
PROF. ARBEN PUTO (Tirana)

THE LONDON CONFERENCE IN TWO EDITIONS

Albania's truncation in the Ambassadors' Conference in 1912-1913 and a historic parallel.

The history of the Eastern question, as one of the most important questions of European diplomacy during the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century has had as one of its primary elements the destiny of the territories inhabited by the Albanian population. It was to this point that the intentions of the new Balkan states for territorial extension were aimed at.

The ideological basis for the truncation of the Albanian territories was laid in an earlier stage in the 40ies of the previous century. It has found its expression in the Serbian "Nacertanie", the Greek "Megali idea" (Great Idea) and later in the Bulgarian expansionist programme of Saint Stephan. The first two projects can be considered as a tacit consent of the new Balkan states not to allow the Albanian nation to find its place, through its own state formation, in the political map of the peninsula once the Turkish domination had come to an end. Likewise, it was noticed since the early days that there was a tendency of some Great Powers to manoeuvre the Albanian territories in order to satisfy their Balkan clientele.

The truncation process of Albanian territories has been divided into three main stages: The Russian-Turkish War and the Berlin Congress (1875-1881); the Balkan War and London Conference (1912-1913); the First World War and the Peace Conference (1919-1920). But undoubtedly this process finds its apogee in the London Conference.

In principle, the Ambassadors' Conference of the Great Powers convened to settle problems that had arisen between the belligerent parties at the end of the Balkan War. During the whole period of time this conference held its proceedings, from December 1912 to August 1913, it dealt almost only with the Albanian question. In fact, not only the contradictions among the Balkan allies, but also those among the powers were focused on the Albanian question. The parallel conference of the belligerent parties-speaking with modern language had consultative functions, functions of pressuring European diplomacy.

The Albanian question was examined for a long time, although with interruption in its three main aspects: Albania's international status, its inner organization and the question of borders. Undoubtedly the last one represents the Gordian knot: facing each-other were both the demands of the parties directly interested and the political and strategic aims of the powers standing behind them. In the London Conference, six Great Powers of the time assumed the role of referee, but they were not impartial in their role. This was another reason contributing to the prolongation of the proceedings.

At the opening of the Conference on December 17, 1912 the great dangers threatening the integrity of the territories inhabited by an overwhelming majority of

Albanian compact population were outlined.

The dangers emerged when the ambassadors started exchanging opinions on the criteria to serve as a basis to demarcate the bounds. The first to take the floor was Mensdorf of Austro-Hungary, who voicing Vienna's viewpoint, stated that "those parts which are inhabited only and solely by Albanians should belong to Albania". The Austro-Hungarian ambassador confirmed his statement presenting also a map which clearly showed "how deep the Albanians were", particularly in the North and North-East. But, this conception was severely opposed by the other representatives of the Conference. Reporting to the centre, Mensdorf himself said that: "the opinion of all the colleagues was that we can not forge ahead based on ethnographic consideration". In other words, it was made clear that the criterion of nationality would not be considered as a basis to define Albania's borders. This marks the origin of the truncation of the Albanian territories and the beginning of injustices made to our people. This injustice without precedent that can not be legitimated, although a long time has gone by, because the principle, if not the only one, but the basic one in demarcating bounds, should be the principle of nationality.

The injustice of 1913 is not only a complaint in Albanian circles: it has been recognised and accepted also by European formal levels. The most authoritative voice of the London Conference, its chairman, British Foreign Minister, E. Grey, voiced his opinion as follows, regarding the demarcation of borders at the House of Commons in August 1913: "I know very well that when everything becomes known, this solution in many points will provoke sharp criticism by those who know the place and view the question closely from a local point of view. It should not be forgotten that in the course of the efforts to find such a solution, the main goal has been to preserve intact the agreement among the Great Powers and if the decision on Albania has attained this, then it has performed the most important duty to the benefit of peace in Europe". Henceforth, the injustice was committed to serve as a sacrifice on the altar of European peace. But, it did not serve this end because a year later the First World War broke out.

To come back to the borders' issue, the question spontaneously arising is the following: What was the basis on which the demarcation of bounds was carried out in 1912-1913? Because however arbitrary and unjust the decisions have been, they have had a basis to rely on. It is the end of the First Balkan War. Military operations have just come to an end it is high time for "the rights of winners" of this war. This implies that the winners should attain the fruit of their victory at war. This means, therefore, that the territories that had remained without a master after Turkey's defeat, would be divided among the triumphant. The Albanian territories were amongst them and they ought to be sacrificed to satisfy the territorial expansion seeking aspiration of the Balkan states, winners of the War. The experience of so many wars goes to show that territorial conquests constitute the first request of the winners after the war.

Consequently, it is "the rights of war" that weights more heavily in the balance. This "rights of war" is a typical expression of territorial expansion, characterizing the policy of the states in this period. Proceeding from easily comprehended motives, Austro-Hungary was ready to incline towards "the ethnic principle". But even Vienna was in a dilemma, hesitating between the objectiveness of enclosing territories within the borders of the new state as much as possible, based on the principle of national

composition and antislav function and the "logic" of the victory of war, "the rights of war". Neither has such logic been alien to the authors who have treated this theme. Thus, E.C. Helmreich, scholar of the diplomacy of Balkan Wars, justifies Vienna's wavering attitude as follows: "The Austrian statesmen who were playing the Albanian card in their Balkan policy, were determined to make the Albanian state ever more "leben fähig" (capable of living), but "on the other side, they comprehended very well the fact that they could not ignore the war events: the winners would ask for the spoil belonging to them"¹.

It is worth mentioning that the Vlora Provisional Government strove to react also with regard to these kinds of arguments. The memorandum it addressed to the London Conference at the beginning of January 1913 aimed its attack at the Balkan thesis based on "the rights of war" and pointed out that "the joint action undertaken by the Balkan allies against Turkey" in Autumn 1912 "to a certain extent was a continuation of the recent uprisings on the Albanian lands" and the allies successes "should be viewed as a fruit of a liberation deed to which the Albanians had made their contribution".

It is important to point out that a series of other argument was launched by two neighbouring states seeking lands inhabited by Albanian population. Another series of arguments is that called "the historic right". Henceforth, the neighbours lay the stress not on "the war rights", but on "the historical rights". This is the conclusion drawn from the two memorandums presented to the Conference in January 1913 by the Serbian and Greek governments.

Let us take the first document which is a concentrate of the theses of this kind that, although they belong to a period of the beginning of the century, still preserve their relevance. It is known that the historical rights are the main battle horse not only for the Serbian propaganda, but also for the Serbian historiography, which comes forth with scientific claims. The essence of "historical rights" in the meaning the Serbian chauvinistic circles attach to them, is that the Albanians are described as an allogeneous people, a fugitive population, invading population settled through "violence", "usurping" Slav lands in the Middle Ages.

They invoke "the historical rights" in this way to make them serve as a juridical basis to restitute the lands to "the legitime owners".

Like everywhere, and in the Balkans particularly, "historical rights" according to meaning attributed by the chauvinistic circles, run counter to the ethnic situations gradually formed in the course of the centuries. The movements of the population are a known phenomenon that have occurred in our peninsula, too, but not in a unique sense. In case "historical rights" testify to something they precisely affirm the autochthony of Albanians on the lands inhabited by them, since the ancient times. When speaking of major migration processes, it must be said that a characteristic of the Albanian populations has been the tendency to contract and retreat, not to extend.

Very often simply historical arguments, as a basis of territorial aspirations, do not have the necessary convincing power, therefore the Serbian version strives to consolidate "the historical rights" by "ethnographic" considerations, advancing the poorly grounded thesis of the Slavs' "albanization". In the process of the formation of various nations and nationalities in the Balkans this kind of phenomenon can not be excluded, but, as far as the Albanians are concerned, in this case, too, they have

been in retreating, contracting positions: suffice to mention the Albanian diaspora, which after the Turkish occupation has led to the gradual mixture and assimilation of the Albanian element in the ranks of the neighbouring populations.

In the time, which we are referring to, the theses justifying the invasions of the Great European Powers with "the civilising mission" of the most civilised nations towards the "indigenous" backward populations of the colonies were considerably in vogue. It is clear that the Serbian leading circles try hard to adapt themselves to these mentalities when they say in their Memorandum that "it is the right of a more civilised nation to perform a cultural mission in less cultured people, putting them under their domination". In the mouth of Belgrade government officials, this sort of reasoning sounds particularly cynical when it is seen their Memorandum is permeated from the beginning to the end by a profound anti-Albanian spirit, something which excludes a priori any peaceful co-existence between the Albanians and the Serbs.

* * *

All these issues need to be reflected in the light of current developments. This European region is again in flames. Just like 80 years ago the Serbian expansionist aims are at the origin of the crisis. And again the international community reacts by organising a new edition of the London Conference.

Hitherto facts go to show that unfortunately violence and force do not function. Through the force of arms the Serbs have laid their hands on about 70 % of Bosnia-Herzegovina's territory. This is Serbia's open challenge to the international community and juridical order which stands at the foundation of inter-state relations nowadays.

At present the problem is: Will Serbia's aggression be stopped? This constitutes a danger not only for our region, but puts a question mark to the normal development of international life after the end of the Cold War.

The London Conference in August 1992 established a series of basic principles for solving problems in former Yugoslavia. They even sound as a warning in Serbia's address. Amongst them, the most important are: a) non-approval to territorial advantages achieved by force and every fait accompli and b) total condemn of the forceful deportations and endeavours to change the ethnic composition of the population. The Conference elaborated a work programme, divided into six groups, each of them pursuing a special aspect to the Yugoslav crisis. The decision made in London to keep the International Conference to the problems that have emerged as a result of the dissolution of the Yugoslav Federation, is of great importance.

Hence, it follows that the main idea of the whole London Conference basic documentation consists in the non-recognition of force as a basis to solve these matters.

We can not fail to point out that here lies also the distinction between the two London Conferences, held in the two extremities of the twentieth century. No doubt time has changed. It is a distinctive mark of the time we are living in not to accept the armed struggle anymore as an instrument of foreign policy. On the contrary, a range of international fundamental acts calls it an obligation of the states to settle matters peacefully amongst them. But it remains to pass from rhetoric onto real facts. Nine months have gone by since the London Conference, but the Serbian aggressors' hand has not been halted yet. The International Community has not counteracted adequately; the Serbian aggressors have not been stopped, although it should be admitted that significant steps have been launched, particularly recently warning the Serbian

leadership with the tightening of pincers around it.

Certainly, the events that are taking place in Yugoslavia and round Yugoslavia at present are fraught with new dangers for our national interests. But there is a point in all this that deserves attention. The Yugoslav crisis brought back to light the fact that the Albanian national question has been solved in half and that international public opinion at official and non-official levels has had the chance to get acquainted again with the injustice inflicted in our people. Without making any illusions as to the chances for a complete and appropriate solution under the current circumstances, endeavours should not be stopped, on the contrary they should be intensified to make broader circles in the foreign world, particularly deliberative instances, aware of the fact that this absurd and dangerous status quo moves from a standstill, and concrete steps might be taken towards a situation which provides new possibilities of adjusting injustices: unimaginable possibilities in another historical period.

The differences witnessed between the two London Conferences, undoubtedly, have to do also with the Albanian national question. We would like to believe that the changes are of a positive nature. First of all, they have to do with the position of the Albanian party at the negotiations table. We have to recall that in 1912-1913 the voice of the Vlora Government and its Memorandum could hardly reach the London Conference, whereas the Albanian delegation did not cross even the threshold of the Conference in the spring of 1913, when Ismail Qemali himself went there.

There is an essential change in this new edition of the London Conference, because a delegation of the Republic of Albania participates officially as a party in the negotiations, on an equal footing with the other Balkan states. Furthermore, the Albanian party is not only formally present in the negotiations. Albania voiced its view-point, its stand, first through the message the Parliament addressed to the Conference not to allow the extension of fightings in the South and, to recognise the right to self-determination as a basis to correctly and finally solve the question of the Albanian nation. Secondly, the delegation of the Albanian government represented by the minister Serreqi, demanded and managed to influence the Conference decisions, when it agreed to treat Kosova's question separately, as a question of one of the 8 constitutive units of the former Yugoslavia Federation, for which a separate group was created. It is not insignificant that on the agenda of the Conference Kosova is mentioned as a "former autonomus province".

From this point of view the presence of the delegation from Kosova was also of special importance, although in the capacity of observer. Kosova's representatives headed by Dr. Ibrahim Rugova had the chance to voice their aspiration and opinions in the numerous contacts they had with foreign ministers, the international organisms' senior officials, and outstanding personalities of the participating countries. We would recall that Ismail Qemali in his time took with him to London Isa Boletini, in order to appear in the eyes of Europe as the image of a unique nation. 80 years later, indeed the Albanians were presented as two separate units, but acted jointly on a more solid foundation on behalf of the unity of the nation, which the historic injustices have taken up again for a just solution according to the new standards of the nations' civilised co-existence.

Without negating the importance of these changes, the deed of the London Conference in this new edition will finally be judged from the concrete results. And actually they are too far from Albanians' expectations.

1. E.C.Helmreich, *The Diplomacy of the Balkan War (1912-1913)*, Cambridge, Jaw, USA, 1938, p.254.