

STUDY ON THE BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN IN CONSTANTA – ITS IMPACT ON DAILY LIFE

Paul DOMINTE¹

¹Professor Ph.D., Theoretical College „Decebal”, Constanta

Abstract: After 1989, an event which had long been passed over in silence - thanks to communist propaganda – the presence of the Potemkin Battleship in Constanta, in the summer of 1905, returned to the attention of historians. The film that made famous the Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein, “Battleship Potemkin”, did not stage the whole story. Especially its end, which was consumed peacefully in the Romanian seaside harbour with the rebel sailors’ landing – whom the Romanian state has granted asylum for, according to constitutional rules - and taking over the ship by the Tsarist military authorities, was not at all convenient for the Soviet propaganda.

Other studies on the subject, since 1989, have insisted on the military-logistics side of the action, being less concerned with the impact the event had on the collective mind. In fact, the population in the city -when the cruiser appeared in mid-June off the coast of Constanta-lived a state of panic at the rumour that uncommon insurgents could open fire, the mood of the crew on the Potemkin, the Romanian authorities and the people who attended the events; it was the tensest for several days as events lasted. This side of the story is the substance of this article.

Keywords: Battleship Potemkin, sailors rebelled, authorities, daily life, political asylum

Undoubtedly the most publicized event of the year 1905 in Constanta – and probably throughout the country – was “the Potemkin affair”. The Russian cruiser “Potemkin”, the largest combat unit of the Russian Black Sea fleet: 12 800 dwt., armed with 4 caliber 305 mm guns, 16 caliber 150 mm, 14 caliber 75 mm and 6 caliber 47 mm, with a speed of 16 miles and a crew of approximately 740 members had to face a revolt of the sailors who brought the ship up the coast of Constanta. On July 19 the High Command Division receives a communication from the Sulina Garrison commander complaining that “at 6 am, he distinguished the great ship coming from the island, with large armored masts, with three baskets and two accompanied by a torpedo boat” about 8 miles from shore. The Journal continues: “Knowing the revolutionary events in Russia and checking the data reported to the documents that had the characteristics of foreign ships, it was easily established that the warship was « Potemkin », also known « Kneaz Tavriceski » the largest and most powerful Russian Navy vessel in the Black Sea, whose crew revolted”. The Garrison was immediately alerted. Anchoring the two Russian warships at 2 km of land, has caused a “living unrest throughout the city”, especially since the event happened in full season. The two senior officers, the commander of the port and of the cruiser “Elizabeth” had every reason to be anxious, based on the finding that the insurgents “had no control and a formidable force that nothing can oppose them effectively, the city being deprived of any defense and « Elizabeth », the only battleship, was a neglectable amount against armored forces”.

After being announced, the Ministry of War, has started a round of talks with the rebels, who were interested in the opportunity to receive asylum in Romania. Since the authorities demanded the surrender of the two vessels, the Russians said they would leave the Harbour of Constanta. Tension peaked at 4:35 in the morning when the Russian battleship “Flag”, which always accompanied “Potemkin”, has turned to port, and the Romanian commander gave orders to open fire, which caused its withdrawal, causing the two vessels to leave the rebellious waters at 13.

“Potemkin” returned to the port of Constanta on 25 June 1905, but the day after, the insurgents showed their intention to surrender to the Romanian authorities, which they did, once, they previously, had obtained assurances regarding their freedom in the country. At 12:45 the master port, Lieutenant Commander Nicolae Negru (Nicholas Black), brought the battleship to shore, and 2 hours later, 700 Russian sailors were stationed, in the presence of the public, “assisting with satisfaction at the end of this event. Later the battleship was

handed over to the Russian authorities. These are the events, in short”.

About the effects on the population, we also have many stories of particular interest in this paper. Fortunately, the archives of the Museum of National History and Archaeology in Constanța keeps accounts of Romanian officials directly involved in the events.

Commander Negru, one of the most important protagonists of the event, told Ion Duployen, a few years after – meanwhile a retired naval officer – over a friendly breakfast, his version of the events. The Commander reported that the day of July 19, 1905, was a very hot day, and that at 16 o'clock, he went to Harbour Headquarters, whose chief he was, after having eaten. One of the first reactions was fearing the clerk Zugravu. He was actually, chattering his teeth, when he tried to report the post commander of the firing position, off the coast city, of two Russian warships. Coming to the captain, after he mocked the clerk, the pilot Bezerghianu informed the commander about the revolt of 700 sailors on the Potemkin, which he has already read about in newspapers. When Potemkin fired in greeting, the military clerk turned pale. The commander then ordered the pilot to prepare the “flagship”, a poor boat with a pair of shovels, so called only in derision, to go to the rebelled ship. The pilot was terrified to walk among some rebels that had killed the officers, thinking that the commander would share the same fate. When the commander announced that he must go too because he spoke Russian, he began to complain that he had a wife and children and then, after loading, to pray to God to take him to His guard. On board he was made aware of the revolt, and then the employee called the revolutionary committee, led by Sergeant Matușenko. Commander Negru said that he came to visit because this courtesy was common amongst Romanians, which calmed the crew. Horror reached climax for the pilot when Matușenko turned his revolver to the Commander, so they fired two steps back. In fact the sergeant was telling him how he had shot the Commander of the cruiser. Negru calmly urged him to put the gun on the table, and Matușenko gave it to him, believing that he liked the gun. Asked how many days he would like to stay in the area of the port, Matușenko replied that they need food and pay. The Commander told him that he could not decide alone to give them food, but would consult with the authorities for fear not to spoil relations with Russia; Matușenko threatened to bomb the city. After a short silence, he tried to soften the threat of war using the Romanian fleet, which allegedly was in port. Finally, he promised to try to bring them supplies for several days, then discuss the matter with his superiors, at which the Russian rebels broke out in cheers.

We find the discussions with the Russian officers who came to take over the ship after landing, interesting from the perspective of everyday life and the collective mind. To achieve this objective, a Russian admiral was sent aboard “The Rostislav” in Constanta. At first the tsarist government representatives treated coldly commander Negru because of the Romanian decision to disembark the insurgent sailors while the Russians would have preferred to judge extradition in a military court. The Russian Admiral Pizarwski, treated the commander coldly. He kept him standing, sprawling in an armchair and threatening, pounding his fist on the table that poured half a liter of vodka – proof that he had drunk the other – irritated by the fact that the Romanian officer told him he cannot run without orders from superiors. The next day, receiving absolution from Bucharest, Commander Negru was forced to return to the cruiser “Rostislav” to communicate the approval of the request.

This time Admiral Pizarwski received him in a completely different atmosphere. The Romanian officer told the Russians they had received approval to take the abandoned ship. As if by magic the Admiral relaxed and adopted an attitude full of friendship. The remaining discussion portrays a funny picture of Commander Negru, which to some extent puts to light, what the Romanian officers liked to believe about themselves. True or not, the story highlights this trait, our picture of ourselves and others. When the Russian asks: “What’s your name sir?”, the Commander says his name, then begins to lay the other studies and evidence, “a diplomat from the Livorno Naval Academy. Currently seconded to the leadership of the port where you have the honour to be”. Then the Romanian officer continues and the Russian admiral is surprised that Romania has officers schooled in Italy: “All senior officers from the Romanian Navy had made academic higher education abroad”. After hearing whom he has to do with, the Admiral, invites him to sit and to discuss some more. This is where the Commander draws him in a “race” to laugh on his account. To verify the information, the Admiral began to ask Black about with his teachers at Livorno. So, he reminds him of the Admiral Loveri from Maria. The Russian bluffs making him believe that Loveri was a wonderful man.

But he got stuck in his own lies; because he said that he met the Italian Admiral about three years ago, when in fact he had died 8 years before. Caught, the Admiral blushed, and as a diversion, opened the family gold crest cigarette container – he came from a noble family – and gave the Commander a cigarette with an elegant gesture followed by an invitation in French. Then he went on talking and invited him to choose their drink, the Commander opting for champagne. The two were drinking for Russia and Romania, for the Navy and the “eternal friendship between Romanians and Russians”. Then they chatted the Commander being urged to narrate his memories. He continued to buckle Russian pride. Incidentally he noted that had Admiral Murgescu as an exam teacher: “He who, in 1877, in the war with the Turks, rescued two Russian ships, attacking and shaking two Turkish monitors” and at another exam Commander Koslinski, a very demanding professor. The Russian did not hesitate to answer: “One of our Russians, of course, they are demanding ...” but the reply came immediately: “Yes. It was not Russian. He was Romanian. However one of the most able mathematicians, astronomers”. Finally, tired of this cat and mouse game, the Russian Admiral replied: “But to hell with all this. Let’s drink a cup and then, tell dirty anecdotes”.

It is obvious that this discussion expresses the national mentality that animated the Romanian army officers and especially the desire to assert themselves through education, knowledge, skills, sense of finesse, and daring, courage and balance etc. Moreover the Commander was able to make known its capabilities for navigation when the Russians, wishing to start the Battleship Potemkin, were wrong and

flooded the bilge, which sank the ship. The Commander showed them the error by simply researching the draft, letting Prince Gagarin behind; the new commander of the Battleship Potemkin, was a true scholar, as the Russian admiral had put it. The following year, 1906, the cruiser “Pantelimon”, as it was renamed in the meantime “Potemkin”, came to make a courtesy visit to Constanta. On this occasion Commander Black received the “Saint Ann” decorations and the tsar granted him the rank of Commander, saying no more and no less than that he was “the most educated and skilled sailor, of all he had known”. But when leaving Constanta, “because prince Gagarin’s quality of skilled sailor”, he “led the good ship to the cliffs in front of a Genovese Lighthouse”, a second pilot error which caused the Commander to make ironic comments. The sailors on “Tomis” and “Amarilis” needed two days to remove the ship from the rocks. And finally the Commander maliciously comments that the rebel sailors proved more than competent marine officers as compared with those within the Russian nobility. In fact almost all of officers who have left written testimonies about the Romanian navy of the time, Ionescu N. Johnson, Jean Bart, wrote about the hostility toward officers because of high-ranking relations.

Regarding the reaction of civilians in the city, they feared a bombardment. John Duployen gathered more evidence about the “business Potemkin”. In one, entitled, *The battleship “Potemkin” in Constanta*, the author shows the confusion in the city. Finding out about the arrival of the ship with the rebelled crew, the local population panicked, fearing bombings in response to our navy authorities’ refusal to give them the required supplies “The hotels were emptied’ the people stormed in trains, and locals led their families to nearby villages”.

There were tense moments, aroused by the unexpected, as it happens in such situations. The first was caused by the Russian commander of the “Psezuape”, Nicolae de Banov’ decision, who was in port for several days, to go to the “Potemkin” to present a high honor to an official, as demanded by navy codes, without being made current of the rebellion that took place on the cruiser. Here he was taken over by rebels, who asked him to join them. Banov managed to escape by a trick, meaning that he needed permission from his crew for this decision. Then, shaking, he was placed under the protection of the crew of the Romanian cruiser “Elisabeta” and was allowed to enter the small port, for shelter. The second point stressed was that in which he threatened Matusenko, leader of the revolutionary committee of the “Potemkin”, coming to shore to discuss the issue of supply and was informed the Romanian authorities’ refusal to give food to the rebels. On the ship “Elizabeth”, however, there was the Russian official Kartaşev that threatened Matusenko with arrest. The discussions became very heated, and Matusenko got, by mistake, on board the “Elizabeth”.

Convinced that he was entrapped in order to be arrested he tried to jump into the water, but was stopped from this reckless act by a sailor. Finally a third tense moment was that when the “Flag” that accompanied the cruiser, tried to force its entry into port, and was greeted with a first warning, then a shell in the bow of the vessel, after which it backed off. That same evening, Matusenko came to “Elizabeth” demanding an apology for the incident and showing, for the ease of Romanian authorities, that he has no hostile thought, but wanted only to accommodate the powerful Russian craft.

It must be said that the events were reflected in the Romanian media based on political and ideological sympathies. Socialists’ opinion on the event, for example, differs from the official one. According to them, there was an unusual agitation – even before “Potemkin” came to area – caused by fears that outraged Russian fleet would come to bomb the city.

The news increased the panic because the Command Division had already received some information from Sulina. Fears were fueled by all sorts of news about the fights in Odessa with data from military officers and Cossacks, the occupation of berths by revolutionary troops and rebel sailor workers. During talks with sailors panic in the city has been amplified by “Ohrana”, the Russian secret service, whose agents have maintained the idea that the consulate will bomb the city. This has generated confusion among the authorities which were divided into two camps: some hostile to rebels, others – who although did not support the rebels – believed however that we should have a dignified behaviour, as it was customary in international laws. Socialists have said that the porters, were “cruelly exploited by their masters” and expressed sympathy for the Russian rebels.

The conservative government sent Safety forces to prevent contamination with revolutionary ideas. Finally revolutionaries landed and Romanian authorities have handed over the ship. They said that they would do this not to endanger the city, especially since they knew that there are thousands of workers who think like the insurgents: “We owe them the sparing of the city” Matușenko would conclude. The news that reached immediately Constanta, made large masses of Romanian workers, or from the Turkish suburbs, turn to port. But here they were harassed by police who barred access to the port, they were rejected with weapons and made to flee. The rebels on the “Potemkin” then surrendered to receive political asylum, before dividing amongst them the 84.000 rubles on board. The battleship was then returned to the Russians, who took the rebels’ side. Workers helped the rebels to find a job in Constanta, Galati, Braila, but “Ohrana”, in collaboration with the Romanian authorities have continued the challenges and tried to kidnap the former seamen on “Potemkin” on several occasions without much success, to take them to trial in Russia.

In his work dedicated to the Russian republic of 11 days, Em. I. Grant shows that when the ship “Potemkin” appeared in sight people came to look after the ship, but their curiosity turned to panic because the vessel transferred to port and anchored about 2 km away. After the first contacts with the insurgents, Commander Black and a delegation met with the prefect and General Angelescu at the new pier, where they were informed that the Romanian government cannot supply, but the deserters were asked to surrender; instead if they delivered all weapons, they will be granted security. Meanwhile the authorities were alerted and 3 vessels were sent to defend the city and an artillery regiment in Cernavoda was immediately mobilized to the city. As part of the crew of the “Psezuape” was tempted to join the rebels on Potemkin, there officers have taken the prevention of any riots, and the Russian consul, forced the sailors to take an oath of allegiance. Other events had a direct impact on Constanta, and the people who watched the events. To appease the spirits, Russian revolutionaries gave links to 25 European powers showing that their purpose is to fight against autocracy, not to massacre innocent people. In the night of June 25, when the cruiser returned to Constanta, Admiral Kozlinschi entered into negotiations with Russian sailors and guaranteed them that if they gave the ship and weapons they will not be extradited and they will be guarantees freedom in Romania. After a second round of negotiations, which was attended by Romanian Prime Minister Grigore Cantacuzino, the insurgents decided to land. The joy was so great among them, that they broke their lockers to take the equipment and everything. On shore they were greeted by thousands of people (as assessed by the author, more than 8.000 people), who broke out in cheers. Again they were guaranteed to be free, to go where they wanted, or live in Romania as at home,

a statement covered by cheers. Some were shy, for fear of being drawn into a trap and arrested or being turned over to a firing squad, others frowned, others were very happy and singing, playing the mandolin, guitar and harmonica. Some even danced with the Romanians and gave them their berets and ribbons as a souvenir.

The Sailors were concentrated at Anadolchioi (a hamlet near Constanta), then settled in Galati, Braila, Bucharest, Calarasi, Focsani, Iasi, Barlad, where they became mechanics, workers in ports or on the field. Most remained in Constanta, and six have gone abroad. Gr. Cantacuzino received Matușenko, with whom he spent time talking, and two officers and a mechanic were invited by the royal family in Sinaia. An officer was removed from the vessel hull more dead than alive, after being monitored for 11 days by the revolutionaries. Taking over the ship was not easy, because on two occasions the Russian sailors wanted to blow it up, which sparked a brawl in which two Romanians were assaulted when taking over the ship “Potemkin,” which was in a terrible state of disorder and misery: broken windows, spots of blood, broken cabinets and mirrors, curtains torn from the windows in the operating room, cadaverous odor, the “infirmary in the middle of chaos produced the impression of a slaughterhouse”. The battleship no. 267 went to Sevastopol after the sailors of the “Potemkin” had landed. 8 Russian sailors from the “Potemkin” followed them.

Obviously the press reflected the subjective opinions of events, arising either from the political sympathies, either from its own investigations. The Newspaper “Universul” (Universe) presented the tension that prevailed among the population, especially at night, when “Potemkin” monitored the port lights, then the cruiser “Elizabeth” went to the supervision of the rebelled vessel. According to investigations conducted by the above mentioned newspaper correspondents in Constanta, rebel sailors had not eaten for 2 days. Some wanted to land immediately, but were kept under threat from others who had keys to store weapons and ammunition and warned that they would shoot if they left the ship. At one point one of the Russians sent to talk to the Romanian authorities burst into tears at the memory of the battle of Odessa, which has created a powerful emotion.

The fact is that the revolt of the cruiser “Potemkin” caused very tense moments, with European impact. Bulgaria reacted immediately and demanded that if insurgents came off the coast, to be disarmed immediately or be asked to leave its waters. The Sultan was seized by a terrible fear and did not allow Turkish vessels to leave the Mediterranean to venture into the Black Sea for fear of revolt on Ottoman ships.

Even in Romania opinions were divided. While the public and political opinion in the country called for a harsh attitude towards the vessel which has violated the sovereignty of territorial waters, the people of Constanta, on the contrary, even sympathized with the insurgents and pressed the authorities to give them supplies.

On the other hand the authorities have been in a very delicate situation with Russia. They could not turn over the sailors, because it violated the Constitution, and they did not want to spoil relations with their neighbours. Eventually the situation was resolved between the tsar and King Charles I, who held a very cordial exchange of letters, which have resolved the event. Thus, through its effects on local population and the Romanian authorities, by the way the media covered the events, the contacts with the rebel sailors and the Russian authorities, the international effects, the events related to “Potemkin” in Constanta are one of the most important moments in Romanian and regional history up to World War I, matched perhaps only by Tsar Nicholas I’ visit and of the Russian sovereign family, in Constanta in 1914

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