



## ROMANIAN NAVY OFFICERS SENT TO STUDY ABROAD (1925-1928)

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*Despite the fact that the Navy School was established in Constanța, in 1920, the Romanian Navy considered necessary to send several young officers to study at the Naval Academies in the West. This practice was implemented in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and many famous officers, some of them even Navy Commanders, graduated from Naval Academies in the West. The present study focuses on a group of young officers educated and trained in Italy and France, starting in the mid '20s. Studying their reports sent to the Navy Inspectorate in Bucharest, interesting lessons are emphasised, which were implemented when they came back to the country. From concepts, through naval tactics, to complex exercises, each officer belonging to the group could acquire certain skills, depending on the specifics of the Navies of the countries they studied in. Once they returned to the Romanian Navy, the officers could promote the acquired information, which had important effects on the Romanian naval thinking during the interwar period.*

*Keywords: Navy, interwar period, Naval Academy, naval tactics, naval doctrine.*



## INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was considered that the most effective way to maintain contact with the Western naval achievements was to send young officers to study abroad. In the *Report no. 13719* on 28 March 1923, the Chief of the Naval Technical Inspectorate, Rear Admiral Niculescu-Rizea, requested the Council of Ministers to approve to send Romanian naval officers to study abroad. The report showed that the naval attaches of the mentioned foreign countries provided information and relations about the availability of their own governments to receive Romanian naval officers in the academies of Italy, France or Britain, namely in Livorno, Brest or Keyham.

The French authorities proved to be the most open to discussions and they quickly agreed to this proposal, but there were other suggestions to the leadership of the Navy, concerning the British Admiralty<sup>1</sup>. The British party was ready to receive, each year, three naval officers having the rank of second lieutenant, at the Royal Naval Engineering College in Keyham. The cost for the classes was 200 pounds for each officer and Bucharest was also required to cover the accommodation and meal expenses.

At the same time the Italian Naval Ministry chose to accept, in turn, three Romanian officers, with 4 high school classes to study in Italy. Two of them were to attend the three-year programme at the Naval Academy in Livorno. The third one would benefit from a practice programme aboard Italian warship. The classes were free and Romania would pay for the necessary materials and equipment.

Of all these proposals the most advantageous one was, of course, the Italian one, more so because the programme was three-year long, a period considered “*indispensable for the formation of good mechanics for the modern Navy*”<sup>2</sup> by the Naval Technical Inspectorate.

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<sup>1</sup> The National Military Archives of Romania, *Microfilm* Collection, roll II 2.2758, file 150, c. 233.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, c. 234.



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## INTELLIGENCE MISSIONS IN FRANCE AND ITALY

Not only young officers would benefit from these programmes of foreign study. One of the most important missions was organised at the end of 1924, when the Commander of the Black Sea Division, at the time Read Admiral Vasile Scodrea, and Lieutenant Commander Gheorghe Koslinski were sent in a mission to gather information in Italy and France. The aim was to collect intelligence about the naval shipyards in those countries, especially concerning the new submarine projects being built there. The Romanian Navy wanted to know the exact characteristics of the new submarine in construction in the West in order to better adapt its own constructions, since none of its current projects were deemed adequate to suit its needs. Of course, taking advantage of this occasion, the Navy got some precious data since the French and Italian authorities were quite open hoping to get favours with a possible client in the East<sup>3</sup>.

In Italy the officers were warmly received and they were given all the info they asked, going so far as being allowed to visit the Arsenal of Spezia. The Naval Ministry in Rome even offered some vacancies for Romanian Navy officers to study at the Naval Academy. In Spezia they could inspect the “Ansaldo” Shipyards, the battleship “Cavour” and the destroyer “Falco”. The Romanian officers were also given some data on the new submarines the Italian Navy was building. The impression they took home was that the Italian armament industry had progressed significantly, including the naval one, producing quality ships<sup>4</sup>.

In Paris the Romanian officers were well received. Moreover, they were invited to Cherbourg to inspect the submarine “Requin”, the newest one in service for the French Navy. The ship had been launched only five months before the Romanian visit and was part

<sup>3</sup> The National Military Archives of Romania, *Inspectoratul General al Marinei* Collection, file 28/1924, p. 196.

<sup>4</sup> In reality, the Italian fleet, though growing since the Fascists took power, was lagging behind its main rival, France. That is why the Italians were focusing on submarine construction, since they were cheaper and easier to build. According to Brian R. Sullivan, *A Fleet in Being: The Rise and Fall of Italian Sea Power 1861-1943*, in *The International History Review*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1988, p. 116.

of the naval programmes of 1922 and 1923. It was an oceanic patrol boat for the Atlantic. Weighing 947 tons, it was armed with 3 guns (1x100 mm, 2x88 AA) and 10x550 mm tubes<sup>5</sup>.

The official talks were focused on the Russian Admiral Wranghel Fleet and the danger it posed for Romania if it were ever returned to the Bolsheviks. That was a very present threat, since in 1924 there were many incidents at the Romanian-Soviet border in Bessarabia. The arguments of Rear Admiral Scodrea were well aimed. He showed that the return of such a significant force in the Black Sea area, according to the conventions of that time, would allow the crossing of any equal-size naval force in the Black Sea. This was clearly in the disadvantage of France, which did not have the naval power to send a fleet there, but could have been an opportunity for Britain, a much larger naval power<sup>6</sup>.

Another Romanian naval officer who also visited the two mentioned countries in 1924 was Commander Petre Bărbuneanu, the Commander of the Naval School in Constanța. Although his mission was to observe the workings of the Naval Academies in France and Italy, he was keen on collecting intelligence for the inspectorate. The quest remained; Romanian needed to create a submarine fleet and some information could be gathered from the French and Italian constructors. Italy was in the process of launching submarines of three types.

The first one, of 1,800 tons, was an oceanic boat and clearly not suited for Romania. Of real interest was the 800 tons “Mameli” class, of which Italy launched four units (“Pier Capponi”, “Giovanni da Precida”, “Goffredo Mameli” and “Tito Speri”), armed with 6x530 mm tubes and 1x102 mm gun. This type would reach 17 knots on the surface and 9 underwater<sup>7</sup> and was deemed suited for the Romanian Navy by Commander Bărbuneanu.



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<sup>5</sup> Henri Le Masson, *Navies of the Second World War: The French Navy*, vol. I, Macdonald&Co., London, 1969, p. 145.

<sup>6</sup> The National Military Archives of Romania, *Inspectoratul General al Marinei* Collection, file 28/1924, p. 197.

<sup>7</sup> Bruno Weyer, *Taschenbuch der Kriegsflotten 1928*, J.F. Lehmanns Verlag, Munchen, 1928, p. 82.



In France, at Brest, the officer took advantage of the naval exercises of the submarine flotilla there in order to inspect the “Gorgone” class submarine, “Hermione”, built before the war, in 1917. Displacing 500 tons and armed with 8x450 mm tubes and 1x75 naval gun, this boat was very similar to the “Laubeuf”, class, meaning its tanks were inside<sup>8</sup>. At Brest Bărbuneanu was presented the latest achievement of the French Navy in submarine construction, the “Marsouin”, only a few months from its launch. The boat was of the “Requin” class.

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Despite it, in the long term the most benefits were for the young naval officers sent to study abroad because they could get accustomed with the developments in the West and they managed to implement most of them just in time before the Second World War. The study focuses on one of those officers, Horia Macellariu. He studied in France and Italy, following the negotiations with these countries, which were finalized with the acceptance of a limited number of Romanian officers in the respective Naval Academies. Italy chose to receive two Second Lieutenants at the Naval Engineer School of Genova for two years and one Lieutenant for torpedo training at the Livorno Naval Academy for one year. In France Romania could send a Lieutenant to study at the Naval Warfare School in Paris for one year<sup>9</sup>.

## HORIA MACELLARIU AND THE RELEVANCE OF HIS REPORTS

The Lieutenant in question was Horia Macellariu, who went to study at the Naval Warfare School in Paris in 1927-1928. As the other officers he had to report regularly to the Naval Inspectorate in Bucharest. Studying his reports, we can observe the kind of strategic and tactical exercises he had to complete in France and the way they could be implemented in the service of the Romanian Navy.

<sup>8</sup> Jean Labayle Couhat, *French Warships of World War I*, Ian Allan Ltd., London, 1974, p. 154.

<sup>9</sup> The National Military Archives of Romania, *Inspectoratul General al Marinei* Collection, file 204/1924, p. 112.

In an analysis of the naval actions in the North Sea during the First World War, Lieutenant Măcellariu studied the objectives and methods used by the German Imperial Navy to ensure its access to the High Seas<sup>10</sup>. The naval operations on the Belgian coast were of interest for the Romanian officer because they could be compared with those undertaken by the Romanian Navy in the same period of time. He was focused on two types of operations. On the one hand, the blockade of the Belgian ports of Zeebrugge and Ostende by the Royal Navy. The ports were occupied by the Germans since the start of the war. On the other hand, he looked at the bombing of the Belgian coastline positions by the Allied ships in the later parts of the war.

In the first category, *“with maritime objectives”*<sup>11</sup>, the future Commander of the Romanian Navy during the Second World War, Horia Macellariu, included the blockade of the two Belgian harbours by the Royal Navy. The Germans were using these ports as staging grounds for supply ships for their High Seas Fleet, but also as bases for their submarines and hydroplanes, which were threatening the South coast of England. That was actually the reason why the Royal Navy wanted to cut the threat at its roots and annihilate the submarines in their protective bases. We see here a first parallel with the situation of 1939-1945, when the annihilation of the German submarine bases was one of the main objectives. This took many forms in the Second World War, but the aim was always the same: the neutralisation of threat posed by those ships for British communication and supply lines. The basic principle the British planned to employ was one of *“strategic speed”*, which meant they had to destroy the submarines before they could do any damage. It required their destruction or at least blocking their bases of operations.

As in the case of the Second World War, the Germans protected their submarines with powerful concrete structures so the only viable solution was to block the harbour. It was not an easy task because



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<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 764.

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*The British plan was to use their monitors and airplanes to bomb the area for a couple of days, so that the defenders could be kept in the dark concerning the real date of attack. Moreover, they set up a diversionary attack on the dike, all the while their focus being on the harbours of Ostende and Zeebrugge, by blocking the canals there.*

the German coastal defence was equally formidable: over 200 guns, of 150-300 mm calibre, spread out on the coast. The dike at the entrance of the Port of Zeebrugge had torpedo tubes for protections, a stockade made of barges and torpedo nets.

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These operations were an important success for the Royal Navy both “*materially and psychologically*”, because the ports had to be closed for a long period of time. In the case of the enemy morale, the fact that the British were capable of mounting such a serious attack, with over 100 ships, severely damaged the morale of the German defenders<sup>13</sup>.

The success of these raids was owed mainly to the efficient coordination of different services of the Armed Forces. The element of surprise was also a contributing factor. We should also acknowledge the fact that the British Admiralty took a calculated risk with this operation. An important factor was represented by the excellent communications between the ships, the British could this way keep in touch with both the attacking forces, one for each harbour. Another lesson that the Romanian officer was able to use from this attack was the great importance of the coordination between the Land Forces and the Navy, because the Army’s artillery could also act as another distraction for the enemy<sup>14</sup>.

Lieutenant Macellariu noticed that, in general, the training of the men involved in this kind of high-risk operation was crucial. “*Well drilled, prepared and motivated men*”<sup>15</sup> were an important factor, because they had better morale and they believed in the success

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 766.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 767.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

of the operation: *“Each man knew what he could expect from the attack and still had hopes of coming back alive, because he knew that every measure was taken to ensure his rescue with fast boats, for example. It is not good to go to war with men that know they are not coming back”*<sup>16</sup>.

Another interesting perspective, which was very useful in the case of a naval war in the Black Sea area, was the cooperation with the Air Force. In his report to the Navy General Inspectorate, Macellariu argued that *“one could see the significant influence in future naval operations”*<sup>17</sup>.

In respect to the landing operations, which were quite useful as seen in the Black Sea area between 1941 and 1944, the British raids on the Belgian coasts showed some interesting conclusions. First of all, one would have to use different types of ships, with monitors (or battleships), armed with heavy artillery that could soften up the enemy coastal defences. Then destroyers would have to come into play, followed up by torpedo boats. Here the Romanian officers noted correctly that those small boats could act as a defence screen for the big gun ships while they were pounding the enemy batteries on shore. It proved to be a correct assessment in the Second World War, examples in this regard being the Soviet Black Sea Fleet landings in Crimea, in the winter of 1941-1942.

Another interesting conclusion of Lieutenant Macellariu in France was about the different elements forming the coastal defence force. Although the Germans had significant assets on the ground, both in men and materials, including a great number of artillery pieces, without good, reliable intelligence, they were exposed to the Allied attack. As it happened in 1944, in Normandy, which was a couple of hundred miles to the south of the Belgium coast, the air and naval superiority of the invading force prevented any patrols from alerting the Germans of the impending attack<sup>18</sup>.



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<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem.*

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In respect to the support that the Navy's big guns could offer to the Army, Lieutenant Macellariu noticed that in the First World War, the naval operations on the Belgium coast could be categorized into two parts: those in the first years of war and then those in 1918. In the beginning the Allies made good use of their naval superiority in the Channel to bring in warships of different tonnages, especially light destroyers and even gunboats to attack the German coast. The enemy reacted with the fortification of its coast and the installation of coastal artillery. The Admiralty used bigger ships which proved to be dangerous for the battleships, cruisers and destroyers. If we add to this the danger of torpedo attacks from the enemy submarines, we can clearly see that the British ships were quite exposed to many perils and their accuracy suffered as a consequence, all the while being in range of the enemy coastal guns. More so, the smaller ships were also used to bomb the enemy positions and had to go back to defend their bigger counterparts<sup>19</sup>.

## CONCLUSIONS

All of the mentioned considerations made the development of a new type of warships – the maritime monitor inevitable. Armed with heavy artillery, this ship could tackle the German batteries and because it had a low draught, it could get quite close to the coast to increase its accuracy. Furthermore, it had torpedo tanks, partially filled with water, so that it was almost impervious to torpedo attacks.

These ships were used to bomb the German coastal positions in the second phase of the operations, in 1918. The attacks yielded better results than those of 1915-1916. Lieutenant Macellariu observed that those raids caused “*serious concern*” for the defenders. The main conclusion of his study was that the age of “*squadron ships*”, all-rounders, that could fulfil all range of missions was over. They were replaced by specialised warships, and, very soon by aircraft<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 769.

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