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FACULTY OF HISTORY***

***PHD THESIS***

***The United Kingdom, Romania and the Question of  
the Danube  
(1856 - 1883)***

***Summary***

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## Introduction

The analysis of the political and commercial participation of the United Kingdom in the area of the mouths of the Danube involves a variety of topics: the great moments of the diplomatic history of the nineteenth century, the episodes of pan-institutional collaboration, the components of the international law concerning the legal status of the navigation on the Danube, the quantitative and qualitative data on trade relations in the context of the economic policy of the Romanian state, the issues related to hydrotechnical design, the local and regional issues related to the status of the Danube harbours, etc., i.e. a variety of facets of the “question of the Danube”, hence the possibility to use a lot of information that is, however, scattered in works belonging to several areas of scientific analysis.

The foundations mainly consist in the published and unpublished sources and in the rich Romanian and foreign historiography concerning the diplomatic and legal component of the “question of the Danube”. The documents that stand out among these, due to their importance for the development of this thesis, are the documents that are very little used in the literature and belong to the Fund of the European Commission of the Danube, and that kept at the County Direction of the National Archives Galati<sup>1</sup>. While the record information from sections such as “General Secretariat” or “Protocols” provide access to internal and official data on the European Commission of the Danube, the reports contained in the “Delegate of England” section include documents dating from the period 1856-1916. The files contain invaluable documents, usually consisting in the diplomatic correspondence of the English delegates with their superiors of the embassies in Constantinople and London, as well as the relationships with different British trade houses interested in the welfare of the navigation and the economic exchanges carried out on the mouths of the Danube. These sources help rebuild the involvement of England in the affairs of the European Commission of the Danube. This information corroborated with other contemporary sources and with the rich historiography of the matter, illustrates the consistency of the policy of London on the “question of the Danube”.

The work of Romanian or foreign biologists, hydrologists, geographers, historians, economists or engineers includes various aspects of the question of the Danube that were often the subject of extensive exegesis in the field, which nevertheless remained constrained in space or time strict limits because of the authors’ interests or of the technical language that is inaccessible to the researchers in other fields. The interdisciplinary visions that represent the product of the work of passionate connoisseurs of the river such as Grigore Antipa or Jean Bart are important contributions to the knowledge and dissemination of the “question of the Danube”, in a sense that lacks the diplomatic nuance of the phrase; yet, they are no longer possible today when the scientific research has become so specialized and it is very difficult

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<sup>1</sup> The contents of the Fund can be consulted in the volume *Inventar Arhivistic 12: Comisia Europeană a Dunării (1856-1949)* (*Archive Inventory 12: The European Commission of the Danube (1856-1949)*), coordinated by Ioana Alexandra Negreanu, Bucharest, 1987.

for a writer to master different skills which are required to reveal the geographic component, the geopolitical impact, the cultural aspects, the economic value or the historical constants that are subsumed by the “the question of the Danube”.

“The thing that recurs periodically and that is presented in a new form each time”, one of the “things that threaten to perpetuate itself”<sup>2</sup>, according to jurist Dimitrie Nenițescu, “the question of the Danube” means, in a diplomatic and political sense in the nineteenth century, the rivalry between Russia and Austria for the dominance over the mouths of the river. Located on the mandatory route from Russia to the warm seas, the Lower Danube also represented a region where the Habsburg Monarchy manifested their expansionist intentions, as they wanted to find satisfactory compensations in the East for its more and more fragile position in the German area. The interest in the Danube region increased significantly when, during the search for new markets for their manufactured goods, the French and British traders found a market in sustainable development in the Danubian - Pontic basin. It was not only the moment when the Danube became “the strategic basis of the political balance of the East”<sup>3</sup>, but also, as Jules Michelet believed, the moment when all obstacles brought to the navigation on the Danube, a major European artery, caused a serious disruption of its functions, turning the freedom of the river into “a prerequisite for the social and political health of Europe”<sup>4</sup> or, as Richard Frucht noted, when “maintaining the freedom of navigation on the Danube became a matter of European interest”<sup>5</sup>.

“The problem of the Danube”, as Nicolae Iorga noted, does not only include “that diplomatic moment” which was so useful in training specialists in diplomacy or international law, it also represents a socio-human reality which is “much broader: it includes the whole history of Eastern Europe – and of Western Europe related to Eastern Europe”<sup>6</sup>. Or, according to the more explicit statement of Grigore Antipa, “whoever wants to understand the question of the Danube must first understand his or her life, because before being a political issue, it is a matter of physical, economic and commercial geography. Therefore, we shall find the ways of solving this issue not only by means of studying documents, treaties or diplomatic notes, but also, and more importantly, by examining the real situation and by pursuing our interests”<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Dimitrie N. Nenițescu, *Studiu asupra fluviilor convenționale. Dunărea în dreptul internațional public (Study on Conventional Rivers. The Danube in the Public Institutional Law)*, Bucharest, 1903, pp. 3 – 4

<sup>3</sup> Heinrich F. Geffcken, *La Question de Danube*, Berlin, 1883, p. 8

<sup>4</sup> *La Roumanie et la liberte du Danube*, with an introduction by Armand Levy, Paris, 1883, pp. 5 – 6

<sup>5</sup> Richard Ch. Frucht, *Dunărea Noastră. România, the Great Powers, and the Danube Question. 1914-1921*, Boulder-New York, 1982, p. 7

<sup>6</sup> N. Iorga, *Chestiunea Dunării. Istoria Europei răsăritene în legătură cu această chestie (The Question of the Danube. The History of the Eastern Europe Related to this Question)*, published by Victor Spinei, Iași, 1998, pp. 83 – 84

<sup>7</sup> Gr. Antipa, *Dunărea și problemele ei, (The Danube and its Problems)* p. 6

From this perspective, the Danubian studies gain inconspicuous consistency at a mere superficial analysis. Yet, the natural complexity results from the contribution of the Danube in the support of the human activities in the current Romanian space. Eugeniu Botez (Jean Bart) wrote that “the energy and tenacity proved by our statesmen while defending our rights over the river cover the most beautiful pages of the question of the Danube and of our political and diplomatic history”<sup>8</sup>; similarly, Nicolae Iorga stated that the history of trade on the Danube is “a prerequisite for understanding the history of our nation itself in all its relations, origin and development”<sup>9</sup>; in addition, Vintilă Brătianu found that “discussing the ways for developing the Danube basin and its mouths means trying to clarify some of the conditions of the progress of our country and our race”<sup>10</sup>.

Thus, as a natural consequence, the political and diplomatic component of the question of the Danube had an important commercial dimension, which was the result of specific social, economic and cultural realities of the Eastern regions. These were the terms of a historical equation where the constant was the political and economic interest to control the mouths of the Danube and the variables were only the manifestations of this hegemony. “Whoever is handling the mouths of the Danube is the master of the Danube”<sup>11</sup> and whoever dominates the navigable waterway may be able to bring the Levant market and, by extension, all the Eastern market “in contact with the peoples of Central and Western Europe” according to Karl Marx. As diplomat, C. Diamandy wrote: “while the Danube geographically speaking ends at its mouths, it economically flows into the Mediterranean Sea: it flows into the Delta and it takes its ships into the Mediterranean Sea”<sup>12</sup>. And while the Black Sea, at certain times in its history was a real “turntable” of the great international trade and represented an extension of the Mediterranean Sea towards the rich eastern regions, the Danube consisted in an extension of the Mediterranean Sea and of the Pontus towards the inland areas. Grigore Antipa believed that “the greatest of all our natural resources of our country is undoubtedly the Danube, and that is if we only saw it as a global artery of navigation and trade. As masters of its mouths, which are Europe’s gateway to the Orient and the Orient’s gateway to the heart of Europe, as masters of 36% of its navigable waters and of all its northern affluents, as masters of all this, we have the greatest treasure with which the generous nature can endow a nation”<sup>13</sup>. In other

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<sup>8</sup> E. P. Botez, *Cum se desleagă cheștiunea Dunării (How to Explain the Question of the Danube)*, p. 11

<sup>9</sup> N. Iorga, *Istoria comerțului românesc (The History of the Romanian Trade)*, vol. II, *Epoca veche*, Bucharest, 1925, p. 5

<sup>10</sup> Vintilă I. Brătianu, *Preface*, Constantin I. Băicoianu, *Le Danube. Aperçu historique, économique et politique*, Paris, 1917, p. 6

<sup>11</sup> Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *Works*, vol. IX, Bucharest, 1959, p. 418

<sup>12</sup> Ilie Seftiuc, Iulian Cârțână, *România și problema Strâmtoarelor (Romania and the Question of the Straits)*, Bucharest, 1974, p. 15

<sup>13</sup> Gr. Antipa, *Cheștiunea Dunării*, în *Politica externă a României (19 prelegeri publice organizate de Institutul Social Român) (The Question of the Danube, in Romania’s Foreign Policy (19 public debates organised by the Romanian Social Institute))*, coordinators: Mircea Djuvara, Demetru Negulescu, D. Iancovici, București, 1924, p. 160

words, as Al. Lahovary concluded: “as the Nile created Egypt, we can also say that the Danube created the political and economic importance of Romania”<sup>14</sup>.

### **Structure of the thesis**

From a structural point of view, the thesis is organized into four chapters. The thesis entitled “The United Kingdom, Romania and the Question of the Danube (1856-1883)” analyzes a subject that is as rich and interesting as it is difficult and complex. To accomplish such a task, which means to get closer to the specific realities of the Romanian history from the perspective of the British interests in the Lower Danube, we considered at least three points of view: 1. the politico-diplomatic behaviour of the United Kingdom in the regulation of the issues related to the navigation in the region of the Lower Danube; 2. the effective way in which the directives coming from the Foreign Office in London and from the British Embassy in Constantinople were implemented by the British representatives in the ports of the Lower Danube; 3. the attitude of the authorities in Bucharest towards the options which, on several occasions, severely harmed the national sovereignty of the Romanian state. Similarly, the analysis of the British political and economic interests in the region of the mouths of the Danube reached very different aspect, such as: remarkable moments in the diplomatic history of the 19th century, episodes of European institutional cooperation, the regulation of the relationships of international law regarding the legal regime of the navigation on the Danube, the quantitative and qualitative details related to trade within the British economic policy in Romania, hydrotechnical improvement on the Danube, local and regional aspects of the situation of Romanian ports, etc. This involves the analysis of various aspects of “the question of the Danube” by using rich and diverse bibliographic material.

The logical and methodological framework of the thesis is organized starting from politico-diplomatic, legal, commercial or hydrotechnical issues relevant for the Lower Danube. Thus, the first 30 pages of the book are dedicated to an introduction containing interesting general considerations regarding the role of the Danube in the history of Romania, together with a series of pros and cons on the importance of the Danube in Europe, as well as a detailed presentation of the Romanian and foreign historiography concerning the navigation on the Danube.

The first chapter describes the legal situation which led to the regulation of the status of the Danube, in the context of diplomatic negotiations regarding the conclusion of peace after the Crimean War, focusing on the attitude of the diplomats in St. James towards the complete internationalization of the navigation on the Danube. From the same perspective, the author describes the establishment of the European Commission of the Danube in 1856 and the activity of the British plenipotentiaries at the Conferences of Paris (1858 and 1866) and

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<sup>14</sup> Al. Lahovary, *works cited*, p. 3

London (1871), which completes the picture of the British interest in the regulation of the navigation on the mouths of the Danube.

The attitude of the diplomats in St. James was decisive not only for the elimination of Russia as a riparian state of the Danube, but also for limiting the Austrian hegemonic attempts that were considered to be hostile to the development of trade in the region. The internationalization of the Danube and the creation of the European Commission of the Danube were remarkable achievements which were to be guaranteed beyond the spatial and temporal boundaries of the organization based in Galati. Thus, besides the great names of the British foreign policy involved in the “question of the Danube”, the actions of the first British delegate to the European Commission of the Danube, Officer John Stokes, and the chief engineer of the Commission Sir Charles Hartley, showed how the British representatives on the site agreed to defend the interests of the major economic and political circles in London. Also, thanks to their efforts, the European Commission of the Danube actually succeeded in perpetuating its existence and in turning into a solid institution, whose work contributed to the economic development of the Lower Danube. The way in which British merchants and ship-owners benefited from the improved navigation is analyzed using statistical sources available in the Regional Archive of Galați as well as published statistical sources, which helped explaining how economic interests prompted British diplomats’ particular political conduct.

The following chapters of the thesis discuss the “question of the Danube” in the same quadruple perspective: political-diplomatic, legal, technical and economic. After the considerations concerning the situation of the technical work of the Sulina bar and canal, the author raises the question of the Danube in the context of the Oriental Question during the period 1871-1878, and of the diplomatic struggle that Romania had to lead against Austria – Hungary to control the Lower Danube, from 1879 to 1883. After the Treaty of Berlin recognized the independence of the Romanian State and accepted it as a full member of the European Commission of the Danube, a new period in the history of the river began in 1878, when Romania took over from the UK the mission of protecting the freedom of the navigation on the lower river; this freedom was threatened by the expansionist ambitions of Austria – Hungary and Russia, which had become a riparian state after the annexation of southern Bessarabia. The author relied on published and unpublished quality documents when presenting in detail the way in which the British delegate to the European Commission of the Danube opposed the claims of Vienna’s representatives who wanted to dominate the fluvial region between Porțile de Fier and Brăila / Galați, as well as the compensation and compromise policy of the Foreign Office (visible in the debates and decisions of the Conference in London, 1883). At the same time, the author continues to present the work of the “father of the Danube”, Charles Hartley, who remained the engineer advisor of the European Commission of the Danube, as well as the way in which trade relations and the British navigation evolved in the area of the Lower Danube under the protection of the representatives of England in the European Commission of the Danube, which are now regulated by the Romanian – British bilateral treaties.

The thesis also includes a series of conclusions where the author provides a summary of the position of the British political and economic groups concerning the maritime Danube, as well

as a bibliography containing the most important works on the subjects under discussion.

### *Conclusions*

The interests of the British political and economic groups in the navigation and trade on the maritime Danube were a constant of the Romanian – British relationships during the nineteenth century. The rather slow start of the British diplomatic representation in the Romanian space was related to obvious political purposes during a period when preserving the integrity of the Ottoman Empire became one of the foundations of the eastern policy of the British government (as the Romanian Principalities represented an advanced point for watching the threatening movements of Russia). However, the more and more significant commercial aspects soon began to become increasingly important as the Black Sea captured the attention of the representatives of the Western capitalist economy, who were interested in finding supply markets for agricultural products and sales markets for products manufactured in the West. Thus, once with the economic and political reasons, the Danube also gained considerable importance, as an extension of the Black Sea to the interior of the continent, and as a mandatory path connecting the European powers from central Europe to the East. The development of the commercial interest in the area of the mouths of the river along an east-west axis, and longitudinally on the maritime segment of the river, was in total contradiction with the expansionist plans of the Russian Empire, for which the Lower Danube was a mandatory transit area for the Tsarist offensive towards the Straits.

After 1848, the disputes generated by the navigation on the Sulina canal worsened, going beyond purely economic differences and moving towards the political and diplomatic area. Together with the other European powers interested in the opportunities offered by the region in the north of the Danube, the representatives of the British political and economic groups campaigned to eliminate the obstacles that the Russian authorities tolerated or accentuated at the Sulina bar and canal. In this context, the Crimean War was the opportunity to monitor and solve “the question of the Danube” because the anti-Russian coalition was unanimous in its desire to stop the exclusive control over the navigation in the area held by Russia. The attitude of the diplomats in St. James was determined not only in this regard, but also in limiting the Austrian hegemonic attempts considered unfavourable to the same extent for the prosperity of the trade in the region. The internationalization of the regime of navigation on the Danube and the creation of the European Commission of the Danube were great accomplishments to be consolidated by eliminating the temporal and spatial boundaries of the organization based in Galați. With regard to the principles of the international fluvial rights, what was truly revolutionary was the appeal to the large commercial interests in the region as the argument for granting the right of representation in a committee constituted for the hydrotechnical development and the regulation of navigation on a large river.

These earned rights were defended by the skilled and knowledgeable British officials holding the position of the CED delegates, who were interested not only in solving the issues related

to the navigation on the mouths of the Danube, but also in increasing the powers of the Commission and, at the same time, in supporting the initiatives of the business groups of London in a region whose economic resources seemed so promising. The activity of the British commissioners, coupled with a half-century of specialized aid of Sir Charles Hartley, the influential engineer who was rightly regarded as the “father of the Danube”, was intended for a wide range of issues ranging from the political and diplomatic ones to the technical, legal and financial ones. In this respect, the attitude of the first British Commissioner in the CED was even stronger than that of his superiors, as John Stokes successfully defended the permanent status of the institution and the expansion of its powers; the simplest method was to demonstrate the usefulness of executing development works for the navigation on the mouths of the Danube. Fighting against Russia’s desire to eliminate a consequence of the humiliating Treaty of March 30th, 1856, against Austria’s pressures which sought to extend its dominant position in the segment of the Lower Danube and against others Commissioners’ indifference, the English delegate sincerely believed in the success of the European mission and in its usefulness for the interests of British merchants and ship-owners. The same consistency, although weaker than the experts would have liked, was proven by the diplomats in St. James during the tense moments of the debates on “the question of the Danube” in the complicated affairs of Bolgrad and Snake Island, in the problem of the navigation act developed by the riparian states on the occasion of the Conferences of Paris, 1858 and 1866, or of London, 1871. Of course, considered as part of the Treaty of 1856, the British position was perfectly justified because it helped maintain the balance of powers established in the region of the Danube mouths and of the Black Sea basin. And, last but not least, the initiatives of the CED had a great importance in the development of the British navigation and trade on the Lower Danube, where the British ships of large tonnage (most major steamships used for transporting grain) imposed themselves against the small vessels under Ottoman or Greek flag.

A naval supremacy and the beginning of several attempts to conquer the Romanian market made their forceful debut, but they were soon threatened by most various dangers. These hazards included, on the one hand, the concessions and compromises that British diplomats had to make with regard to the European Commission of the Danube, and which were all the time at the expense of the principles of 1856, and, on the other hand, Russia’s claims, which wanted to regain its title of naval power in the Black Sea and of riparian State of the Danube. Another problem was the attempts of Austrian officials who were anxious to assert their dominance in the sector downstream of Porțile de Fier, as well as the aspirations to a full sovereignty of the young Romanian independent state. Caught in this complicated equation, the British diplomacy could obtain an extension of the Danube Commission only for relatively short periods of time, and the repeated requests to extend the powers of the institution throughout the maritime Danube, even though approved, were not implemented because of the same interests of the regional powers.

The period between 1878 and 1883 marked an important change in the policy of the British cabinet concerning the Danube, in a context where the entire Eastern policy of the Foreign Office was influenced by the new balance of powers on the continent on the one hand, and the

establishment of the British dominance in Egypt on the other hand. The authorities in London planned their movements carefully because the pressure of the Eastern empires on the Danube were resumed more forcefully at the time of the return of Russia at the Danube and of the Austrian attempts to form the Mixed Commission of the Danube, an institution by which Austria – Hungary sought to extend its supremacy over the river between Porțile de Fier and Brăila/Galați. Without ignoring all principles that Palmerston had imposed on the British policy concerning the Danube during the Crimean War, the policy makers in London reconsidered the political and economic role of the region at the mouth of the Danube, following the outbreak of the “Oriental Crisis” in 1875, very different from what it had represented in the mid-19th century. Thus, although the British ship-owners clearly dominated the shipping to / from Romanian markets, all the British economic interests concerning the Danube fell sharply due to the strong competition that U.S. grain represented, due to the fact that they were cheaper, of better quality and easier to carry. In addition, during the first years after gaining the state independence, the trade in Romania was dominated by the unfavourable trade agreement with Austria – Hungary in 1875; later on, the British merchants were forced to face the strong economic offensive of the Central Powers. These factors clearly affected the Romanian – British trade relations carried out almost exclusively on the Danube, where British Commissioners Ch. Gordon, H. T. Siborne or P. Sanderson were among the most skilled and interested members of the European Commission of the Danube.

As Petre Gradisteanu indicated, “The Commission was not established to make us happy, it was established because Europe is interested in the Danube and these interests are so strong that they facilitated the introduction of the modern principle of free navigation in the international public law, of which we, the small and insignificant ones, can only take advantage”. And from this point of view, during the period of political, economic and institutional building of the modern Romanian state, the importance of free navigation on the river as well as of the positive role of the European Commission of the Danube and of the Western powers in stopping the exclusive domination of the mouths of the Danube were issues on which there was little controversy within the political elite and the informed public in the Romanian territory. Mihail Kogalniceanu stated that “under penalty of suicide, it is our duty to defend the freedom of the Danube as a European interest and, by only doing this, will it remain the Romanian Danube”. Thus, the newspaper “Românul” believed that “Romania, who sacrificed much of its prosperity to the neutrality of the Danube, was by all means forced to oppose all the claims contrary to the free navigation of the river”. Or, to mention the opinion of conservative politician Al Lahovary, “only the Treaty of Paris, which guaranteed the freedom of the Danube and eliminated nature’s obstacles and political barriers, developed Romania and made it flourish. So, let me pay tribute to those Great Powers that shed their blood and gold for this to happen”.

The reality proves that England was as concerned with the free navigation of the river as Romanian was, overcoming the indifference or the sterile good will it showed towards Romania on several occasions. “For we must be aware that in reality it was not for our sake that Europe opened the mouths of the Danube in 1856 and gave us the opportunity to start a different life from that to which we had been doomed for so long – it was because England

got involved". The opinion of Romanian scientist Grigore Antipa is, of course, a relative opinion, because what was really "involved" was Romania's wealth, and "for the sake" of large financial gains both the French and the British, as well as the Austrians and the Romanians were more than willing to open the ports of the Danube to the international trade.