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THE EXPROPRIATION OF THE ALBANIAN POPULATION AND ATTEMPTS FOR COLONISATION OF ALBANIAN TERRITORIES (1918-1941)

The ethnic cleansing of Albanian territories from Serbia and Montenegro, which has its origin in the winning of autonomy of their part, would be intensified, alongside their consolidation and expansion particularly during the years 1877-1878 when based on the unjust decision of the Berlin Congress of 1878, these states, annexed a vast territory of the Albanian trunk. Serbia managed to fully accomplish this target in the Albanian territories of Nish¹ Sandjak, whereas Montenegro was successful in the territory of Shpuza, partially in the territory of Tivar and Podgorica, and slightly so in that of Ulqin².

The Serbian and Montenegrin Kingdoms continued the policy of ethnic cleansing and colonisation of Albanian territories even after the occupation of the vilayet of Kosova and of other Albanian territories³. The colonisation of these territories, which begins with the first days of the occupation by the Serbian and Montenegrin armies in October 1912, was sanctioned by special decree laws, issued in both kingdoms at the beginning of the year 1914.

As a result of such a policy during 1912-1913, thousands of Albanians were killed and 60 000 others were moved out of their ancestors' hearths for ever.

Kosova and other Albanian ethnic territories, which on the unjust decisions of the Paris Peace Conference (1919-1920) again unjustly remained outside Albania, under the newly created Serb-Croat-Slovene Kingdom, would again be submitted to a combined system of measures and actions of terror and violence.

The agrarian colonizing legislation was drafted to provide formal juridical support for this policy. Such legislation justified the arbitrary actions providing possibilities for further expropriation to a greater extent for the Albanian agrarian peasantry. This legislation favoured the Slav minority and particularly urged Slavs from Serbia and other territories of the Kingdom to settle in Albanian territories⁴.

It is known that the decree-law of February 25, 1919 formally abolished feudal relations, and the land should have been given to the farmers. But, this right was valid only for the Serb farmers and other Slavs, whereas the overwhelming majority of Albanian farmers did not gain the rights to land inheritance over the land they had tilled for centuries either⁵. Different from the Albanian peasants, the colonists managed to seize up to 27 hectares per family, and some "model" families up to 60 hectares of land. A series of facilities were created for the colonists, such as the transport free of charge to the settlement, freedom for 5-10 years from state taxation and for 5 years from regional taxes, supply with building material, granting of profitable credits for house building, etc⁶.

The organised colonisation of Kosova and of the other Albanian territories was intensified by the decree-law of September 24, 1920, valuable for the "Southern territories", and consequently for the Albanian and Macedonian territories. The commissions of agrarian organisms, apart from those lands defined for expropriation, including ten thousand "outlaws" properties, those defined as defending or offering shelter, as well as the "abandoned" territories, would add to the funds for colonisation. Even the so-called "free" lands, state property, joint communal territories, pastures, the so-called untitled lands, as well as the lands subject to expropriation according to preliminary provisions⁸ would be included.

The process of arable land expropriation was intensified after 1923 when the commissions of agrarian organs were allowed to sequester, even other lands of Albanian peasants for the complexes of colonisation, according to the need. Exploiting as a pretext the lack of land certificates of the overwhelming majority of Albanian peasants, who were the owners of these lands on the basis of collective heritage since the time of Ottoman rule, the colonising agrarian organs expropriated their owners and those who did not possess land certificates. The former were expropriated on allegations that they were big landowners, and the latter as usurpers. The agrarian commissions sequestered even lands the Albanian farmers had bought during World War I from the feudal lords, defining them as "abandoned" lands. In cases when the buyers were Serbs, these actions were considered legitimate. The commissions sequestered also the lands of Albanian peasant families whose members had emigrated to Albania or Turkey, including them in the category of "abandoned" lands⁹.

The expropriation of the Albanian agrarian population assumed preoccupying proportions following the sanctioning of the law on colonisation (1931), with the complements and amendements made to it in 1933. According to the law, the land of Albanian peasants might be sequestered to the threshold of their homes, although formally they enjoyed the right of keeping 0.40 acres per family member¹⁰. The determination of the regime to expropriate the Albanians of the last palm of land can be clearly seen in the statement by the Deputy Minister of Agriculture.

The Albanian deputies in the Parliament of the Serb-Croat-Slovene Kingdom, the Cemiyet members, headed by Ferat Draga, raised their voice against the plunder of the lands of the Albanian peasants. Through arguments and rare courage, Ferat Draga denounced to the last the policy of Serbian genocide towards the Albanian people¹¹. A group of Albanian deputies from Macedonia addressed the Parliament, through a joint complaint, which provided numerous examples of injustices perpetrated on the Albanian peasants in Macedonia, those of Shkup territory in particular, to whom ten thousands hectares of land were sequestered without any legal grounds¹². Meanwhile, the deputy of Pazar i Ri, Aqif Bluta, declared in the sanctuary of the Parliament: "In Southern Serbia the agrarian law has led only the Albanians to famine. Not an inch of land has been taken from any Serb". The deputy of Manastir Qenan Zijai¹³, too, reacted against these injustices.

The arbitrariness of the colonizing agrarian organs over the Albanian population always kept increasing, aiming at forcing it to abandon the ancestral hearths. The Albanian peasants were often compelled to shelter the colonist families in their homes "temporarily" till spring. But they did not go away from these homes. There were even cases when the colonist families were settled on the second floor, and while

the owners lived downstairs together with the animals. The Albanians were obliged either to accept the permanent "co-existence" with the colonists or help them build the house by compulsory labour.

The agrarian colonizing organs seized even the properties of the Albanian feudal lords. Although as compared to properties in other areas of the Kingdom, these properties were much smaller¹⁴, the majority of them included in the complexes for colonization, frequently even without compensation. In other areas of the Kingdoms these kind of estates remained almost untouched.

The regime did not spare the Albanian agrarian bourgeoisie, either. Its properties were confiscated sequestered and for the colonising complexes. Particularly persecuted were those representative of this stratum who defended the national cause. It was in this way that Mali i Mojstirit and i Dragajve were nationalised the Vocaj family persecuted, Rame Bllaca's murder organised, etc¹⁵. Those who were suspected to cherish nationalistic sentiments ended up in prison.

Different from the Albanian agrarian bourgeoisie, the Slav bourgeoisie and administration staff drew great material profits from the colonising agrarian reform, augmenting and multiplying their properties, which were cultivated by using the labour power of the Albanian expropriated farmers. They were rightfully called "the new beys" (masters). Hence, N. Pasic enlarged the fund of land plundered after World War I, becoming one of the biggest feudal lords in the Kingdom¹⁶. Following this Punisa Racic, who by means of a false land certificate, managed to procure 3 500 ha of woods in the Decan mountains, 50 ha of land in the plains of Shkup and other estates extending down to Oher. The lands of the Albanian agrarian peasantry on the side of Shkup, Tetova, Veles and Prilep were plundered by Vasilije Terbic and on the side of Gjilan by Tote Popovic, etc¹⁷.

The agrarian reform was also exploited to cause the increase and proper of the land and forest funds of the orthodox religious institutions. Hence, in 1927, the properties of 50 families of Isniq, were given to the Manastir of Decan, the properties of 20 families of Llausha to the Monastir of Devic, whereas to the Monastir of Gracanica there were given 10 hectares of forests in Anadrin's territory. In 1932, another 518 ha of land, always to the detriment of the Albanian peasantry, were divided between these institutions. As for the Albanian religious institutions, the Moslems and Catholics it was done quite differently. Their properties were expropriated mercilessly by the colonizing agrarian organs. The properties of the mosques of Shkup territory were seized, 100 hectares of the Tetova Masjids, 60 ha of the Prizren Mufti's properties, the properties of the temples of Kacanik, Presheva and Kumanova, the property of the Catholic Church of Novo Sella of Gjakova, etc. They did not spare the graveyards of the Catholic Church of Peja and Moslem ones of Tetova either¹⁸.

Uninterrupted economic pressure of different kinds was exerted on the Albanian peasantry. As the Albanian people underscored in their Memorandum, addressed to the League of Nations in 1930, all this happened "in order to change at all costs the ethnic character of the regions inhabited by Albanians"¹⁹.

As a result of the 20-year long endeavours of the Serbian political circles to transform Kosova and other Albanian territories into ethnically pure Serbian territories with the help of agrarian reform, half of the lands of the Albanian agrarian peasantry was destined for the complexes of colonisation. According to data of the official organs,

381,245 ha of land were expropriated in the territory of five agrarian directories (of Shkup, Ferizaj, Prizren, Peja and Mitrovica) by December of the year 1940. According to data obtained by the Albanian representation in Belgrade, during the 1919-1938 period, about 400 000 hectares of land were expropriated throughout the Yugoslav Kingdom. The greatest part of land expropriated was in Kosova. Half of all lands expropriated on "the Southern territories" were in Kosova²⁰. It is worth mentioning that from all the lands sequestered in the Albanian and Macedonian territories reckoned together, 3/4 belonged to the Albanian territories. During the period between the two World Wars, approximately half of the Albanian population (450 000 inhabitants), including here the deportees moved out by force was dealt an unprecedented vast and severe economic blow on its private property²¹.

The colonising agrarian organs organised the installation of colonists in the Albanian ethnic territories. The colonists were settled in strategic places of the Albanian territories such as on the border with Albania, beginning with Ulqin, Tuz, Plava, Gucia, the Dukagjin Plateau, the Pollog plain, down to Struga. Besides these strategic places, there were created colonies in the fertile valleys and plains of the Albanian territories, such as the Llap valley, Kosova plain, the Dukagjin Plateau, the valley of Bujanovc, Presheva, Kumanova, the plain of Shkup and Pollog, etc. They did not leave aside the hilly-mountainous zones either, particularly the insurgent regions, such as Drenica.

During the period between the two World Wars, about 15 000 colonist families were installed in the Albanian ethnic trunk under the rule of the Yugoslav Kingdom, without taking into account here the 545 families that moved into the territory of Kosova and hundreds of other families which were settled in the northwestern Albanian territories. It is worth mentioning the fact that about 4 times more colonies were set up in the Albanian territories as compared to the Macedonian ones. According to occupation sources, only in the Italian occupation area, during the period between the two World Wars, there were set up about 800 colonies, not including those set up on the Albanian territories under German and Bulgarian occupation. It is a known fact that these statistics provide data only on the colonists' families which were given land from the official organs. This does not include the free colonisation and the elements settled in towns. Other data speak of the perceptible increase of the number of the Slav population in the Albanian urban centres during the 30s, which was the result of their coming and settling from 1912 to 1941. If in 1912 in Shkup, Presheva, Ferizaj, Mitrovica, Tetova, Dibra, Ulqin, Plava, Gucia, Kumanova and Struga, the Slav population accounted for a symbolic percentage, in the 30s this population accounts or 20-35 per cent of the total number of inhabitants²².

The implementation of the colonising agrarian reform in the Albanian ethnic territories incorporated in the Yugoslav Kingdom in the period between the two World Wars brought about grave consequences to all the Albanian social strata, particularly to the peasantry, which was impoverished as never before as a result of the expropriation. Apart from the many thousands of families that moved out forever, thousands of other families fell into economic and social misery. According to data from the Social Insurance Institution of Shkup, about 50 000 peasants of the "Southern" regions, mainly "Moslems" (Albanians), although they lived in the countryside, did not possess even an inch of land, but earned their living from their activity as agricultural labourers (sharecroppers) on the properties of the Slav colonists. Meanwhile,

not possessing the most elementary elements of livelihood, thousands of other peasants had moved to urban centres, where they lived on alms, becoming a "burden to the society". About 60 per cent of the urban population was composed of Albanian paupers, who could not make ends meet²³.

Evaluating the body of results from the implementation of the colonising agrarian reform, we draw the conclusion that despite the sensitive reduction of the Albanians' percentage (65,6%) in the total number of the population, and the evident improvement of the structure of the Slav minority (34,4%) the attempts of the Serbs to denationalize and Slavicoize Kosova and the other ethnic territories under the rule of the Yugoslav Kingdom, or at least to change the ethnic ratio in favour of the Slav minority, did not yield the expected results, thanks to the resistance and national liberation war the Albanian people waged to defend their ancestral hearths.

1. According to the scholar Sabit Uka in the Albanian regions of Sandjak of Nish the Albanians were compelled to migrate from 614 villages mainly inhabited by them, or mixed with Serbs. Mr. Sabit Uka, *Vendbanimet e sanxhakut të Nishit të banuara me popullatë shqiptare dhe të përzier deri në vitet 1877-1878*, in: "Gjurmime albanologjike", SSHH, XII, Prishtinë, 1983, pp.103-123.

2. M.Verli, *Reforma agrare kolonizuese në Kosovë (1918-1941)*, Tiranë, 1992, p.17.

3. Z.Cana, *Socialdemokracia serbe dhe çështja shqiptare 1903- 1904*, Prishtinë, 1986, pp.146-148; M.Krasniqi, *Lugu i Baranit*, Prishtinë, 1984, pp.29-30; B.Pejani, *Grushti i Neptunës II*, in: "La Fédération Balcanique", no.102, Wien, October 15, 1928, p.2215; *Protivustavan akt, kod ustava bez ustava*, in: "Radnicke Novine", February 27, 1913. The same newspaper dt.09.02.1913, wrote: "...there were plundered shops, sheepcotes, granaries, anything that could be plundered... the villages were reduced to half... No one has felt the fury of these "liberators" as the Albanians have".

Polozaj zavojevanih krajeva, in: "Radnicke novine", December 2-3,1913.

4. J.Osmani, *Zakonski propisi o agrarnoj reformi i kolonizaciji na Kosovu izmedju dva rata*, Vjetar (Yearbook), XX,Prishtinë, 1985, pp.169-189.

5. M.Obradovic, *Agrarna reforma i kolonizacija na Kosova (1918- 1941)*, Prishtinë, 1981, p.230; M.Verli, *op.cit.*, pp.34, 38, 58.

6. M.Obradovic, *op.cit.*, p.230; R.Abdyli, *Faktorë që ndikuan në ndryshimin e strukturës sociale të fshatit të Kosovës*, in: "Kosova", 15, Prishtinë, 1986, p.163.

7. M.Verli, *op.cit.*, p.32; A.Hadri, *Pozita dhe gjendja e Kosovës në Mbretërinë Jugosllave (1918-1941)*, in: "Gjurmime albanologjike", no.2, 1986, pp.167-168.

8. *A.J.S* 14, p.101/40, dok.462; A.Hadri, *op.cit.*, p.167; M.Verli, *op.cit.*, p.32.

9. M.Verli, *op.cit.*, p.58.

10. M.Obradovic, *op.cit.*, pp.186, 230; M.Verli, *op.cit.*, pp.66 - 67; H.Islami, *Fshati i Kosovës, kontribut për studimin sociologjiko-demografik dhe evolucioni rural*, Prishtinë, 1985, p.31.

11. *Stenografske beleške Skupstine Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca, vanredni saziv za 1923 god.*, II, Beograd, 1923, st.1734-1735.

12. The complaint was signed by the representative deputies of various Albanian regions of Macedonia: Reshat Bey, representative of Shkup, Halim Bey Deralla,

representative of Tetova, Jusuf Bey, representative of Ohri, Sylejman Efendija, representative of Kumanova (Reshat Nexhipi, *Pozita shoqërore, ekonomike e politike e shqiptarëve të Maqedonisë midis dy luftërave botërore*. Diploma thesis sustained at the Faculty of Philosophy of Prishtine in 1987, p.69).

13. M.Verli, *op.cit.*, p.62; *St.Bel.KR.SHS.saziv za 1923 god.VII*, Beograd, 1923, p.443.

14. Rastko S.Puric, *Radnistvo i sirotimja Juzne Srbije*. Socijalni arhiv, no.8-9, Beograd, 1936, I, p.247.

15. *Mitrovica dhe rrethina*, in: "Radnicke Novine", January 11, 1931.

16. *Novi Begovi*, in: "Socijalisticka zora", no.55, Shkup, August 8, 1920; *Cifluci N.Pasica*, in: "Socijalisticka zora", no.38, June 12, 1920.

17. Z.Kulundzic, *Politika i korupcija*, Zagreb, 1968, pp.449, 457, 465; See also: *Agrarna reforma*, in: "Socijalisticka zora", no.31, May 16, 1920.

18. B.Boskovic - A.Apostolov, *Stav KPJ prema agrarnoj reformi i kolonizaciji na Kosovu i Metohiji 1919-1941 god.*, in: "Kosova", no.1, Prishtinë, 1972, pp.342-343.

19. *Stenografske beleške Senata Kraljevine srba...*, I-II, 1923, pp.21-23; *La situation de la minorité en Yougoslavie* (Memoire présenté à la société des Nations par Don Bisaku, Don Etienne Kurti et Don Luis Gashi), Genève, le 5 mai 1930.

20. M.Verli, *op.cit.*, pp.96-97; A.Hadri, *op.cit.*, pp.165-166; H.Islami, *op.cit.*, p.32. According to Rastko S.Puric untill 1936 in the so called southern territories there were sequestered 224 500 hectares of land, which nearly comply with M.Verli's data (Compare M.Verli, *op.cit.*, p.97; R.S.Puric, *Radnistvo i sirotimja juzne Srbije*, Socijalni arhiv, no.8-9, Beograd, 1936, I, p.145.

21. M.Verli, *op.cit.*, pp.96-98.

22. Compare R.S.Puric, *Radnistvo i sirotimja Juzne Srbije*, Socijalni arhiv, no.8-9, Beograd, 1936, pp.245-265; *Radnistvo Juzne Srbije*, in: "Juzni i Pregled", 5, Skoplje, 1939, pp.153-165; M.Verli, *op.cit.*, p.144.

23. R.S.Puric, *Radnistvo i sirotimja Juzne Srbije*, Socijalni arhiv, 8-9, Beograd, 1936, I, pp.245, 252; R.S.Puric, *Radnistvo Juzne Srbije*, in: "Juzni Pregled", 5, Skoplje, 1939, p.158.