



THE FRENCH NAVAL MISSION TO ROMANIA – THE EFFORTS MADE FOR SIGNING NAVAL PROCUREMENT CONTRACTS AT THE END OF WORLD WAR I –

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At the end of World War I, the Romanian Army was experiencing the results of three years of military conflict on its own territory and was also entering into a period of reconstruction. One of its components, the Navy, was also coming to the point of realisation that the new, greater Romania was inevitably going to put more pressure on its Black Sea Division, especially if we take into consideration that the union with Basarabia meant it had to defend a much larger coast. Therefore, the Romanian Naval Inspectorate sought new ways to increase its naval forces, mostly by using the experience of foreign naval officers accredited in Romania. The most active ones were the representatives of the French Naval Mission. They would go on to propose a large array of different ship types for the Romanian Navy.

Keywords: Naval Inspectorate, French Naval Mission to Romania, Military Navy, minesweepers, Royal Navy.



THE BEGGINING OF THE FRENCH MISSION

Starting 1916, France organised a Military Mission to assist its Entente ally, Romania. This would include a naval component, meant to help modernise the small Romanian Navy. A more important fact for France was that it could help guide the Romanians in combat on the Danube against the Central Powers. For this mission, the French sent to Romania three officers: Captain Belloy de Saint-Lienard (who led the mission) and Lieutenants Berg de Breda and Baheze de Lanley¹.

The concrete results of the mission to Romania were quite scarce for the French specialists. Romania's rapid failure to occupy Transylvania led to its catastrophic defeats in 1917 and its exit from the war. This meant that the naval actions on the Danube were quite rare, and successes even rarer.

The French interest for the naval affairs of Eastern Europe and Romania in particular was to return after the country reentered the war in 1918 and captured its lost territories. This was to continue for the next couple of years, during which time Romania was struggling to consolidate its much larger territory. As a possible ally in a naval war in the Black Sea, Romania did not promise much in terms of maritime strength. The Romanian Navy did not have any seaworthy ships to talk about, and despite many plans of expansion, it clearly lacked the funds to support them, at least on the short and even medium term.

Its strategic position, however, was a different story and offered more interesting possibilities. More so since it had in its possession most of the course of the Danube and the country was very close geographically to Russia. These all benefited from special attention from French planners in Eastern Europe. Similar conclusions were reached by the British Navy (The Royal Navy). It was quick to catch up to the French in trying to secure naval influence in the Black Sea area.

Comparatively to the British, the French were already much more invested in this problem and they soon had to allocate more resources

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¹ Patrick Boureille, "Les relations navales franco-roumaines (1919-1928): les illusions perdues", in *Revue historique des armées*, 244/2006, p. 2.



Ever since February 1919, the leadership of the Romanian Navy had asked the French Naval Mission to help it organise a minesweeping service on the coasts of Romania after its calls for help to the other Allied Powers went unanswered. As with those requests, the Romanian Navy just wanted to be handed out some minesweepers, even if temporarily. These would then be operated by Romanian crews to sweep the approaches.

to ensure they held a superior position in regards to the influence in the Romanian Navy. The results fell short of their expectations though. By the summer of 1920, Great Britain managed to send its own Naval Mission to Bucharest and it functioned in parallel with the French one, practically making up the disadvantage it had compared to the French. Even more, the British mission was accredited to the War Ministry in Bucharest, which actually was of much higher rank than the French one, which was accredited to the Navy Directorate. We can safely assume that France was losing ground in respect to the British, as far as the Romanian Navy was concerned.

This explains why the French Naval Mission was very busy in trying to find new ways of becoming relevant in the Danube and Black Sea areas. One endeavour would have unforeseen and negative consequences for the French. This was their involvement, which is to say their naval officers, in the different projects of reorganisation of the Romanian Navy. From Captain O'Neill, who replaced Belloy as the chief of the mission at the end of 1919, we can find that the Romanian Naval Inspector, Rear Admiral Constantin Bălescu, did not appreciate the French cooperation and their connections directly with the Romanian Government. He felt that the direct connection between the French and the Government was an intrusion, bypassing him and his staff at the Inspectorate and Directorate level².

THE SUBMARIN CHASERS IDEA

A matter that brought some success for the French Naval Mission and also an opportunity to surpass its British rivals was the very difficult task of sweeping the sea mines on the Danube and in the Black Sea. These were left there after the war, and ever since the Central Powers minesweepers retreated, they caused a significant amount of trouble of the shipping in the area. The Romanian Navy was ill equipped to handle this problem, having no real minesweeper for the Danube and its territorial waters in the Black Sea³.

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² *Ibid*, p. 3.

³ Arhivele Militare Naționale Române/Romanian National Military Archives – AMNR, Military Navy Command Collection, file 270, p. 71.



Navy just wanted to be handed out some minesweepers, even if temporarily. These would then be operated by Romanian crews to sweep the approaches. It is clear that the Romanians were eager to exploit the willingness of the French Mission to make up for the ground it had lost and relinquish some ships for that purpose. The Romanian Naval Inspectorate saw some evidence in this regard in the fact that the French kept their ships in the area even during peace times for minesweeping.

The Romanian Navy was eager to create its own sweeping units in the Black Sea, not just to safeguard its navigation routes which were very important for the economic recovery of the country. As Rear Admiral Bălescu pointed out, it was critical to avoid that the Allied Power “*should organise on their own the minesweeping service in our harbors and waters*”⁴. It was a question of national prestige for Romania to avoid relying on foreign ships and this was the reason it tried to get a hold on some vessels and use them with Romanian crews. Romania had goals of becoming a significant power in the Black Sea region and it found it unacceptable to allow foreign powers to sweep its waters: “*this would mean to request and accept a foreign protection in regions that might lead to costly obligations and humiliating servitudes*”⁵. It is quite possible that these remarks also pointed out the resentment that the Naval Inspectorate had towards the foreign naval missions in Romania and their constant involvement in the reorganisation process of the Romanian Navy, an intrusion that caused such problems.

The Navy’s plan was to continue the negotiations with the French and create some goodwill by buying some gunboats it had already agreed upon (the “*Chiffone*” type ships). These talks would bear fruit in December 1919, when four of these ships entered Romanian service⁶. The Romanian Navy hoped this goodwill would be used to broker a deal for some minesweepers, lent or given at no cost by the French. If all went as planned, it was thought that the Navy could create three minesweeping divisions⁷ as follows:

- the first unit, in the northern, most threatened area, would have been based at Sulina. It would have had two gunboats

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⁴ *Ibid*, f. 69.

⁵ *Ibid*, f. 70.

⁶ Georgeta Borandă, “*Nave de luptă românești – breviar*”, in Ion Ionescu, Georgeta Borandă, Marian Moșneagu, *Noi contribuții la istoria Marinei Militare Române*, Constanța, Editura Muntenia & Leda, 2001, p. 145.

⁷ AMNR, Military Navy Command Collection, file 270, p. 70.



The American Navy wanted a submarine hunter that was cheap and solid, but with a wooden hull. It had to reach speeds of up to 17-18 knots. The planned range was about 1,500 miles and the initial armament consisted of a 76 mm naval gun, a 57 mm one and three machine guns. The lessons learned before that during the war showed that submarine chasers could be limited to actions in coastal water. Instead, they would have to venture in deep waters in pursuit of their targets.

with sweeping gear, plus six motor boats in the area of Sulina – Akerman;

- the second one, at Constanța, would have had the same number of ships and the same types. Its area of operations was from Constanța to Balcic;
- lastly, the third division, with another two gunboats and six motor boats, was the reserve⁸.

One can see that in July 1919, when this plan was created, the Romanian Naval Inspectorate was counting on getting six gunboats. Eventually, however, it could only afford four.

At the same time, the Chief of the French Naval Mission, Captain Belloy de Saint Lienard, was involved in other projects designed to help the Romanian Navy to increase its forces on the seaside. After the Romanians made several inquiries about what ships the French Navy was ready to sell, of course trying to get some good bargains, there were some ideas. The French Mission made some significant efforts in trying to find different solutions for a mutual advantageous solution.

Also in the summer of 1919, taking advantage of the fact that some French submarine chasers (motor boats, to be more precise) were on the Danube on minesweeping missions, the Romanian Naval Inspector, Read Admiral Bălescu was invited to visit one of these ships, "C 27"⁹.

These ships were actually of American design and build, the project starting back in 1917, when the threat of German submarines was at its peak. The American Navy wanted a submarine hunter that was cheap and solid, but with a wooden hull. It had to reach speeds of up to 17-18 knots. The planned range was about 1,500 miles and the initial armament consisted of a 76 mm naval gun, a 57 mm one and three machine guns. The lessons learned before that during the war showed that submarine chasers could be limited to actions in coastal water. Instead, they would have to venture in deep waters in pursuit of their targets. This led to the idea of slowing the ships down for an increase in machine reliability, the project thus becoming even better¹⁰.

The ships would receive the name of "S.C's" from "Submarine chasers". They were quite resilient despite their wooden construction.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, f. 84.

¹⁰ Norman Friedmann, *U.S. Small Combatants, including PT-boats, Subchasers, and the Brown-Water Navy: An Illustrated Design History*, Annapolis, Naval Institute Press, 1987, p. 27.

Over two hundred of them managed to cross the Atlantic during the war. Their greatest flaw was their small size which made life aboard difficult for the crews. The American Navy tried to adapt them for sea minesweeping operations, but with no success. As river sweepers however, they were well suited¹¹.

The US Navy contract was signed in April 1917, for 355 units to be delivered until January 1 1918. The figure was almost done, which allowed for the transfer of 50 ships to France. After 1 January, another 50 were sent to that country. Up until the end of the war the Americans build 441 of such ships, with 133 being transferred to allied countries¹². In American services, they were used all over the Atlantic and Mediterranean theatres of operations, from England to the island of Corfu, in bases such as Otranto and Gibraltar. Some of them even escorted the transport ships in the Atlantic, from the Eastern coast to Bermuda, the most dangerous areas where the U-Boats prowled. In the Mediterranean, in conditions more close to the ones they would have faced in the Black Sea, the chasers would hunt in groups of three, detecting the enemy submarines with their hydrophones via triangulation. They would then use their depth charges to attack the U-Boats¹³.

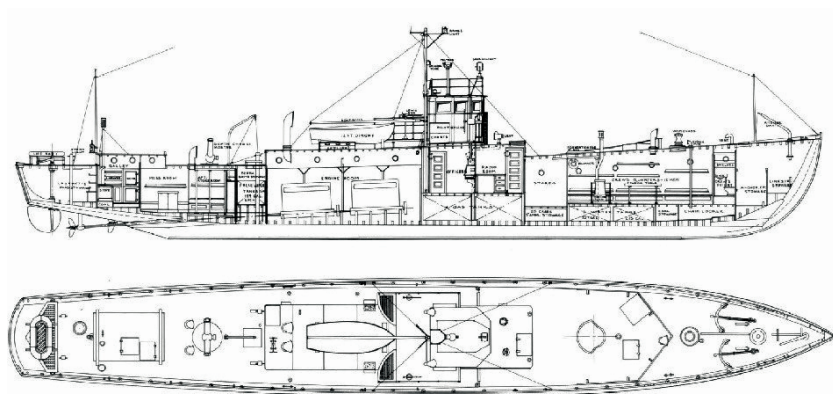


Photo 1: The design of the American S.C. ships¹⁴

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 31.

¹² <https://www.subchaser.org/statistics>, retrieved on 16.04.2020.

¹³ Norman Friedmann, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

¹⁴ Photo source: Norman Friedmann, *op. cit.*, p. 28.



The limited strength of its naval forces was the main concern for the Inspectorate, especially as it expected a difficult situation on the Eastern borders of the countries as the tensions with Russia were soaring. The Navy was going through a period of transformation, as was the whole Romanian Army.

The results of the investigation by the Romanian Naval Inspectorate on these ships were then sent to the War Ministry in Bucharest. They show a sense of urgency in the Romanian Navy in trying to get a hold of as many ships as they could, transitioning to a period of uneasy peace in the East. The limited strength of its naval forces was the main concern for the Inspectorate, especially as it expected a difficult situation on the Eastern borders of the countries as the tensions with Russia were soaring. The Navy was going through a period of transformation, as was the whole Romanian Army. This was expected to include the building up of its naval power in the Black Sea for its Sea Division there. In the Great War Romania tried to fight without a significant maritime force, relying instead on its allies, the Russians, to defend its coast. This was not possible in the future. The unification of Bessarabia also meant that it had to defend an even larger coast with the meager forces at its disposal.

This is why the report on the submarine chasers was very positive, the Chief of the Naval Inspectorate actually saying that *“this ship type would be very useful for us, not just in the current conditions, but in the future as well, whatever the organization of the Navy would be then”*¹⁵. Read Admiral Bălescu was referring to the process of reorganisation envisaged for the naval forces at the end of the war. The focus for the Navy then had to change from the Danube sector to the Black Sea region. In the first two years after the war, up until 1921, naval planners had to find new ways to change the structure of the Navy and circumvent the lack of funds available, even though they were insufficient even for the minimalistic projects.

As for the Black Sea Division, it was clearly going to be the emphasis for the Navy and most the resources were allocated for that sector. All of the naval analyses showed that the Navy could not fight *“with a hand tied on its back”*, as it did in 1916-1918, when Romania practically did not have any ships in the Black Sea and its coastal defenses were stripped.

¹⁵ AMNR, Military Navy Command Collection, file 270, p. 84.

As many military analysts pointed out, the lack of investments in the equipment of the Sea Divisions was a major strategic mistake¹⁶. Confirming this, a report from the Chief of Staff of the Army to the War Ministry showed that the absence of Romanian naval power in the Black Sea led to a desperate situation there. After its allies retreated from the area and facing the Bolshevik threat, Romania was to contend to a communist fleet of three destroyers and two submarines in Odessa with practically no forces of its own¹⁷. Despite the fact that Russian fleet was not nearly as powerful as during the war or as it would become later on, it was still a significant threat. The Romanian Navy, on the other hand, had “no means of securing its own coasts” and could not stop the enemy from mining the seaways which meant that its communication with the Allied Powers could be severed at any time. The only solution that the General Staff saw going forward was to ask the Allied Naval Command to help the Romanian Navy by relinquishing no fewer than 4 1,000-ton destroyers, 12 submarine chasers and 12 hydroplanes¹⁸. The report also considered a backup solution, in the form of the gunboats that were being acquired from France¹⁹, which could be pressed into service quite rapidly and used as minesweepers and coastal defense ships. This plan, to get ships from the Allies on a temporary or permanent basis was abandoned and the French gunboats with some “M” class destroyers would be the only maritime ships for Romania for a significant amount of time.

The submarine chasers inspected in 1919 seemed to help the Romanian Navy in a variety of ways; more than anything they would be a much needed military presence in the Black Sea. The Navy desperately wanted to have some sort of presence there, no matter what ship type would be involved. There were already reports about the submarine program that the Russians were developing, alongside



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¹⁶ Andreea Atanasiu-Croitoru, “Forța navală maritimă a României între cele două războaie mondiale”, in *Analele Dobrogei*, nr. X-XIII, 2009-2012, Muzeul de Istorie Națională și Arheologie Constanța, p. 72.

¹⁷ AMNR, 5th Maritime Directorate, file 386/1919-1920, f. 703.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 704.

¹⁹ Andreea Atanasiu-Croitoru, “Canoniera Locotenent comandor Eugen Stîhi – o călătorie cât un centenar” in Corneliu Postu, Petrișor Florea, Cornel Popescu (coord.), *Armata Română și Marea Unire*, studies and articles delivered during the National Scientific Papers Session, Pitești, 26 July 2018, Editura Militară, București, 2018, pp. 366-368.



Their submarine detection capabilities were crude as well, given that at the time the hydrophones were a new development. Therefore, the Inspectorate argued for the creation of three squadrons, each with six ships. In turn, the squadrons would be divided into two groups of three hunters and placed in key areas of Drobrogea: Constanța, Sulina and Gura Chiliei.

other ships. In his report to the superiors in Bucharest, Rear Admiral Bălescu alluded to the Russian submarine threat when he spoke about the “threat from Russia”. This was a danger for which the Romanian anti-submarine capabilities were inadequate to nonexistent²⁰.

Because the submarine chasers in question were of small size and had limited armaments, they were not very well suited to defend a large coastal area. The Navy concluded it needed a significant number of ships in order to organize many groups of ships. Their submarine detection capabilities were crude as well, given that at the time the hydrophones were a new development. Therefore, the Inspectorate argued for the creation of three squadrons, each with six ships. In turn, the squadrons would be divided into two groups of three hunters and placed in key areas of Drobrogea: Constanța, Sulina and Gura Chiliei²¹. With six ships in reserve, the total amount that the Romanians wanted to acquire was 24 units.

Because it lacked other warships in the area, the Romanian Navy considered using the submarine chasers in a variety of other missions, not limited to anti-submarine warfare. The Navy had to defend a maritime coast of significant importance and had to rely on flexible ships, this meant that the submarine chasers had to patrol as well as fight enemy agents trying to infiltrate the coastline. The missions went as far as being able to be sent in “*information gathering incursions in enemy waters*”. This type of missions were very well suited for the submarine chasers, because they were very fast and their great speed could prove useful in evading enemy forces.²²

There were other missions as well that the French ships of American origins would have had to do in the service of the Romanian Navy. These included transports of troops and materials along the Black Sea coast, even though the Naval Inspectorate acknowledged the fact that their small size would limit their capabilities for this type of tasks. They were also considering the possibility of using them in the role of achieving means of communication between land and sea forces, but the Inspectorate was more interesting in using the submarine

²⁰ AMNR, Military Navy Command Collection, file 270, p. 85.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

chasers in peacetime. The ships could be employed as coastal patrols, a “*very precious mission in stopping the contraband*”²³. In summary, the leadership of the Navy lobbied for the reception of 24 submarine chasers from France.

The series of interventions to the War Ministry to solve the crisis of lacking warships in the Black Sea continued with a new appeal from the Naval Directorate. This entity, under the Naval Inspectorate, also argued that the minefields in the Black Sea were threatening the navigation in the area. The problem was very serious and the fact that the Allied ships were retreating was making it worse. The unexploded mines could jeopardize the commercial ships sailing to and from Romanian waters. The Navy only had three improvised minesweepers, “*Basarab*”²⁴, “*Rareş*” and “*Ungheni*”, but they were riverboats and could not operate in the Black Sea. Although Romania had the obligation to sweep its own territorial waters, it just did not possess the means to do that²⁵.

OTHER TYPES OF SHIPS OFFERED TO ROMANIA

Under these circumstances, the talks with the French Naval Mission would continue to reach new conclusions. Alongside the negotiations for the “*Frippone*” gunboats (concluded with the acquisition of four units instead of the six the French offered)²⁶, the Mission would offer different types of ships, especially motor boats, well suited for minesweeping. In August 1919, France started to pull back its naval forces from the Western coast of the Black Sea and from the Lower Danube area, expecting that this decision would force the Romanian Government to expedite the process of buying some of these very ships²⁷. The Romanian Navy was aware of the French decision, because the representatives of the Naval Mission were open about it and went as far as expressing their conviction that “*given the complete lack of defence forces for the maritime coast*”, Romania would have



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²³ *Ibid*, f. 86.

²⁴ A paddleboat, built in 1893 at the Naval Shipyards in Linz. During the war, it was part of the Minesweeping Group of the Romanian Navy. Georgeta Borandă, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

²⁵ AMNR, Military Navy Command Collection, file 270, p. 69.

²⁶ For four million francs. Patrick Boureille, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

²⁷ AMNR, Military Navy Command Collection, file 270, p. 87.



Captain O'Neill suggested that Romania should buy the gunboat "Decidee" of the "Surprise" class. These were colonial gunboats that had served during the war with good results. The ship that Romania would have bought served during 1914-1917 in the Indochina station. In the latter years of the war, it was part of the Syria patrol groups.

to resort to the French ships to "create the nucleus of its naval force, which would, after a further expansion, ensure the hegemony of the Romanian flag in the Black Sea", as Lieutenant Commander Ioan Bălănescu, the Chief of the Naval Directorate, put it in his report²⁸. Of course, we can safely assume that the Romanian Navy could not hope to achieve naval dominance in the Black Sea. This was not even the purpose of its existence, but the way in which the French officers chose to express their beliefs proves that they were employing a marketing strategy that was hoping to capitalise the Romanian natural fear of the Russian threat.

Even so, the French Naval Mission offered other alternatives for the development of the Romanian fleet, especially in regards to minesweepers. From the array of different ship types that were considered, two of them stand out because they were specifically built as minesweepers and not improvised: "Gres" and "Marbre". They were "Granit" class ships, launched in 1918, so a new design and build. Their characteristics were: displacement 360 t, length 58 m, breadth 8 m, draught 2 m. Their armament consisted of one 120 mm gun and another of 75 mm²⁹. These minesweepers were inspected by Romanian Navy officials at Galatz with positive results. They were part of the French naval groups operating on the Danube and in the Black Sea.

Alongside the purposefully built minesweepers, the French Navy was ready to sell two ships of "Herse" class. An older design, from 1913/1914, the ships were called "Rateau" and "Coquelicot" and were smaller than the "Granit" ones. They displaced 255 t and were armed with 2x47 mm guns, but they were a cheaper alternative.

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²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, f. 91.

³⁰ Robert Gardiner (coord.), *Conway's all the World's Fighting Ships 1906-1921*, London, Conway Maritime Press, 1985, p. 196.



Photo 2: The gunboat "Decidee"³¹

Its armament was considerable for a ship of her size: 2x100 mm guns, 4x65 ones and 1x37 mm. The displacement was 630 t and the crew was 100 men³².

Captain O'Neill's most spectacular idea was still to come. He argued that the Romanian Navy should buy at a lower cost the protected cruiser "Jurien de la Graviere", launched in 1899 and completed in 1903³³.

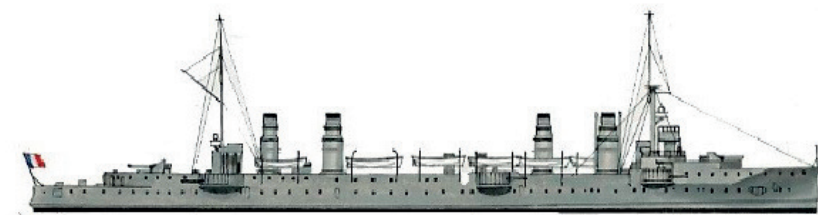


Photo 3: The cruiser "Jurien de la Graviere"³⁴

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³¹ Photo credit: http://servimg.com/image_preview.php?i=57&u=11930999#

³² http://www.navypedia.org/ships/france/fr_of_surprise.htm, retrieved on 16.04.2020.

³³ Patrick Boureille, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

³⁴ Photo credit: <https://www.naval-encyclopedia.com/ww1/France/jurien-de-la-graviere/>.



6x37 mm and two torpedo tubes of 450 mm³⁵. The main artillery comprised eight Modèle 1893 164.7 mm guns, of which two were in shielded centerline mounts fore and aft, the remaining six in sides casemate mounts. The problems of the ship did not stop at the armaments. It was quite a slow ship, reaching 21 knots with some difficulty, even though the designed specified 23 knots. The engine compartment was cramped and she was extremely unhandy. It is no surprise then that, as with the other offers from the French, the cruiser was rejected by the Romanian Navy

CONCLUSIONS

After the end of World War I, France tried to ensure it had good relations in respect to the naval affairs of Romania, in so doing striving to use the strategic position of that country in Eastern Europe and in the Black Sea area. The volatile situation in Russia warranted some safety measures for the French. This meant keeping and actually expanding the naval mission in Bucharest in order to protect the lines of communication in the event of a military operation in the Russian Civil War. At the same time, the Naval Mission had to contend with the unexpected rivalry from the Royal Navy, who sent its own advisors in Romania.

Although it had the advantage of fighting together with the Romanians on the Danube and creating good relations with those allies, the French Naval Mission was experiencing difficulties consolidating its position in the Romanian Naval Inspectorate. The natural hesitations of the Romanian officers, some of the frictions during the war and other offers from different Western Powers, all contributed to a rather frustrating experience for the representatives of the French Navy.

Even so, the French naval officers tried to help the small Romanian Navy in its expansion process by offering different ships, some outdated, other of new designs, with which to create a naval force in the Black Sea.

³⁵ Fred T. Jane (coord.), *Jane's Fighting Ships 1905/1906, A Reprint of the 1905/1906 Edition of Fighting Ships*, New York, Arco Publishing Company, 1970, p. 123.

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