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THE IMPACT OF THE PORT OF VALONA IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ITALIAN NAVY'S DOMINATION OF THE ADRIATIC SEA IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

*İtalyan Donanmasının Birinci Dünya Savaşı'nda Adriyatik Denizi'ndeki Hakimiyeti
Bağlamında Avlonya Limanı'nın Etkisi*

Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Ozan TUNA 

Milli Savunma Üniversitesi

otuna@msu.edu.tr

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THE IMPACT OF THE PORT OF VALONA IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ITALIAN NAVY'S DOMINATION OF THE ADRIATIC SEA IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

**İtalyan Donanmasının Birinci Dünya Savaşı'nda Adriyatik Denizi'ndeki Hakimiyeti Bağlamında
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Öz

Avlonya, Adriyatik Denizi için oldukça kritik bir öneme sahip olup yirminci yüzyılın başları itibarıyla özellikle İtalya ve Avusturya-Macaristan İmparatorluğu arasındaki Adriyatik Denizi rekabetinde etkisi ve caydırıcılığı oldukça artmıştır. İtalyan donanması Birinci Dünya Savaşı öncesinde askeri güç bakımından Akdeniz'de oldukça faal olsa da Avusturya-Macaristan İmparatorluğu donanmasının etkisi nedeniyle Adriyatik Denizi'nde tam ve kesin bir hakimiyet tesis edememiştir. Akdeniz'in batısında Fransız donanması ile de rekabet halinde bulunan İtalyanlar, donanmalarındaki savaş gemilerinin eksikliğini alanda hakimiyet kazanarak kapatmayı uygun görmüş, Birinci Dünya Savaşı'nın hemen başında Avlonya limanını ele geçirmiştir. Bu sayede İtalyanlar hem Adriyatik Denizi'nde Avusturya-Macaristan İmparatorluğu'na karşı hem de Balkanlarda Yunanistan'a karşı avantaj elde etmişlerdir. Özellikle zırhlı muharebe gemileri döneminde donanma için stratejik önemi bulunan bir limana sahip olmak donanmanın bölgedeki gücünü bir kat daha arttırmakta idi. Bu avantaja rağmen İtalyanların askeri kapasitesi Avlonya limanını denizden, karadan sürekli ve etkili olarak tahkim etmeye yetmediği için Avlonya, Alman ve Avusturya-Macaristan deniz ve hava unsurları tarafından bombalanmış ve İtalyanlar kayıp vermişlerdir. Bu bağlamda çalışmamızda İtalyan donanmasının Birinci Dünya Savaşı'nda Adriyatik Denizi'ndeki stratejisi bağlamında Avlonya limanının önemi ve caydırıcılığı tespit edilmeye çalışılmıştır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Sazan Adası, Dandolo Savaş Gemisi, Giornale d'Italia, General Bertozzi

Abstract

Valona has a critical importance for the Adriatic Sea, and as of the beginning of the twentieth century, its influence and deterrence increased considerably, especially in the Adriatic Sea competition between Italy and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Although the Italian navy was very active in the Mediterranean in terms of military power before the First World War, it could not establish a full and definite dominance in the Adriatic Sea due to the influence of the Austro-Hungarian navy. Being in competition with the French navy in the west of the Mediterranean, the Italians saw fit to compensate for the lack of warships in their navy by gaining dominance in the area, and captured the port of Valona at the very beginning of the First World War. In this way, the Italians gained an advantage both against the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the Adriatic Sea and against Greece in the Balkans. Having a strategically important port for the navy, especially in the era of armored warships, increased the strength of the navy in the region. Despite this advantage, since the military capacity of the Italians was not enough to fortify the port of Valona from sea and land, Valona was bombed by German and Austro-Hungarian naval and air elements and the Italians suffered losses. In this context, in our study, the importance and deterrence of the port of Valona were tried to be determined in the context of the strategy of the Italian navy in the Adriatic Sea in the First World War.

Keywords: Sazan Island, Dandolo Warship, Giornale d'Italia, General Bertozzi

Introduction

Before the First World War, the Adriatic Sea was a competition zone between the navies of Italy and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but especially the Italian navy was planning an attack on the port of Valona in order to be more effective in the competition in the Adriatic Sea and to increase its influence in the Balkans. Valona port, which is an important port city in Southern Albania and 60 km away from the Strait of Otranto, is located on the shore of a bay surrounded by the island of Sazan and the Karaburun peninsula, and it was the first port of the Ottoman navy in the Adriatic Sea.¹ Valona, which came out of the domination of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkan Wars, was attached to Albania, which gained its independence with the London Conference on 29 July 1913 after the war, and this status of the city of Valona was accepted by Italy.² As of the first half of 1914, the Italian navy had three active dreadnoughts, while the Italian navy had its bases in La Spezia in the west, Taranto in the south, Brindisi and Venice in the Adriatic Sea, and when the war began, the Italian navy was mainly based in Taranto, consisting of dreadnought and predreadnought class ships, cruiser and destroyer class ships were patrolling between Libya and the Dodecanese Islands.³ The Italian navy, which had a very modern and deterrent naval power, seized the port of Valona, whose influence and potential had increased one more time with the outbreak of the First World War, and succeeded in making it an important base in the Adriatic Sea.

1)- Italian navy's capture of the port of Valona andPort of Valona in the First World War

In the rivalry between Italy and Austro-Hungarian Empire in the Adriatic Sea before the First World War, Italy's long coastal coastline, which could easily be exposed to an extraction, was a disadvantage. In order to balance these disadvantages, the Italians developed good relations with England and tried to get the support of this state in a possible war, and also tried to gain space against the Austro-Hungarian Empire navy by obtaining new bases in the Adriatic Sea.⁴ The Italian navy, which wanted to consolidate its dominance in the region by making the Adriatic Sea an inland sea, visited the port of Valona on April 28, 1914, with three torpedo boats alongside Regina Elena, Naples and Rome warships under the command of Vice Admiral Luigi Amadeus.⁵ At the same time, the Italian navy was making a military build-up on the island of Rhodes on the one hand, and intensifying its navigational campaigns in the Eastern Mediterranean on the other hand.⁶

¹ Mehmet İbbaşı, "Avlonya Sancağı ve Yönetimi (1750-1800)", *Osmanlı Mirası ve Araştırmaları Dergisi*, Cilt: 6, Sayı: 14, Mart 2019, s. 143

² Kevin Doko, *İtalyan İşgalinde Arnavutluk (1939-1943)*, Trakya Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Balkan Çalışmaları Anabilim Dalı, Basılmamış Yüksek Lisans Tezi, Edirne 2020, ss. 6-10; *Illustrierte Kronen Zeitung*, "Beschließung der Valona", S. 1, 7 Dezember 1912

³ Lawrence Sondhaus, *The Great War at Sea: A Naval History of the First World War*, Cambridge University Press, UK 2014, s. 59

⁴ Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, RZ 201/2410, S. 143-145, 12 August 1911

⁵ Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, RZ 201/7835, S. 143, 28 April 1914

⁶ Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, RZ 201/7835, S. 139, 24 March 1914; Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, RZ 201/7835, S. 147, 9 June 1914



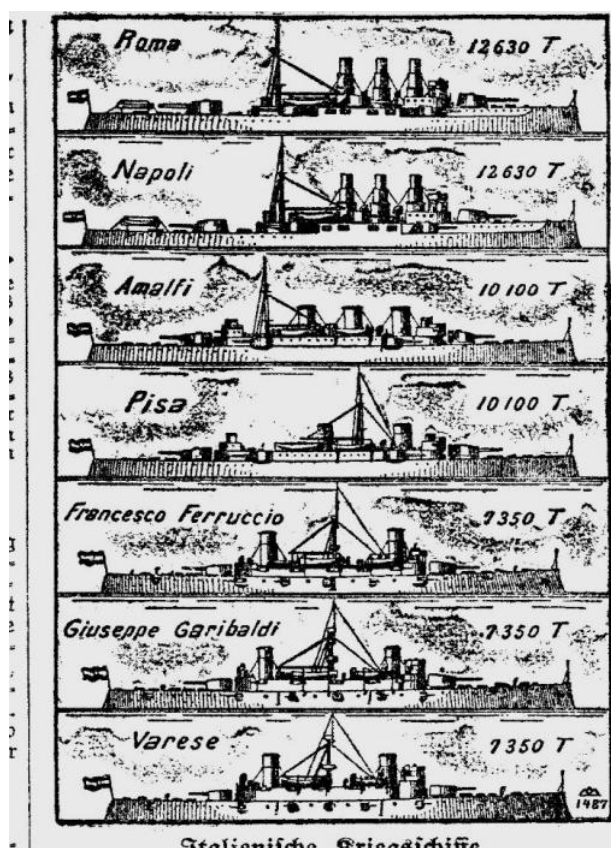


Illustration 1: Italian Navy⁷

With the start of the First World War, Italy's interest in the port of Valona increased and the Italian press (*Giornale d'Italia*) stated that Valona, which is the key to the Adriatic Sea, should definitely not fall into the hands of Greece.⁸ It was emphasized that planting the Italian flag on the islands of Sazan and Valona did not require a very comprehensive military operation, and it was stated that Italy could not tolerate the fall of Valona to Greece.⁹ Ultimately, Italian navy marines occupied the port of Valona in October 1914, and power policy in the Strait of Otranto turned in Italy's favour.¹⁰ After the Italians captured the port of Valona, they sent warships called Dandolo to the region to fortify the port, and then they placed two radio-telegraph stations in the port. The warship Calabria also patrolled the region and kept the calm in the city of Valona.¹¹

The Italian navy also captured the island of Sazan, near Valona, in November 1914 and made this island a base. Then the Italians began to attack Greek ships over the island of Saseno.¹² Although there is not much information about how the Greek navy responded to the Italian navy,

⁷ *Die Neue Zeitung*, "Italienische Kriegsschiffe", S. 3, 1 October 1911

⁸ *Badische Presse*, "Die Vorgänge in Albanien", S. 3, 2 October 1914

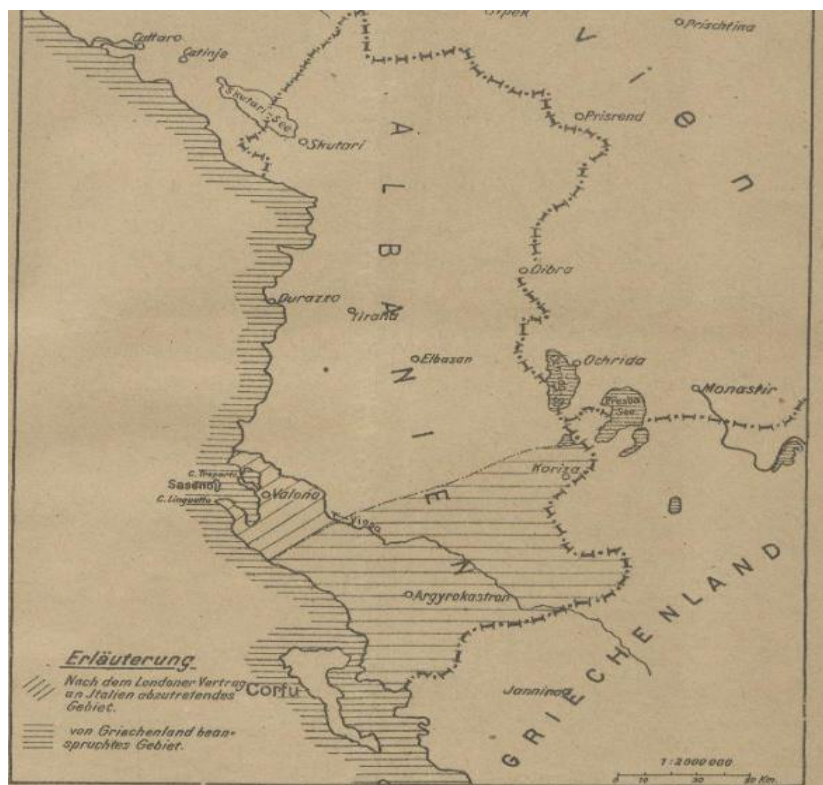
⁹ *Badischer Beobachter*, "Die Sehnsucht Nach Valona", S. 3, 3 October 1914; *Jeverisches Wochenblatt*, "Das Bischen Albanien", S. 1, 7 October 1914

¹⁰ *Volksmacht*, "Die Neuesten Vorkommnisse in Italien", S. 1, 22 October 1914; *Volksmacht*, "Valona", S. 2, 23 October 1914

¹¹ *Badischer Beobachter*, "Italienische Kriegsschiffe in Valona", S. 1, 27 October 1914; *Jeverische Wochenblatt*, "Albaien", S. 2, 30 October 1914; *Dresdner Neueste Nachrichten*, "Um das Herrenlose Albanien", S. 1, 30 October 1914

¹² *Karlsruher Zeitung*, "Zur Kriegslage", S. 2, 3 November 1914; *Berliner Börsen Zeitung*, "Vom Lage", S. 3, 17 November 1914

it is predicted that the island of Sazan is a very small island without land fortifications, and that Sazan island will be a deterrent base only if the Italians strongly fortify the port of Valona.¹³



Map 1: Valona and Sazan Island.¹⁴

Although it is seen that Greece generally did not show a reaction against Italy's capture of the port of Valona, it is stated in the Italian press (*Giornale d'Italia*) that the Italians have 5000-6000 soldiers in the port of Valona and that the Italian soldiers managed to establish a strong defense system in the city.¹⁵ The port of Valona had a very strategic position for the Italians, and this port provided the Italians with the opportunity to close the Adriatic Sea with very little force. Thus, the Adriatic Sea took the form of "*Mare Nostrum*", (Our Sea) for Italians.¹⁶ The Italians' inclusion in the First World War by declaring war on the Austro-Hungarian Empire on April 26, 1915, increased the importance of the port of Valona. The continuation of the Dardanelles Wars and the possibility of Italy helping its allies in this region also affected the developments in the Adriatic Sea.¹⁷ Italy's entry into the First World War made the port of Valona the main base for the navy of this state in the Adriatic Sea and the Balkan Peninsula, and Italy, together with its allies (England and France), managed to establish a connection between the port of Valona and Thessaloniki.¹⁸ At the same time, having the port of Valona gave the Italian navy, which was tactically squeezed by the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Greek navy, the opportunity to

¹³ Bundesarchiv, Militärarchiv; *RH 53-4/179*, S. 18, 6 July 1920

¹⁴ Bundesarchiv, Militärarchiv; *RH 53-4/179*, S. 51, No Date.

¹⁵ *Berliner Börsen Zeitung*, "Ersten Lage in Albanien", S. 5, 4 January 1915; *Jeversches Wochenblatt*, "Serbien und Griechenland gegen Italien", S. 3, 3 May 1915; *Innsbrucker Nachrichten*, "Die Neue Balkan Lage", S. 3, 21 June 1917

¹⁶ Bundesarchiv, Militärarchiv; *RH 52-4/179*, S. 52, 1 August 1920

¹⁷ *Karsruher Zeitung*, "Der Krieg Zur See", S. 1, 4 January 1916

¹⁸ *Vorwärts*, "Neue Kriegschauplätze", S. 2, 30 January 1916

balance the situation and seize the superiority in the Adriatic Sea.¹⁹ The shifts of the British and French navies to the Mediterranean prevented the Italian navy from fighting alone with the Austro-Hungarian navy from the north, and the Italians were able to use the port of Valona more proactively.

Even though the fact that the port of Valona was in the hands of Italy provided a great advantage to this state, it was seen that the military elements in Valona were mainly composed of around 50,000 troops brought from Rhodes and other islands during the air and land explorations of the Germans to the region. For this reason, it was stated that the Italian commander had a very difficult time defending Valona, he could not reinforce the region from the land, and it was very difficult to reinforce the weapon from the sea.²⁰ Therefore, General Bertozzi, the commander of the Italian troops in Albania, did not think of an attack through the port of Valona and considered it appropriate to stay on the defensive in the region.²¹



Photo 1: Valona²²

Although the Italians took measures against the port of Valona, the Austro-Hungarian navy attacked the region and the submarines of the Austro-Hungarian Empire succeeded in sinking the Italian ships in Valona.²³ Towards the middle of 1916, while the number of Italian soldiers in Valona was around 32,000, it was seen that the Italian troops in Valona did not have a military deterrent and would not be enough to change the balance in the Adriatic Sea.²⁴ Although the support of the British and French navies to the Italian navy strengthened Italy's hand in the

¹⁹ *Berliner Börsen Zeitung*, "Italien Interessen an Albanien", S. 3, 21 December 1915

²⁰ Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts, *RZ 202/22144*, S. 17, 1 March 1916

²¹ Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts, *RZ 202/22144*, S. 14, 11 February 1916

²² Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, *Totalansicht von Valona*, 1916-1918

²³ *Berliner Börsen Zeitung*, "Ein Österreichischer U-Boot Erfolg", S. 1, 8 December 1915

²⁴ *Leibziger Tageblatt und Handelszeitung*, "Gunaris über die Griechische Politik", S.3, 28 December 1915; *Badische Landes Zeitung*, "Die Italiener in Albanien", S. 1, 4 January 1916

Adriatic Sea, Germany's declaration of war on Italy in 1916 and the concentration of German military equipment in the Adriatic Sea reduced the pressure on the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Nevertheless, Italy continued to use the port of Valona effectively until the end of the war. During the aerial reconnaissance of the aircraft belonging to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, it was determined that there were 10 warships of the Italian navy in the port of Valona on 17 November 1917 and that the transport ships entered the port under the protection of Italian warships.²⁵ In the following dates, German submarines managed to blockade the port of Valona. In the reconnaissance reports of German submarines dated 28 November 1917, they informed that there were 4 large and 25 small ships belonging to the Italian navy in the port of Valona and that there were two cruisers belonging to the Italian navy 10-25 km away from the port.²⁶ The potential of the port of Valona and the Italian elements stationed in the region continued to pose a threat to the German and Austro-Hungarian Empire. Therefore, although five seaplanes belonging to the Austro-Hungarian Empire bombarded the port of Valona on September 25, 1917, no serious damage occurred in the port due to the zig-zag cruise of the Italian destroyers stationed in the port.²⁷ While the air elements belonging to the Austro-Hungarian Empire continued to bombard the port of Valona, German planes also bombed the airstrip in Valona, thus causing damage to the Italian air force in the port.²⁸

In general, the fact that the Italians had a maritime state tradition and that they could receive continuous help from their allies was a factor that determined the outcome of the competition in the Adriatic Sea in the First World War. The fact that the Austro-Hungarian Empire did not have enough reserves for a long-term war in terms of navy constituted a disadvantage for this state in the war. As a result, it has been seen that the Italians acted wisely in their military policies towards the port of Valona, and that the German and Austro-Hungarian Empires managed to fend off the sea and air attacks with little damage.

Conclusion

After completing their national unity in the 19th century, it was seen that the Italians quickly developed their industries and began to arm themselves militarily. The fact that they are geographically covered by the sea from three sides and that they have a long coastline where the enemy can land in the event of a war posed a great danger for Italy, and for this reason, the Italians considered it necessary to build a strong navy first in terms of national defense. Although the victory in the Tripoli War (1911-1912) showed the strength of the Italian navy in the Mediterranean, it was seen that the Italians could not be effective against the Austro-Hungarian Empire navy in the Adriatic Sea and this state remained on the defensive against the navy power. At the beginning of 1914, although the Italians held alliance negotiations with the Germans against the British and French navies in the Mediterranean, these negotiations did not yield any results, and the frictions with the Austro-Hungarian Empire continued. Especially in the construction of dreadnought type warships, the Italians, who were far behind this state, decided to occupy the port of Valona in order to balance these disadvantages. While the geographical location of this port allowed to close the Strait of Otranto with a small force, it also gave the Italians the advantage of being effective in the Balkans and sending troops to the Balkan

²⁵ Bundesarchiv, Militärarchiv; *RM 40/338*, S. 6, 23 November 1917

²⁶ Bundesarchiv, Militärarchiv; *RM 40/338*, S. 4, 1 Dezember 1917

²⁷ Bundesarchiv, Militärarchiv; *RM 40/338*, S. 15, 25 September 1917

²⁸ *Welt Blatt*, "Erfolgreicher Angriff Unserer Seeflugzeuge auf Valona", S. 4, 4 May 1917; *Norddeutsche Volksblatt*, "Von den Balkanfronten", S. 2, 27 August 1918

peninsula. In addition, the Italians, who did not want Greece to expand towards the north of the Balkans, had also suppressed Greece through the port of Valona.

As a result, the Italians occupied the port of Valona in October 1914 and by fortifying the port, they succeeded in gaining dominance in the region. However, when Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire declared war on Italy, the Italian military equipment in Valona became a target, and the sea and air elements of these two states attacked the port of Valona until the end of the war. While this situation prevented the Italians from using the port of Valona effectively, the Italians in Valona had to stay on the defensive. However, the Italians used their power wisely and gained the upper hand in the Adriatic Sea and repulsed the attacks on the port of Valona. As a result, although the impact of the port of Valona was not directly decisive in the strategy of the Italians in the Adriatic Sea in the First World War, it prevented the German and Austro-Hungarian forces from attacking the Italian mainland. From this point of view, it can be said that it was a right decision for the Italian navy to occupy the port of Valona at the beginning of the war and turn it into a base. The control of the Italians in the port of Valona continued after the war and Valona dominated the Italian military and bureaucracy for a certain period of time.

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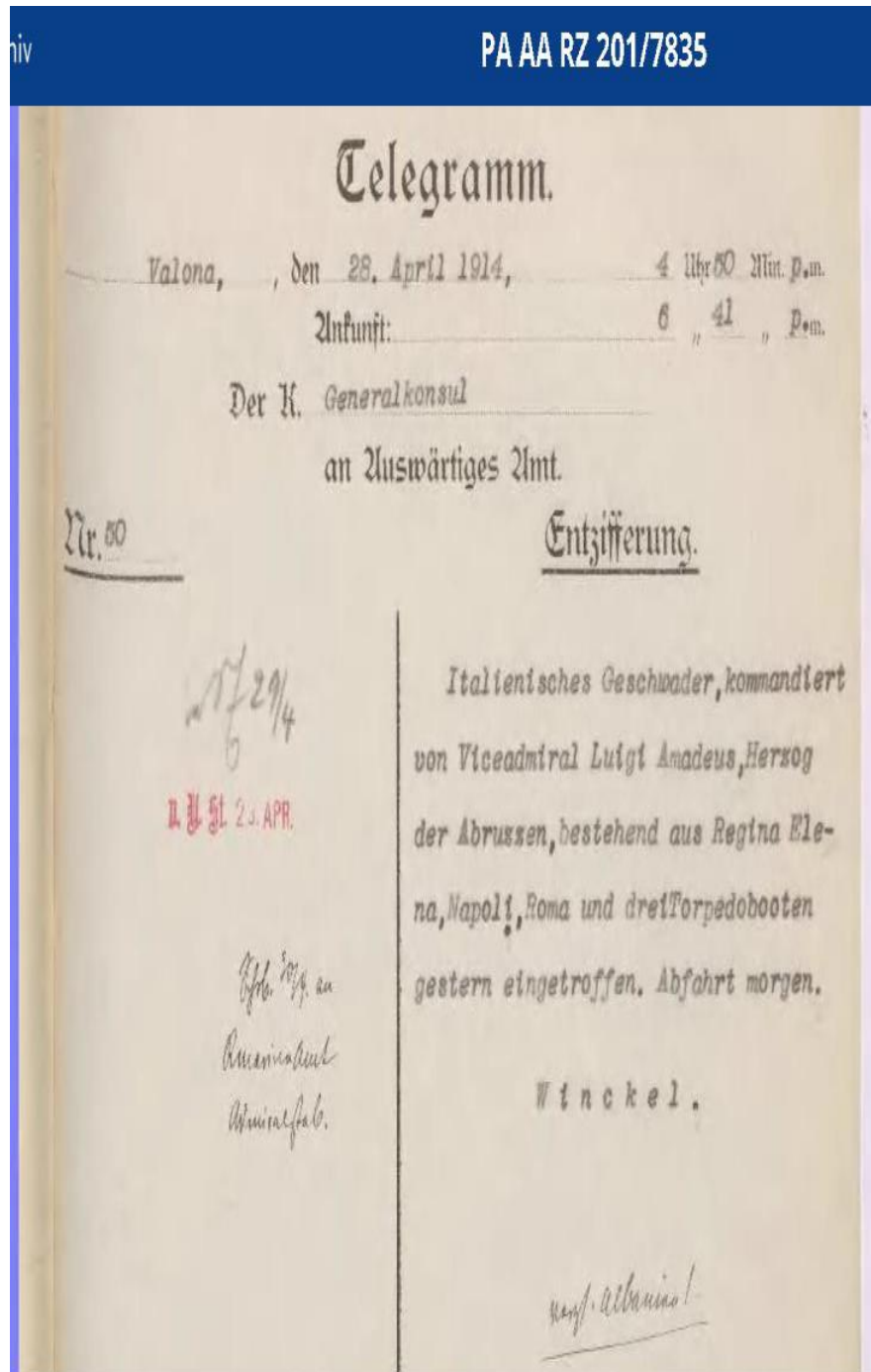
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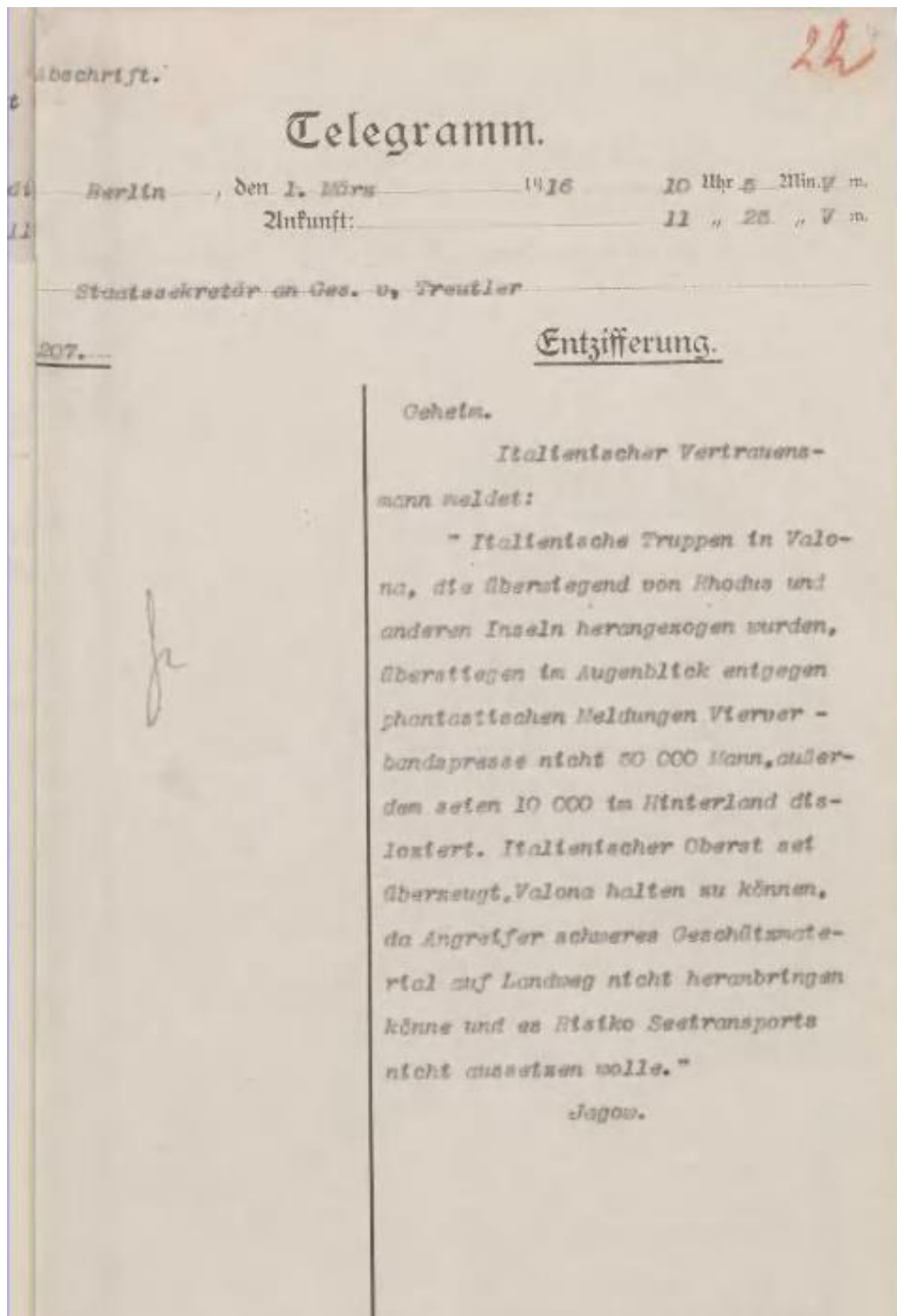
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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Visit of the Italian Navy to the Port of Valona²⁹

²⁹ Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, RZ 201/7835, S. 143, 28 April 1914

Appendices 2: Capacity of the Italian Army and Navy in Valona³⁰



³⁰ Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, RZ 202/22144, S. 17, 1 March 1916

Appendix 3: German Submarine Discovery Report on the Port of Valona³¹

17/12 1917 10

aus der Felde 17/12 11 am
 an Etappe (offen 2.30 pm)

KOMMANDO DER FLOTTE
 Eing. 19.12.17 1917
 B. Nr. 1917 Anlag. 1917

mark

v. Dueffel meldet Beobachtungen in Valonabucht :

Wegen Nebel und Schneefall 9. bis 14. Dezember keine Sicht.

15. Dez. 8 Uhr vorm. ein Transporter in Begleitung eines
 Torpedobootes von Suedwesten einlaufend, 8 Uhr 30 vorm. ein
 Dampfer an der Kuente Sasena kreuzend. Schlepperbewegung
 an der Kuente zwei Transporter, drei Dampfer verankert.

10 Uhr 15 vorm. Aufstieg eines Wasserflugzeuges das 5
 Minuten spaeter sudwestlich Sasena abstarzte und in
 Wellen verschwand. An Unfallstelle zwei aufsteigende Wasser-
 saeulen beobachtet, ferner drei Dampfer nach Unfallstelle
 fahrend.

Admiralstabs-Zweigstelle Bukarest Nr 2436

weitergegeben an Flotte

K5.

Z. M. 20 1.12.17



³¹ Bundesarchiv, Militärarchiv, RM 40/338, S. 10, 17 December 1917