

The Corfu Channel incident through aspects of the press of the era

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The Corfu Channel incident is a controversial historical event. This paper focuses on the second stage of this diplomatic episode on October 22, 1946 through aspects of the press of the time, when a British naval flotilla across the northern Strait of Corfu collided with naval mines, damaging the destroyers HMS Saumarez and HMS Volage. 43 crew members were killed and a similar number were wounded. A first approach is attempted to the dimensions it has taken and to the way the historical event was captured in Greek and international newspapers. It should be noted at this point, first of all, that the selected newspapers are representative in their entirety, constituting remarkable sources, while the references in the respective newspapers are indicative, since the examples given stem from a larger material.

In the Greek press, the newspaper *Eleftheria* on October 23 published an article entitled "Two British destroyers hit mines in the Corfu Strait" stating: "It was learned late last night that two British destroyers, while visiting the British Navy based in Greece, collided with a mine between Corfu and the Albanian coast of Agioi Saranda. [...] The victims are raised to 45 ". The newspaper further states that there are suspicions that these are mines, which were recently planted. The newspaper then republished the British Admiralty announcements from London. The next day, *Empros* made headlines about 38 dead and 43 wounded, questioning whether the mines had recently been planted by Albania for military reasons, adding that based on unconfirmed information, Russian and Yugoslav experts had taken part in the sinking. It also published the statement of the Deputy Minister of Finance of the Admiralty John Dougtel: "[...] The explosion took place in Saumarez and the ship caught fire. Volage was ordered to tow Saumarez, whose bow was blown up in the air. "Volage tried to proceed with the stern tug the Saumarez but there was a danger that both ships would be stranded on the shore." On October 25, *Empros* informs the public that the commander of the British Mediterranean fleet, Admiral Willis, is personally conducting the investigations into the accident, while the Minister of the Navy, Mavromichalis, also went to Corfu. According to Reuters it is written that according to a reliable source, talks are being held between the Ministry of Interior and the Admiralty about who is responsible for determining whether the Corfu Strait is mine-free. However, the British Admiralty announced, according to the publication, that the responsibility for the clearing of the Strait lies with the Greek Navy. The Greek press, however, emphasizes that the

Strait had been completely cleared of Greek minesweepers. The reprint from London is interesting, initially describing the event as "the mystery of Corfu", while in the course the following statement is quoted: "The British honor cannot be satisfied with a simple protest. Remedies should be sought, compensation for the relatives of the victims, punishment of the guilty and an assurance that the attack will not be repeated." The front page also features a photo by plane of Saumarez towing the Volage. Accordingly, the newspaper *Eleftheria* speaks of "clear indications that the mines had lately been placed". According to information from London, the Albanian government, carrying out large-scale defense projects near Agioi Saranda and along the coast of Avlona, placed mines in its territorial waters. However, the information is not omitted that the British circles have not made an official announcement, therefore the presence of mines is considered accidental so far. On October 26, *Empros*, like the British *Belfast Telegraph* of the previous day, published an article about the funeral of the victims of the British war in Corfu. According to the telegram of the Reuters correspondent: ten of the 38 victims were buried in Corfu with military honors. Drummers with covered drums preceded the British marches, which were accompanied by a Greek detachment. The bodies of the other 28 victims have not yet been retrieved. This article also tells the personal story of the missing Maltese cook Francis Malia, who one day before the accident met his sister for the first time in 16 years, who was a nun teacher at the corfiot school for Maltese children of the monks of St. Francis. Finally, the newspaper *Neologos Patron* on October 30 states on the front page entitled "The Corfu accident" that the Greek Navy is not responsible for the collection of mines while the responsibility is international.

In the international press and initially in France, the newspaper *Combat* published in Paris on October 24 with the title "Damaged English destroyers near Corfu. Were they victims of an attack?" republishes the news from London on the front page, noting that "even in times of war, there were never any mines there. So we have to conclude that this is an attack." On the same day, the Parisian *Ce Soir*, based on information from Athens, suffices with a small reference to the incident without details, while *Franc-Tireur* stresses that the diplomatic circles in London expect a strong British protest to the Albanian government after the incident, because it is believed that the accident was deliberately caused by the Albanian authorities. On the same wavelength is *L'Aurore*, which on the front page entitled "The naval drama of Corfu" also provides the information of the accident.

In the British press the *Daily Herald* on October 23 announces the incident to the public and the *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer* on October 24 speaks of "catastrophic losses in Corfu" while the *Daily Herald* reports that the Greek Navy was responsible for clearing of the Strait of Corfu. The *Londonderry Sentinel* on October 31 reported that 44 crew members had been killed and 42 wounded, while stressing that "the narrow strip of water between the Albanian coastline and the

Greek island of Corfu is in fact an international canal." The London-based *Daily Mirror* reported on the maritime channel on October 24, saying it had been used by naval and merchant ships for almost two years, adding that British Prime Minister Winston Churchill had asked if it was the same canal, when in May two British destroyers came under fire from an albanian artillery.

The austrian newspaper *Salzburger Nachrichten*, on its front page on October 25, based on information from London, reported the accident, describing it as a serious political affair, and Britain's suspicions that the mines were planted with specific intentions. According to the newspaper, it is worth noting that the Strait of Corfu had been demined by allied units. Similarly, the *Wiener Zeitung* on the second page according to Reuters informs the public about the incident and the losses. *Welt am Abend* published the statement of the British Admiralty on October 25, accusing the Greek Navy of negligence regarding the clearance of mines, as it is written: "This is the reason for yesterday's accident, in which two British destroyers were seriously damaged".

The Australian newspaper *West Australian* on October 24, in addition to republishing the basic information from London, reports that the destroyers arrived in Corfu and transported the injured to the hospital. The *Herald* published an article entitled "38 lives were lost on two destroyers, which collided with mines". Specifically, it is written that "When the British destroyers Saumarez and Volage collided with mines in the Strait of Corfu on Tuesday, one officer and 37 crew members were killed, or are missing, believed to have been killed. Two officers and 43 members were injured." The same news is published in *Argus*, but the next day the newspaper writes based on its correspondent in London that evidence shows that the mines were deliberately placed with the main question of who did it and why. It is also reported that a previous incident inevitably came to light last May when an albanian artillery shot down the British HMS Orion and HMS Superb destroyers. The article closes by asking the question if and when, the crime of Corfu will be proven.

Concluding it is very important to note that the press interest in this historical event was great and continuous, informing on a daily basis about the developments through official announcements of the respective correspondents and foreign news agencies, mainly in London, while being one of the main topics of discussion of newspapers. The projected picture of the situation could be said to be relatively adequate in a general context as to the scope of the incident. A proposal for future research could be to examine the Albanian and British press, and consequently the communication war and propaganda techniques between Britain and Albania, focusing on the study of the conflicting perspectives of the two sides.

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