its everyday administration, including the building, repair and supplying of its warships, was the responsibility of the Navy Board, which came under the

The Arrival of John Leard in Rijeka, 1802

Admiralty. The Navy Board maintained a network overseas of agents to negotiate the purchase or control the quality of its naval supplies. These were usually master mariners or shipwrights, with the necessary expertise.

John Leard was one such master mariner. Born about 1757 he received his warrant as master with the rank of junior lieutenant in the Royal Navy in 1780. In 1793-99 he was given command of an experimental “ambi navigator” vessel, KENT, which was possibly the first sailing ship to try to use steam power. He then commanded the navy storeship EMPRESS MARY, taking supplies to the Mediterranean and the West Indies. But in 1802, on the death of its agent in Rijeka, a Mr Ulny, Leard was sent to Rijeka to sort out the Navy Board’s affairs. This was during the only short interval of peace from March 1802 to May 1803 in the long war from 1793-1814 between Britain and France. Austria had also been at peace with France from February 1801. Under these more promising circumstances, Leard must have liked the look of Rijeka, because in 1802 he bought a house there (without the knowledge or approval of the Navy Board, although it was so satisfied with Leard’s handling of the late Mr Ulny’s business that they decided to leave him there as their agent).

On his arrival in Rijeka, Leard must have immediately met Adamić, who at least from 1800 was supplying the Navy Board. The first appearance of Adamić in British archives is in a letter from the Foreign Office to the British ambassador in Vienna, Lord Minto, dated 5 December 1800. Adamić was described as a respectable merchant of Vienna who had offered to contract with the Victualling Board to send 6000 bags of biscuit from Rijeka, or other Austrian ports in the Adriatic, to Malta. Lord Minto was asked to secure the permission of the Austrian authorities.¹

In April 1802, Leard, describing himself as acting agent for the Navy Board, wrote from Rijeka to the Navy Board to say that only 340 of a large consignment of 466 large bales of hemp, to be transported to a British dockyard by order of the commander-in-chief of the British navy in the Mediterranean (Nelson), could be

¹ National Archives (NA), FO 7/61

The Arrival of John Leard in Rijeka, 1802

loaded on the navy store ship DILIGENT at Trieste. The remainder would be brought to Rijeka and loaded on ABUNDANCE. Two other transports, WESTMORELAND and SUCCESS would be loaded at Kraljevica with other unspecified supplies. It would take about £10,000 sterling to settle the balance of the account (a very large sum at that time).² But the Navy Board seems to have changed its mind about the need or desirability of taking all of the hemp, which Leard had procured on its behalf. A delayed letter dated 5 June reached Leard on 14 November 1802 to inform him that the PREVOYANT was being sent out via Malta to Kraljevica to load hemp; but another letter of 15 June instructed him to resell hemp that he had obtained. In his reply of 15 November 1802, Leard informed the Navy Board that for reselling the hemp, he would seek the assistance of Mr Adamić. It is possible that Leard had bought the hemp from Adamić in the first place.³ This is the first reference to Adamić in Leard's letters from Rijeka.

² NA, ADM 106/1559, 23 April 1802

³ Igor Žic in his article on Adamić in *Riječka Luka*, Muzej Grada Rijeke, 2001, says that by 1802 Adamić had become rich from selling hemp to the British navy.