

THE FIRST LOSS OF ROMANIAN COMMERCIAL VESSELS

Colonel (ret.) Prof. Ion GIURCĂ, PhD

Hyperion University, Bucharest

DOI: 10.55535/RMT.2023.4.27

The issue of Romanian commercial vessels during the Second World War has not been extensively presented in Romanian historiography, although it pertains to national security and defence.

After great financial efforts, in 1939, Romania had a commercial fleet that ensured part of the transport needs of exported and imported goods. With the exception of the passenger ships sent to Istanbul, the other vessels, which were in ports in the Mediterranean, the USA and Great Britain, as well as those leased to Germany, were lost. Even if some shipowners managed to recover the vessels or their value, they did not sail under the Romanian flag.

The mentioned situation was determined by the geopolitical and geostrategic evolution in Europe and worldwide. With regard to Romania, the proximity to Germany and, then, the "alliance" with the government in Berlin were catastrophic also from the perspective of the situation of the Romanian commercial fleet. The USA, Great Britain and the USSR acted in accordance with their interests both during the war and after its end, so that the Romanian state could not recover any vessel or the value of those lost.

Keywords: abuse; shipowner; commercial; government; requisitioning;

INTRODUCTION

In the years of the Second World War, in a complex, complicated, dynamic geopolitical context, Romania's situation was a difficult one, the geostrategic position proving unfavourable as the great belligerent powers wanted to capitalize on Romanian space and resources, especially oil, which was vital considering the military structures motorization and mechanization.

The fateful entry into the German sphere of influence was unacceptable for Great Britain, the USA and the USSR, which reacted to that situation, seriously affecting the commercial fleet of the country, which was achieved with great efforts in the interwar period.

On 30 August 1939, two days before the outbreak of the Second World War, the vessels of the Romanian Maritime Service (RMS) were in various situations in the ports where they operated (AMNR, collection Microfilms, roll P 3.1164, f. 693):

Name	Tonnage	Situation	Date of departure from the country	Destination	Date of arriving in the country
<i>MAIL SHIPS</i>					
"Transilvania"	6,672	Beirut			3 September
"Basarabia"	6,672	Constanța, stationing	31 August	Alexandria	10 September
"Dacia"	3,419	Haifa		Beirut	2 September
"România"	3,151	Constanța	3 September	Beirut	16 September
"Regele Carol I"	2.369	Galați	-	-	-
<i>MIXED CARGO SHIPS</i>					
"Alba Iulia"	5,695	Constanța, unloading	21 September	Marseille	26 October
"Peleş"	5,695	On the way to Piraeus		Marseille	27 September
"Suceava"	5,695	Constanța, maintenance			
"Ardeal"	5,695	Constanța, unloading	19 September	Port Said	15 October

Name	Tonnage	Situation	Date of departure from the country	Destination	Date of arriving in the country
"București"	2,499	Galați, loading	6 September	Port Said	6 October
"Oituz"	2,525	Beirut		Port Said	18 September
"Durostor"	1,309	Salonika		Piraeus	5 September
<i>CARGO SHIPS</i>					
"Carpați"	4,336	Brăila, unloading	20 September	Hamburg	20 November
"Bucegi"	4,330	Haifa, unloading			2 September
"Sulina"	5,700	Under construction at the shipyard in Palermo			
"Mangalia"	5,700				
"Cavarna"	5,700				
"Balcic"	5,700				

On the same date, the maritime vessels owned by some companies or shipowners sailing under the Romanian flag were in the following situations: "Carmen Sylva", owned by the "Capato&Macri" Company, in the East; "Danubius", owner Mateo Loewensohn, abroad; "Siretul", "Prahova" and "Oltul", the property of the "Ing. Vlasov" Company, sailing, America-Poland, America-Italy; the oil tankers "Câmpina", "Steaua Română" and "Oltenia", the property of the "Steaua Română" oil company, sailing, Italy-America, Italy-Genoa, London (Ib., f. 692).

The most modern and efficient ships, the cargo ships "Sulina", "Mangalia", "Cavarna" and "Balcic", which entered service between September 1939 and June 1940, could, in case of mobilization, be transformed and adapted to the needs of war.

ROMANIAN COMMERCIAL SHIPS DETAINED OR REQUISITIONED BY THE BRITISH AUTHORITIES

The first reaction of the British authorities towards some Romanian commercial ships was in the spring of 1940, in the context of the existence of fears that the transported products would be re-exported to Germany. The ships "Alba Iulia" and "Suceava" were the first subject to the abuses of the British authorities.

"Alba Iulia" was intercepted by the English military authorities on 17 February 1940, near the island of Tenedos (Bozcada), and its captain was forced to change course to Malta, where the ship was detained by order of the English naval authorities. In accordance with procedures, the captain submitted a Maritime

Protest to the British authorities, however, the documents on board the ship were seized by the British and checked by law enforcement officers, and the captain and other crew members were questioned by officials of the Contraband Control Service at the Malta Base.

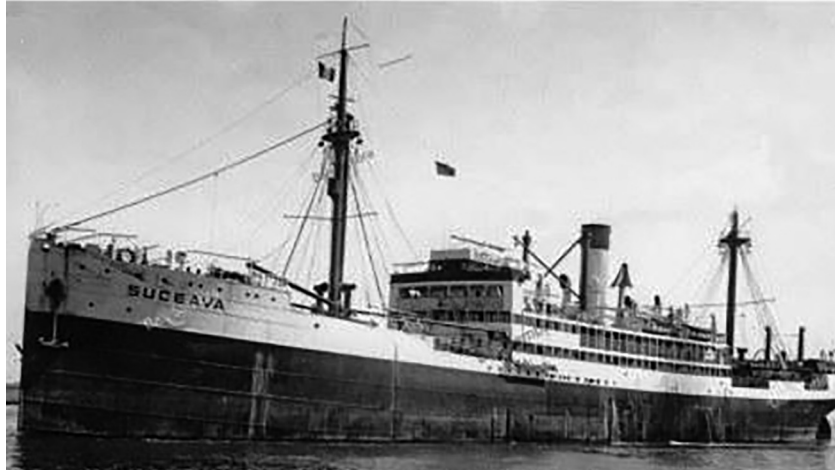
Without any explanation, the representatives of the Contraband Control Bureau agreed to grant freedom of navigation to the ship, after its captain gave a statement regarding compliance with the destination of the goods. In relation to the attitude of the British authorities, the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs intervened in London on 26 February 1940, but the ship had been already released since 21 February 1940.



"Alba Iulia" cargo ship (Source: <https://marinari.ro/nava-mixta-alba-iulia/>, retrieved on 22 September 2023)

Although it was considered that such situations would not be repeated, the impositions of the British were becoming more drastic, as the commercial attaché of Great Britain in Bucharest demanded that, in order to avoid similar situations, the RMS "should make a statement by which it obliges itself to retain the goods it transports to the port of destination through its agents, on its responsibility and until it receives British instructions" (AMAE, 71/Anglia collection, vol. 11, p. 284).

On 7 April 1940, the ship "Suceava" was on its way to Izmir, being stopped and controlled by the crew members of a British warship, who allowed it to continue its way to the destination, asking the captain for a written commitment that, after unloading the goods destined for the port of Izmir, he would continue the way to Malta, for a second control (AMNR, *Ministerul Aerului și Marinei* collection, file no. 4301/1943, p. 151). Arriving in Malta on 13 April, the ship was escorted to Valletta, where several British naval officers requested and then retained the documents accompanying the goods with the certificates of origin.



"Suceava" cargo ship (Source: <https://www.wrecksite.eu/wreck.aspx?184685>, retrieved on 22 September 2023)

The captain's interventions with the British authorities were without result. Thus, the captain of the ship addressed the issue to the RMS in Bucharest and to the Romanian Legation in London, on 15 and 20 April, without receiving any response, then, again, to the Contraband Control Service in Valletta, finally managing to obtain approval for departure on 22 April.

The abuses of the British control authorities in the spring of 1940 on the crews of the ships "Alba Iulia" and "Suceava" represented only the first of the series of difficult situations that the personnel of the Romanian commercial ships, regardless of the owner, faced in the period that followed.

On 20 June 1940, the government led by Ion Gigurtu, at the request of the German authorities, ordered not only the detention of British and French merchant ships on the Danube, but also the arrest of some British oil "experts" in Romania. Under those conditions, the government in London ordered the detention of some Romanian commercial ships in Port Said, Alexandria and Haifa.

DETAINMENT AND REQUISITIONING OF THE SHIP "BUCEGI"

Up to mid-February 1941, when the diplomatic relations between Great Britain and Romania were severed, the issue of the ships belonging to the RMS or some shipowners, Romanian citizens, had no solution in terms of clarifying their legal situation. On the date of the severance of the Romanian-British diplomatic relations, the situation of some Romanian ships was as follows: "Oltenia", "Steaua Română", "Bucegi" and "Ing. Vlasopol" were requisitioned by the Ministry of War Transport within the British government; "Oltul", "Siretul" and "Prahova",

which were in different ports in South America, were put up for sale, with the approval of the Bucharest government.

On 23 June 1940, the cargo ship "Bucegi" was anchored at Port Said, with cargo bound for Istanbul and Constanța on board. In the context of the Romanian-British divergences, on that day, the British authorities from Port Said notified the captain of "Bucegi" that from that moment on it was "in a state of detention", a situation about which the Ministry of Air and Navy was immediately informed, and on 2 July, Adjutant Rear Admiral Nicolae Păiș informed the Minister of Foreign Affairs, requesting urgent intervention in London to obtain permission for the ship to depart for its destination.



"Bucegi" cargo ship (Source: https://www.graptolite.net/Facta_Nautica/press/Bucegi.html, retrieved on 22 September 2023)

After a month, the British Admiralty allowed the ship to depart, on 4 August, with the destination Istanbul. However, on the same day, British sailors boarded the ship and forced the captain to sail to Haifa, the officer assigned to detain the vessel handing the captain a *Note* from which it appears that "the vessel above named is in a state of detention in this port and that any attempt to move the vessel without the written authorization of the officer in charge of the vessels detained in this port will be considered a violation of ownership... Possession was placed on the ship's documents together with the documents onboard" (lb., file no. 5530/1940-1941, p. 64).

From the moment the Romanian ship was detained, the British authorities acted promptly and efficiently to take over the ship, while, in Bucharest, Haifa and Jerusalem, the Romanian authorities acted to obtain the release and resumption of voyage, initially to Istanbul, then to Constanța.

After the ship's arrival in Haifa, the British authorities checked all the documents in the captain's possession, the cargo on board was inventoried and the schedule of the Romanian crew was established. The British authorities were interested in taking possession of both the ship and some of the cargo on board, so they acted quickly and efficiently, as requested from London. Although the Romanian authorities tried to lease or sell the ship to the British authorities, their attitude was firm, the requisition decision being final.

After several discussions with the British authorities in Palestine, on 21 September 1940, 20 Romanian sailors from Bessarabia were repatriated, and on 24 November 1940, other 27 sailors left for the country, leaving 14 people on board, according to the requirements formulated by Haifa port authorities. The 14 crew members remained on board the ship until 2 December 1940, when they were disembarked by the British authorities.

Requisitioning of the ships belonging to "Steaua Română" Company

The oil tankers "Steaua Română" and "Oltenia", whose value was estimated at 500 thousand lei, to which it was added the value of the cargo, 140 thousand dollars, were detained on 12 June 1940 in Alexandria, Egypt, until 10 September 1940, when they were transferred to the port of Mombasa, where, in early January 1941, they were requisitioned.



"Oltenia" oil tanker and captain Alexandru Dragoș

(Source: <https://furcuta.blogspot.com/2010/12/romanian-oil-tanker.html?m=1>, retrieved on 2 September 2023)

The odyssey of the ship "Oltenia" began in the spring of 1940, when it left the port of Constanța on its last voyage to the Mediterranean Sea. By order of the "Steaua Română" Society in Constanța, on 11 June 1940, the ship was taken

to Alexandria to be placed at the disposal of the British authorities, from where, after a few days, it left for Port Said, and from there to Suez, where it was ordered to go to Abadan. On 17 August 1940, the ship left the port of Suez for Aden, where the captain of the ship was ordered to proceed to Mombasa (Kenya). After a period of uncertainty regarding the future, on 16 October 1940, the ship's captain received the requisition order, the vessel being transferred under the English flag. Under those conditions, all crew members opted for repatriation, leaving 3 officers and 7 sailors on board the ship for the surrender of the ship. The 10 sailors went to Bombay to be repatriated via Iran, but eventually the Romanian sailors ended up in a prison camp in Palestine.

After being requisitioned, the ship was renamed "Oltenia II"¹, transporting oil and derivative products according to the orders of the new "owner". Its fate was not the desired one, being torpedoed and sunk by the German submarine U-436 on 8 January 1943.

The ship "Steaua Română" was taken to the port of Alexandria, where, on 12 June 1940, was detained by the British Admiralty. The captain of the ship was obliged to comply with the orders of the British, to follow the navigation course imposed by them through the Suez Canal to Port Said, then to Mombasa, where, on 16 October 1940, it was officially requisitioned by the harbour authorities. The ship remained anchored in the port of Mombasa for a long period of time, with part of the Romanian crew, doubled by English sailors, on board, the crew fate remaining uncertain.

On the date of being requisitioned, on board the oil tanker "Steaua Română" there was a crew of 36 sailors, of whom 21 were repatriated, and 15 remained on board, who, finally, were detained and sent for internment in a prison camp in India (AMAE, collection *Problema 214/Anglia 38*, 1940-1955).

During the war years, the oil tanker "Steaua Română" transported liquid fuel materials in the Atlantic Ocean and the Indian Ocean, being constantly under the threat of German and Japanese submarines, which carried out attacks on commercial and war vessels under the British flag operating in those waters.

The ship survived the war, being used by the Ministry of War Transport until 4 March 1947, when it was sold to "Chr. Salvesen & Co" and renamed "Polar Maid".

¹ *Oltenia II British Steam tanker*, <http://www.uboat.net/allies/merchants/ship/2572.html>, retrieved on 12 September 2023.

The new owner used it as a supply ship for Hawke Harbor Labrador and South Georgia ports until 1957 when it was decommissioned and disassembled at the shipyard in Rosyth, Scotland².

Requisitioning of the ship “Inginer N. Vlassopol”

In September 1939, the ship “*Ing. N. Vlassopol*” left Constanța for England, and at the beginning of the war, the owner ordered that the ship “*should be used in the service of England and for the cause of the Allies, thus avoiding the fall of the ship into the hands of the Germans, as it happened to the ship Jiul*” (AMAE, collection Anglia 38, 1940-1955, Problem 214). In December 1940, having just arrived from Canada, the ship was requisitioned by the British Ministry of the Navy, invoking the domestic and international legal basis, although, at that time, there were no valid reasons for such an action. On 3 January 1941, the ship was confiscated by the British authorities, a gesture that attracted the reaction of the Romanian authorities that used diplomatic channels to clarify the situation of the ship and the crew.

After being requisitioned, on 15 February 1941, the ship was renamed “*Hampton Lodge*”, then used for cargo transports between Canada and Great Britain, being sunk on 21 January 1943 in the Mediterranean Sea after being hit by three bombs dropped by a German JU-88 plane on 20 January.

THE VESSELS BELONGING TO ALEXANDRU VLASOV

Alexandru Vlasov (1880-1961) was one of the shipowners who established a shipping company in Romania following the purchase of three ships: “*Oltul*”, “*Prahova*” and “*Siretul*”, which sailed up to a certain point under the Romanian flag. During the Second World War, they were sold or requisitioned by the British and American authorities. Being renamed, they sailed under various flags.

The situation of the ships became complicated in the spring and summer of 1940, in the context of the unfavourable evolution of the situation for Great Britain, so Alexandru Vlasov established in New-York the company “*Alvion Steamship Corporation*”, registered in Panama, then, “*Compania Argentina de Navigacion de Ultramar SA*” (CANUMAR), the ships sailing under the Romanian or other flags.

After 22 June 1941, the ships under the Romanian flag were no longer safe in the Atlantic Ocean, so Alexandru Vlasopol decided to sell the ship “*Oltul*” to a South American company, “*Prahova*”, to the North Americans, and “*Siretul*” was captured

and transferred into the service of the British Ministry of War Transport. The ship “*Siretul*” was captured by the British naval forces on 27 May 1940 near the Cape Verde Islands and forced to change its course to Cadiz, under military escort. After a long period of inactivity, in which it was blocked in port, starting in August 1942, it was renamed “*Omega*” and made available to “*Navigation & Coal Trade Co Ltd*”, a British company founded by Alexandru Vlasov, requisitioned, in turn, by the British Ministry of War Transport. After the end of the war, the ship continued to remain at the disposal of the British Ministry of War Transport until 1947, when it was returned to its owner.

The ship “*Oltul*” left the port of Buenos Aires for Genoa, on 22 July 1940. On 9 August, it entered the port of Recife (Brazil), where the captain requested a “*navicert*” from the British Consulate, a request that was refused. On 28 December 1940, the ship was sold to the “*Bolphin Company Inc*” of Panama, being renamed “*Esmeralda*”. On 6 November 1941, the ship became the property of the “*Compania Argentina de Navegacion de Ultramar*” from Buenos Aires. After October 1942, the situation of the ship “*Oltul*” is unknown. What is known is the fact that, having a new name, it sailed under the Argentinian flag.

COMMERCIAL SHIPS REQUISITIONED AND SOLD IN THE USA

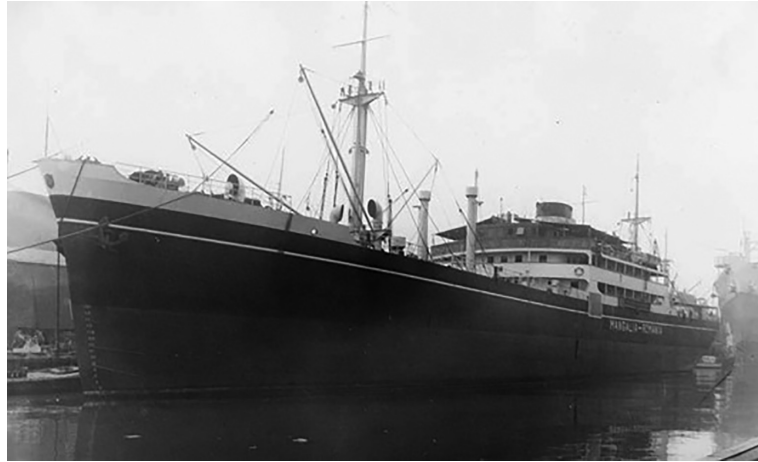
In the spring of 1940, the ships “*Sulina*” and “*Suceava*” had arrived in the US ports and had been loaded with materials destined for Romania and other countries. After fulfilling all the formalities regarding navigation in international waters, they left and arrived in the port of Constanța. Two other ships, sailing under the Romanian flag, “*Prahova*” and “*Moldova*”, belonging to some shipowners, were in the territorial waters of the USA, being subject to restrictive measures, so the owners tried to solve the problems, which brought them great financial damage in the short and long term. Even in that context, considering that different ministries had purchased raw materials, military material and spare parts, it was decided in Bucharest to send the cargo ship “*Mangalia*” to New York, on its first voyage.

“Mangalia” cargo ship in a one-way voyage

Arriving at destination, after unloading the cargo, the ship was reloaded, to leave for the country on 2 July 1940. On 24 June 1940, the ship was blocked in the US territorial waters, most likely at the request of the British government. Therefore, the Romanian authorities intervened through diplomatic channels in London

² About the use of the ship after 1947, see: *Tales of a “Vindi Boy”, Part Four: Polar Maid Adventure*, <https://merchantships.tripod.com/vinditales4.html>, retrieved on 12 August 2023.

to obtain freedom of navigation. In July 1940, in Constanța, it was considered that *“Mangalia”* was not detained, but it was only ordered to remain in New York until it obtained free navigation from the British government, which did not happen, so the ship remained in the port of New York³.



“Mangalia” cargo ship in New York, 1941 (Source: US National Archives, RG-19-LCM, <https://www.navsource.org/archives/09/13/130046.htm>, retrieved on 22 September 2023)

Under those conditions, the sale of the goods that had been loaded was suggested and approved. The situation became complicated when, on 10 October 1940, the US Congress passed a law by which the President could authorize the requisitioning of certain products and materials for the US needs and for other purposes, a measure that also targeted Romania, so that all the Romanian available products in the US were blocked.

Coste Brutus, the charge d'affaires in Washington, unsuccessfully intervened with the Department of State to obtain some relief regarding the ship and the cargo, provided that the measure applied to other states. Therefore, along with the sale of the goods, the Romanian government authorized the sale of the cargo ship *“Mangalia”* by the RMS. The sale of both the goods and the ship was a failure, caused by the fact that it was determined by late decisions, adopted in Bucharest, but also by procedures established by the American authorities, which were aimed at a course of action favourable to them. A proof in this regard was the involvement of the US Treasury in knowing the situation of the goods loaded on the ship

³ For more information about the history of *“Mangalia”*, see Ion Giurcă (2021). *Rechiziționarea cargoului “Mangalia” în 1941. Un diferend româno-american*. București: Editura Militară.

“Mangalia”, meaning that those interested knew how to defend their interests by invoking the legislation and orders of the US President.

Against the backdrop of the difficult situation in the Atlantic Ocean, where the British had blocked most of the transport ships, decisions were being made in Washington regarding the US national security and defence. Therefore, on 7 May 1941, the members of the House of Representatives of the US Congress voted a law authorizing the President of the country to order the requisitioning of foreign ships that were refugeed in American ports, so the fate of the ship *“Mangalia”* was predictable, the authorities in Bucharest being promptly informed. Based on the new law, on 24 June 1941, the US Maritime Commission established and submitted to those that were subject to the decision of the Congress and the President the method of notifying the captains of the ships regarding requisitioning.

The next day, the US Maritime Commission representatives boarded the ship *“Mangalia”*, where, according to the procedures established in case of requisitioning a foreign ship in US territorial waters, they displayed in a visible place the notice of taking over the ship. Regarding the gesture of the American authorities, on 19 July 1941, on behalf of the Romanian government, Coste Brutus submitted a protest to the Department of State, stating that *“the Romanian government does not recognize the legality of requisitioning and reserves all rights to the ownership of the vessel and to compensation”* (AMAE, collection USA/71, Package no. 214 USA, vol. 1, p. 116). In the days that followed, the Maritime Commission proceeded to taking an inventory of the vessel, which was completed on 2 July 1941, the day that marked the definitive loss of the motor ship *“Mangalia”*.

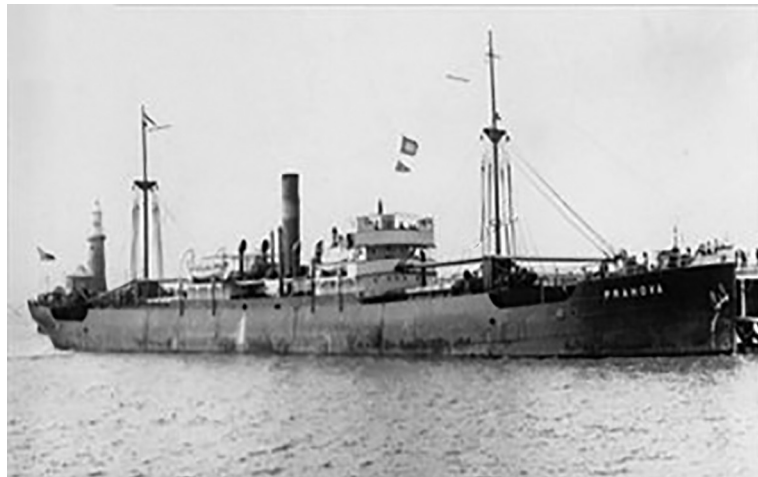
After being repaired, converted and adapted to the needs of the US naval forces, the ship, renamed *“Pleiades AK-47”*, was used for transporting materials to ports in Europe, survived the war, remained in the possession of the USA, without being returned to the Romanian authorities, despite the steps taken in this regard in the period 1945-1959.

Requisitioning of the ship *“Prahova”* by the USA

On 9 June 1940, the ship was in the USA, at Hampton Roads (Virginia), from where it immediately left for New York, the port of Charleston, to unload the cargo on board. After being loaded with goods in Charleston, the ship *“Prahova”* left for Los Angeles, then sailed along the west coast of the USA. On 17 December 1940, the ship collided with another ship, being seriously damaged and sent for repairs

to the San Pedro dock, in order to be transferred to an owner from the “*Alvion Steamship Company*”, in which context its name was changed to “*Tropicus*”, under the Panama flag.

It was the moment when the ship definitively lost its Romanian identity. Through this action, Alexandru Vlasov tried to save the ship from being requisitioned by the USA. On 8 September 1942, the ship “*Tropicus*” was requisitioned by the US authorities and renamed “*Cloverbank*”, the arguments of the US authorities being similar to those in the case of the cargo ship “*Mangalia*”, and it was used for maritime transport throughout the war period. After the end of the war, the ship was transferred to the company “*CIA. Argentina de Navigación de Ultramar*”, carrying out commercial transport between Argentina and Brazil.



“*Prahova*” ship (Source: <http://www.tynebuiltships.co.uk/P-Ships/prahova1922.html>, retrieved on 2 September 2023)

The ship was returned to Alexandru Vlasov in 1947, after the name “*Tropicus*” was restored, based on a document issued by the United States Maritime Commission, entitled “*Deposition of Just Compensation*”.

Sale of the ship “*Moldova*”

The ship “*Moldova*” belonged to the “*Vlassopol*” Company. It left the port of Constanța in the fall of 1939, sailed in the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean to Buenos Aires, where its presence was recorded on 11 February 1940.

From Buenos Aires, the ship “*Moldova*” sailed to the Caribbean Sea, passed through the Panama Canal, anchored at Puerto Eten, in Peru, from where it left for Europe, arriving at Marseilles towards the end of May 1940. In the fall of 1940,

the ship was in ports on the west and east coast of the USA, leaving New York for Kobe, where it was sold on 1 February 1941, its flag being handed over to the Romanian representative in Tokyo. It was the moment when the ship “*Moldova*” was removed from the records of the Ministry of Air and Navy.

LOSS OF SOME COMMERCIAL SHIPS IN THE BLACK SEA

The Romanian commercial ships were used in the Black Sea in the period 1941-1944 according to the concept of the German naval command installed in Constanța, based on the “*Lease Contract no. 11011*”, signed, on 20 October 1941, between the RMS, as the shipowner, and the German Navy, represented by the “*German Admiral Black Sea*” Command, as the beneficiary, through which the Romanian state leased, only for the ports accessible to vessels from the Black Sea, including Istanbul, the following ships: “*Balcic*”, “*Câmpina*”, “*Carol I*”, “*Oituz*”, “*Peleş*”, “*Suceava*”, “*Danubius*”, “*Romania*”, “*Durostor*”, “*Ardeal*”, “*Carpați*”, “*Sulina*”, “*Cavarna*”, valid during the hostilities in Russia, each of the parties having the obligation to denounce it for each individual ship with a ten-day notice (AMAE, collection 71/Romania, 1941-1943, *Probleme militare*, vol. 365, pp. 223-225).

The contract stipulated that the leased vessels could be used by the Germans in the accessible ports of the Black Sea, as well as in Istanbul. The lease period was limited to the duration of hostilities in Russia, the parties being able to terminate it with a ten-day notice. Regardless of their type, the ships could transport the materials necessary for the conduct of military operations, capture and prisoners of war. It was stipulated that the vessels would sail under the Romanian flag, the crews would be made up of Romanian sailors, some of whom could be replaced only following the RMS agreement.

In case of loss of a ship, the German state undertakes to provide the Romanian state with another ship having similar characteristics within one year at most. Also, the Germans were to pay the insurance premiums of the crews to a company in Romania, their value being 100 times the salary and monthly allowances.

Most of the ships leased to Germany were sunk by the Soviet naval and air forces, and the “*Alba Iulia*”, saved as if by a miracle, was requisitioned by the “*liberators*” in 1944, after Romania’s transition to the Entente. The only commercial ship that remained under the Romanian flag after 23 August 1944 was the “*Ardeal*”. Each of the listed ships had a glorious and tragic history, their crews doing their duty, most of them making their ultimate sacrifice.



"Ardeal" cargo ship (Source: <https://marina-noastra.ro/2021/12/13/flota-noastra-comerciala-distrusa-in-cel-de-al-doilea-razboi-mondial/>, retrieved on 22 September 2023)

ATTEMPTS TO REGAIN THE SHIPS REQUISITIONED BY THE USA AND GREAT BRITAIN

From the moment of the detention and then the requisitioning of the ships belonging to the RMS or other shipowners, whose ships crossed the seas of the world under the Romanian flag, the authorities in Bucharest and the owners acted for the physical recovery of the ships, their value and the financial damages incurred during the period between the detention until the declaration of war was transmitted by our authorities to the governments in London and Washington.

In the USA, throughout the war period and after the end of the war, the Romanian authorities acted for the recovery of the cargo ship "Mangalia" and the resolution of disputes related to the goods on board the ship. The finalization of the litigation that dragged on for seven years was unfavourable to the Romanian state, and the way of resolving the dispute remains debatable, given that we consider that it was acted in a manner that disadvantaged the authorities in Bucharest, in a context in which the Romanian-American relations were far from the normality existing after the conclusion of the Peace Treaty in Paris, but understandable under the conditions of the outbreak of the "Cold War".

The transition of Romania to the side of the Entente was followed by the resumption of political, economic, diplomatic and cultural relations with the USA

and Great Britain, in the context in which the USSR had the freedom to impose its will on the territory of Romania, invoking the provisions of the Armistice Convention signed on 12 September 1944. The representatives of the USA and Great Britain who came to Bucharest acted in accordance with the instructions received with regard to the Romanian requests in connection with the lost ships.

The resumption of the attempts for the physical or value recovery of the ship "Mangalia" was recorded in the fall of 1944, on 25 September, when the Undersecretary of State for the Air, General Ermil Gheorghiu, was informed by the Director of Economic Affairs within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs about the sale of the aviation materials on the cargo ship "Mangalia" by the US Department of Treasury through the law firm "WM. Müller&Co.Inc".

In February 1946, as a result of the decisions adopted at the Conference of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the USSR, the USA and Great Britain, held in Moscow between 16-26 December 1945, the governments in Washington and London recognized the Bucharest government, and the mutual level of representation was raised from that of a political representative to that of a legation.

In the proceedings for the recovery of the vessel, the RMS requested that the motor vessel should be returned to it, and in case it was lost, it should be replaced with a vessel of the same type or having similar characteristics, given that it was seized. The Romanian authorities managed to document well the situation of the ship "Mangalia", so that, on 7 March 1956, the Romanian government submitted a "Note" to the American government proposing a meeting of the delegations of the two states, which would analyse and regulate the unclarified economic and financial problems, to find ways and means to relaunch economic exchanges between the two states. The response from Washington was favourable, establishing that the meeting should take place in Bucharest, between 15 October and 3 November 1956. For that meeting, among the documents prepared and sent to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was the "Note regarding the problem of the 'Mangalia' vessel left for New York and requisitioned there by the American authorities in 1941" (AMAE, Problema 214 SUA, 1944-1959, vol. 1, f.f.n.), in which it was formulated the request to obtain the official document of the American law on requisitions from 1941, which would constitute a basis for discussion in the ongoing negotiations. The Romanian party gave a certain interpretation to the provision of the Peace Treaty, in the sense that the article was not applicable in the case of the ship "Mangalia",

since Romania had no complaint to make in connection with the requisitioning of the ship by the American authorities, but only requested for the ship to be returned or its value to be compensated for by the Americans. The answer from the USA came on 14 December 1959, when the requested documents were sent. However, the gesture was not intended to resolve the Romanian-American dispute regarding the ship requisitioned in 1941, but only to present the US legal framework based on which action was taken. It is as clear as possible that, even in 1959, there was no hope for the recovery of the ship or the payment of its value. Things seem to have been resolved a few months later, when, on 30 March 1960, in Washington, an *“Agreement between Romania and the USA was signed by which the various pending financial problems between the two countries were liquidated. At the same time, a Declaration was published regarding the development of commercial relations between the two countries”* (*Politica externă a României*, 1986, p. 268).

The attempts made in London in relation to the requisitioning of Romanian commercial ships were complicated, complex and long-lasting, being possible only after 15 February 1946, when the two states mutually agreed on their representatives. 12 April 1946 marked the beginning of direct relations between Romania and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Thus, the issues of the Romanian vessels and sailors in the territories of the British Empire were discussed directly between the representatives of the two states, a fact that ensured, at least theoretically, the possibility of a faster solution to the divergent problems between the two states. A first attempt to recover the damages generated by the requisitioning of Romanian commercial ships belonged to Gheorghe Navrea, the commander of the *“Steaua Română”* oil tanker, from the time he was in the Dehra Dun prison camp. It was followed by the actions of the owners of the ships requisitioned by the British – the RMS, *“Steaua Română”* Company and the company of Spiridon Vlassopol, which generated discussions between the British institutions having a decision-making role in relation to meeting the demands of the injured parties.

Given that the British ministries were aware that the demands of the Romanian owners of the requisitioned ships were justified, the main problem was to find an advantageous solution to avoid payments. On the other hand, the authorities in London, through their representatives in Moscow and Bucharest, mostly British secret service personnel, acted in every way possible to counter the demands

of the Romanian owners, in order to reach an agreement with the Soviet authorities from Moscow and Bucharest, even with Veaceslav Molotov during the Potsdam Conference (16 July- 2 August 1945) and afterwards. The correspondence between various figures in British political life is evidence of concerns for finding a politically and financially advantageous solution for the government in London.

A decisive position of the British authorities towards the legitimate claims of the Romanian owners of maritime vessels was expressed on 24 July 1945 by the British Foreign Office, in a letter to the Head of the British Treasury, who was requested to find a justification for avoiding payment compensation to owners. Furthermore, it was suggested that the Romanian state should be compensated for the detention of British ships on the Danube in the summer of 1940, as well as the fact that the resolution of the dispute should be the responsibility of the Treasury and the Ministry of War. The British approach was also based on the provisions of a Romanian-Russian agreement, signed on 19 July 1945, regarding the establishment of the Soviet-Romanian Joint Navigation Company *“Sovromtransport”*⁴, with the stated purpose of managing the recovery of Romania’s debts to the Soviet Union. In that view, on 2 August 1945, the Foreign Office in London launched the idea that *“...our reasons for protest would be better based on the argument that the Russian/Romanian Agreement is a violation of Article 11 of the Armistice rather than on the ground that the agreement is discriminatory”* (National Archives Kew). It was referred to the provision in the Armistice Convention according to which: *“Romania will pay compensations for the losses caused in Romania to the properties of the other Allied States and their nationals, during the war, compensations whose amount will be fixed at a later date”*⁵.

The matter under discussion concerned the ships *“Ing. N. Vlassopol”*, *“Bucegi”*, *“Steaua Română”* and *“Oltenia”*, about which the British *“argued”* the requisitioning with the *“Defence Regulations of the Colonial United Kingdom”*, stating that: *“His Majesty’s Government would be fully entitled to undertake any measures that could prohibit any legal right to claim compensation regarding the requisition period*

⁴ *Monitorul Oficial al României/Official Gazette of Romania*, no. 172, 1 August 1945, pp. 6583-6586.

⁵ *Convenție de Armistițiu din 12 septembrie 1944 între guvernul român, pe de o parte, și guvernele Uniunii Sovietice, Regatul Unit și Statele Unite ale Americii, pe de altă parte/ Armistice Convention of 12 September 1944 between the Romanian government, on the one hand, and the governments of the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom and the United States of America, on the other hand*, <https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliuDocument/31>, retrieved on 22 September 2023.

that the Government of Romania may propose... By prohibiting the legal right to claim compensation, we could put ourselves in the position of paying compensation in exchange for an equivalent gesture on the part of the Government of Romania" (National Archives Kew, Foreign Office collection, General, 1945, 371, file no. 953, f.f.n.). Finally, the British government found another reason not to pay compensation to the Romanian party: *"Only one of these ships, Ing. N. Vlassopol, was requisitioned in this country"* (Ib.).

However, the British government did not find a convenient, unassailable solution, in order not to pay compensation, so it acted to impose a provision in the Peace Treaty with Romania, in the chapter dedicated to economic problems, working in this sense with the USA and the USSR representatives. Therefore, according to the provisions of Article 30, Romania waives *"complaints in relation to the decisions or orders of the Prize Courts of some Allied or Associated Powers, Romania accepting to recognize as valid and binding all the decisions and orders of these Prize Courts, pronounced on 1 September 1939, or after this date, regarding Romanian vessels, Romanian goods or the payment of expenses"* (Ib.).

Despite the provisions of the Peace Treaty, on 10 April 1953, the Ministry of Transport requested from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Treaties Directorate, an opinion regarding the legal situation of the ships *"Bucegi"*, *"Steaua Română"*, *"Oltenia"* and *"Inginer N. Vlassopol"*: *"let us know your opinion whether we can consider that these vessels are still our property, or whether the English would be entitled to consider them as war captures"* (AMAE, collection 38/Anglia, Problema 214, 1940-1955, file *Vase sub pavilion românesc rămase în ape engleze, 1940-1955*, f.f.n.).

On 1 September 1953, through a *"Note"*, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs informed the claimant that: *"At the beginning of June 1940, the Romanian government, under the influence of the German government, did not authorize the operation of registering the French fleet on the Danube under the English flag, fleet which, owing to the precipitate events in France, had been sold to England. Also, under the pressure of the Hitler government, at the beginning of July 1940, the Romanian government prevented the British vessels from leaving the Danube"* (Ib.).

After presenting the situation of each vessel, the author of the *"Note"* estimated that the measure taken by the British was one of retaliation in the case of the ships *"Bucegi"*, *"Steaua Română"* and *"Oltenia"*, which, in the end, were requisitioned,

and in the case of the ship *"Ing. Vlassopol"*, which was war capture and then requisitioned.

In the context of the post-war situation, Spiridon Vlassopol acted in his own name alongside the British authorities for the recovery of the damage, so that, in the years 1950-1951, the British party carried out a detailed documentation on the situation of the owner and his ship, which formed the basis of discussions and analysis in a trial held in London, at the end of which it was decided to award compensation for the period during which it was detained and used by the British authorities.

CONCLUSIONS

The situation of Romanian commercial ships starting in 1939, even before the outbreak of the war, was a difficult one, which, under the conditions of the evolution of the geopolitical and geostrategic situation in 1940, became more and more complicated, reaching the point of physical or value loss. The relations with Germany after 1939, its impositions from 1940 regarding the British and French ships on the Danube, led to worsening the relations with Great Britain and the USA and their reaction regarding Romanian commercial ships. Also as a result of the relations with Germany during the war, the leased commercial ships that operated in the Black Sea were, with one exception, lost.

After the end of the war, the situation did not improve for Romania in terms of commercial ships, their physical or value recovery, given that the three great allies, the USA, the USSR and Great Britain, in the same situation regarding the requisitioning of some Romanian ships, found the convenient solution in terms of solving the problem in their favour.

In relation to the commitments assumed by Germany regarding the loss of the leased and used Romanian ships, the Romanian party has never raised the issue.

The analysis of the context and the conditions in which Romania's commercial fleet was lost during the Second World War demonstrates, similar to other situations, that, in the relations with the great powers, small states, always considered to have limited interests, suffer defeats when the interests of the big ones require it. It was not only the case of Romania.

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