

Gelina Harlaftis. Creating Global Shipping: Aristotle Onassis, the Vagliano Brothers, and the Business of Shipping, c.1820-1970. Cambridge, UK: [Cambridge University Press](#), 2019. xxiv + 375 pp., illustrations, maps, tables, notes, bibliography, appendices, indices. Cloth: ISBN 9781108475396, £90.00, Cdn\$137.50.

A recent addition to the Cambridge Studies in the Emergence of Global Enterprise, *Creating Global Shipping* acknowledges the role of international shipping in the integration and globalization of the world economy. At the same time, the author argues that the sector is “equally invisible in economic and business history” with its emphasis on manufacturing and finance. The larger ship owning enterprises (think East India Company) were trading firms first, while prior to the twentieth century the business of shipping was dominated by small scale firms, whose services were largely provided out of sight. Finally, the modern global shipping groups use multiple hierarchies of offshore companies and open registries to obscure their true dimensions. (xv-xvi). What business histories we have of major shipping firms, have tended to focus on the liner businesses, and their successors in the container trade. But the bulk trades in goods like grain and oil, have traditionally taken different routes across the seas in a much more competitive market. To provide insights into the business of shipping Harlaftis draws on two examples of major Greek shipping entrepreneurs, the Vagliano Brothers and Aristotle Onassis.

The author’s sources demonstrate the challenges of such a research enterprise. In the nearly twenty pages of secondary sources, perhaps three represent work published by the author, frequently with collaborators that drills even more deeply into the primary sources than this volume does. And it cites work in archives in Greece, Russia, Ukraine, the United Kingdom and the United States, amongst others. Sources range from business correspondence, ledgers of the Bank of England, to Russian court filings and the dossiers prepared by agents of the FBI. To this is added a significant amount of genealogical research, to draw out the complex dimensions of the familial networks within which this business was conducted. That said, perhaps most intriguing is the access Harlaftis was given to the corporate records of the Onassis companies.

The Vagliano fortunes, were initially driven by the great expansion of Russian grain exports to western European markets in the mid-nineteenth century (68). Initially, the brothers were ship captains, carrying grain and other goods from Baltic ports into the Mediterranean. They emerged as leading figures in a network of largely non-Russian traders managing the purchase and export of the booming supply of grain from the steppes, with Mari Vagliano positioned on the Sea of Azov near the mouth of the Don, to channel that flow into vessels owned or chartered by the brothers. They moved from the position of managing the flow of their own grain, to providing services, especially to other Greek dry bulk shipping in terms of vessel financing, insurance, chartering, merchant banking and other services. A second brother was first stationed in Constantinople and later Marseilles, whither much of the Russian grain was bound. The third, Panagi Vagliano, operated from London between 1856 and his death in 1902. The London branch of the brothers’ operations was quite successful despite the fact that Panagi neither read nor wrote English well. (73, 96) In the late nineteenth century, the Vagliano Brothers business operated, largely in Greek but occasionally in Italian, in four empires, the Russian, Ottoman, French and British. Harlaftis demonstrates the results of a considerable investigation into the evolution of their network, both in terms of their correspondence with a wide network of

merchants, bankers, other agents and in terms of the extensive family tree. The three brothers operated within a network of extended family, marrying into other Greek merchant families, as did many of the next generation.

The family connections inform how Harlaftis begins her analysis of Aristotle Onassis' early business career. Born in Smyrna in what was still the Ottoman empire, Onassis arrived in Buenos Aires in 1922 on a refugee passport. His father, however, had been able to preserve some capital and his first cousins would collaborate with him for many years. Moreover, when he eventually married, his first wife was the daughter of a Greek shipowner, and [his] brother-in-law was the head of a rival shipping firm.

There are a few Canadian connections in this volume. Onassis' first ship purchases were made in Halifax, two 13-year-old freighters from the Canadian Government Merchant Marine. After World War II Onassis acquired ten surplus Canadian frigates to be converted to passenger vessels in Greek waters, one of many Onassis ventures that failed to unfold as planned. One, however, HMCS *Stormont* survives as the superyacht *Christina O*. He also acquired two Empire-class freighters in 1946. Another set of Canadian corvettes were converted into whale catchers in 1950, in another ill-starred Onassis venture.

The core of Onassis' success came in the market for tankers to transport the rising production of oil in the 30 years before his death in 1975. Access to the Onassis archive and interviews with the senior managers of the Onassis legacy gives Harlaftis particular insight into the structure of this trade. Most of these vessels were incorporated as single ship companies in Panama where ownership could be anonymous. Their annual meetings were held in Uruguay while the ships were largely managed by Olympic Maritime SA, which after 1954 was based in Monaco. Onassis is also credited with being the first to translate secured time charters into collateral for loans, especially from New York bankers, to buy or construct ships.

Among the many strengths of this volume are the parallels the author is able to draw between the nineteenth century experiences of the Vaglianos and the twentieth century experience of Onassis. They were ethnic Greeks but lived most of their lives outside the nation state of Greece, the Vaglianos having grown up in the Ionian islands while they were a British protectorate. Mari Vagliano (in Russia) and Onassis (in the United States) were the subject of protracted litigation triggered by conservative nationalist forces. Harlaftis attributes their success in fighting those lawsuits to the entrepreneurs drawing carefully on the best legal advice of their host nations to ensure they remained inside the letter of the law.

The study has a number of insights to offer the business historian. It is an excellent example of pursuing research across national boundaries and language. Key records of a London based ship agency, written in Greek and Italian, are located in a Greek archive, dealing in part with the movement of Russian grain to French ports. It excels as a study of networks, particularly in the first half of the volume, a study that leans heavily on the author's decades of research within the extended Greek shipping communities. To this reviewer, perhaps the most intriguing dimensions of that analysis was an insight into the emergence of the modern ship managing agency drawn from the example of the Vaglianos' London office. In its role as agent and broker for "practically the whole Greek-owned fleet" (138) it begins to invert the principal – agent paradigm. It is a

fairly short step from that to an environment where institutional investors turn the entire management of their shipping assets to management agencies. Onassis did this within the firms and fleet he controlled.

It is a pity that *Creating Global Shipping* is not yet available in a paperback edition, for Harlaftis' work deserves to be read by a wide audience, some of whom may be put off by the hardcover's cost.

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