

**SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE EFFECTIVENESS  
OF THE OTTOMAN NAVY IN THE BALKAN WARS 1912-1913\***

Piotr Nykiel

Most historians are explicitly negative in their assessment of the effectiveness of the Ottoman Navy in the Balkan Wars in 1912-1913. According to them the only positive aspect of its activity was the raid of the cruiser *Hamidiye* in 1913, but they usually pass in silence over the fact that it failed to accomplish its main tactical principle. The navy is blamed for the loss of the Aegean islands and quite often even accused of cowardice in the face of the Greeks. But in fact, if we take into consideration the conditions in which the Ottoman Navy entered and was forced to conduct this war, we should rather praise it for its achievements.

At the outbreak of the first Balkan War the operationally active Ottoman Navy consisted of four battleships (*Barbaros Hayrettin*, *Turgut Reis*, *Mesudiye* and *Âsar-ı Teyfik*) two protected cruisers (*Hamidiye* and *Mecidiye*), eight destroyers, five torpedo boats and two gunboats. Although the first two battleships were purchased in 1910, they were in fact former German vessels of the “Brandenburg” class, built in the first half of 1890s. *Mesudiye* and *Âsar-ı Teyfik* were even more obsolete – the first one having been built in 1874 and modernized in 1903, while the second one was built in 1868 and modernized in 1907. The protected cruisers could be considered as the most modern vessels in the whole Ottoman Navy, though *Mecidiye* had some structural mistakes which had a negative influence on her sailing capacities. The destroyers and torpedo boats, though not as “ancient” as the battleships, had lower performance levels when compared to the same type of ships in the Greek Navy<sup>1</sup>.

---

\* Paper delivered on the international conference „The Centenary of the Balkan Wars (1912-1913): Contested Stances” – Ankara, 23-24 May 2013.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri Tarihi. Balkan Harbi*, VII nci Cilt, *Osmanlı Deniz Harekâtı 1912-1913*, (Ankara, 1993), pp. 10-26; A. Gülerüz, B. Langensiepen, *Osmanlı Donanması 1828-1923*, (İstanbul, 2007).

The Greeks, the main naval opponent of Turkey in this conflict, had one modern armored cruiser (*Georgios Averoff*) which though having a smaller caliber of main guns than the Turkish “Brandenburg” class battleships, had a longer firing range, double the firing rate and was much faster. In addition to this they had three coastal battleships which due to their twice smaller displacement, lighter artillery and a maximum speed that was equal to the Turkish battleships could be easily beaten by them. However, the Greeks were superior in respect of number and quality of destroyers, having fourteen of them with a maximum speed higher than the Turkish ones. Thus, the Ottoman Navy could face the Greek Navy on equal grounds, but only if the armored cruiser *Georgios Averoff* was somehow eliminated<sup>2</sup>.

In the Balkan Wars, both the Greek and Bulgarian navies operated on single basins – the Greek one on the Aegean Sea and the Bulgarian one on the Black Sea, while the Ottoman Navy had to divide its power into three squadrons in order to be operational not only on the Aegean and Black Seas but also on the Sea of Marmora. This last basin, although being a part of Ottoman internal waters, needed a number of capital vessels too, in order to provide the artillery support for the land forces defending the area of Çatalca.

Due to geographical reasons the Greek Navy operated on the rear of the frontline, so its tasks were almost entirely reduced to the pure naval operations: in the majority of cases the ships were unable to support the land forces with their artillery, as the main frontline was too far inland while the Aegean islands were occupied one after another with practically no Turkish military resistance.

The Bulgarian Navy consisted of only small vessels (gunboats and torpedo boats), so it simply did not have the technical means to support the land forces. Thus its tasks were, just like the Greek ones, limited to the purely naval<sup>3</sup>.

At the same time, the Ottoman Navy, with its military potential slightly lower than the Greek one and operating on three basins at the same time was forced both to fight the enemy navies and to support the land forces (both with artillery fire and as a means of transportation).

---

<sup>2</sup> Cf. C. Paizis-Paradellis, *Hellenic Warships 1829-2001*, (Athens, 2002); P. Olender, *Wojny morskie 1883-1914*, (Warszawa, 2005), pp. 716-718.

<sup>3</sup> Olender, *Wojny morskie...*, p. 716.

Most of the Ottoman ships were not only obsolete, as we have already mentioned, but their technical condition was disastrous. The vessels were constantly in need of various repairs and the technical facilities – as obsolete as the ships themselves – were only in the shipyards at Istanbul. Thus, the Aegean Squadron based in the Dardanelles had practically no chance to repair more complicated failures or combat damage in a short time<sup>4</sup>.

The training level of the Ottoman sailors constituted another serious problem. As we know very well, during the whole 33 years-long reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II, the fleet was not used in combat. The regular training of crews was also neglected. When the two “Brandenburg” class battleships were purchased in 1910, they were manned by the most qualified officers and sailors the whole Ottoman Navy had. Thus, the crews of all other vessels were nothing more than a mixed bunch of casuals. The British Naval Mission, which had started its activity in Istanbul in 1909, was expected to change this situation by implementing a British teaching and training system. Although some important steps were made in this respect, the period of three years between the arrival of the first British Naval Mission and the outbreak of the first Balkan War was too short a time to improve significantly the training level of the Ottoman officers and sailors, especially those who manned the smaller and older vessels<sup>5</sup>. This was very clearly visible in the course of the naval battle of Elli on December 16, 1912, when the Ottoman 1<sup>st</sup> Destroyer Squadron had a splendid chance to attack and sink the armored cruiser *Georgios Averoff* but failed to use this opportunity, because the commanders and crews of the Turkish destroyers had no theoretical and practical training in conducting offensive operations in daylight<sup>6</sup>. A similar situation took place during the Battle of Lemnos on January 18, 1913<sup>7</sup>.

However, the situation proved to be much better regarding the personnel of battleships (particularly *Barbaros Hayrettin* and *Turgut Reis*) and of both protected cruisers. During the Battle of Elli the abovementioned battleships scored four direct hits at *Georgios Averoff* while *Barbaros Hayrettin* was hit only twice and *Turgut Reis*

---

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri Tarihi. Balkan Harbi*, VII nci Cilt, *Osmanlı Deniz Harekâtı...*, p. 131.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, pp. 29-31.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, p. 145.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, p. 179.

sustained no damages<sup>8</sup>. The failure in the Battle of Lemnos, when both Ottoman battleships were seriously damaged and scored only a single hit at the enemy's flagship, seemed to be rather the effect of firing worn guns than of a lack of training<sup>9</sup>.

It is forgotten by many historians that the "Brandenburg" class battleships played an important role in breaking the Bulgarian offensive on Istanbul on November 18, 1912 by providing a very effective artillery support to the land forces defending the fortified zone of Çatalca<sup>10</sup>. This was however paid for with a significant wear of the guns.

The brilliant raid of the protected cruiser *Hamidiye* through the Aegean and Red Seas between January and September 1913 was indeed an achievement in itself, as well as evidence of the high qualifications of its crew commanded by Lt Com. Hüseyin Rauf. However, it failed to fulfill its main objective, which was to force the *Georgios Averoff* to leave the Dardanelles area and chase the Turkish cruiser. Thus, this event doubtlessly had a big impact on the morale of Ottoman society though its military importance should not be overestimated<sup>11</sup>.

The loss of most of the Aegean islands and two unsuccessful attempts to break the Greek blockade of the Dardanelles resulted in a very poor assessment of the Ottoman Navy by the average Ottoman citizen. Even now some historians accuse the naval commanders of being too equivocal and of having no initiative, but it seems that such a judgment is far from objective and reflects, to a large extent, the negative attitude of the Ottoman General Staff towards the navy. The problem of a permanent conflict between these two bodies certainly deserves a separate and much more comprehensive study. Yet, let us made here a very short analysis of it:

---

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, pp. 140-147; Olender, *Wojny morskie...*, pp. 622-625; P. P. Wiczorkiewicz, *Historia wojen morskich*, t. 2, *Wiek pary*, (London, 1995), p. 337.

<sup>9</sup> *Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri Tarihi. Balkan Harbi*, VII nci Cilt, *Osmanlı Deniz Harekâtı...*, p. 191.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, p. 115.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *ibid*, pp. 220-240; E. Baş (ed.), *Mesudiye Zırhlısı*, (İstanbul, 2007), pp. 73-99; A. Güteryüz, *Hamidiye, Mecidiye & Kruvazörler*, (İstanbul, 2009), pp. 6-22; A. Güteryüz, B. Langensiepen, *Osmanlı Donanması...*, pp. 36-38; B. Langensiepen, A. Güteryüz, *The Ottoman Steam Navy 1828-1923*, (London, 1995), pp. 25-27.

Doubtlessly the basis of this conflict were the totally unrealistic expectations of the Ottoman General Staff towards the navy<sup>12</sup>. Regardless to the number and technical condition of the ships available, the high command expected the navy to defeat the Greeks on the Aegean Sea and to recapture the islands, to provide a full artillery and logistic support to the land troops in Thrace (by operating both on the Marmora and Black Seas) and to dominate the Bulgarian Navy on the Black Sea. Nobody in the General Staff cared whether the navy had any means or resources to do this or not. And in some cases those tasks, even if carried out separately and with the use of main forces, were far beyond the navy's capabilities. Let us only remind ourselves here that the plans of feint landings on the Bulgarian shore on October 23, 1912 had to be abandoned due to a lack of transport<sup>13</sup>. The attempt to land the troops on Tenedos on January 4, 1913 failed at its initial stage because of the catastrophic coordination between the land and naval commands<sup>14</sup>. The very same problem, combined with the insufficient training level of the naval personnel, led to the utter failure of landings at Şarköy on February 8, 1913<sup>15</sup>. The "Brandenburg" class battleships provided a very effective artillery support for the land troops at the Çatalca front, as we have already mentioned, but it was achieved at the cost of the complete wear of their guns, which in turn resulted in their very poor firing accuracy during the Battle of Lemnos. The deputy commanders-in-chief, particularly Cmdr Tahir and Cmdr Râmiz were fully aware of what the actual potential of the navy they were leading in combat was, but when they dared to express their objections openly, they were dismissed...

When we analyze the command of the Ottoman Navy in the Balkan Wars we should also give some thought to the actual role of the British Naval Mission in Istanbul. Most Turkish historians claim the successive commanders of this mission were in fact the commanders-in-chief of the whole Ottoman Navy. But if they really were, would things have really gone so wrong during the Balkan Wars? Even Vice-admiral Douglas Gamble, the first commander of the mission (in 1909-1910), who had the widest scope of responsibilities among all the British Navy officers ever sent to Turkey,

---

<sup>12</sup> Probaly the most comprehensive account of this coflict can be found in the monograph *Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri Tarihi. Balkan Harbi*, VII nci Cilt, *Osmanlı Deniz Harekâtı...*, although its authors seem to share, rather uncritically, the position of the then General Staff.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *ibid*, pp. 93-96.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *ibid*, pp. 161-163.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri Tarihi. Osmanlı Devri. Balkan Harbi*, II nci Cilt 2 nci Kısım 2 nci Kitap, *Şark Ordusu İkinci Çatalca Muharebesi ve Şarköy Çıkarması*, (Ankara, 1981).

was not authorized to command the Ottoman fleet in combat<sup>16</sup>. Vice-admiral Arthur Henry Limpus, who was head of the British Naval Mission in Istanbul during the Balkan Wars had only the status of “technical advisor to the commander-in-chief of the fleet”<sup>17</sup>. And the real commanders of the Ottoman Navy in this period were Turks – Cmdr Tahir (until December 7, 1912 and from February 2, 1913) and Cmdr Râmiz (December 7, 1912 – February 2, 1913).

It seems the position of advisors to the Turkish commander-in-chief suited the British vice-admirals very much, especially during the Balkan Wars, because at the very same time England had its naval mission in Greece too. London must have been aware that if the two navies, having British commanders-in-chief, confronted each other in a war the situation could have been politically very awkward for the British Empire. Moreover, it is well known that England had openly supported Greece since it started its struggle for independence in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, while the British policy towards the Ottoman Empire had always been very opportunistic and altered according to the actual strength of the Russian position in the region. So, we should not be surprised that during the Battle of Lemnos, which was the last Ottoman attempt to gain domination on the Aegean Sea, on the bridge of *Georgios Averoff* and next to the Greek Rear-admiral Pavlos Kountouriotis stood Admiral Mark Edward Frederic Kerr, head of the British Naval Mission in Athens<sup>18</sup> and commander-in-chief of the Greek Navy from 1913 to 1915<sup>19</sup>. At the same time his counterpart in the Ottoman Navy, Vice-admiral Limpus was not on board the flagship *Barbaros Hayrettin* but in his warm office in Istanbul – in fact the only place he could be with his official status of “technical advisor to the commander-in-chief of the Ottoman Navy”. The position and effectiveness of work of the naval missions in the navies of the countries fighting in the Balkan Wars was very clearly reflected in their achievements: The very “symbolic” Bulgarian Navy (trained prior to the Balkan Wars by the Russians and French) almost sunk the Turkish protected cruiser *Hamidiye* near Varna on November 21, 1912; the Greek Navy took almost all

---

<sup>16</sup> Cf. C. Yavuz, *Osmanlı Bahriyesi'nde Yabancı Misyönlör. Çeşme Faciası'ndan Birinci Dünya Harbine Kadar Osmanlı Bahriyesi'nde Çağdaşlaşma Gayretleri*, (İstanbul, 2004), p. 152.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *ibid*, p. 164.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri Tarihi. Balkan Harbi*, VII nci Cilt, *Osmanlı Deniz Harekâtı...*, p. 182. In this book Adm. Kerr appears incorrectly spelt as “Makker”. At the beginning of 1913 Kerr replaced in this post another British Navy officer, Rear-admiral Lionel Grand Tufnell, who had been head of the British Naval Mission in Greece from 1910.

<sup>19</sup> *Who's Who 1925. An Annual Biographical Dictionary With Which is Incorporated "Men and Women of the Time"*, Seventy-Seventh Year of Issue, (London, 1925), p. 1587.

the Aegean islands and preserved its domination on this basin. And the only success of the Ottoman Navy was the safe return of *Hamidiye* from her splendid raid. Although in the course of this mission she had managed to sink one auxiliary cruiser and 5 transport ships, her achievements were to have a very limited influence on the course of war.

To sum up, we know that a navy as an institution is not only the sum total of the officers and sailors on their vessels. No matter whether they do their best or not, they have to act within technical, political and financial frames, over which they usually have no influence whatsoever. Even the famous admiral Horatio Nelson would not have done a better job, only having at his disposal such obsolete and squalid ships manned by such poorly trained sailors, and being forced to act in an atmosphere of permanent conflict between naval command and a totally unrealistic General Staff.

### **Bibliography:**

- Ali İhsan, “Şarköy ve Bolayır Muharebelerinde Bulgarlar”, in *Ordu ve Donanma*, Numara 10, Mayıs 1330, pp. 625-648.
- Arıkan Z., Sancar L. (ed.), *Türk Denizcilik Tarihi*, vol. 2, (İstanbul, 2009).
- *Balkan Harbi (1912-1913)*, I nci Cilt, *Harbin Sebepleri, Askerî Hazırlıklar ve Osmanlı Devletinin Harbe Girişi*, (Ankara, 1970).
- Batowski H., *Cieśniny tureckie 1911-1936*, (Warszawa, 1936).
- Baş E. (ed.), *Gazi Hamidiye ve Akın Harekatı*, (İstanbul, 2006).
- Baş E. (ed.), *Mesudiye Zırhlısı*, (İstanbul, 2007).
- *Conway's All the World's Fighting Ships 1906-1921*, (London, 2006).
- Erickson E. J., *Defeat in Detail. The Ottoman Army in the Balkans, 1912-1913*, (Westport-Connecticut-London, 2003).
- Ersü H., *Balkan Savaşı'nda Şarköy Çıkarması ve Bolayır Muharebeleri*, (Ankara, 2006).
- “Famous Turkish Warship to Cross the Atlantic”, *The New York Times*, 5 April 1914.

- Gülerüz A., *Hamidiye, Mecidiye & Kruvazörler*, (İstanbul, 2009).
- Gülerüz A., *Osmanlı Donanması'nda Torpidobotlar ve Destroyerler – Sultanhisar & Muavenet*, (İstanbul, 2009).
- Gülerüz A., Langensiepen B., *Osmanlı Donanması 1828-1923*, (İstanbul, 2007).
- “Hamidieh’s Feats Arousing Wonder”, *The New York Times*, 23 March 1913.
- *Jane’s Fighting Ships of World War I*, (London, 1990).
- Langensiepen B., Gülerüz A., *The Ottoman Steam Navy 1828-1923*, (London, 1995).
- Mütercimler E., *İmparatorluğun Çöküşüne Denizden Bakış. Çöküşün Son On Yılı 1912-1922*, (İstanbul, 2003).
- Olender P., *Wojny morskie 1883-1914*, (Warszawa, 2005).
- Otay O., *Efendi Kaptan kurtar bizi! Mesudiye Zırhlısı Osmanlı'nın son 40 yılın tanığı (1874-1914)*, (İstanbul, 2005).
- Paizis-Paradellis C., *Hellenic Warships 1829-2001*, (Athens, 2002).
- Rabka R., *Balkany 1912-1913*, (Warszawa, 2010).
- *Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri Tarihi. Balkan Harbi.*, VII nci Cilt, *Osmanlı Deniz Harekâtı 1912-1913*, (Ankara, 1993).
- *Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri Tarihi. Osmanlı Devri. Balkan Harbi*, II nci Cilt 2 nci Kısım 2 nci Kitap, *Şark Ordusu İkinci Çatalca Muharebesi ve Şarköy Çıkarması*, (Ankara, 1981).
- Uzdil M. B., *Balkan Savaşı'nda Çatalca ve Sağ Kanat Ordularının Harekâtı. Savaşın Siyasi ve Psikolojik İncelemeleri*, (Ankara, 2006).
- Vachkov A., *The Balkan War 1912-1913*, (Sofia, 2005).
- *Who’s Who 1925. An Annual Biographical Dictionary With Which is Incorporated “Men and Women of the Time”*, Seventy-Seventh Year of Issue, (London, 1925).
- Wiczorkiewicz P. P., *Historia wojen morskich*, vol. 2, *Wiek pary*, (London, 1995).
- Wituch T., *Tureckie przemiany. Dzieje Turcji 1878-1923*, (Warszawa, 1980).
- Yavuz C., *Osmanlı Bahriyesi'nde Yabancı Misyonlar. Çeşme Faciası'ndan Birinci Dünya Harbine Kadar Osmanlı Bahriyesi'nde Çağdaşlaşma Gayretleri*, (İstanbul, 2004).