



HAL
open science

Admiral Miklós Horthy in the First World War: the Birth of a Myth

Catherine Horel, Alma Hannig

► **To cite this version:**

Catherine Horel, Alma Hannig. Admiral Miklós Horthy in the First World War: the Birth of a Myth. Zwischen Krieg und Frieden, Festschrift für Erwin Schmidl zum 65. Geburtstag, 2022. hal-03908182

HAL Id: hal-03908182

<https://hal.science/hal-03908182>

Submitted on 20 Dec 2022

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Catherine Horel

CNRS/CETOBAC, Paris

Admiral Miklós Horthy in the First World War: the Birth of a Myth¹

The Austro-Hungarian navy was, despite reproaches uttered by the late Francis Ferdinand, a sizeable force whose potential had been seriously enhanced in the years leading up to the war. The German allies also had a favorable opinion of its capabilities and of the officer corps. The German Lieutenant-Commander Max Valentiner who joined the naval base at Pola (Pula) in 1917 was very impressed by the Austro-Hungarian officers: “This is a model body. The officers were all very well behaved, very distinguished, and for the most part belonged to noble families. (...) The training of Austrian naval officers must have been remarkable because they demonstrated the most extensive knowledge in all areas relating to the navy”². The navy is immediately preserved from destructive combat because Italy is still formally part of the *Dreibund* while having declared itself neutral, and Germany has mobilized in the Mediterranean a powerful and numerous fleet. Austria is currently safe in its bases in the Adriatic: to the north Trieste, Pola, and Fiume, further south Šibenik (Sebenico) Split (Spalato) and the mouths of Kotor (Cattaro). At the controls of the battleship *Habsburg*, a boat he considers old, slow and poorly armed, Captain Miklós Horthy (1868-1957) initially confines himself to fortifying the base of Pola which is protected by Fort Tegetthoff on the island of Brioni and the batteries placed on the tips of Maria Luisa-Ficella and Punto Cristo. The arsenal and garrison of Pola are also reinforced and made ready to withstand a possible siege. But hardly any ship ventures into these waters, a few submarines attempting to approach the ports of Kotor and Pola are neutralized. Most naval movements then took place in the southern Adriatic. The Kotor base is threatened by Montenegro from Mount Lovćen, making it difficult to use it to the full. The *Habsburg* belongs to the 4th division of the 2nd naval squadron commanded by Rear Admiral Franz Löffler. The 4th division, commanded by Rear Admiral Karl Seidensacher, comprises three ships, including the *Habsburg* which is his flagship³.

Horthy was appointed in January 1915 at the controls of the armored cruiser *Novara* to which he would associate his name until May 1917. The boat had just come out of the shipyards of Pola and was designed for special operations because of its speed. Italy's entry into the war alongside the Entente changed the situation in the Mediterranean and the Adriatic, and the Austro-Hungarian navy really entered into the conflict from May 1915. The Italian navy was given the mission of fighting in the Upper Adriatic against the Empire. The south is controlled by the Anglo-French fleet which blocks the Otranto Canal as well as the eastern Mediterranean, preventing all communication between Austria-Hungary and its German and Turkish allies. The order of battle of the Austro-Hungarian Navy was changed accordingly and armored cruisers such as the *Novara* are now grouped into an independent flotilla, but still within the 2nd Squadron, commanded by Seidensacher. The flotilla made up of six

¹ The text is taken from Catherine Horel, *L'amiral Horthy. Régent de Hongrie*, Paris, Perrin, 2014.

² Max Valentiner, *La terre des mers. Mes aventures en sous-marin 1914-1918*, Paris, Payot, 1931, S. 91.

³ Hugo Sokol, *Österreich-Ungarns Seekrieg 1914-1918*, vol. 2, Graz, Akademische Druck- u. Verlags-Anstalt, 1967 Annex V, S. 9.

armored cruisers is headed by Rear Admiral Alexander Hansa⁴. After the rout of the Serbian army and its evacuation by the Allies to Corfu in early 1916, the threat posed by Montenegro to the Kotor base was lifted by the capture of Mount Lovćen by the troops of General Stefan Sarkotić. The Austro-Hungarian navy can therefore make full use of the base and concentrate a large part of its fleet there, namely the submarines.

The Austro-Hungarian submarines were made from parts supplied by the Germans. They are few in number and there is an attempt at making them pass through the Otranto Canal so that they join the Mediterranean and the German-Turkish fleet which is under attack from the British. Horthy must thus convey the U-8: he camouflages his boat as a merchant ship and arrives near Cape Tenare (Matapan) in the south of the Peloponnese. He is then spotted by French cruisers and has to free himself. The submarine dives and is able to hide, thus escaping the French and manages to reach Smyrna. The *Novara* is pursued but Horthy succeeds to make his way northwards and regain his base safely. He then built a reputation where daring competed with skill. Among Pola's Officers: "Horthy of course had a long reputation for being the most dashing officer in the navy."⁵

The incident dissuades Navy Commander-in-Chief Admiral Anton Haus from sending the ship on an ammunition supply mission for the Turkish fleet. The risk is too great, especially since the *Novara* could only have carried a small amount of cargo. Haus also subsequently refused to ferry new submarines to the Dardanelles. This cautious strategy goes against the ideas of Horthy who advocates offensive, even provocation. At the beginning of December 1915, he obtained from the commander of the flotilla the authorization to launch an operation against the port of San Giovanni di Medua (Shëngjin) then occupied by the Serbs who stored there reinforcements for the batteries located on Mount Lovćen. Reaching the front of the port undetected, the *Novara* and the four destroyers accompanying it fire on the ships after revealing their presence and waiting for the crews to take refuge ashore. It's a success: 23 ships are destroyed. There the navy made an important contribution to the subsequent infantry assault on the Lovćen.

Horthy is also always ready to storm the strait of Otranto: on December 19, 1915 the *Novara* once again escapes its British pursuers – a cruiser and a warship – not without having signaled to the cruiser that he would face it willingly. However he asks her "to take his big brother away", to which the commander replies "I would but I can't!"⁶. A few months later, he failed to board the boat that was to transport King Peter I of Serbia from the port of Durazzo (Dürres) in Albania to Brindisi, but the latter was ill and postponed his crossing.

More problematic is the action against the Italians immediately after their declaration of war. The Austro-Hungarian fleet is ordered to attack the Adriatic coast from Venice to Brindisi. On the one hand, the aim is to prevent the routing of Italian troops by the coastal railway towards the Austrian border, and on the other hand to destroy any batteries installed in the ports. The Italians, for their part, fear an Austro-Hungarian landing in Ancona and a march towards Rome. Horthy is tasked with commanding the northern assault group that will attack Porto Corsini. The *Novara* is accompanied by four torpedo boats and a destroyer. This operation, which Horthy describes briefly by evoking its only military aspect, leaves painful traces in Italian collective memory. The story resurfaced in November 1936 during the regent's visit to

⁴ Ibid., Österreich-Ungarns Seekrieg 1914-1918, vol. 2, Annex IX, S. 79.

⁵ Dora Lauffer, Die Wellen. Altösterreich. Familiensaga zwischen Adria u. Schlesien. Nach Aufzeichnungen d. Maria Lauffer-Ossoinack u. Familiendokumenten, Graz, Edition Sterz in d. ADEVA, 1989, S. 363.

⁶ Antonio Schmidt-Brentano, Die österreichischen Admirale, vol. 3. 1915 – 1924, Osnabrück, Biblio-Verlag, 2005, S. 148.

Italy. Horthy was then accused of having deliberately bombed the undefended port of Ancona, which resulted in civilian casualties. He is also said to have taken prisoners, tortured and killed Italian sailors with his own hands. The Italian prefectural authorities (Gorizia, Milan) then embarked on an investigation lasting several months which produced no results⁷.

The fact is that the destruction of Porto Corsini is the work of the destroyer *Scharfschütze*. The *Novara* and the torpedo boats, on the other hand, were targeted by the Italian batteries. Horthy lost six men in the incident, eleven are injured. Horthy was not personally involved in the attack on Ancona, of which the Italians have a traumatic memory. This is indeed where the operation was concentrated with the dreadnoughts *Tegetthoff*, *Viribus Unitis*, and *Prinz Eugen*, the six “pre-dreadnoughts” of the *Erzherzog* and *Habsburg* class, the *Franz Ferdinand*, four destroyers and twenty torpedo boats. Admiral Haus himself is in command aboard the *Habsburg*. The bombings destroy the station – which was their goal – and burn down the coal and oil reserves. Three merchant ships are damaged in the port and a fourth is sunk. In the city the police and army buildings were hit as well as the military hospital, a sugar refinery and the offices of the Bank of Italy. The balance sheet made by the Italians counts thirty deaths among the military, 38 among civilians and 150 wounded⁸.

The Austro-Hungarian attack on the entire Adriatic coast had a lasting effect and created a feeling of inferiority in the Italian navy which was pre-existing since the defeat of Lissa (1866) but which it was hoped would be compensated by rearming. The destruction and civilian casualties have thus been exaggerated and it is therefore not surprising to see this memory reappear twenty years later. The Italians must then admit that the control of the Adriatic remains with Austria-Hungary. The south, on the other hand, was permanently blocked by the British and the French who were off Corfu. The British have strung anti-submarine nets across the Strait of Otranto to lock it. But the dam was difficult to maintain and at the beginning of July 1916, Horthy succeeded aboard the *Novara* in destroying part of the nets. Following the destruction of two of its submarines, one of the aims of the Austro-Hungarian navy is to blow up this dam.

The thread of the war is suddenly interrupted by the announcement of the death of Francis Joseph, on the evening of November 21, 1916. Horthy learns the news immediately and asks permission from Admiral Haus to go to the sovereign's funeral, which is granted to him. He attends as chamberlain, an honorary function conferred on him after his stint in the emperor's service as aide-de-camp from 1909 to 1914 and which allows him to participate in court ceremonies. It is by virtue of this same office that he can then attend the coronation of Charles I/IV in Budapest on December 30. In Vienna Horthy attends Mass in Saint-Stephen's Cathedral on November 30 and accompanies the coffin to the Capuchin crypt where Francis Joseph is buried. He is also present a month later in Budapest where Charles performs the ritual gestures, as evidenced by the images of the film made on this occasion of which one of the operators is Mihály Kertész, later famous under the name of Michael Curtis (*Casablanca*). Horthy meanwhile returns to Pola.

The beginning of 1917 saw the intensification of the submarine warfare which, again, took place mainly in the southern Adriatic. Horthy presents in his memoirs the German decision to carry out this naval offensive as risky – the Russian front effectively collapsed a few months

⁷ Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS). Segreteria particolare del Duce. Carteggio riservato 1922-1943, folio 1.

⁸ Lawrence Sondhaus, *The Naval Policy of Austria-Hungary, 1867-1918*. Navalism, Industrial Development, and the Politics of Dualism, Purdue University Press, West Lafayette, Indiana, 1994, S. 75.

later – and the Emperor Charles as hesitant, which is in any case a trait of his character, to follow this effort. The German submarines are in the Mediterranean, but the Austro-Hungarian ships must systematically pierce through the Otranto canal, off Corfu, between the nets set by the Franco-British. The submarines are based primarily in the mouths of Kotor, a safe haven, but at the same time remote from the coast. The fleet has meanwhile changed commander following the death of Admiral Haus and is now under the command of Admiral Maximilian Njegovan (1858-1930), the first South Slav to hold such a post in the navy. At the same time the emperor decided – following the recommendation formerly made by Francis Ferdinand – to separate the *Marinesektion* of the War ministry from the command of the fleet, which in wartime seems judicious to say the least.

In May 1917, a large-scale action was prepared to break the blockage of the Otranto canal: Horthy obtained from the commander of the cruiser flotilla, Rear Admiral Alexander Hansa, two armored cruisers, *Helgoland* and *Saida*, who were going accompany the *Novara*, as well as two torpedo boats, the *Csepel* and the *Balaton*. He devotes in his memoirs a detailed account the battle. This feat of arms will indeed constitute his moment of glory and decide on the pursuit of his career. He will also help build his legend as the Otranto "hero". In reality, the operation ended in disarray and had no meaning in the course of the war.

The attack was carried out on May 15, 1917 at dawn, off the Albanian port of Valona (Vlorë). The two torpedo boats sent an hour before as scouts "cleared" the ground in order to allow the three cruisers to line up, the *Novara* is to the east, opposite the Greek island of Fano (Othoni), the *Saida* to the middle to the south and *Helgoland* covers the west to the cape of Santa Maria di Leuca. The ground is covered by drifters, those boats which stretch the nets across the canal. They are armed and defend themselves: Horthy says in his memoirs that the three cruisers destroyed 21 of these boats, he is not exaggerating by much because the *Jahresbericht der k.u.k. Marine* gives the figure of twenty boats destroyed, ten of which by *Novara* alone⁹. The Austrians allow the British sailors to escape the boats before they are sunk: a humanitarian gesture much appreciated by the adversaries but which slows down the rest of the operation and will above all prevent the *Novara* and the two other cruisers from leaving the place quickly before enemy ships, alerted by rockets and drifters signals, set off to hunt them from Valona. A first exchange of fire ensued but the attackers retreated towards the port. The general alert has meanwhile been given and the retreat is cut off off Dürres by Franco-British ships. The two torpedo boats commanded by Prince Liechtenstein were chased and pushed towards the coast, preventing them from reaching the mouths of Kotor. Horthy thus attracts the adversaries towards him, which allows the two torpedo boats to free themselves and to regain the base. The balance of power is now two to one, and things are looking very bad for the Austro-Hungarian cruisers who face three cruisers (two British and one Italian) and two Italian destroyers. Rear Admiral Hansa asks if he should send reinforcements, but Horthy claims he can control the situation; this is presumptuous and reveals to be retrospectively an undeniable mistake. The enemy boats opened fire, it is 9.28 am. Horthy attacks the English cruiser *Dartmouth*, much bigger and more armed than him, a daring certainly admirable but which will cost him dearly. There are several photographs of the battle, taken by airplanes and from ships¹⁰. We can see the columns of smoke billowing from the affected ships: *Helgoland* first, then *Novara*. *Saida* is also affected, but less seriously. The *Novara* was literally strafed by the *Dartmouth* and *Helgoland* then came up to her in an attempt to neutralize the British ship. The situation on the *Novara* is serious: the first

⁹ Ibid., S. 342 Fussnote 12.

¹⁰ Sokol, Österreich-Ungarns Seekrieg 1914-1918, vol. 1 384. See also Nikolaus von Martiny, Bilddokumente aus Österreich-Ungarns Seekrieg 1914-1918, Leipzig, Leykam-Verlag, 1939 vol. 2.

officer, Robert Szuborits, is killed and the command post hit by a grenade and destroyed. Horthy is wounded in the legs by the shells, a shrapnel removes the cap from his head without however hitting him more badly. His clothes are on fire and the crew spray him with water. However, he remained in control and is laid down on a stretcher on the deck. It is ten past ten. The opponents' projectiles visibly contained gas as Horthy then loses consciousness. Upon coming to himself he handed over command to the artillery officer, Lieutenant (N) Stanislas Witkowski, but kept that of the entire flotilla.

Other accounts come later to relate this dramatic moment when Horthy nearly passed away. Lieutenant (N) Andor Scholtz, who would later be one of his aides-de-camp, wrote his recollections of the battle: "Shrapnel bursts from all sides, gas, flames and smoke envelop [the post of navigation] and those who rush for help see in horror their beloved commander, whose heroic personality is already associated with a legend of inviolability, bleeding from several wounds and covered with burns on his feet, lying among the wounded. Barely bandaged by the ship's doctor and recovered, he was carried on a chaise-longue in front of the [command] tower and took over the direction of the battle, until gas poisoning caused him to again lose consciousness. The fresh sea air soon makes him come to his senses and heedless of the pain caused by his injuries, he continues to give his orders until the end of the fight"¹¹. Another testimony describes the crew's concern for their captain: "The machinists came one after another to him, brought him cigarettes and stroked his face with their charcoal black hands. It was touching to see the care they took of their commander"¹². The same author further gives his feeling about Horthy's exercise of command on the *Novara*: "All of us who were under his command had blind faith in his leadership. There emanated from him an absolute calm and a self-assurance which reverberated down to the last man and everyone followed him with enthusiasm"¹³.

The Austro-Hungarian naval aviation has meanwhile come into action. She certainly does not manage to sink any of the enemy ships, but nevertheless reaches them and hinders them enough that some give up the fight. The *Novara* is again seriously hit, the engine room is damaged and the boat practically immobilized. It is 10.35. The other two cruisers must come to the aid of the *Novara*: the *Saida* is at its height and takes it in tow while the *Helgoland*, placed between the *Novara* and the *Dartmouth*, continues the fight against the latter. The situation appears untenable and an assault is expected from enemy ships when they suddenly reverse and leave the field in the direction of Brindisi. It is five past eleven. Witkowski, who describes the scene to Horthy lying on the foredeck, can't believe what he sees through his binoculars¹⁴. Rear Admiral Hansa has meanwhile brought the armored cruiser *Sankt Georg* out of Kotor, escorted by two destroyers and four torpedo boats, who now rescue the three damaged cruisers. The results show to the benefit of the Austro-Hungarian flotilla a sunk Italian destroyer, a downed plane (by a shot from the *Novara*), and considerable damage inflicted on the opposing flotilla: the *Dartmouth* ended up being sunk by a German submarine, other Italian and British ships hit mines. Despite the inglorious outcome of the showdown, the Austro-Hungarians look as winners as they lost no ships despite being clearly outnumbered.

¹¹ Quoted by Schmidt-Pauli, Nikolaus von Horthy, S. 89.

¹² Diary of an officer quoted in Martiny, Bilddokumente aus Österreich-Ungarns Seekrieg 1914-1918, vol. 2, S. 240.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Nikolaus von Horthy, Ein Leben für Ungarn, Bonn, Athenaeum Verlag, 1953, 101 (Hungarian edition, Emlékirataim, Budapest, Európa-História, 1990, S. 101).

The episode was immediately promoted to the rank of achievement credited to the Austro-Hungarian Navy. Propaganda automatically associated Horthy's name with this naval battle and does a lot to get his name known, including in Hungary. Following army statements, from June 6 Austrian newspapers highlighted the operation and its successful outcome. The reports adorned with illustrations are picked up by the Hungarian press, which points out that the hero is a Hungarian officer and congratulates him on having "magnificently carried out a daring project"¹⁵. From the outset there is a comparison of this feat of arms to the victory of Lissa and Horthy is paired with Tegetthoff; this can only flatter him, he who had put the beginning of his career under the sign of the admiral who had defeated the Italian navy in 1866. But the insignificance of this battle can also – unfortunately for Austria-Hungary – be related to that which took place during the Austro-Prussian war. Lissa and Otranto do not change the issue of war, the decision of which is made by land. The hero is therefore not really such and he owes this epithet only to his wounds and the in extremis rescue of the flotilla by the reinforcements and the retreat of the adversaries. Thanks to this action, the Otranto canal dam is at least partially raised and from now on the nets let out by the drifters will only be released during the day, which will allow the German and Austro-Hungarian submarines to pass through the canal during the night.

Back in Kotor, Horthy was first hospitalized there, where his wife had joined him. He was then sufficiently recovered to bring the *Novara* back to Pola for repairs, but he still had to lie down on a stretcher and a photo widely circulated at the time testifies to this uncomfortable position to ensure the command, but which helped to consolidate his reputation of courageous captain. He then left for Vienna to be operated on by the famous surgeon Anton Eiselsberg and spent his convalescence in his house in Baden and then at his estate of Kenderes. The only lasting sequel to him is a hearing difficulty due to the violence of the explosion: he is then followed by Professor Biel who, however, cannot completely cure the disability. Horthy himself admits having difficulty hearing when several people are talking at the same time, but his relative deafness goes unnoticed in face-to-face interviews¹⁶.

Returning to Pola after several months of rest, Horthy was appointed at the end of November 1917 commander of the dreadnought *Prinz Eugen*, which belonged to the 1st division of the 1st squadron. According to Dora Lauffer, his name was already beginning to be mentioned to soon take command of the fleet: "Among the young officers the opinion was unanimous: we have found the future commander of the fleet!"¹⁷. Yet Horthy is not satisfied with the situation: he is given command of a warship that is of no immediate use. The inaction of the fleet in Pola is also having dire consequences for the morale of the crews and workers in the arsenal. The news of the Russian Revolution and the subsequent desertion of some Austro-Hungarian regiments from the Eastern Front do the rest. On October 5, 1917, the torpedo boat Tb.17 defects in the direction of Italy and this incident causes a stir in its home port of Sebenico where southern Slavic non-commissioned officers fomented a large-scale plot¹⁸.

Horthy enrages at his helplessness and realizes the seriousness of the agitation in the rear front. He sees the conjunction between national discontent and socialist agitation. As for the first aspect, he blames the Czechs, Italians and Yugoslavs who influence the arsenal workers as well as the sailors. On his own ship he immediately encounters difficulties. Sailors are

¹⁵ According to *Budapesti Hirlap* (Budapest News) of 6 June 1917, quoted by Péter Sipos, "Horthy Miklós az első világháborúban" [Miklós Horthy during the First World War], *Történelmi szemle* XXXV/1-2, 1993, S. 89.

¹⁶ Horthy, *Ein Leben für Ungarn*, 103 (Hungarian edition, S. 104).

¹⁷ Lauffer, *Die Wellen*, S. 387.

¹⁸ Richard Georg Plaschka, Horst Haselsteiner, Arnold Suppan (Hg.), *Innere Front. Militärassistenz, Widerstand und Umsturz in der Donaumonarchie 1918*, vol. 1, Vienna, Verlag für Geschichte und Politik, 1974, S. 416.

unruly and indulge in acts of insubordination. He cleans up and observes with astonishment, distinguishing between nationalities on board, that there are far more Hungarians there than he thought. However for the majority of officers, national considerations were practically unknown because they had been stifled if not repressed during the years of training and the mobility inherent in the career. But the war has changed the situation: the officers remain with their troops and they themselves are gradually confronted with the massive arrival of reserve officers who do not have their discipline or their respect for the supranationality of the monarchy. The death of Francis Joseph did not help in anything by putting on the throne a young sovereign, certainly well-intentioned but hesitant and easily influenced.

The military situation is not encouraging: despite the collapse of the Russian front which should have relieved Austria-Hungary, the command gets bogged down in endless and indecisive fighting such as on the Italian front along the Isonzo about which Horthy says he hears the blasts when he walks on the bridge, a somewhat exaggerated assertion especially for someone who has recently suffered damaged hearing! The Otranto Canal is again closed by the Allied barrage, which has recently been joined by American ships tasked with tracking down Austro-German submarines that attempt to cross it. Horthy is annoyed that nothing is being done to try to break this roadblock again.

In early 1918, discontent and unrest among the sailors led to a strike by the Pola dockyard workers. They demand better supplies and permissions: in both cases the demands are justified, but it is all of Austria which suffers from shortages and the lack of personnel does not allow to relieve the sailors and the workers who have therefore not returned to their families for many months. After negotiations with the director of the arsenal, Baron Oskar von Hohenbruck and the port commander, Admiral Paul Fiedler, the strikers partially succeed and the unrest ceased¹⁹. All these demands are coupled with a national bidding up: in Kotor at the beginning of February 1918, the Czechs and Croats united with the national councils created by the two nationalities and formed a council of sailors on the Bolshevik model. These movements respond to a wave of strikes and mutiny that have taken place ashore across the monarchy since January. It was on the flagship, the *Sankt Georg* still commanded by Hansa, that the riot began, so it is he who is in the front line in this whole affair, and not immediately Horthy, as the later Communist historiography pretended to demonstrate. The mutiny wins almost all the ships on the base. For the moment, the 3rd Naval Division is being sent to the mouths of Kotor to subdue the rioters and restore the ships to working order. Horthy at the helm of the *Prinz Eugen* is part of the expedition. The rioters are also under threat from land batteries, but their movement is massive and the authorities are loath to use violence as long as the sailors are armed and have explosives on board the boats. The show of force will be enough for now and as Hugo Sokol puts it: "The rioters failed to make the Gulf of Cattaro an Austro-Hungarian Kronstadt", nevertheless the whole affair lasted ten days. The military court summons 800 people, of whom 392 are ultimately indicted. The national distribution shows 42.6 % Croats, 20.6 % Italians, 12.7 % Czechs, 11.4 % Germans, 8.1 % Hungarians and 4.6 % others (Poles, Ruthenians and Romanians combined)²⁰. On February 11, 1918, four people condemned to death were executed: Franz Rasch, Anton Grabar, Jerko Sisgorić and Mate Berničević, precisely a German from Bohemia and three Croats²¹.

In both cases, Admiral Njegovan has shown a slowness of decision that prompts Emperor Charles to remove him from office in order to replace him with a more energetic man. His

¹⁹ Sokol, Österreich-Ungarns Seekrieg 1914-1918, Bd. 2, S.654.

²⁰ Ibid. S. 692.

²¹ The plaque put up in Kotor to commemorate the four executed mutineers was unveiled in 1967 to mark the 50th anniversary of the Russian revolution.

choice fell on Horthy, which does not fail to surprise all observers. Certainly the sovereign knows Horthy personally and is informed of his recent exploits and his qualities, but he upsets the hierarchy by naming him. Summoned to Laxenburg Castle at the end of February 1918 with Admirals Holub and Keil, Horthy tries to dissuade Charles from this option, which he fears will cause a stir, but nothing can deter the monarch. Such an upheaval has not happened in the Navy since Tegetthoff's appointment. In general, the commanders are all relatively old, which observers notice, as for example the submariner Valentiner who notes: "It is perhaps regrettable that the posts of chiefs were held by too old admirals whose spirit of initiative left something to be desired for a large-scale use of their fleet"²². Officers older than Horthy are partly forced to retire or take lower-level commands: Fiedler, Port Commander in Pola, and Koudelka, in Trieste, are under pressure to request their retirement. They were not directly affected but had to vacate their posts to make way for men relegated by Horthy's promotion. This "shake-up" in the words of Lawrence Sondhaus made waves up to the Danube flotilla. According to him, Archduke Karl Stefan, who was a naval officer with the rank of admiral, and responsible for monitoring the investigation into the Kotor mutiny, had gone to Pola for this purpose to follow the events closer on the spot. There, he is said to have sounded out on behalf of the Emperor the young officers about the appointment of a new commander-in-chief of the fleet, and Horthy's name was then unanimously quoted. This enthusiasm of the young officers for Horthy is confirmed by Franz Lauffer, the commander of the battleship *Szent István*, who tells his wife: "Aged 49, relatively young, he was the best commander of the navy, battle-hardened, unmistakably quick to decide, cunning and daring, loved by crews, a man with charisma. To choose a Hungarian was also to play a clever move vis-à-vis Hungary. If we had voted by acclamation, he would have been elected anyway. " Lauffer also benefited from Horthy's untimely advancement and found himself propelled to the top of the 2nd Division²³. All ship captains had indeed to be younger than Horthy, and so no officer over fifty left to sea for the remaining duration of the war.

The Emperor cautiously announces Horthy's appointment and reassures the other officers that his decision is a mark of special confidence in him and not a measure of distrust of them and their abilities or a doubt as to their loyalty. Charles appeals to their sense of duty and their patriotism to become one behind the new commander. It was an ordinance of February 27, 1918, which made the sovereign's decision effective.

"Mein besonderes Vertrauen hat den Konteradmiral Nikolaus Horthy de Nagybánya auf den Posten des Flottenkommandanten berufen. Eine Reihe rang älterer hervorragend tüchtiger Admirale und Linienschiffskapitäne wird hierdurch dem ihnen bisher rangjüngeren Admiral unterstellt. Diese Herren dürfen in Meiner Verfügung kein Misstrauen in ihre Person erblicken. Wenn Auch allmählich auf einigen der hohen Posten Meiner Marine eine Verjüngung eintreten muss, so erwarte Ich doch von dem bewährten Pflichtgefühl und dem Patriotismus Meiner Seeoffiziere, dass die dem jüngeren Kameraden Unterstellten, eingedenk der ernstesten Zeit, ihr Bestes für den Dienst einsetzen, den Flottenkommandanten mit ganzer Kraft unterstützen werden."²⁴

Horthy therefore rose exceptionally to the rank of rear admiral and officially took office on March 2, 1918. The German allies applaud this change and Kaiser Wilhelm II congratulates Charles on "a decision that was long overdue"²⁵.

²² Valentiner, *La terreur des mers. Mes aventures en sous-marin 1914-1918*.

²³ Lauffer, *Die Wellen*, S. 402.

²⁴ Dated in Baden, 27 February 1918, quoted by Schmidt-Pauli, *Nikolaus von Horthy*, S. 114.

²⁵ Sondhaus, *The Naval Policy of Austria-Hungary*, S. 328.

At the same time, the decision-making chain was also reorganized: Charles re-established the *Marinesektion* of the War Ministry, of which he entrusted the command to Rear-Admiral Franz Holub, who was until then Chief of Staff of the Navy, and Admiral Franz von Keil remains at the disposal of the High Command in Baden. In reality, Horthy does not have to consult these two high-ranking officers who are however older than him and he can call directly to the sovereign if he feels the need to do so. But the system is complicated, and Keil is reluctant to act as a mere recording room for orders given by Horthy whom he considers his subordinate.

Horthy is given blank cheque to make changes. The weeks following his appointment saw disruptions in the deployment of personnel and equipment. As a consequence of the Kotor mutiny, Captain Carl Rössler was appointed head of counter-propaganda (*Feindespropagandaabwehr*) and plans were drawn to create a corps of training officers (one in each large boat and one per flotilla for small vessels). Rössler also wants to broadcast films with subtitles written in all languages spoken by sailors and offers to hold conferences for them, but the navy is sorely lacking in men and money. This ambitious but somewhat belated plan cannot be carried out. Horthy must resolve to use both more traditional but also more brutal methods to restore order and discipline, a fact that will help fuel his dark legend as the "executioner of Cattaro"²⁶. A revolt begins on the torpedo boat Tb. 80 escorting transport to Albania. Two sailors plan to divert him to Ancona after having assassinated the officers. Their maneuver is discovered in time and they are handed over to military justice, which sentences them to death²⁷. Horthy upholds the judgment and orders that twenty sailors taken from each boat in the harbor at Pola attend the execution. This should be used as a measure of intimidation against possible rioters²⁸. Horthy gives a short speech in which he praises the courage of those who fight and stigmatizes the traitors who must be eradicated just like a disease in a healthy body²⁹. He thus hopes to avoid further mutinies. In the immediate term, indeed, calm returns.

A second immediately visible aspect of his assumption of duty is a desire to relaunch naval action which he deemed insufficient in recent months. The lack of military engagement, he said, contributes to the birth of discontent, and therefore fosters mutinies. The navy is still undefeated, and only new successes are likely to boost the morale of the crews and workers in the arsenal. Yet Horthy was not going to have either the human or the material means to launch significant naval strategy in a few weeks while the Empire was going under from all sides. He tries to reorganize the divisions by transferring dozens of officers and hundreds of men. He has some obsolete ships disarmed and others rearmed. To put the fleet back in order of battle (the last order of battle of the fleet is dated August 26, 1918), he summons maneuvers and artillery exercises. He then decides to attempt a blow on the port of Ancona in order to recapture the torpedo boat Tb.11 which defected in October 1917. At first, this operation of pure revenge had been rejected by the admiralty and Horthy had, moreover, shown solidarity with it. But it is now on the agenda to give an new impulse to revive the fleet. The plan is to disembark a commando of saboteurs whose task is to undermine the submarines moored in the harbor and board the torpedo boat in order to bring it back. However, the mission fails, the port is empty, and three men are even captured, including the head of mission, the reserve lieutenant Josef Veith. It seems that the fault lies with the intelligence service which transmitted false data. But Horthy ignores this failure and turns the

²⁶ Zoltán Vas, Horthy, Kecskemét, Petőfi nyomda, 1977, S. 128.

²⁷ Plaschka, Haselsteiner, Suppan (Hg.), *Innere Front*, Bd. 1, S. 419.

²⁸ Sipos, "Horthy Miklós az első világháborúban", S. 93.

²⁹ Plaschka, Haselsteiner, Suppan (Hg.), *Innere Front*, Bd. 1, S. 420.

affair into a success. He writes personally to Alois von Schinko, the father of one of the captured saboteurs, who is a former classmate of the cadet school, on May 8, 1918: "The fleet as a whole is proud of our brave comrades, who volunteered with commendable courage for this dangerous expedition"³⁰.

Horthy, however, is seeking to mount a large-scale naval operation that will make a lasting impression as well as having a decisive effect on the conduct of the war. Yet he must wait until the reorganization he ordered is in place and the fleet accordingly ready. His obsession remains with the breaking of the Otranto Canal dam and this becomes the goal of the planned operation. He intends to repeat the attack of May 1917, but with a stronger strike force. The idea is again to combine surprise and cunning: the attack – hopefully unexpected – by light cruisers against the barrage, must be coupled with a maneuver consisting in attracting any pursuers to the rear of the fleet made up of the most powerful dreadnoughts and the three "Erzherzog" type battleships. The departure of the fleet from Kotor was scheduled for the night of June 8, 1918, and there were two nights of navigation in order to create the surprise effect. The attack itself is slated for the dawn of June 11. The attack fleet has been assembled in Kotor. Horthy himself left Pola at the head of the 1st Division, which included the attack fleet, and arrived safely at the port of Gravosa (Gruž, in the northern vicinity of Dubrovnik). The 2nd Division, which also started from Pola, fell behind due to damaged machinery on the *Tegetthoff* and arrived at the anchorage point of Isola Grossa (Dugi Otok). This is where the Italians surprised her. Two torpedoes are fired against the *Szent István* from an Italian speedboat. The modern battleship, released in January 1914 from the Hungarian shipyards Ganz & Co.-Danubius-Werft in Fiume³¹, is both a flagship of the Austro-Hungarian navy and a pride for Hungary since it represents its contribution to the naval armament; it symbolically bears the name of the holy king, founder of the nation. The ship, commanded by Captain Heinrich Seitz, was sunk at dawn on June 11, 1918³²: four officers and 85 crew died, 29 were wounded³³. The *Tegetthoff* came to the aid of the sinking *Szent István* and, with the help of the torpedo boats also reaching the area, managed to save part of the crew. The ship's construction showed weaknesses in the exterior waterproofing as it sank in record time. It also showed a clear lack of stability³⁴. Consequently Horthy must abandon the operation. He could have continued, but the element of surprise was irremediably lost. The opposing flotilla was now alerted and besides it was known to outnumber by the Austro-Hungarian forces. Reports from Italian officers do reveal that the alert was issued on the morning of June 10. Despite the command's determination and spirit of sacrifice, the failure of the operation revealed that the Austro-Hungarian navy was decidedly too weak against the enemies because its flotilla lacked modern vessels³⁵.

³⁰Letter to Alois von Schinko, Pola, 8 May 1918, quoted in Friedrich Jahn, Erwin Sieche, « Der Handstreich auf Ancona am 4. und 5. April 1918 », in *Marine-Gestern-Heute* 15, 1988. Konrad von Schinko stays in Italy after the war and enlists in the merchant marine, he resumes his military duty during the Second World War and dies in November 1942 when the ship he commands is sunk off Sicily by an air raid.

³¹ Erwin Sieche, Walter Blasi, „Seiner Majestät Schlachtschiff Szent István“, in: *Österreichische Militärische Zeitschrift* 44, 2006, S. 563–578.

³² See the remarkable documentary film by Maria Magdalena Koller, *Torpedos im Morgengrauen. Das letzte Schlachtschiff des Kaisers*.

³³ Sokol, *Österreich-Ungarns Seekrieg 1914-1918*, Bd. 2, S. 560.

³⁴ Jean Pelletier-Doisy, « Les cuirassés austro-hongrois », in *Chronique d'histoire maritime* n°62, juillet 2007, S. 58.

³⁵ Sokol, *Österreich-Ungarns Seekrieg 1914-1918*, Bd. 2, S. 563.

These clear signs of decline notwithstanding, Horthy is steering the course. In a report to Admiral Keil on August 9, 1918, Horthy said the fleet was ready for battle, and his concern seemed to be more about the shortage of men than the morale of the crews. The navy actually received only 1,900 of the 8,000 recruits planned for 1918. The tone of the report recalls that of other land front commanders: the Austro-Hungarian army held out until the end of hostilities and its officers refused to lend credit to national dissensions which were, for the most part, foreign to them. They have demonstrated in this regard unflinching loyalty but also shown ignorance and blindness of the centrifugal forces at work in the monarchy, which is matched only by those of their supreme leader. Horthy says, "Was Geist und Stimmung in der Flotte betrifft, so sind seit Mai keine Erscheinungen aufgetreten, die auf eine Gärung schließen lassen. Bis zum Mai wirkten die Februarereignisse nach und ließen im Zusammenhange mit den Streiks im Hinterland ein Wiederauflammen der Bewegung im Golfe von Cattaro erwarten. Im Mai 1918 wurde auch ein durch zwei slawische Unteroffiziere angestiftetes Komplott auf dem Torpedoboat "80" in Pola aufgedeckt, dass die Überwältigung der Offiziere und den Übergang zum Feinde bezweckte. Die rasche Aufdeckung des Komplott und die strenge Bestrafung der Schuldigen hat starken Eindruck gemacht und abschreckend gewirkt. Die Stimmung auf der Flotte, deren Mannschaft sich aus allen Nationalitäten zusammensetzt, ist bis zu einem gewissen, durch die militärische Disziplin eingeschränkten Grade ein Spiegelbild der in der Monarchie herrschenden Stimmung. Da die politische Agitation im Hinterlande durch keinerlei energische Maßnahmen der Regierung gehemmt wird, ist zu befürchten, dass diese schließlich kritische Dimensionen annehmen werde. Es liegt daher im Bereiche der Möglichkeit, dass die ruhig und zielbewußt arbeitenden Hetzer im Hinterlande, die auch noch von der feindlichen Propaganda unterstützt werden, durch gewisse Elemente auf der Flotte wieder Boden gewinnen können. Diese Elemente sind zwar ein ganz geringer Bruchteil der Mannschaft, aber zwischen ihnen und den völlig verlässlichen Elementen steht eine schwankende, zum Teil minder intelligente Masse, die, wie im Februar, auf die umstürzlerische Seite gerissen werden kann. Der rege Kontakt der Stabspersonen mit der Mannschaft, dem ich ein besonderes Augenmerk widme, und die seit jüngster Zeit arbeitende Gegenpropaganda sind gewiss gute Mittel, um dies zu verhindern. Ein anderes Mittel ist der Ersatz der älteren Mannschaft durch junge Matrosen. Der Wechsel könnte aber nur im beschränkten Maße durchgeführt werden, weil die Kriegsmarine keine Mannschaftsreserve besitzt. (...) Hier wäre Abhilfe dringend geboten. Resümierend wird gemeldet, dass die Flotte in meiner Hand ist und aller Voraussicht nach bei feindlichen Aktionen gegen unsere Küste es bleiben wird. Bezüglich der Schlagfertigkeit der Flotte darf ich nicht unerwähnt lassen, dass die Einheiten der Torpedoflotte durch den Dienst sozusagen restlos aufgebraucht wurden. Infolge dieser kontinuierlichen starken Inanspruchnahme steht mangels von Neubauten zu befürchten, dass die Flotille in absehbarer Zeit zusammenbricht"³⁶.

Still, Horthy is not fooled and he is well aware that what he still maintains lacks cohesion, especially as the news from the nearby Italian front is alarming. One of the last operations of the Austro-Hungarian navy is the defense of the port of Dürres and the repatriation of the remains of the Panzer-Baltin army which is evacuating Albania. On October 16, 1918, Emperor Charles published the Manifesto in which he proposed the federalization of Cisleithania as the ultimate remedy against the decomposition of the Empire. The text makes no reference to Hungary, which can therefore consider itself freed from the ties that bind her to Austria. The general confusion aggravated by the shortages, the collapse of the fronts, the routs of several regiments belonging to all nationalities, including the Hungarians, cannot

³⁶ Horthy to Admiral Keil, Armeeeoberkommando, Pola, 9 August 1918. Quoted by Sokol, Österreich-Ungarns Seekrieg 1914-1918, Bd. 2, S. 705.

remain without consequences for the navy. On October 27, faced with the threat of a new mutiny in Pola, the foundations of which this time were national and non-social demands, Horthy launched a desperate appeal for ground artillery reinforcements in the form of a reliable infantry brigade with two mobile batteries, which is an unrealistic demand to say the least. The former February mutineers have once again agitated the crews and the arsenal, which the officers report by adding that are afraid they can no longer control the ships. Horthy met with a refusal from the High Command embodied by General Svetozar Borojević, whose Isonzo troops were themselves troubled; he categorically opposed sending reinforcements to Pola. The High Command then advises Horthy to inform the sailors that the armistice and peace negotiations are underway to calm them down³⁷. The officers then tour the crews and the arsenal, making appeasing statements suggesting that the end of the war is imminent. The submariners were the only ones not being agitated, but their German comrades left their posts and blew up the submarines that were still under construction. On the evening of the 28th, the order was restored but the situation remained tense and deteriorated again on the following day with the formation of sailors' councils. However everything is unfolding without significant violence. Arsenal workers stop work. A crowd gathers in front of the *Marinekasino* waving Italian flags. Some stones fly, windows are broken, the demonstrators then loot the barracks abandoned by the Germans who have meanwhile headed their way back home. The panels and signs bearing German inscriptions are destroyed. Most ships are now ungovernable and even the flagship *Viribus Unitis* falls prey to insubordination and the sailors elect the ship's doctor, a Slovene, as their new captain³⁸.

In the meantime, Horthy was ordered by the emperor to hand the fleet over to the Yugoslav National Council to prevent it from falling into Italian hands. Despite statements by representatives in the Croatian parliament in Zagreb voting for secession, Vienna still hopes that the southern Slavs (Croats and Slovenes) will agree to join the federal state proposed by the emperor. This would imply that they turn away from the plan to unite with the Serbs. This decision was taken in Schönbrunn by a conference gathering around the sovereign Admirals Keil, Holub, the Chief of general Staff General Arthur Arz von Straussenburg, the Chief of the Military Chancellery General Erwin von Zeidler and the Chief of Staff Baron von Seidler. Charles also has a telephone conversation with Foreign Minister Count Gyula Andrássy jr.³⁹ The telegram containing the order arrives in Pola on October 30 at 8 p.m. Its effect on Horthy and the officers is devastating: they are being asked to hand over the entire undefeated fleet at sea to nationalist politicians whose legitimacy they do not recognize. But obedience wins out and in no port (Trieste, Fiume, Sebenico) happens scuttling. In Kotor, it is the French who will in a way "take delivery" of the Austro-Hungarian fleet, but since there are not enough sailors and officers capable of maneuvering it towards Corfu to hand it over to the National Council, it remains temporarily on the spot⁴⁰.

On October 31 at nine in the morning, Horthy received on the flagship, the *Viribus Unitis*, the representatives of the National Committee in the presence of his Chief of general Staff, Commander Emil Konek, the commanders of the 2nd and 3rd Divisions, Captains (N) Lauffer and Schmidt as well as the commander of the 2nd torpedo flotilla, Commander Franz Morin. The delegates of the National Council are Ante Trešić-Pavičić, Ivo Cok, Vilim Bukseg and a few others sent by the local committee of Pola among which Horthy is surprised to see Commander Method Koch. The interview is cold, Horthy refuses to lower the red-white-red

³⁷ Plaschka, Haselsteiner, Suppan (Hg.), *Innere Front*, Bd. 2 S. 225.

³⁸ *Ibid.* S. 228.

³⁹ Sokol, *Österreich-Ungarns Seekrieg 1914-1918*, Bd. 2, S. 732.

⁴⁰ Contre-Amiral Lepottier, « La fin de la flotte autrichienne », *Neptunia* n°83, 1966 s.p.

naval flag to hoist the Slavic flag in its place. On the other hand, he promises to leave the ship at 5 p.m. Before that nothing should be attempted. In accordance with the wishes of the Council, the crew is requested to remain at their post, but actually only seamen who recognize themselves as Croats or Slovenes remain. The delegates did not think about the question of the command and Horthy proposed to leave it in the hands of Captain Janko Vuković, which initially displeased the Yugoslav delegates because although a Croat, Vuković was seen as resolutely loyal to the Habsburg monarchy. In the minutes which follow, Horthy sends his last telegram to the emperor in which he assures him once more of his unshakeable loyalty: "Im Begriffe, befehlsgemäß die k. u. k. Flotte an die Jugoslawen zu übergeben, drängt es mich, in den letzten Minuten, in denen noch die rot-weiß-rot Flagge weht, die während des ganzen Krieges ehrenvoll und unbesiegt geführt wurde, Eure Majestät meiner unwandelbaren Treue zu versichern"⁴¹.

A few hours later, as arranged, Horthy prepares to leave the *Viribus Unitis*. He goes out on the deck at four-thirty: "one of the saddest hours of my so happy life," he says in his memoirs. The whole crew are present, Horthy is so moved that at first he cannot find his words. He takes with him the portrait of Francis Joseph, his captain's pennant and the ship's flag of honor. At the same time all the flags were lowered on the other ships of the squadron. All officers are leaving their posts, including many Croats. As these painful moments unfold, arrives the Emperor's signed telegram appointing Horthy vice-admiral. It was only in the evening that the new flag was hoisted and greeted by 21 cannon shots⁴². The boat remains temporarily under the command of Vuković who remains on board with part of the crew. At dawn the next morning, two Italian artillerymen manage to place mines under the ship. They are intercepted and there is enough time to evacuate the sinking ship but its captain remains on board. The end of the Habsburg Empire could not be better illustrated than by the sinking of the ship bearing the motto of its late emperor with on board a Croatian sailor loyal to the end: "*Caru vjerman do smrti*" (*Kaisertreu bis in den Tod*).

From his arrival at the head of the 1919 counter-revolution, Horthy cultivated references to the navy. An imagery begins to appear for the public opinion that portrays Horthy as the nation's savior. Posters are distributed showing symbols that recall both its former function (the rudder), and adorned with the red-white-green tricolor, or Saint-Stephen's Crown. As regent of Hungary from 1920, Horthy wears ostensibly the uniform, as Owen Rutter observes: "He never appears in public but in the Admiral's uniform of a navy which has ceased to be"⁴³. Depending on the circumstances, Horthy wears his admiral's uniform or a Hungarian army uniform. It is obvious that he continues to cultivate his image as a sailor, and the insistence on the admiral's uniform only reinforces the national mourning that is the loss of the seafront of the Kingdom of Hungary. He wears it during each of his official visits and especially in November 1936 in Italy as well as in August 1938 in Germany where he has the occasion to attend navy parades, and to receive foreign guests. In this context, he is always higher ranked than any of the heads of state he meets, to begin with Adolf Hitler, and there is no doubt that he took some pride in it. Horthy wears his admiral's gala uniform also at the annual garden party he gives at the royal castle and on all official occasions when the nation glorifies itself. The systematic wearing of the uniform undeniably allows him to consolidate his image as savior of the fatherland.

⁴¹ Plaschka, Haselsteiner, Suppan (Hg.), *Innere Front*, Bd. 2 p.238.

⁴² Sokol, *Österreich-Ungarns Seekrieg 1914-1918*, Bd. 2, S. 737.

⁴³ Owen Rutter, *Regent of Hungary. The authorized life of Admiral Nicholas Horthy*, London, Rich&Cowan, 1939, S. 345.

More than his attachment to Francis Joseph, it is Horthy's war facts that are constantly brought to the attention of the public. The parallel drawn between the rudder of the ship and that of the state is one of the most readily employed metaphors, both in writing and in images. The Hungarian Seamen's Association (*Magyar haditengerészeti egyesület*) established in 1937 publishes a monthly magazine that serves this aspect of propaganda. Its distribution and reading are, however, limited to a restricted public. The lack of a maritime surface did not allow Horthy to showcase his naval past. Opportunities to get on a boat are rare and the Danube flotilla is just a stopgap. On May 15, 1942, the 25th anniversary of the Battle of the Otranto Canal was celebrated festively on the Danube by a naval parade run by the boats of the Hungarian royal society for river navigation (*Magyar Király Folyam- és Tengerhajózási Részvénytársaság*).

Finally it was the *Magyar haditengerészeti egyesület* that was to become the officious organization responsible for Horthy's reburial at Kenderes on September 4th, 1993. The event was framed in a dubious revival of the interwar regime as well as a never ending national grievance about the dismantling of the territory of royal Hungary.