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## **The British-French Naval Rivalry in the Ionian and Adriatic Basins 1807-1814 from an insular perspective**<sup>\*\*</sup>

The war in the Mediterranean was among the major European battlefields during the long period of the Napoleonic Wars. Although geographically not a peripheral part of the Mediterranean basin, the Ionian and Adriatic Seas remained a secondary battleground during this period. Islands, especially Vis and Zakynthos, were crucial for the success of the British campaigns, especially after 1809. They also allowed the British navy to adopt more privateer tactics to disrupt French activities in both seas. Apart from unpublished sources from the National Archives in London, memories and literature have been used to analyse why the British remained superior despite having fewer warships for most of this period.

*Keywords:* Mediterranean Sea, Ionian Sea, Adriatic Sea, Ionian islands, Vis, Zakynthos, William Hoste

### **Introduction**

The war in the Mediterranean marked a series of land and naval fights led by Napoleon Bonaparte and other coalitions that Napoleon led from the time of the first success of Napoleon in Toulon until France's defeat by the Sixth Coalition. A Young Corsican officer in the service of the French Republic defeated Captain Horatio Nelson, who was fighting under Admiral Hood, for the first and last time

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<sup>\*\*</sup> The realisation of this research was financially supported by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia as part of the financing of scientific research work at the University of Belgrade – Faculty of Philosophy (contract number 451-03-66/2024-03/200163).

in Toulon in 1793.<sup>1</sup> This victory, it can be claimed, had a decisive influence over Napoleon who then thought that with the correct use of artillery and ground force, he could defeat the navy. Following that, Napoleon would be victorious in most of his ground battles but would fail in naval clashes.<sup>2</sup> This battle and the successful defence of the encircled Republic would open the door for the counter-offensive that would stop only two decades later with his defeat by the Sixth Coalition in 1814.

The Mediterranean Basin, until Napoleon's Italian campaign, was a peripheral arena in European affairs – especially the eastern portion of it. Everything east of Italy was living a quiet and forgotten life until the French arrived.<sup>3</sup> However, two major events took place in 1797 and 1798 that reshaped the Mediterranean Sea and, in particular, the Adriatic and Ionian Basins. The first was the end of the Venetian Republic which the French disbanded as a result of the Treaty of Campo Formio –however, the main overseas possessions of *Serenissima* were already taken as a result of the Peace of Leoben.<sup>4</sup> The French were, for the first time ever, in possession of the Ionian islands (Corfu, Lefkada, Zakynthos, Kefalonia, Ithaka, Paxo and Kythera) and the strip of land across the islands – their most important towns being Parga, Preveza, Vonitsa and Igoumenitsa. This was a very big change as the French were now imminent neighbours of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>5</sup> The French were also in possession of the most important port town on the western side of the Adriatic – Ancona – which allowed them to easily transfer troops to the new French departments that were founded on the Ionian islands. For Napoleon, the importance of the Ionian islands was significant, as he was aware that they could guard the Adriatic and also open new naval passages to the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>6</sup> The end of Venice was also dramatic due to the changes in its Adriatic possessions that, as a result of the Treaty of Campo Formio, were passed to the Habsburgs.<sup>7</sup> The island of Vis, which would later become the most

<sup>1</sup> On the night of the French main assault on the 16/17<sup>th</sup> December 1793, Nelson was in the waters around Corsica, although some of the crew members of his boat *HMS Agamemnon* were embarked in Toulon. Tom Pocock, *Horatio Nelson* (London: Thistle Publishing, 2013), 267.

<sup>2</sup> Haris Dajč, *Istočni Mediteran. Velika Britanija i Francuska na Levantu: 1796-1807* (Beograd: Naučno društvo za istoriju zdravstvene kulture, 2020), 47.

<sup>3</sup> Dajč, *Istočni Mediteran*, 66-67.

<sup>4</sup> Dajč, *Istočni Mediteran*, 66-67.

<sup>5</sup> United Kingdom (hereafter: UK) – The National Archives (hereafter: TNA) – Public Record Office (London) (hereafter: PRO) – Foreign Office (hereafter: FO) – Venice (hereafter 81)/12, Sir Richard Worsley to Lord Grenville (Venice 23rd August 1797).

<sup>6</sup> UK-TNA-PRO-FO – Ionian Islands (hereafter 42)/2, Consul Spiridion Foresti to Lord Grenville, Principal Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Zante 24th November 1797.

<sup>7</sup> The Ionian possessions officially became French departments after the Treaty of Campo Formio, online source of the Treaty: last accessed on accessed on February 19, 2024 [https://www.siv.archives-nationales.culture.gouv.fr/siv/rechercheconsultation/consultation/ir/consultationIR.action?irId=FRAN\\_IR\\_055193&udId=A1\\_45&details=true](https://www.siv.archives-nationales.culture.gouv.fr/siv/rechercheconsultation/consultation/ir/consultationIR.action?irId=FRAN_IR_055193&udId=A1_45&details=true).

important British naval base in the Adriatic, faced the same fate as its larger neighbour island of Hvar, which came into the possession of Austria.<sup>8</sup>

The second event that reshaped the Mediterranean was the French conquest of Malta in June 1798.<sup>9</sup> The acquisition of Malta was essential for Napoleon's eastern expedition and the conquest of Egypt.<sup>10</sup> That easy conquest was important and also served as a precondition to the Egyptian campaign that was doomed after the naval defeat in the Battle of Aboukir Bay in August 1798.<sup>11</sup> Still, Napoleon managed to survive his Egyptian campaign and came back to France to establish a consulate. The French naval defeat led to the formation of the Second Coalition.<sup>12</sup> Ottoman Selim III and Russian Tsar Paul I joined their forces with the British, which eventually led to the French loss of Malta and the Ionian islands. The new alliance was important as it not only stressed the immediate fight against the French but also the new spheres of influence in the Mediterranean.<sup>13</sup> The siege of Malta led to a significantly higher presence of the British Navy in the Mediterranean, which successfully took Malta after a two-year siege in September 1800.<sup>14</sup> Although Malta seemed a significant prize due to its strategic location, its awarding led to a change in the stance of the Russian Tsar, Paul I. He was enraged at Brites for not following through on his earlier decision to hand the island to Russia.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Nikola Safonov, *Ratovi na Jadranu 1797-1815* (Beograd: Mornarički glasnik, 1988), 21.

<sup>9</sup> Dennis Castillo, *The Maltese Cross: A Strategic History of Malta* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006), 99.

<sup>10</sup> John Holland Rose, "The Political Reactions of Bonaparte's Eastern Expedition", *The English Historical Review* 44 (1929), No. 173: 49.

<sup>11</sup> The Battle of Aboukir Bay or the Battle of the Nile, was one the most important British naval victory over French forces during the Napoleonic Wars. It resulted in the first ever war between the French and the Turks since their anti-Habsburgs alliance of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The irony was that the French were most likely the first that heard the news of their defeat thanks to the French ship of the line *Généreux* that escaped to Ionian islands controlled by French. UK-TNA-PRO-FO-42/2, Consul Spiridion Foresti to Lord Grenville, Principal Secretary of the State, Lazzareto (Venice 14<sup>th</sup> September 1798.). For more details on the battle: Captain A. T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution and Empire 1793-1812*, vol 1. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1894), 266-272; Brian Lavery, *Nelson and the Nile: The Naval War Against Bonaparte 1798* (London: Chatham Publishing, 1998); Michèle Bat-testi, *La Bataille d'Aboukir 1798: Nelson contrarie la stratégie de Bonaparte* (Paris: Economica, 1998) and Juan Cole, *Napoleon's Egypt: Invading the Middle East* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 107-110.

<sup>12</sup> David Jordan, *Napoleon and the Revolution* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 65; Sakul Kahraman, "An Ottoman Global Moment: War of Second Coalition in the Levant" (PhD thesis, Washington University, 2009), 78.

<sup>13</sup> Minutes of a Congress of Bebek UK-TNA-PRO-FO- -Turkey (hereafter: 78)/20, Spencer Smith to Lord Grenville (Constantinople 10th September 1798.).

<sup>14</sup> Dajč, *Istočni Mediteran*, 104.

<sup>15</sup> Pocock, *Horatio Nelson*, 465.

We can consider these two changes as most important for the British – French rivalry in the Ionian and Adriatic Seas, as the end of the Venetian Republic changed the equilibrium in their once-maritime domains, while the fall of Malta into British hands allowed the British Navy to launch expeditions in the Ionian and later the Adriatic Sea, thus endangering French military and merchant activities in those seas.

### **From the Treaty of Tilsit in 1807 to the British offensive in 1809**

The new Russian Tsar, Alexander I, took the throne in March 1801 and reconciled with Britain in April 1801.<sup>16</sup> This was important for the next few years, as the British and Russian navies were in control of the southern Adriatic and Ionian Seas.<sup>17</sup> The Third Coalition against Napoleon was formed only in 1805 but the British continental allies didn't stay long involved in the war, as they were defeated by the end of the year. The Ionian-Adriatic Basin remained calm until the defeat of the Austrians and Russians at Austerlitz in December 1805.<sup>18</sup> Emperor Francis II signed the Peace of Pressburg in late 1805, which meant that all of the previous Austrian possessions in the Adriatic gained after the end of Venice were transferred to the Kingdom of Italy, which was in union with France.<sup>19</sup> Another big gain for the French was the conquest of Dubrovnik, which was taken in 1806, while the Republic of Ragusa was abolished by the French in 1808 and its territory annexed to France.<sup>20</sup> Apart from occupying the powerful fortress, they also put the large merchant fleet of the former Republic in a dangerous position, as it could become a legitimate British trophy once it stopped using its neutral flag, and that's what happened after the French forced them to use the Italian flag in late December 1807 – although British ships were already capturing ships of Dubrovnik merchants since the French occupation of Dubrovnik in 1806.<sup>21</sup> This quick change on the ground allowed the French to control the entire eastern

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<sup>16</sup> Pocock, *Horatio Nelson*, 489.

<sup>17</sup> Malcolm Scott Hardy, *Velika Britanija i Vis. Rat na Jadranu 1805.-1815.* (Split: Književni krug, 2006), 10-11; Haris Dajč, *Sumrak starog Mediterana: Jonska Ostrva 1774-1815* (Beograd: Hera Edu, 2016), 114.

<sup>18</sup> The Battle of Austerlitz, also known as the Battle of the Three Emperors, fought on 2nd of December 1805, showed the genius of Napoleon who won against the stronger Austrian and Russian armies, combining the indirect approach tactic. See: Lidel Hart, *Strategija posrednog prilazjenja* (Beograd: Vojno delo, 1952), 156; Steven Englund, *Napoleon. Politički život* (Zagreb: Naklada Ljevak, 2008), 306.

<sup>19</sup> Safonov, *Ratovi na Jadranu 1797-1815*, 66-67.

<sup>20</sup> Lujo Vojnović, *Kratka istorija Dubrovačke republike* (New York: Marica Schidlof-Vojnović, 1962), 144-148; Vinko Ivančević, "Prilog poznavanju dubrovačkog pomorstva u razdoblju francuskog zaposjednuća (1806-1813)", *Anali* 17 (1979): 365-367.

<sup>21</sup> Ivančević, "Prilog poznavanju dubrovačkog pomorstva", 367-368.

Adriatic coast from Istria in the north to Kotor Bay in the south, a part of the strip of the Croatian coast that was still in Habsburg possession.

The following year, the Fourth Coalition against Napoleon was formed and Prussia replaced Austria as one of the main allies of Britain. For the changes within the Ionian-Adriatic Basin, the most important event happened in Eastern Europe where Napoleon defeated the Russians after an exhausting campaign in June 1807 at Friedland.<sup>22</sup> After losing the battle, the Russian Tsar, Alexander I, asked for peace, which was conducted in Tilsit in July 1807.<sup>23</sup> As a result, the Russians gave up the territories that they controlled in the Mediterranean – most importantly, the *Septinsular Republic* of the Ionian islands.<sup>24</sup> The Republic was autonomous and under the formal rule of the Ottomans, who, jointly with the Russians, administered the islands. However, the Russians took advantage of the “Gibraltar of the East Mediterranean” (the powerful fortress of Corfu) and were *de facto* in control of the islands and its most powerful fortifications.<sup>25</sup> The French came into possession of the Ionian islands that were annexed to France in 1807.<sup>26</sup> That change on the islands was a huge shock for some of the locals who later kept their loyalty to the British fleet.<sup>27</sup> The Treaty of Tilsit was additionally important as it proved that, for the Russian Empire, possessions in the Mediterranean were not as important as the lands they had in the Baltics. It also proved to be the end of Russia’s Mediterranean campaigns that started in the 1770s during Empress Catherine’s reign and led to the creation of her ambitious Greek plan.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Alan Palmer, *Alexander I Tsar of War and Peace* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1974), 143-144.

<sup>23</sup> Lawrence McKnight James, *Russian and the Ionian Islands 1798–1807: the Conquest of the Islands and their role in Russian diplomacy* (MA dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1962), 297-299.

<sup>24</sup> British diplomats and statesmen were suspicious regarding the Russian decision to cede the Ionian islands to the French, as this was not stated in the official documents of the Treaty of Tilsit. The handover of the islands was part of the annex to the main document of the Treaty of Tilsit. UK-TNA-PRO-FO-78/56, Arthur Paget to George Canning (Imbros 23rd August 1807). The citizens on Corfu were told by the Russians that the change of the administration would happen soon with the arrival of French in August. UK-TNA-PRO-FO,-42/9, Spiridion Foresti to Lord Collingwood (Corfu 11th August 1807).

<sup>25</sup> Dajč, *Sumrak starog Mediterana*, 128.

<sup>26</sup> The control of the islands was important as they could be used for the possible advance into Turkey and the mainland across the sea. UK-TNA-PRO-FO-42/9, Spiridion Foresti to George Canning, Principal Secretary of the State (La Valetta October 3rd 1807).

<sup>27</sup> The affection towards the British was not the same on all the islands but, because of the merchants’ reasons, a lot of islanders politically leant toward the British. The island of Zakynthos had the strongest pro-British sentiments. Dajč, *Sumrak starog Mediterana*, 100.

<sup>28</sup> Patricia Kennedy Grimsted, *The Foreign Ministers of Alexander I: Political Attitudes and the Conduct of Russian Diplomacy, 1801–1825* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 15–50. Hugh Ragsdale, “Evaluating the Traditions of Russian Aggression: Catherine II and the Greek Project”, *The Slavonic and East European Review* 66 (1988): 92.

Since this retreat of the Russian navy, their presence in the Mediterranean was never as significant until Alexander chose to leave the basin. In the years after Tilsit, the British navy was busy in the Levant, as the Ottoman Sultan Selim III declared war on Great Britain (1807 to 1809) and the Turks found themselves at war with both the Russians and French at the same time, and a war against Great Britain proved to be less costly than with its continental neighbours.<sup>29</sup>

For France, this was a major success as, for the first time, they had full control of both the Ionian and Adriatic Seas, and they could easily transfer their troops from Italy to the Balkan peninsula and threaten the eastern Mediterranean and the Ottoman Empire. Still, the French underestimated the powerful Ali Pasha Tepelena, one of the most important Ottoman pashas and the ruler of most of Epirus, who had already taken possession of the once-prosperous towns of Vonitza and Preveza across the island of Lefkada.<sup>30</sup> They were more supportive of his rivals — other Albanian pashas — which was one of the main reasons for the lack of provisions for the Ionian islands that were under their control. This time, once they were back in the Ionian Sea, they were more cautious dealing with the Albanian pashas and especially with Ali Pasha.<sup>31</sup>

The French administration in Dalmatia and the Ionian islands during this period led to important changes in the newly acquired possessions: from the development of infrastructure to social changes within very archaic societies that had been under Venetian dominance for centuries. The French even established the Ionian Company, which was supposed to bring together Ionian merchants, however, it failed to exploit the trading potential of the archipelago. Most of the transfer of raw materials from the Peloponnese and Epirus to the Ionian islands was carried out by merchants from the islands of Spetses and Hydra.<sup>32</sup> In addition, possession of the Ionian islands was important because of the ambitious plans to build new fleets that would be carried out in the former Venetian possessions.<sup>33</sup> When it comes to the Adriatic, France's presence almost encircled the entire Adriatic east coast, which was part of Habsburg Croatia. Only after 1809 and the Treaty of Schönbrunn, when the Illyrian provinces were created from the former Habsburg territories, were the French able to gain the entire Eastern

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<sup>29</sup> Dajč, *Sumrak starog Mediterana*, 133.

<sup>30</sup> Haris Dajč, "Preveza pre i posle osvajanja Ali-paše 1798: demografske i ekonomske posledice", in: *Postepidemiološki stres: Istorijske i medicinske dileme*, ed. Nevena Divac, Haris Dajč and Nikola Samardžić (Beograd: Naučno društvo za istoriju zdravstvene culture, 2024), 65-67.

<sup>31</sup> Haris Dajč, Filip Mirić, "Ali Pasha and Napoleon Bonaparte: From Diplomatic Correspondence to Struggle Over Possessions in the Ionian Basin", *Српске студије – Serbian Studies* 14 (2023): 86.

<sup>32</sup> Dajč, *Sumrak starog Mediterana*, 141.

<sup>33</sup> Lawrence Sondhaus, "Napoleon's Shipbuilding Program at Venice and the Struggle for Naval Mastery in the Adriatic, 1806-1814", *The Journal of Military History* 53 (1989), No. 4: 351-352.

coast of the Adriatic.<sup>34</sup> The loss of Trieste and Rijeka was the biggest blow for the Habsburgs. The treaty also foresaw Austria to embrace an embargo of British goods and ships<sup>35</sup> in the period 1809-1813 and there was no British ambassador in Vienna although the correspondence was going on through the network of agents.<sup>36</sup>

At the same time, merchant activities faded as it was impossible for the old trade routes to be re-established because the British navy maintained a blockade of sea routes. The British navy did that for the first time as early as November 1807, when *HMS Glatton* with a few small boats conducted a successful blockade of Corfu, seizing several French and Italian reinforcement convoys. In April 1808, the British fleet bombarded and almost destroyed the capital of Paxos, Gaios. That island was one of the most important on the route between Corfu and Lefkada.<sup>37</sup>

Although a full British offensive had not yet started, the British navy was successful in obstructing French supply lines, making their own blockade of French maritime lines. Those actions made sure that the French struggled to control their insular territories in the Ionian and Adriatic Seas after 1808.

## British – French rivalry 1809-1814

As a result of the success of the blockades in 1807, small British raiders began entering the Adriatic Sea more often – especially from 1808, when they were hunting for French convoys along both coasts of Adriatic Italy.<sup>38</sup> The two islands that were the most important concerning British activities during this period were Zakynthos in the Ionian and Vis in the Adriatic Sea. The former was the island with the most loyal local population as a result of the strong merchants' network from the 17<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>39</sup> while the latter offered the perfect base for the disrobement of French activities in south Dalmatia.<sup>40</sup> The French lost both in 1809 when the British navy took possession of Zakynthos and Vis.

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<sup>34</sup> Hardy, *Velika Britanija i Vis. Rat na Jadranu 1805.-1815.*, 28.

<sup>35</sup> In November 1806 the French proclaimed Napoleon's Berlin decree that declared that the British Isles were under blockade and all of their ships and goods. Francois Crouzet, "Wars, blockade, and economic change in Europe, 1792-1815", *Journal of Economic History* 24 (1964), No 4: 574.

<sup>36</sup> Hardy, *Velika Britanija i Vis*, 11-12.

<sup>37</sup> More details about the size of the British navy presence at that time are available in UK-TNA – War Office Records – Office of the Commander in Chief: Monthly Returns to the Adjutant General 17/1933 that covers January 1808).

<sup>38</sup> Richard Woodman, *Victory of Sea Power: Winning the Napoleonic War 1806-1814* (London: Caxton in association with the National Maritime Museum, 2001), 153.

<sup>39</sup> Dajč, *Sumrak starog Mediterana*, 214.

<sup>40</sup> Hardy, *Velika Britanija i Vis*, 43-45.

These two islands proved to be the most important for the successful British offensive in the Ionian-Adriatic Basin. Still, there was a big difference between Zakynthos – one of the richest islands—and Vis—one of the poorest.<sup>41</sup> Zakynthos was, along with Corfu, the richest island on the Ionian archipelago, and it also had a very strong commercial connection with Great Britain thanks to the raisin trade. Due to its position, it was also more secure than the other islands that were closer to the mainland. The strong sentiments and expectations from Britain led to a very delicate position—when the British Colonel Calendar organised an uprising on Zakynthos, it also managed to spread to Kefalonia in spring 1801. The mutiny was stopped after the army was sent from Corfu and because the British were not in favour of such an affair.<sup>42</sup>

Vis was important as it had a significant strategic location, located very deep in an area that was controlled by enemy forces. Although France controlled other islands and the entire of mainland Dalmatia, the British had an advantage on the sea that allowed them to make their naval base on Vis.<sup>43</sup> For the island, this was a time of prosperity as the war and the arrival of the most powerful navy boosted its development. The number of islanders in both Vis and its main town of Komiza grew from 4,218 in 1803 and 3,310 in 1809—just before the arrival of the British navy—to 12,000 people during the British control over the island, with the population peaking in 1811 and 1812.<sup>44</sup> Such a dramatic change was the result of the arrival not only of British troops but also of merchants, smugglers, and repairmen and artisans.

The Ionian-Adriatic Basin gained additional importance for France in 1808-1809 as they needed ships that were built in the Venetian arsenal but that couldn't leave Venice and the Adriatic due to the successful British blockade.<sup>45</sup> Those ships were needed to help the French positions in Toulon and the western Mediterranean. However, Napoleon's plan for using the arsenal in Venice for that purpose

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<sup>41</sup> Šime Peričić, *Sudjelovanje Dalmatinaca u Napoleonovoj ratnoj mornarici: (1806-1813)* (Zadar: Društvo za proučavanje i unapređenje pomorstva Jugoslavije, 1967), 65.

<sup>42</sup> Colonel Calendar even raised a Union Jack flag on the island. That move was condemned by both the British General Consul on Corfu, Spiridion Foresti and Ambassador to Constantinople, Lord Elgin. Just after the army was sent from Corfu, the mutiny stopped. That incident could have jeopardised relations with both Turkey and Russia who had joint administration of the Ionian islands until 1807. It is important to mention that the islanders sympathised with Colonel Calendar and his collaborators. UK-TNA-PRO-FO-42/4, Spiridion Foresti to Lord Grenville, Principal Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (Corfu, 14th March 1801.) and UK-TNA-PRO-FO-42/4, Spiridion Foresti to Lord Hawkesbury, Principal Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (Corfu, 22nd April 1801.).

<sup>43</sup> Sondhaus, "Napoleon's Shipbuilding Program", 356.

<sup>44</sup> Peričić, *Sudjelovanje Dalmatinaca*, 65; Safonov, *Ratovi na Jadranu 1797-1815*, 150.

<sup>45</sup> Sondhaus, "Napoleon's Shipbuilding Program", 354. According to Pocock, Captain Hoste was saved from the Battle of Trafalgar by his protégé Nelson, who sent him away on the frigate just before his final battle in October 1805. Pocock, *Horatio Nelson*, 643-644.



proved to be unworkable as most of the sea passage was controlled by enemy boats. As would be obvious later, the shipyard programme of the French was too slow and proved not to be much of a challenge for the British navy.

The arrival of Captain William Hoste, a young and talented protegee of Nelson<sup>46</sup> was the biggest challenge for the French in the southern Adriatic, as he single-handedly disturbed their trade.<sup>47</sup> In 1809 alone, he destroyed over 200 enemy ships.<sup>48</sup> Captain Hoste was in charge of the little fleet headed by Nelson's former frigate, *Amphion* (32 cannons), which included three more frigates—*Volage* (22 guns), *Active* (36 guns), and *Cerberus* (32 guns), along with one brick *Redwing*.<sup>49</sup> Still, it is important to mention Captain Patrick Campbell, the first British officer who praised the importance of the island of Vis as a key naval base in his letters to Vice Admiral Cuthbert Collingwood.<sup>50</sup>

The small British fleet not only disrupted the French and Italian navies but also trade, which led to the commercial stagnation of French-controlled Dalmatia. Captain Hoste used the tactics of smaller armed boats that could easily navigate in the very shallow canals between the islands, which didn't need as much wind as bigger sailing boats nor in surprise attacks in the ports.<sup>51</sup>

The British fleet from April 1809 until October 1809 was able to coordinate their attacks with Austria, which also made important gains on the mainland. The French were in retreat until their victory in the Battle of Wagram in July, which led to the dissolution of the Fifth Coalition and the Treaty of Schönbrunn in October 1809. This, in turn, led to the French occupation of the entire Adriatic coast,<sup>52</sup> which left Great Britain alone in its fight against Napoleon's France.

After the formation of the Illyrian provinces,<sup>53</sup> the French military presence was strengthened, and they almost encircled their presence on both sides of the Adri-

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<sup>46</sup> Tom Pocock, *Remember Nelson: The Life of Captain Sir William Hoste* (Glasgow: Collins, 1977), 11-26; Pocock, *Horatio Nelson*, 726.

<sup>47</sup> Malcolm Scott Hardy states that Captain Hoste was among the most predatory British captains, who was highly motivated with prizes of the captured ships. The overall numbers of the ships he captured proves this statement. Hardy, *Velika Britanija i Vis*, 27.

<sup>48</sup> Colin White, *The Nelson Encyclopaedia* (London: Chatham Pub. in association with the Royal Naval Museum, 2002), 154; Safonov, *Ratovi na Jadranu 1797-1815*, 151-155.

<sup>49</sup> Safonov, *Ratovi na Jadranu 1797-1815*, 155; White, *The Nelson Encyclopaedia*, 154.

<sup>50</sup> The most detailed account of the British presence on Vis was made by the British historian Malcolm Scott Hardy in his book "Velika Britanija i Vis. Rat na Jadranu 1805.-1815"; Hardy, *Velika Britanija i Vis*, 25.

<sup>51</sup> Safonov, *Ratovi na Jadranu 1797-1815*, 162.

<sup>52</sup> Édouard Driault, "The Coalition of Europe Against Napoleon", *The American Historical Review* 24, (1919), No. 4: 613.

<sup>53</sup> Drago Roksandić, *Vojna Hrvatska – La Croatie Militaire*, vol. 1 (Zagreb: Školska knjiga; Stvarnost, 1988), 168-172.

atic Sea for the first and the last time. But they struggled to control the high seas. The British strategy in the Adriatic was very much dependent on their hold of Vis as the main base from which they could disrupt French activities in the Adriatic.<sup>54</sup> British boats could only compensate for their inferiority in number by constant actions. In late 1809 and early 1810, the British expedition led by Captain Hoste didn't even stop their attacks during winter. British ships captured or destroyed hundreds of smaller vessels and dozens of medium-sized sailing boats, which led to frustration among the French, who embarked on a plan to capture Vis.<sup>55</sup>

Napoleon made an order on the 13<sup>th</sup> of October, 1810, for the capture of Vis, using a French fleet from Ancona.<sup>56</sup> A French fleet of three frigates, two corvettes and two brigs led by Captain Bernard Dubourdieu arrived at an unprotected Vis on the 21<sup>st</sup> of October, 1810.<sup>57</sup> The next day, the French landed on the island but, apart from destroying a few vessels and capturing three more which they took to Split, they didn't stay on the island. This French attack on Vis was an important warning for Captain Hoste and, by the end of 1810, the defence of the island was improved.<sup>58</sup> In the correspondence of British naval officers in 1808-1811, it was clear that Vis was important for the British navy but there was a lack of consensus on how much should be invested in its defence. There was also a conflict between the navy and army authorities. The final fortification of Vis was to happen only after the Battle of Lissa.<sup>59</sup>

The decisive moment for the control of the Adriatic and the continuation of the British hunting for French ships was the battle of Vis (Battle of Lissa) that happened on the 13<sup>th</sup> of March, 1811.<sup>60</sup> The French fleet, led by Captain Bernard Dubourdieu, left Ancona on the 11<sup>th</sup> of March. The French fleet and its forces were superior to the British in numbers: 2,600 men against 879, and 271 cannons against 124. The French fleet also consisted of six bigger ships (four frigates: the *Favorite*, *Flore*, *Danae* and *Corona* – each containing 44 cannons – and two corvettes: the *Bellona* and *Carolina*, each with 32 cannons), with an additional three smaller ships. The British fleet under Captain William Hoste had four big ships (three frigates: the *Ampfion*, *Cerberus* and *Active*, with fewer than 40 cannons each) and one sloop (the *Volage* with 22 canons).<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Safonov, *Ratovi na Jadranu 1797-1815*, 165; John D. Grainger, *The British Navy in the Mediterranean* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2017), 164.

<sup>55</sup> Safonov, *Ratovi na Jadranu 1797-1815*, 166-167.

<sup>56</sup> Hardy, *Velika Britanija i Vis*, 29.

<sup>57</sup> Hardy, *Velika Britanija i Vis*, 30.

<sup>58</sup> Safonov, *Ratovi na Jadranu 1797-1815*, 169.

<sup>59</sup> Hardy, *Velika Britanija i Vis*, 45-48.

<sup>60</sup> Sondhaus, "Napoleon's Shipbuilding Program", 357-358.

<sup>61</sup> Safonov, *Ratovi na Jadranu 1797-1815*, 170-171.

The battle took a few hours and, according to Nikola Safonov, the French approach and attack were poorly synchronised. This led to the destruction of the command ship, the *Favorite*, and the death of her captain, Bernard Dubourdieu. But the battle continued until the late afternoon when the British troops emerged victorious. They didn't lose a single boat and they took the *Bellona* and *Corona*.<sup>62</sup> In a much less detailed description of the battle, Sondhaus places the blame for the heavy French defeat on Captain Jean Peridier, who quickly withdrew with half of the squadron as soon as he encountered the British fleet near the island.<sup>63</sup> Both sides suffered heavy losses in manpower, but the French suffered more than three times worse, with close to 700 dead and wounded compared to 190 British men. The most detailed description of the battle was written by James Henderson,<sup>64</sup> and it almost completely overlaps with Nikola Safonov's record of events. The consequences for the French were immense, as it was not only a lost battle accompanied by heavy material and human losses but a loss of trust in its own troops and strength. It could be claimed that responsibility also lay with Napoleon as he insisted on conquering Vis, while he neglected the British operations that combined the privateers' methods with the superiority of British navy officers and sailors.

However, Napoleon still didn't want to abandon his plan to use the ships from the arsenal in Venice to break through the British blockade of the Adriatic.<sup>65</sup> Until the First Peace of Paris, the French were in a defensive position against the British navy, which also occupied the island of Hvar from where they continued seeking French ships.<sup>66</sup> The following year (1812) was very dire for Napoleon's plans to use the Venetian arsenal as a shipyard that would eventually strengthen the French fleet in the Mediterranean.<sup>67</sup> The heaviest defeat for the French took place when the newly-constructed 74-gun ship of the line *Rivoli* was lost to the British navy after the naval battle on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of February close to Trieste. The British ship of the line *Victorious* took one of the greatest prizes since the Battle of Trafalgar as there were just a few French ships of such a size that had been taken by the British navy since 1805.<sup>68</sup> This heavy loss for the French also saw the end of Napoleon's dream to build up new boats that could eventually help fight the British siege of Toulon.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Safonov, *Ratovi na Jadranu 1797-1815*, 176-177.

<sup>63</sup> Sondhaus, "Napoleon's Shipbuilding Program", 358.

<sup>64</sup> James Henderson, *Frigates, Sloops and Brigs* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2012), 295-313.

<sup>65</sup> Sondhaus, "Napoleon's Shipbuilding Program", 353-355.

<sup>66</sup> Safonov, *Ratovi na Jadranu 1797-1815*, 178-180.

<sup>67</sup> Sondhaus, "Napoleon's Shipbuilding Program", 351-359.

<sup>68</sup> Sondhaus, "Napoleon's Shipbuilding Program", 359.

<sup>69</sup> Sondhaus, "Napoleon's Shipbuilding Program", 360-361.

After the formation of the Sixth Coalition against Napoleon in 1813, Great Britain also effectively worked in cooperation with the Austrian armies and jointly coordinated the invasion of the Illyrian provinces and northern Italy. By the autumn of 1813, the British navy with Austrian troops captured Zadar after a siege of less than two weeks<sup>70</sup> and captured Kotor too in January 1814 after a close to four-month siege together with the Montenegrins.<sup>71</sup> British raiders had unopposed domination in the Adriatic Sea. The Adriatic Basin, after the fall of two of the most important fortified coastal towns, became completely controlled by the British navy that freely cruised from Venice to Corfu.

The situation for the French in the Ionian Sea was even tougher than in the Adriatic. As soon as Austria joined the new Fifth Coalition in 1809, the French transferred most of their forces from Corfu to Ancona.<sup>72</sup> At the same time, the French who had their main base on Corfu couldn't count on provisions for more than a few months, as an Albanian pasha that they supported – Ibrahim Pasha – was defeated by Ali Pasha by early autumn 1809.<sup>73</sup>

The naval base that the British had on Malta was essential in their quick conquest of most of the Ionian islands. The British fleet that conquered Zakynthos had only three frigates but was capable of capturing all major islands in a few days without much resistance.<sup>74</sup> All the islands (Zakynthos, Kefalonia, Ithaca and Kythera) apart from Corfu, Paxos and Lefkada were taken in a matter of days. In this quick campaign, the British navy showed its superiority compared to the French again, who, while proving to be better administrators than before in developing the infrastructure of the islands,<sup>75</sup> still failed to gain the support of the locals when the British navy showed up. It is worth mentioning one important meeting that happened just a few months before the British landing – the unexpected meeting of Lord Gordon Byron and the British Consul of Zakynthos, Spiridion Foresti, who was in Malta. Byron accepted Foresti's advice and decided to visit Acarnia and Aetolia in the Ionian Basin instead of the Levant. This decision ultimately changed Byron's life.<sup>76</sup> Byron didn't influence the British naval campaign at this stage but, by ending up in Greece and dying there eventually after the beginning

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<sup>70</sup> George F. Nafziger, Marco Gioannini, *The Defense of the Napoleonic Kingdom of Northern Italy, 1813-1814* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002), 115-117.

<sup>71</sup> William James, *The Naval History of Great Britain*, volume 5: 1808–1811 (London: Conway Maritime Press, 2002 [1827]), 180-181.

<sup>72</sup> UK-TNAPRO-FO-78/65, William Leake to George Canning (Prevesa 9th April 1809).

<sup>73</sup> Papiers Donzelot 14, doc. F°146–147v° (1 février 1810. La Valone.).

<sup>74</sup> UK-TNA-PRO-High Court of Admiralty – – Napoleonic War and the War of 1812 – 32/1753 John Williamson to general Oswald (Zante, October 2nd 1809).

<sup>75</sup> Dajč, *Sumrak starog Mediterana*, 84.

<sup>76</sup> Roderick Beaton, *Byron's War Romantic Rebellion, Greek Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 3-4.

of the Greek Revolution, he immensely helped the Hellenophiles in developing British policy towards the Greeks from the 1820s onwards.

After the conquest of Zakynthos, the British navy used its comfortable position and the big bay of the main town to host most of their navy in the Ionian Sea. From there they coordinated the blockade of Corfu as the most important French base in the Ionian Sea. The base at Zakynthos was also important for the lines of communication (and coordination) between the British navy and army in Malta and the navy squadrons in the Adriatic.

In April 1810, the British navy along with Greek islanders took Lefkada,<sup>77</sup> which made France's possession of Corfu even more expensive to maintain, as they possessed just two islands in 1810 – Corfu and neighbouring and one of the smallest island of the archipelagos – Paxo.<sup>78</sup> The following period between 1810 and 1813 was rather calm, as the French were fortified and rather static in their remaining Ionian possessions. They depended on smuggling food from Albania, which they managed to keep going despite the British's naval superiority, thanks to their close proximity to the Albanian coast. On the other hand, the British navy was also reluctant to start a siege of Corfu, which was one of the best-fortified islands in the Mediterranean. For the British navy, the French possession of Corfu wasn't an obstacle to their sea routes between Malta, Zakynthos and Vis. At the same time – until June 1814 – the French spent 60 million Francs on their administration of the Ionian islands, with most of that money spent on Corfu, where they had a peak of around 6500 troops in 1811 (four times more than the British had in the same period in the Ionian islands).<sup>79</sup> Contrary to the situation in the Adriatic, there were far fewer naval clashes between the two sides in the Ionian basin, which led to the development of both French and British islands in the Ionian archipelagos. The most important difference was in the cost of administration: the French, as mentioned before, had high costs of maintaining their governance while the British administration largely retained the administrative legacy of Venice. The only big difference was in the judiciary where the new administrators concluded that islanders were unable to govern independently.<sup>80</sup>

The final act concerning the French presence on Corfu happened in May-June 1814, after General James Campbell embarked on Corfu and captured the entire island apart from the fortress.<sup>81</sup> The French were able to hold the fortress and the French commander and governor of the island, General François Donzelot,

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<sup>77</sup> UK-TNA-PRO-FO-42/12, Spiridon Foresti to Marquis Wellesley (Zante 1st February 1810).

<sup>78</sup> Dajč, *Sumrak starog Mediterana*, 142.

<sup>79</sup> Dajč, *Sumrak starog Mediterana*, 84.

<sup>80</sup> Dajč, *Sumrak starog Mediterana*, 86.

<sup>81</sup> UK-TNA-PRO-FO-42/15, James Campbell to Viscount Castlereagh (HMS Revenge 10th May 1814).

refused to surrender until the arrival of a French ship from Toulon on the 7<sup>th</sup> of June, which updated the general and assured him that the British troops should take the Corfu. The handover of the fortress took place on the 21<sup>st</sup> of June.<sup>82</sup> It is worth mentioning that General Donzelot was the first and last French commander to receive a golden sword from the senate of the island as an act of gratitude.<sup>83</sup>

## Conclusion

During the period of rivalry between the two biggest navy powers (1807-1809), three coalitions against Napoleon were formed and only the final one – the Sixth – was victorious and defeated the French. On the other hand, in the Ionian and Adriatic Basins, although the French were winning continental wars, they were unable to gain naval superiority even when they had more boats than their British counterparts. And, even after the autumn of 1809 when they took all the Habsburgs' Adriatic possessions, the French couldn't enjoy safe sailing in the Adriatic. The biggest reason for this was the experience of British naval soldiers, but also the British strategy that combined the privateers' methods with navy discipline. It is important to mention that the genius skill of Captain William Hoste as he led the British in the Adriatic was essential in securing British success in the Adriatic where the French controlled much of the coast, unlike in Ionian Basin where they were isolated on Corfu after 1810. The Battle of Vis (Battle of Lissa) was the most important event during this rivalry in the Adriatic, after which the French didn't recover in these waters despite controlling almost all of the mainland and islands.

The Ionian Sea was much less dramatic than the Adriatic when it came to naval battles. During a long period of almost five years (1809-1814), the rivalry even helped competition in good governance between both the French and British administrations of different islands of the Ionian Sea. The main beneficiaries of this were the islanders who, despite the challenges in trade, received other opportunities in smuggling along with gaining access to other trade markets thanks to British protection. They also benefited from the infrastructure projects that were left by both the French and Brits on the Ionian islands. Still, the rivalry in this part of the Mediterranean remained in the shadow of other major continental combats. In the paper other important victories of the British navy were not

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<sup>82</sup> UK-TNA-PRO-FO-42/15, James Campbell to Viscount Castlereagh (Corfu 21st June 1814).

<sup>83</sup> UK-TNA-PRO-FO-42/15, James Campbell to Viscount Castlereagh (Corfu 15th September 1814).

analysed like the British successful siege of Zadar in 1813<sup>84</sup> and Ragusa,<sup>85</sup> as well as the siege of Trieste. Those stages of the war were important, as well as the role of other navy officers that were active in the Ionian and Adriatic Seas, still as the main aim of the text was to stress the insular perspective of British-French Naval Rivalry rather than the Italian campaign of 1813-1814 they were not analysed in more details.

British control of Zakyntos and Vis was essential for the successful operation of the British navy in the Ionian and Adriatic Basins, and it also allowed them to disrupt commercial activities and keep the blockade of French commercial activists. The French kept under their control the biggest islands of the Adriatic and Ionian Sea but were unable to stop the British navy that often used the privateers' methods of warfare. The Mediterranean was important for the British-French naval rivalry during the wars but it remained very peripheral. For most of the period 1807-1814, it was a basin that was important for distracting opposition plans.

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<sup>84</sup> In the siege of Zadar captain George Cadogan, as the captain of frigate *Havannah* and assisted by the brig *Weazel*, was in command of the successful siege of Zadar (22<sup>nd</sup> November 1813 – 5<sup>th</sup> December 1813). He was among the most effective British naval commanders during the British camping in Adriatic.

Robert Gardiner, *The Victory of Seapower. Winning the Napoleonic War, 1806-1814* (Chatham Pictorial Histories), 174-175.

<sup>85</sup> Captain William Hoste was in charge of the siege of Ragusa. The conquest of Ragusa was important as French lost one of the best fortified fortresses in Dalmatia, and the end of the siege also allowed Captain William Host to help the British navy in the Ionian sea. Lujo Vojnović, *Pad Dubrovnika: (1797.-1806.)* (Strmec Samoborski: Fortuna, 2009), 194.

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*Haris Dajč\**

## **Britansko-francusko pomorsko suparništvo u Jonsko-jadranskom bazenu 1807. – 1814. kroz otočku persepektivu**

### **Sažetak**

U članku se istražuje britansko-francusko suparništvo na Jonskom i Jadranskom moru u periodu između Tilzitskog mira i Prvoga pariškog mira. U tom je razdoblju rat tih dviju pomorskih sila u najvećoj je mjeri bio u sjeni njihovih drugih, značajnijih sukoba. Francuzi su nakon uspješne kampanje Napoleona Bonaparteu u Italiji, postali najznačajnija sila u Jonskom i Jadranskom moru. U svega nekoliko mjeseci, nakon travnja 1797. godine, političke okolnosti u potpunosti su se promijenile nestankom Mletačke Republike, čije su posjede podijelile Francuska i Austrija. Nove promjene, uz osvajanje Malte i pohod na Egipat, utjecale su na formiranje Druge koalicije, te dovele do prvog rata između Turske i Francuske u modernoj epohi. Nakon poraza Rusije od Francuske i povlačenja s Mediterana 1807. godine, Velika Britanija je bila primorana vratiti se u akvatorij Jonskog i Jadranskog mora kao jedina pomorska protivnica Francuske. Osvajanjem Zakinta i Visa stekla je važna uporišta u borbi protiv Francuza, što je dovelo do inteziviranja sukoba nakon 1809. godine. Britanske eskadrile, koje su bile aktivne u Jonsko-jadranskom bazenu, bile su sastavljene od manjih i srednjih brzih brodova, koje su im dozvoljavale piratske metode ratovanja, dok se u malobrojnim, izravnim sukobima tih dviju flota, uvježbanija i iskusnija britanska mornarica pokazala superiornijom.

*Ključne reči:* Sredozemno more, Jonsko more, Jadransko more, Vis, Zakint, William Hoste

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