
DR. ZEKERIA CANA (Prishtina)

KOSOVA AND THE INDEPENDENT ALBANIAN STATE

The struggle for territorial and administrative autonomy, as a necessary stage toward national emancipation, total separation from the Ottoman Empire, and the national independence which was the ultimate aim of the entire Albanian national movement, followed a long and tortuous path, with many advances and reversals. As a result, programs for autonomy sometimes varied in scope. In contrast to the Albanian League of Prizren, which based the issue of autonomy on territorial and national foundations, the League of Peje gave secondary importance to this issue. In comparison with the memorandum of Grece in 1911, that of Hasan Prishtina in 1912 marked a step backwards.

Postwar Albanian historiography has not established a proper balance between the two factors, foreign and domestic, that determined the struggle for autonomy and national independence. In fact, the former has always been given greater weight.

It is indisputable that the Albanian landowning class, which played an important role in the country's political life in attempting to take into its own hands key positions in the country's administration, eventually drew closer to the progressive elements of the Albanian bourgeoisie, with whom it shared immediate interests. Nevertheless, the process of the national emancipation of the landowners was slow, and did not keep pace with the times; for a long time, they followed Constantinople's tune.

I believe that the foreign factor was most important in the struggle for national emancipation. It was the abject foreign policy of the Sublime Porte, the absolutist regime of Sultan Abdul Hamid II, and later the doctrine of aggressive Ottomanization, the chauvinist policies of the Young Turks, the Balkan policy of the great powers, and especially the Balkan states' appetite for conquest, that decided the struggle of the Albanian people for national autonomy and independence. The epicenter of this struggle was Kosova.

One of the weaknesses of the Albanian national movement in the first decade of the 20th century was the neglect of the time factor. The movement waited on the course of events, fell into the trap of Istanbul's loud but never reliable promises, and lacked coordinated military and political activity. As a result, the anti-Ottoman uprisings of 1909-1912 did not extend to all the ethnic territories. Other regions did not respond to the clarion-call for a general uprising, at a time when bloody battles were being waged in the gorges of Kacanik and Carraleve against the battalions of Sefket Turgut Pasa.

The same thing happened one year later. The uprising of the Mbishkoder highlands was not supported by other areas. The General Assembly of the Albanian notables, which met in Grece and was composed of representatives from both north and south, approved a memorandum for Albania's territorial and administrative

autonomy, which brilliantly crowned the victories on the battlefield. However, these victories were quickly turned into a defeat as a result of subversion from abroad. Interventions especially from St. Petersburg but also from Vienna undermined the Albanian-Turkish talks on the basis of the memorandum of 23 June. Meanwhile, Cetinje placed the highlanders before a dilemma: either to accept the proposals of Constantinople for the recognition of certain limited rights for the population of the vilayet of Shkoder, or to leave at once the territory of Montenegro together with their families. They were faced with a *fait accompli*, while the Red Book remained a historical document. It is quite true that the uprising of spring 1912 was the greatest and best-organized armed revolt since the League of Prizren. However, history always has its glorious and its bitter truths. It is true that this uprising never reached the level of the pledge of the secret meeting at Taksim, and therefore did not assume the dimensions of a general uprising. Kosova responded to the rallying cry to Albanians "from seven to seventy to fight at Verrat e Llukës", seized its weapons, and entered into the decisive struggle to shake off the Ottoman yoke and to declare national independence, but other provinces did not prove themselves up to their historic duty. They contented themselves with organizing a few small bands, which undertook a few minor incursions.

The uprising of Kosova in 1912 was of a size and strength that obliged the Turkish Government to seek a cease-fire and to come to talks from the position of a loser. The rebel forces, equal in number to an army division, were fully in a position to impose their will on Constantinople and to secure recognition for the Albanian nation and the autonomous Albanian state that was to be proclaimed in Prishtina, Ferizaj, or Shkup. The bitter truth then again became apparent that the leaders of the Albanian national movement did not harvest the fruits of military victory, did not appreciate the importance of the time factor, and, instead of anticipating events, waited upon them. The Albanian people again missed their historical cue.

The fact that not all areas were represented in the Albanian-Turkish talks of July-August 1912 shifted the balance of forces in favor of the Turks. This weakened the position of Hasan Prishtina and his successors.

Faced with the objections of the Turkish leadership, the obstructions of the reformist wing, the influence of certain notables who supported the policy of Serbia, and the wedge driven between the leaders of the uprising by Serbian agents, the struggle of the wing supporting autonomy resembled the battle of David and Goliath. As a result, Hasan Prishtina's 14-point memorandum marked a step backwards in comparison with the memorandum of Grece.

Some of our historians have deplored Hasan Prishtina's acceptance of the agreement with the Turkish Government and the message he sent to other Albanian cities to put an end to military actions against Turkey as a premature act of capitulation. They fail to bear in mind the black clouds appearing on the Albanian horizon, which led to an easing of tension in Albanian-Turkish relations. The states of the Balkan Alliance faced the Albanian national movement with the need to regroup its forces and to organize itself to defend the Albanian territories against new invaders. The armed forces that resisted at Merdar and other places did not fight against the Serbian and Montenegrin armies solely in order to defend Kosova. It was a war to defend the whole of Albania.

The dramatic events under which the National Assembly of Vlore met are well known. None of the distinguished leaders of the rebels and of the national movement in Kosova was able to take part. Isa Boletini and Bajram Curri were busy fighting the Serbian and Montenegrin armies, while Hasan Prishtina, Idriz Seferi, and 12 other leaders were being held in Kalemegdan prison in Belgrade.

Nevertheless, the historic act of the declaration of independence and the hoisting of the standard of the Albanian people for national liberation, was accomplished in the name of the entire nation and of all the Albanian territories. The greatest burden in this struggle was borne by the Albanian territories of the Plain of Dukagjin; the Highlands of Gjakove, Has, and Rugova; Llapushnik; Drenice; Llap; Gollak; the Highlands of Karadak; and the Plain of Tetove. These regions laid an important foundation stone for Albanian independence. The men of Kosova, united round Isa Boletini and other patriots, formed ranks alongside Ismail Qemali and his Provisional Government. They became a strong shield protecting the independent Albanian state.

The Albanian uprising of September 1913 did not have the sole aim of shaking off the Serbo-Montenegrin yoke and liberating the occupied areas of the Albanian state as laid down by the Conference of London. Its main aim was to unite the two portions of ethnic Albania. The bloody suppression of this uprising did not quench the resistance of the Albanian people in Kosova. This resistance was to last a long time. This people, just as they did not hurl themselves into anti-Ottoman uprisings solely for themselves, and just as they did not place demands before Constantinople solely for themselves, likewise did not confront the onslaughts of Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes solely for their own interests.

The stronger their resistance became, the more secure the independent Albanian state would be. Nicola Pasic was right when he said that bringing the Albanians of Kosova to their knees would pave the way for the subjugation of Albania.

The Serbo-Montenegrin of Yugoslavia invader could wage in Kosova the terror of the rifle-butt and the truncheon, could mount mediaeval-style expeditions of death squads, killing and wounding the aged, pregnant women, young girls, and children. He could escalate his policy of genocide, seizing from peasants their wheat fields as far as their very cottage doors, and condemning them to destitution and starvation.

However, this barbaric invader could not uproot the strong spiritual ties of the Albanian people of Kosova with Albania, whom they called their mother. These roots were as deep as they were strong. It is therefore understandable that enslaved Kosova has always fixed its mind on and turned its eyes toward Albania, hoping to find Albania as strong and prosperous as possible, a rallying-point for the unification of the Albanian nation on its own territories.

