

Miloš Ković\*

University of Belgrade  
Faculty of Philosophy  
Department of History

## The British Adriatic Squadron and the Evacuation of Serbs from the Albanian Coast 1915–1916

**Abstract:** Unpublished sources and archival material can still shed fresh light upon the history of the evacuation of the Serbian Army and civilian refugees from the Albanian coast in 1915–1916. Among them are reports to the British Admiralty written in 1915 and 1916 by the commander of the British Adriatic Squadron, Rear Admiral Cecil Fiennes Thursby. These documents deposited in the National Archives in Kew Gardens have never been used in reconstructing the evacuation operation. Written on an almost daily basis, Thursby's reports of 1915 and 1916 constitute a unique source not only for the history of the evacuation of Serbs but also for the history of the South-East Europe in the Great War.

**Keywords:** Serbia, Albania, British Adriatic Squadron, Corfu, evacuation, Entente Powers

### I

In the autumn of 1915, Serbia and Montenegro were attacked by the combined force of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Bulgaria. Decimated by the battles of 1914 and devastating epidemics of 1915, the Serbs fought and gradually retreated, expecting the Allies' help. However, it would not be an exaggeration to say that they were left to their fate, since the Entente Powers failed to fulfil their promises.

Especially clear among Allied officials' reassuring messages<sup>1</sup> was Sir Edward Grey's House of Commons announcement of 28 September 1915 concerning Bulgarian mobilisation on the eve of the attack on Serbia:

---

\* [mkovic13@gmail.com](mailto:mkovic13@gmail.com)

<sup>1</sup> See D. R. Živojinović, *Nevoljni saveznici: Velike sile i Solunski front (1914–1918)* [Unwilling Allies: The Great Powers and the Salonika Front (1914–1918)] (Belgrade: Zavod za udžbenike, 2008), 121–148; D. R. Živojinović, "Velika Britanija i 'moralna podrška' Srbiji (decembar 1915 – mart 1916)" [Great Britain and "Moral Support" to Serbia (December 1915 – March 1916)], *Nadmeni saveznik i zanemareno srpstvo: Britansko-srpski odnosi (1875–1941)* [Domineering Ally and Neglected Serbdom: British-Serbian Relations (1875–1941)]

If, on the other hand, the Bulgarian mobilization were to result in Bulgaria assuming an aggressive attitude on the side of our enemies, we are prepared to give to our friends in the Balkans all the support in our power, in the manner that would be most welcome to them, in concert with our Allies, without reserve and without qualification.<sup>2</sup>

David Lloyd George realised immediately what had been done to Serbia. As a minister in Herbert Henry Asquith's government, he was vainly trying to induce Grey and other colleagues to stick to their promises. In his memoirs, he wrote extensively about this "deception practised upon Serbia".<sup>3</sup> Another minister in the Asquith government, Edward Henry Carson, was even more "disgusted".<sup>4</sup> In his House of Commons speech of 20 October 1915, Carson stated that he resigned from the government because of its broken promises, Edward Grey's in particular:

The statement made by the Foreign Minister, under the sanction of the Cabinet, in this House, appeared to me to have announced a policy of the highest importance in our obligations in the Balkans, involving our prestige and our honour.<sup>5</sup>

However, Serbian Crown Prince Alexander Karadjordjević, Nikola Pašić's Cabinet and *Vojvoda* (Field-Marshal) Radomir Putnik's Supreme Command were united in refusing to surrender even after the Bulgarians cut off the Serbian Army's route to Salonika, where the dilatory landing of insufficient Allied forces started. After the epic and tragic winter retreat through the mountains of Montenegro and Albania, in December 1915 the remnants of the Serbian Army numbering, according to Serbian official sources, nearly 152,000 soldiers, as well as some 15,000 civilian refugees and more than 22,000 Austro-Hungarian prisoners of war,<sup>6</sup> reached the Albanian coast, where the aid of the Allied fleets was

---

(Belgrade: Albatros Plus, 2011), 391–402; M. Ković, *Jedini put: Sile Antante i odbrana Srbije 1915. godine* [The Only Way: The Entente Powers and the Defence of Serbia in 1915] (Belgrade: Filip Višnjić, 2016), 85–95; M. Ković, "Obmana Srbije 1915. godine: Nekoliko britanskih svedočenja" ["Deception Practised upon Serbia": A Few British Testimonies], *Srpska politička misao* 51/2 (2016), 271–284.

<sup>2</sup> *Hansard*, vol. 74, 732. On Grey's attitude towards Serbia see M. Ković, "The Peace Initiative of Sir Edward Grey and his Proposal for Austro-Hungarian Occupation of Belgrade (29–31 July 1914)", in *The Serbs and the First World War 1914–1918*, ed. D. R. Živojinović (Belgrade: Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 2015), 299–307.

<sup>3</sup> D. Lloyd George, *War Memoirs*, vol. I (London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson Ltd, 1933), 489–529.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 513.

<sup>5</sup> *Hansard*, vol. 74, 1813.

<sup>6</sup> C. Stoyanovitch and M. Savtchitch, *Rapport sur les Dommages causés à la Serbie et au Monténégro présenté à la Commission des Réparations des Dommages* (Paris: Impr. slave, 1919), 14.

expected. As the enemy forces approached Albania, the starving and dying Serbian soldiers, civilian refugees and enemy prisoners had to be evacuated. For the Allies, the state of affairs in the Balkans now became more urgent.

## II

All Balkan countries and Great Powers were involved in the evacuation of Serbs from Albania. In December 1915, the Serbs found themselves on Albanian soil, where Italy, Montenegro and Greece, as well as Serbia itself, had their own interests and territorial claims. The Allies chose the island of Corfu as a base for the recuperation and reconstruction of the Serbian Army and the next step was to transport the Serbs to Greek territory. Before that, about 10,000 Serbian soldiers had been evacuated to Bizerte, Tunisia. The transport of some 189,000 Serbs and Austro-Hungarian prisoners by Italian, French and British ships, under the constant threat of Austro-Hungarian and German submarines, warships and aeroplanes, happened to be the largest sea evacuation in the First World War. Historians have found that it was even “the largest sea evacuation in history until Dunkirk”.<sup>7</sup>

These topics have been explored by many generations of Serbian historians, but in historiography in general, Balkan battles and fronts (with the exception of Gallipoli) are, along with the Eastern front, largely neglected topics. Some basic facts about the 1916 evacuation remain uncertain even in Serbian historiography, including chronology, the exact number of evacuated soldiers and civilians, or the role of Italian, French and British fleets in the evacuation.

There are still many unpublished sources and archival material that can shed new light upon these events. Among them are reports to the British Admiralty written in 1915 and 1916 by the commander of the British Adriatic Squadron, Rear Admiral Cecil Fiennes Thursby. These documents are deposited in the National Archives in Kew Gardens, and they have never been used in reconstructing the evacuation of Serbs from the Albanian coast.<sup>8</sup>

Written by one of the main participants on an almost daily basis, Thursby's reports of 1915 and 1916 constitute a unique source not only for the history of the Serbian evacuation but also for the history of the South-East Europe in the Great War. An accomplished officer and acute observer, Admiral Thursby

---

<sup>7</sup> D. T. Bataković, “Serbia 1914–1918: War Imposed, Martyrdom, Resurrection”, in: *Serbia in the Great War: Anglo-Saxon Testimonies and Historical Analysis*, ed. D. T. Bataković (Belgrade: National Library of Serbia, 2014), 33.

<sup>8</sup> The National Archives, UK (TNA), Admiralty (ADM), 137/780, Adriatic, Reports of Proceedings of the Rear Admiral Commanding British Adriatic Squadron, 18 May 1915 to 28 February 1916; *Ibid.* 137/781, Adriatic, Reports of Proceedings of the Rear Admiral Commanding British Adriatic Squadron, 29 February to 20 December 1916; *Ibid.* 137/833, List of Charts Submitted with Reports of Proceedings, British Adriatic Squadron.

had substantial experience with the eastern Mediterranean. He was commander of a detached squadron during the Adana massacres in 1909, of the International Squadron in Crete in 1910, of the 5th Battle Squadron in the Dardanelles and of the 2nd Squadron landing ANZAC forces in Gallipoli in 1915. At the time of the evacuation of Serbs, he commanded the British Adriatic Squadron. Later that year he became commander-in-chief of the East Mediterranean.

### III

According to Admiral Thursby's reports of December 1915, when exhausted Serbian soldiers and civilian refugees were dying on the Albanian coast, the Allies had no plan or clear idea about what to do with them. "At present we do not know how it is intended to deal with the Serbian refugees and the Serbian army" – this is what Thursby writes on 28 December.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, from 1 to 11 December, the Italians were focused on the transport of their own troops to Valona. The British believed that the main goal of the Italians was the defence of their sphere of influence against what they had perceived as the Serbian threat. Thursby reported that Italian warships, being occupied with transporting their troops, could not provide escort to the steamers carrying provisions from Brindisi to the Serbs at San Giovanni di Medua and Durazzo. These ships were under constant threat from Austro-Hungarian destroyers, cruisers, submarines and aeroplanes coming from nearby Kotor; it took submarines only one hour to get from Kotor to Medua, and aeroplanes, about half an hour.<sup>10</sup>

British and French cruisers and destroyers provided escort to the Italian supply ships carrying food and provisions for the Serbs. Coming from the naval base in Brindisi, they were chasing and attacking Austro-Hungarian submarines. The Gulf of Drin was the site of frequent skirmishes between British, French and Italian ships and the enemy's submarines. At the same time, British net drifters were employed to protect the landing of Italian troops at Valona.<sup>11</sup>

British and French ships sought to prevent the advance of enemy forces from the naval bases in Kotor, Šibenik and Pula with limited success.<sup>12</sup> Enemy vessels had free passage up and down the Dalmatian coast, since the British and French at that time had no submarines capable of patrolling the Quarnero and further off the Dalmatian islands. The Austro-Hungarians were able to return from Medua and Durazzo to their naval bases before being cut off by any

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 137/780, Rear Admiral Cecil F. Thursby to Secretary of the Admiralty, Report of Proceedings, H. M. S. "Queen", 28 December 1915.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 1 December 1915.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 9 December 1915.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

force sent from Brindisi. The difficulties of keeping the naval force at sea instead of sending them from Brindisi were obvious, because the Allies could not determine in advance the strength of the approaching enemy forces, and because many large German submarines were operating in these waters. On 5 December 1915 a strong group of Austro-Hungarian cruisers and destroyers managed to enter the port of Medua, sinking the Italian steamer which had just unloaded food for the Serbs, the Greek steamer *Thira* carrying ammunition for Montenegro, and a number of small vessels at Medua and, a little later, at Durazzo.<sup>13</sup>

After the attack of 5 December, no supplies were despatched to the starving Serbs until the last Italian troops were embarked at Valona on the 11th. Only after that were Italian cruisers and destroyers, together with British and French ships, engaged in protecting supply transports. The harbour in Medua was still blocked with sunken vessels. However, two steamers brought about 700 tons of supplies to Durazzo on the 13th.<sup>14</sup>

The bulk of the Serbian army retreating through Montenegro and northern Albania reached Scutari and Alessio between 15 and 21 December. On the same day, 21 December, the Serbian Timok Army left Elbasan for Durazzo and Valona. Austro-Hungarian prisoners had already reached Valona. From Scutari, Serbian Crown Prince Alexander Karadjordjević repeatedly sent messages to the Allies requesting urgent evacuation of his starving and dying soldiers. They were threatened from the north and east by the approaching Austro-Hungarian and Bulgarian armies.<sup>15</sup>

On 21 December Admiral Thursby estimated that there were between 80,000 and 120,000 Serbian soldiers in Albania, mainly in the Scutari and Elbasan areas.<sup>16</sup> Thursby reported that small steamers were carrying food to Durazzo and Medua, but “the whole question is much complicated as no definite decision has been arrived at as to what is to be the ultimate fate of the Serbian army”.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 15 December 1915.

<sup>15</sup> *Veliki rat za oslobodjenje i ujedinjenje Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca* (VRS), vol. XIII [The Great War for the Liberation and Unification of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes] (Belgrade: Štamparija Skerlić, 1927), 306–365; M. Zelenika, *Rat Srbije i Crne Gore 1915* [The War of Serbia and Montenegro in 1915] (Belgrade: Vojno delo, 1964), 444–465, 511–513; Ž. G. Pavlović, *Rat Srbije sa Austro-Ugarskom, Nemačkom i Bugarskom 1915. godine* [Serbia's War with Austria-Hungary, Germany and Bulgaria in 1915] (Belgrade: Medija centar “Odbrana”, 2017), 868–893; M. Dj. Nedić, *Srpska vojska na Albanskoj Golgoti* [Serbian Army on Albanian Golgotha] (Belgrade: Finegraf d.o.o., 2018), 69–114.

<sup>16</sup> TNA, ADM, Rear Admiral Cecil F. Thursby to Secretary of the Admiralty, Report of Proceedings, H. M. S. “Queen”, 21 December 1915.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

The evacuation of Serbian soldiers was postponed again. Italians had first to supply their own troops in Valona. Then they decided to evacuate “refugees of all nationalities, who have been serving with the Serbian army”, and Austro-Hungarian prisoners, who, as Thursby noted, were “in a dreadful state of disorganisation, disease and starvation”.<sup>18</sup> According to Thursby, there was a total of 24,000–25,000 Austro-Hungarian prisoners.<sup>19</sup> On 5 January, he reported that about 25,000 prisoners had been transported, noting that the steamers which had transported them had to be put in quarantine because of many cases of cholera. As a result, the evacuation of Serbian soldiers had to be delayed again.<sup>20</sup>

From 21 to 28 December four small steamers, each carrying 300 to 400 tons of provisions for the Serbs arrived in Medua and Durazzo. In Medua they were attacked by Austrian aeroplanes, bombs hitting even the hospital ship *Panama* evacuating Red Cross personnel from Medua.<sup>21</sup>

Admiral Thursby collaborated with the officers of the British Adriatic Mission sent from Britain to help the Serbs, and with Admiral Ernest Troubridge, who had retreated with the Serbs and was now in charge as commander of the harbour of Medua.<sup>22</sup> A few days later Thursby met French Lieutenant General Piarron de Mondésir as well. Not knowing that the purpose of Mondésir’s mission was to take charge of the entire operation, Thursby assumed that he was to report on the situation.<sup>23</sup> Obvious lack of coordination, together with the fact that on 28 December Thursby noted again that “at present we do not know how it is intended to deal with the Serbian refugees and the Serbian army”,<sup>24</sup> demonstrated that the Allies were in fact unprepared for the evacuation operation, despite the fact that, back in Serbia, their officials had encouraged and even threatened the Serbs not to surrender but instead to retreat to the coast.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 28 December 1915.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 5 January 1916.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 28 December 1915.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 21 December 1915.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 28 December 1915. On Piarron de Mondésir’s mission see P. de Mondésir, *Albanska golgota: Uspomene i ratne slike* [Albanian Golgotha: Memoires and Images of War] (Belgrade: Prosveta a.d., 1934); M. Živanović, “O evakuaciji srpske vojske iz Albanije i njenoj reorganizaciji na Krfu (1915–1916) prema francuskim dokumentima” [On the evacuation of the Serbian Army from Albania and its reorganization in Corfu (1915–1916) according to French documents], *Istorijski časopis* 14–15 (1963–1965), 272–294. See V. G. Pavlović, *De la Serbie vers la Yougoslavie: La France et la naissance de la Yougoslavie, 1878–1918* (Belgrade: Institut des Études balkaniques, 2015), 254–259.

<sup>24</sup> TNA, ADM, Rear Admiral Cecil F. Thursby to Secretary of the Admiralty, Report of Proceedings, H. M. S. “Queen”, 28 December 1915.

<sup>25</sup> M. Ković, *Jedini put*, 188–199.

On 29 December, the Allied force defending the lines of supply between Brindisi and Albania had to fight its biggest battle in the Adriatic since the beginning of the war.<sup>26</sup> On its way from Kotor to the Albanian coast, an Austro-Hungarian squadron consisting of a light cruiser and five destroyers destroyed a French submarine, and then appeared in front of Durazzo harbour. After shelling the town, and sinking some small boats, the squadron ran into a minefield, losing two destroyers. Then an Allied force composed of two British light cruisers, two Italian light cruisers, five French destroyers and four Italian destroyers left Brindisi to chase the Austrian squadron which was retreating back to its naval base. In support of the squadron, an Austrian armoured cruiser and a light cruiser were despatched from Kotor. The Allies caught up with the Austrians, damaging another enemy destroyer in a long-range gunnery duel. After that, the remaining Austrian force managed to reach Kotor.<sup>27</sup>

How dangerous these routes and waters could be was proven on 8 January 1916, when the Italian merchant cruiser *Città di Palermo*, transporting British and Italian troops to Valona, hit a mine in the vicinity of Brindisi and sank drawing down a number of soldiers who were on board. Two of the drifters picking up survivors also hit mines and were blown to pieces.<sup>28</sup> The previous day the steamship *Brindisi* struck a mine at Medua, sinking with 266 Montenegrin volunteers from Canada and the USA.<sup>29</sup>

On 5 January Thursby reported that three British and two French cruisers were ready to escort, together with Italian forces, the transports of Serbian troops. Allies' submarines were now able to patrol the Austrian-held coast all the way to Cape Planka, near Šibenik. From Venice, British submarines patrolled in the northern Adriatic.<sup>30</sup>

According to Thursby's report of 10 January, about 1,000 Serbian soldiers had already been transported by the French cruiser *Jules Michellet* from Medua to Brindisi and then to Bizerte in Tunisia. Thursby wrote that the original plan approved by Mondesir was to evacuate 88,000 Serbian soldiers in the area of Scutari from Medua, 45,000 men in the Elbasan area from Durazzo, and about 10,000 recruits in Fieri from Valona. Admiral Troubridge, however, reportedly warned that this port, being too close to the enemy base in Kotor, was unfit for

---

<sup>26</sup> P. G. Halpern, *A Naval History of World War I* (London and New York: Naval Institute Press, 1995), 156.

<sup>27</sup> TNA, ADM, Rear Admiral Cecil F. Thursby to Secretary of the Admiralty, Report of Proceedings, H. M. S. "Queen", 5 January 1916.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 10 January 1916.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* According to other sources, the number of "Brindisi" casualties was 402: I. Petrović, *Brodolomnici pod Medovo* [The Shipwrecked off Medua] (Podgorica: Književna zadruga Srpskog narodnog vijeća Crne Gore, 2015), 151–190.

<sup>30</sup> TNA, ADM, Rear Admiral Cecil F. Thursby to Secretary of the Admiralty, Report of Proceedings, H. M. S. "Queen", 5 January 1916; *Ibid.* 10 January 1916.



the mass and safe evacuation of Serbian soldiers. Thursby relayed Troubridge's concerns to the Admiralty, although he believed that "no doubt it could be done in time".<sup>31</sup> Already on 10 January he "understood" that the Allies decided that the Serbian Army would have to march again, this time all the way from Medua to the comparatively safe harbours at Durazzo and Valona.<sup>32</sup>

"Plans are being changed daily, but since the capitulation of Montenegro, plans for the evacuation of the Serbian army seem to be getting more settled," Thursby reported on 19 January.<sup>33</sup> On the same day he expected that steamers would evacuate the Serbian Crown Prince and government, together with a part of the Montenegrin government. In the evening the King of Montenegro and Admiral Troubridge were to be transported. Three hospital ships, British, French and Italian, were ready to evacuate the sick, wounded, women and children from Medua and Durazzo. After them, "the remainder of the Serbian army, estimated at 140,000, will be evacuated from Medua and Durazzo..."<sup>34</sup> Around 10,000 recruits have, according to Thursby, already been evacuated from Valona. The island of Corfu, occupied by the French, was ready for the reception of the Serbian Army. Two thousand Serbian soldiers had already been sent there. The main body of about 50 British drifters, supported by two destroyers, were now protecting the transport route from Valona to Corfu.<sup>35</sup>

On 19 January, Thursby sent to the Admiralty the list of vessels, mostly Italian along with three British and two French cruisers, which had been to Medua and Durazzo since 10 December, dispatching and escorting provisions to the Serbs and evacuating them from Albania on their way back. According to him, from 10 December to 18 January, 5,823 tons of provisions had been discharged, and 6,283 passengers evacuated on the return journeys.<sup>36</sup>

By 25 January, the total number of the evacuated was approximately 20,000 Serbian soldiers, 24,000 Austrian prisoners and 6,000 "sick, wounded and refugees".<sup>37</sup> The British Admiralty ordered that "British hospital ships must

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.; Ibid. Troubridge to Thursby, Medua, 6 January 1916. See M. Ković, "Admiral Ernest Trubridž: Uzroci srpskog poraza (1915)" [Admiral Ernest Troubridge: The Causes of Serbian Defeat (1915)], *Srpska politička misao* 51/1 (2016), 239–251.

<sup>32</sup> TNA, ADM, Rear Admiral Cecil F. Thursby to Secretary of the Admiralty, Report of Proceedings, H. M. S. "Queen", 10 January 1916.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 19 January 1916.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. Rear Admiral Cecil F. Thursby to Secretary of the Admiralty, Report of Proceedings, H. M. S. "Queen", 25 January 1916.



not be used for evacuating women & children unless sick”,<sup>38</sup> and Thursby had to assure his superiors that he was acting in compliance with the order.<sup>39</sup> The rate of evacuation was only 2,000 persons per day, since all ships were engaged in transporting provisions not only for the Serbs in Medua, Durazzo and Valona but also for the Italian troops in Valona and Durazzo.<sup>40</sup> By 20 January, “a total of 5100 men have been taken to Bizerta, making 9741 troops all told”.<sup>41</sup> By 25 January, the Allies had evacuated the King of Serbia, the King and Queen of Montenegro, the Serbian government, a part of the Montenegrin government, the foreign diplomats who had retreated with the Serbs, the English hospital units attached to the Serbian Army, Admiral Troubridge and his mission.<sup>42</sup>

The last transports left Medua on 22 and 23 January. This port was now in the Austrian hands, and Thursby warned that Durazzo might be the next to fall to the enemy. At the same time, Serbian troops were marching from Medua to Durazzo and Valona.<sup>43</sup> On 22 and 23 January, the ships *Regina Elena* and *Cordova* managed to evacuate 4,087 Serbian soldiers from Valona, and on 23 January four small steamers transported 2,300 from Durazzo. Thursby reported that most of the Serbian troops embarked on fifteen Italian and French ships in Durazzo would first be transported to Valona, and the rest directly to Corfu.<sup>44</sup> From Valona to Corfu Serbian troops were to be evacuated by thirteen Italian and French ships.<sup>45</sup>

On 1 February Thursby noted that the evacuation from Durazzo was considerably expedited. The traffic to and fro between Durazzo and Valona was “now practically continuous”. Within seven days, from 25 January to 31 January, 23,450 Serbian soldiers were transported from Durazzo to Valona by twelve small steamers. Another 1,500 soldiers were evacuated from Durazzo directly to Corfu. Nine huge boats had already evacuated 31,187 Serbian soldiers from Valona to Corfu.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. Secretary of the Admiralty to Rear Admiral Thursby, London, 24 January 1916; Ibid. Telegram, 1 February 1916.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. Rear Admiral Cecil F. Thursby to Secretary of the Admiralty, Report of Proceedings, H. M. S. “Queen”, 25 January 1916.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. Attached, General Intelligence, 25 January 1916.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. Rear Admiral Cecil F. Thursby to Secretary of the Admiralty, Report of Proceedings, H. M. S. “Queen”, 25 January 1916.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 1 February 1916.

The safety of the transports depended upon Allied fleets. The British, French and Italian submarines divided the coast from Dubrovnik southwards into their respective zones of responsibility. Five British and three French cruisers, sixteen Italian and nine French destroyers escorted transports of the Serbs, occasionally making sweeps north, chasing enemy submarines and ships. The fleet of seventy-seven British net drifters defended the route from Valona to Corfu against enemy submarines.<sup>47</sup>

However, the evacuation operation entailed serious losses. On 2 February, the French steamer *Jean Bart* transporting Serbs from Durazzo to Valona struck a mine or was torpedoed, leaving only five survivors. On the same day two aeroplanes attacked Valona, killing some twenty Serbian and Italian soldiers and a few sailors. Two days later, the Italian steamer *Assiria* carrying Serbs from Durazzo to Valona was hit by a submarine torpedo, which, however, failed to explode.<sup>48</sup> According to Thursby, on the same day, 4 February, Serbian troops repulsed some 8,000 Austrians on the Ishmi river, north of Durazzo, inflicting heavy losses on them and taking some prisoners.<sup>49</sup> According to Serbian sources, this battle took place a day earlier, on 3 February.<sup>50</sup> Parts of the Serbian Army were still a fighting force, obviously capable of defending themselves and winning battles.

On 8 February Thursby reported that since 1 February 51,256 Serbian soldiers had been evacuated from Durazzo and Valona to Corfu. 28,793 were transported from Durazzo to Valona, 8,121 from Durazzo directly to Corfu, and 43,185 from Valona to Corfu.<sup>51</sup> According to Thursby, evacuation from Durazzo was to be completed on 9 February, and the remaining Serbian troops were to be transported from Valona the following week. In his estimation, the total number of Serbian soldiers in Corfu, exclusive of the wounded, sick, refugees, women and children, would be about 130,000.<sup>52</sup>

In his report of 16 February, Thursby updated these figures. From 9 February to 16 February, 25,942 Serbian soldiers were evacuated from the Albanian coast. All troops were transported from Valona, since the evacuation from Durazzo was completed on 9 February, with the transport of the last 2,500 soldiers

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.; Ibid. 28 December 1915; 8 February 1916; 16 February 1916.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. Attached, General Intelligence, 8 February 1916.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> VRS, vol. XIV, 249–250. See Ch. E. J. Fryer, *The Destruction of Serbia in 1915* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 123–124.

<sup>51</sup> TNA, ADM, Rear Admiral Cecil F. Thursby to Secretary of the Admiralty, Attached, Transport of Serbian Troops, 8 February 1916.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. Report of Proceedings, 8 February 1916.

directly to Corfu. With the previously reported numbers, the total of Serbian soldiers evacuated to Corfu by 16 February was 119,483.<sup>53</sup>

“There are still between 15,000 and 20,000 more Serbians in addition to cavalry and horses to be evacuated from Valona,” Thursby wrote.<sup>54</sup> A more precise number of Serbian troops in Albania that were yet to be evacuated was given in the General Intelligence document attached to Thursby’s report: 7,685 at Valona, and 29,000 “at Vojussa”, on route for Valona, with 18,000 horses.<sup>55</sup>

On 23 February Thursby reported that the evacuation was completed, with the exception of the cavalry and horses. According to him, the total number of Serbs transported to Corfu was 130,000.<sup>56</sup> The General Intelligence document of the same date offered an estimate of 10,000 men and 16,000 horses yet to be evacuated to Corfu.<sup>57</sup>

Writing about the completed operation of evacuating Serbian troops and refugees on 28 February, Admiral Thursby stressed “the very creditable part taken in it by the British Cruisers and Drifters.” According to him, British cruisers of the “Town” class were the only Allied cruisers capable of dealing with the best enemy cruisers, and they had usually chased them back to Kotor. Naval drifters have kept off submarine attacks, and “saved many lives from ships which have struck mines or been torpedoed”. Since October 1915, six drifters were lost while on service. “No praise is too high for them,” Thursby concluded.<sup>58</sup>

\* \* \*

As it was demonstrated in this article, Admiral Thursby’s 1915 and 1916 reports to the Admiralty offer many important facts considering especially the role of the Allied naval forces in the evacuation of Serbs from the Albanian coast, its precise chronology and the numbers of the transported soldiers. They obviously are a very useful source for the reconstruction of this huge historical event, largely neglected in the historiography of the First World War.

---

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. Attached, Transport of Serbian Troops, 16 February 1916.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. Rear Admiral Cecil F. Thursby to Secretary of the Admiralty, Report of Proceedings, H. M. S. “Queen”, 16 February 1916.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. Attached, General Intelligence, 16 February 1916. However, the “Transport of Serbian Troops” document mentioned only 15,000–20,000 remaining Serbian soldiers in Valona.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. Rear Admiral Cecil F. Thursby to Secretary of the Admiralty, Report of Proceedings, H. M. S. “Prince of Wales”, 28 February 1916.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. Attached, General Intelligence, 23 February 1916. Cavalry Division of the Serbian Army will be transported to Corfu between 22 March and 5 April 1916.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. Rear Admiral Cecil F. Thursby to Secretary of the Admiralty, Report of Proceedings, H. M. S. “Prince of Wales”, 28 February 1916.

## Sources and bibliography

### Unpublished sources

The National Archives, UK, Admiralty

- 137/780, Adriatic, Reports of Proceedings of the Rear Admiral Commanding British Adriatic Squadron, 18 May 1915 to 28 February 1916
- 137/781, Adriatic, Reports of Proceedings of the Rear Admiral Commanding British Adriatic Squadron, 29 February to 20 December 1916.
- 137/833, List of Charts Submitted with Reports of Proceedings, British Adriatic Squadron.

### Published sources

*Hansard*. Vol 74.

Lloyd George, D. *War Memoirs*, vol. I. London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson Ltd, 1933.

Mondezir P. de [P. de Mondésir], *Albanska golgota: Uspomene i ratne slike* [Albanian Golgotha: Memories and Images of War]. Belgrade: Prosveta a.d., 1934.

Stoyanovitch C. and M. Savtchitch. *Rapport sur les Dommages causés à la Serbie et au Monténégro présenté à la Commission des Réparations des Dommages*. Paris: Impr. slave, 1919.

*Veliki rat za oslobođenje i ujedinjenje Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca*. Vol. XIII [The Great War for the Liberation and Unification of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes]. Belgrade: Štamparija Skerlić, 1927.

### Bibliography

Bataković, D. T. "Serbia 1914–1918: War Imposed, Martyrdom, Resurrection." In *Serbia in the Great War: Anglo-Saxon Testimonies and Historical Analysis*, ed. D. T. Bataković. Belgrade: National Library of Serbia, 2014.

Fryer, Ch. E. J. *The Destruction of Serbia in 1915*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.

Halpern, P. G. *A Naval History of World War I*. London and New York: Naval Institute Press, 1995.

Ković, M. "Admiral Ernest Trubridž: Uzroci srpskog poraza (1915)" [Admiral Ernest Troubridge: The Causes of Serbian Defeat (1915)]. *Srpska politička misao* 51/1 (2016), 239–251.

— *Jedini put: Sile Antante i odbrana Srbije 1915. godine* [The Only Way: The Entente Powers and the Defence of Serbia in 1915]. Belgrade: Filip Višnjić, 2016.

— "Obmana Srbije' 1915. godine: Nekoliko britanskih svedočenja" ["The Deception Practised upon Serbia": A Few British Testimonies], *Srpska politička misao* 51/2 (2016), 271–284.

— "The Peace Initiative of Sir Edward Grey and his Proposal for Austro-Hungarian Occupation of Belgrade (29–31 July 1914)". In *The Serbs and the First World War 1914–1918*, ed. D. R. Živojinović, 299–307. Belgrade: Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 2015.

Nedić, M. Dj. *Srpska vojska na Albanskoj Golgoti* [Serbian Army on Albanian Golgotha]. Belgrade: Finegraf d.o.o., 2018.

Pavlović, V. G. *De la Serbie vers la Yougoslavie: La France et la naissance de la Yougoslavie, 1878–1918* [From Serbia to Yugoslavia: France and the Birth of Yugoslavia 1878–1918]. Belgrade: Institut des Études balkaniques, 2015.

- Pavlović, Ž. G. *Rat Srbije sa Austro-Ugarskom, Nemačkom i Bugarskom 1915. godine* [Serbia's War with Austria-Hungary, Germany and Bulgaria in 1915]. Belgrade: Medija centar "Obrana", 2017.
- Petrović, I. *Brodolomnici pod Medovo* [The Shipwrecked off Medua]. Podgorica: Književna zadruga Srpskog narodnog vijeća Crne Gore, 2015.
- Zelenika, M. *Rat Srbije i Crne Gore 1915* [The War of Serbia and Montenegro in 1915]. Belgrade: Vojno delo, 1964.
- Živanović, M. "O evakuaciji srpske vojske iz Albanije i njenoj reorganizaciji na Krfu (1915–1916) prema francuskim dokumentima" [On the evacuation of the Serbian Army from Albania and its reorganization in Corfu (1915–1916) according to French documents]. *Istorijski časopis* 14–15 (1963–1965), 231–307.
- Živojinović, D. R. "Velika Britanija i 'moralna podrška' Srbiji (decembar 1915 – mart 1916)" [Great Britain and "Moral Support" to Serbia (December 1915 – March 1916)]. *Nadmeni saveznik i zanemareno srpstvo: Britansko-srpski odnosi (1875–1941)* [Domineering Ally and Neglected Serbdom: British-Serbian Relations (1875–1941)], 391–402. Belgrade: Albatros Plus, 2011.
- *Nevoljni saveznici: Velike sile i Solunski front (1914–1918)* [Unwilling Allies: The Great Powers and the Salonika Front (1914–1918)]. Belgrade: Zavod za udžbenike, 2008.