

Military Operations of the Romanian Fleet in Danube Delta and The Black Sea in the Summer of 1944

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Abstract: The differences between the Romanian and Soviet naval commandments would appear soon, even in the issue of the military collaboration with the aim of ensuring the seacoast against the danger represented by the German ships. The imperative requests for the admission of the war and auxiliary fleets would be received by the Romanian Commandment of the Romanian Naval Forces, namely by the Rear Admiral Horia Măcelariu, on August 29th, at a time when “the Romanian forces had already begun fighting against the German forces” (Dutu, 2000, p. 241).

The character of these hostilities between the Romanian and German maritime units can be defined more precisely as actions of intimidation and mutual surveillance, the German forces having a technical endowment which was totally superior to the Romanian one. For this reason, “the Romanian Royal Navy forces are no longer able to take any armed action against the German naval and land forces, in Constanta and on Maritime Danube, the small actions that have taken place in these areas being considered as incidents”². Without giving any importance to the military actions of the Romanian fleet, the Commander of the Soviet Fleet in the Black Sea, Admiral F.I. Oktiabrski, gave an ultimatum to the Romanian authorities, claiming that “all the Romanian war and auxiliary fleet should be moved to Sulina and handed over to the Soviet Maritime Command”³. According to the Soviet statement, “in the event of a refusal or failure to respond, the Soviet fleet will start attacking your fleet and base from the sea and air”⁴. The protests of the Romanian government and of the Romanian Navy would not cause

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² Archive of the Ministry of National Defense, case 948, file no. 1558, 136-137.

³ Ibidem, case 379, file no. 10, f 54. The operation of surrendering the Romanian Navy fleet had to be concluded in the same day, August 29th, 12.00 hours.

⁴ Ibidem.

any significant change in the behavior of the Russian military navy units, the Operations Log of the Navy Commandment recording on August 30th that the new allies (emphasis added, Ș.Gh.) “Consider us still enemies or a country that has capitulated without conditions”¹. The assessments would also be confirmed by the Russian Rear Admiral Azorov, who would establish, after the Soviet ships entered Constanța port, a strict regime of control over the Romanian navy ships and storage facilities².

In spite of the arrogant and abusive position of the Soviet Commandment, the military authorities and the Romanian government would show a dignified attitude, urging the Navy crews to goodwill “until this difficult situation is over”. The persistence in imposing their point of view would only result in the delay of the total seizure of the Romanian fleet and in the internment of most of the Romanian crew members. The instructions from Bucharest provided “fierce protests”, and if not accepted, “the ships will be put at their disposal, under the same conditions as in Tulcea. Solutions such as interment and sinking ships are excluded”³. Significant are also the instructions of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs addressed to the Romanian delegate affiliated to General F. I. Tolbukhin, commander of the Ukrainian III-rd Front, in order to discuss the military-economical and financial problems related to the presence of the Russian troops in Dobrogea⁴.

The measures taken by the Soviets would not lead to an optimal collaboration with the Romanian side, the Romanian naval commandments being unable to perform their functional missions, making possible the incident caused by the German submarine in Constanța port by torpedoing a Romanian ship and a Soviet one. The result would inevitably be a disaster for the Romanian Maritime Commandment, the natural consequence being “the accusation of the Romanian Commandments of sabotage and complicity with the German Navy from the Black Sea” and the

¹ Ibidem, f 53.

² Ibidem, f 54. To be mentioned that the Soviet fleet, the first group of motor gun boats, would enter in Constanța navigated by the Romanian motor gun boats “Dumitrescu” and “Ghiclescu”, as well as by Boat no. 7.

³ Ibidem, f 46. The Romanian authorities accepted as last solution the replacement of the national flag with the white one and keeping the crews on board the ships at any cost. The exclusion of radical solutions, i.e. the sinking of the ships, showed that the Romanian side hoped the military and political relations with the Soviet Union would be regulated as soon as the Armistice Convention would be signed. The tough position of the two Soviet admirals, the commanders of the Russian inland and maritime forces, did not exclude the hypothesis, favorable to the Soviets, to eliminate by any means an unwanted military presence in the Black Sea waters.

⁴ Idem, case 948, file no. 1558, f 136-137.

interruption of the Soviet Commandments' contacts with the Romanian authorities¹. Accordingly, the event would become an opportunity for an acute exacerbation of the suspicions and accusations from the Soviet side against the Romanian sailors and officers embarked on Romanian Navy ships.

Foreseeing a possible unfavorable turn of events, the Romanian Navy Commander went to Bucharest to report the delicate situation the collaboration between the Romanians and Russians was in. The travel of Rear Admiral Horia Măcelariu to the Capital to report the situation in Dobrogea² would be misinterpreted by the Soviets as another proof of the Romanian refusal to cooperate, this being the reason for which the abusive decision to disarm and intern the crews on board the respective ships on September 5th, 1944, was taken³. The severity of the measure adopted by the Soviets would force the Romanian government to send to the area "a delegate with the rank of admiral - at the request of the temporary commandment of the Navy in Constanța, Commander Nicolae Bardescu - to clarify and restore contacts with the Soviet Naval Commandment"⁴.

Rear Admiral Roman August would be appointed responsible with the above task on September 6th, 1944, who, in a first phase, would have contacts with the Dobrogea Military Commandment. In his report, the Romanian officer noted that "following to the events of September 5th, this year, by disarming the naval forces, the morale of this commandment was rather low, disorientation almost complete, while panic and terror ruled⁵. The report also states that among the senior officers and other Romanian sailors in Constanța there is a state of "extreme moral breakdown"⁶. The desire of the Romanian Rear Admiral to meet as soon as possible with the leaders of the Soviet Naval Commandment could not be

¹ Idem, case 379, file no. 10, f 85.

² On June 6th, 1945, the Allied (Soviet) Control Commission would accuse him of "active co-operation with Fascist Germany" and of criminal actions against the United Nations after August 23rd, 1944. Investigating these charges, Cabinet 7 of People's Court studied the official documents of the Navy General Staff, assessing that the defendant fulfilled the orders received from the upper echelons, being put in a position of inferiority towards the German forces. Regarding the allegations of lack of cooperation with the Red Army on August 26th – 31st, it was revealed that they were the result of the refusal to respond to the Soviet demands, while strictly fulfilling the orders of the Romanian Great General Staff at the same time and complying with the superior decisions.

³ Idem, case 948, file no. 1558, f 136.

⁴ Idem, case 379, file no. 10, f 102.

⁵ Idem, case 948, file no. 1558, f 136.

⁶ Ibidem.

achieved, as his insistence did not receive any response¹. The conclusions of the meeting with the Soviet General would make Rear Admiral Roman August to say that:

Since the arrival of the Soviet Naval Commandment in Constanta, a very hostile attitude and a total lack of trust in the Romanian Navy had been observed.

The Soviet Commandment initially asked the Romanian Navy for close and friendly cooperation between the two sides.

All subsequent requests made by the Soviet Naval Commandment were made in an ultimatum type of tone and, when these could not be solved immediately, the tone would become offensive.

The disarmament of our ships on September 5th was based on certain groundless reasons of the Soviet side.

The irritation and hostility of the Soviet officers seemed to have a reason - the Romanian officer mentioned - the military successes of the Romanian Royal Navy, the fact that it could not capture the German fleet ships which left free from the port and the existence of ships in the port that had been announced as sunk by the Russian Commandment. In parallel, it was shown that both the Commandments and the Marine Corps of Constanța did and do everything in their power to establish good relations with the Soviet ones and to “regain their full trust in the Romanian Navy”².

For all these efforts, the Romanian crews would be interned³, the ships sailed to the Soviet ports under Soviet flag, and the Romanian sailors were disarmed and humiliated. For many of them, the military career would be discontinued here, others would find refuge by joining “Horia, Cloșca și Crișan” division as volunteers, and some would return from the Soviet Union much too late⁴. Preferring death to dishonor, like General Hugo Schwab, the Romanian commander of the destroyer squadron, Alexandru Dumbravă, committed suicide

¹ Ibidem. The Romanian officer would meet General Morgunov, the Russian Commander of Black Sea Coast Defense, for the declared purpose.

² Ibidem, f 137.

³ MFA Arch. , case 71/1939, Condiții de pace (Peace conditions), vol 161, f 237.

⁴ See Marina Română de la război la armistițiu și confruntare, in R.I.M., no. 6(34)/ 1995.

when “the Russians on-boarded the commander ship of the destroyer squadron, N.M.S. Regina Maria”¹.

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¹ MFA Arch., case 71/ 1939, Condiții de pace (Peace conditions), vol. 161, f 238.

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