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THE FORCED DEPORTATIONS OF ALBANIANS FROM KOSOVA AND OTHER TERRITORIES BETWEEN THE TWO WORLD WARS (1918-1941)

The forced deportation of Albanians from Kosova and other territories did much to exacerbate the traditionally tense relations between the Albanians and the Slavs, particularly the Serbs, in the first half of the 20th century. The policy of Belgrade toward the Albanians in what was called the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes from 1918 to 1929, and which became the Yugoslav Kingdom until 1941, was to clear territories with an indigenous Albanian population and to repopulate them with Slav colonists, mainly from the remoter parts of the kingdom.

The forced deportations of 1918-1941 were not the first time that the Serbian rulers had carried out such policies against the occupied Albanians. The Serbs had effectively enforced identical policies in 1877-1878 in the Albanian-inhabited territory called Toplice in the former sancak of Nis, as well as after the annexation by the Kingdoms of Serbia and Montenegro of about 20 000 square kilometers of territory with a majority Albanian population in 1912. Not to mention the various facts and sources, which, it must be stressed, are numerous and trustworthy, I will confine myself solely to Dr. Vasa Cubrilovic, who is particularly well-known to us Albanians: "...After Serbia seized Toplica and Kosanica", he stressed, "...the regions between Jastrepca and southern Morava were entirely cleansed of Albanians. It was left to our state to destroy the remainder of the Albanian triangle in the years after 1918..."¹.

It is therefore understandable that the deportations after 1918 were of special importance for Belgrade's strategy of destroying the Albanian national identity. Their full or partial realization is a different matter. Within the scope of one paper and the time available, I would like to describe the true dimensions of the forced expulsions of the Albanians from Kosova and other territories in the years 1918-1941, the policy behind them, their different stages, the destinations of the deportees, the numbers involved, and the end results. I will concentrate only on certain issues of this very broad subject.

1. The areas most subjected to forced expulsions were regions forming a border zone with the Albanian state and also those that were nationally compact and homogenous. Cubrilovic's Draft of 7 March 1937 is there for anyone to read and reread². It must be underlined that these areas, although subjected to the most drastic measures of expulsion, managed to retain their Albanian compactness and homogeneity. It was areas peripheral to the core Albanian territories that were worst affected.

2. In the forced deportations of Albanians during the 1918-1941 period, two stages that bear a significant relation to one another are discernible. The first stage during the years of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes concided roughly with the national-liberation movement in the Albanian territories known as the kacak

or outlaw movement. During these years, state institutions were directly involved in open pressure on Albanians to emigrate, as were legal and semi-legal instruments of mass violence such as army and gendarmerie units and Chetnik formations, not to mention, as will later be apparent, the state administration as a whole. The use of so-called weapon-collection campaigns led to the emigration rate rising annually after the second occupation of Kosova and the other Albanian territories in 1918. The second stage was in 1929-1941, when, on behalf of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Belgrade used every means in an attempt to base Albanian emigration on official international agreements, efforts that were crowned with success at the meetings of the Balkan Alliance and in the Yugoslav-Turkish government agreement of July 1938³.

3. The main route for the forced deportation of the Albanians from their territories between 1918 and 1941 was through what is now the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia via the Shkup-Salonika railway and thence either by rail or by sea to Istanbul⁴. The Serbian authorities gave priority to such traffic on this route, regardless of expense and the methods used. Documents from the time show that the Yugoslav-Serbian administration, created specifically for organizing deportations and based in Shkup, met with the necessary understanding from Greek official and semi-official institutions over the transit of deported Albanians⁵.

Bulgaria, with its Nis-Sofia-Istanbul railway line, was an important transit route for Albanians deported from Kosova to Turkey, especially during the years 1918-1928. Already well-known data clearly show this fact, which in some cases led to problems and diplomatic contortions between Sofia and Ankara and especially between Sofia and Tirana⁶.

As for other deportation routes, one must also mention those from Kosova and other territories directly to the state of Albania, and from Shkup and Salonika to various Arab countries. There were also remigrations from Turkey to the state of Albania.

The Turkish authorities mainly organized the settlement of the Albanians in the interior of the country, especially in the east round Diyarbakir, Elazig, Yozgat, etc⁷, regions sadly different from the prosperous areas which they had left. Nevertheless, a considerable number of the deportees managed to settle from the start in suitable places such as Bursa, Istanbul, Tekirdag, Izmir, Kocaeli, Eskisehir, etc⁸. Meanwhile, in the Albanian state, Albanians from Kosova and other territories settled mainly in the marshlands of the west, in the modern districts of Fier, Lushnje, Kavaje, Berat, Elbasan, Durres, Kruje, etc⁹.

Is not possible to precisely determine the number of Albanians expelled from Kosova and the other occupied territories until all the possible sources of data are quarried, particularly those of the relevant Turkish authorities. Nevertheless, data from the administrations of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and the state of Albania, mainly diplomatic records and other secondary sources such as the records of political organizations, religious institutions, the press etc., and also analyses of demographic structures show that the total number of emigrants from the Albanian areas of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia to the territory of other states was about 200 000 - 300 000. To ascertain as accurately as possible the number of Albanian emigrants in the period in question, further research will be necessary, especially in the Turkish, Bulgarian, Italian, and Greek archives.

4. The aim of Serbian ruling circles emerges clearly from the start when we consider the problem of the forced deportation of Albanians from Kosova and other territories, particularly to Turkey. However, we think it necessary in this short survey also to mention the attitude of the countries receiving deported Albanians. There is no doubt that the balance is ambiguous: The more hospitably and charitably this great mass of Albanians expelled from their age-old homes was received, the better it suited Belgrade's strategy of Slavification. As far as I have been able to detect so far, there were two antagonistic currents of thought in Turkey in relation to Albanian migration between the two wars.

The first current was represented by influential government and military circles, including especially the Foreign Ministry which was for a long time headed by Dr. Tefik Rustu Aras, as well as diplomats accredited to various Balkan countries, especially the minister in Belgrade, Ali Haydar¹⁰. This current was inclined to favor and authorize the migration of Muslim Albanians to Turkey. The final result of this attitude was the acceptance and signature of a Yugoslav-Turkish government agreement in July 1938 for the migration of 40 000 "Turkish" Muslim families from the Kingdom of Yugoslavia to Turkey¹¹ at a time when it was clearly known that official Yugoslav statistics, even by means of great effort and exceptional manipulation, had only been able to come up with 132 000 members of the Turkish nationality in the 1931 census¹². One cannot fail to mention here Turkey's interest in populating with deported Albanians the most sparsely-inhabited areas of Anatolia and tense areas bordering on the Kurds¹³.

The second current in high-level Turkish circles, mainly including members of parliament who also had the support of President Kemal Atatürk, did not reject the interests of state furthered by the acceptance of Albanian deportees, but also bore in mind the long-term intentions of Belgrade toward the Albanians of Kosova and other regions¹⁴. It was precisely this factor, alongside circumstances on the threshold of World War II, that led the Turkish Parliament not to ratify the government agreement of July 1938.

5. Despite the very significant consequences for the relative decline in the size of the Albanian population, Belgrade's efforts to Slavify and destroy the national identity of Kosova and other areas in the years 1918-1941, through physical extermination, mass deportations, and intensive colonization, did not produce the desired results. In April 1941, when the Kingdom of Yugoslavia ceased to exist, the indigenous Albanians remained the overwhelming majority of the population in their territories, in relation to Serbian and Montenegrin Slavs. Besides a natural population growth at the upper limit of the reproductive capacity of the Albanian population, and international circumstances that culminated in World War II, the following factors played a significant role in the failure of the Serbian plans.

a) The Albanians' armed resistance between 1918 and 1928, although savagely suppressed, to a large extent hindered deportations not only during these years but later, because it powerfully increased the Albanians' national awareness, leading them to oppose the strategy to deprive them of their nationality.

b) The illegal activities of the Kosova National Defense Committee in 1918-1924 helped to obstruct the process of the total deportation of the Albanians, as did the Xhemijet political and religious organization. Xhemijet was created in 1919 and included Albanians, Slavic Muslims, and Turks, achieving representation in the

Belgrade parliament until the organization's suppression in 1925, after which it continued its work clandestinely. It is worth noting the synchronization of the work of the Kosova National Defense Committee and Xhemijet, especially in their denunciation of the forced deportations of Albanians before international figures and institutions, in elected forums, and to the public at large.

In order to make the Albanian nation and Europe as a whole aware of the aims and consequences of the forced deportations from Kosova, patriotic associations and personalities such as Hasan Prishtina, Hoxha Kadriu, Fan Noli, and Bedri Pejani, as well as Catholic clergy such as Gjon Bisaku, Shtjefen Kurti, Luigj Gashi, and many others made their voices heard in the highest state and international circles of the time, but did not meet with the support for which they hoped¹⁵.

c) Regardless of opportunistic vacillations and restricted opportunities, the Albanians state and its institutions tried to exert their influence to prevent the deportation of the Albanians far from their mother country.

Albanian diplomatic representatives, especially those in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia at the legation in Belgrade, the chief consulate in Shkup, and the consulate in Manastir, as well as those in Greece, Turkey, Bulgaria, and Romania, followed minutely and with an extreme anxiety that was not only professional but national every matter connected with the problem of the deportation of the Albanians from Kosova¹⁶. The fact must be stressed that the interested authorities of the Albanian state, especially the royal court, the Foreign Ministry, and the Prime Minister's Office always possessed a clear picture of the deportations and also produced tangible proposals and ideas to prevent them, which were often successfully put into action.

6. Concluding this overview, I wish to stress the connection that Serbian ruling circles in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia made between the need to partition or totally annex the independent Albanian state and the total expulsion of the Albanians from Kosova and other areas. It suffices to cite here a passage written in 1939 by Ivo Andric, then Yugoslav deputy foreign minister: "The partition of Albania", he underlined, "would remove a center of attraction for the Albanians of Kosova, who could then be more easily assimilated... Their deportation to Turkey could be accomplished under new conditions, because no powerful obstacle would exist to prevent it..."¹⁷.

1. Dr. Vaso Cubrilovic, *The Expulsion of Arnauts*, in: K. Prifti et al. (ed.), "The truth on Kosova", Tirana, 1993, p. 178.

2. *Ibidem*, pp. 178-185.

3. Dr. Hakif Bajrami, *The Yugoslav-Turkish Convention of 1938 on the Deportation of Albanians*, in: *op.cit.*, pp. 187-191; Hamit Kokalari, *Kosova - djepi i shqiptarizmit*, Tirana, 1943, p. 54.

4. *Arkivi Qendror i Shtetit i RSH (AQSH)*, Fondi 251 of 1925, dos. 113, fl. 5, 7, 16; of 1935, dos. 185/1, fl. 172.

5. *Ibidem*, 1935, dos. 185/1.

6. *Ibidem*, 1923, dos. 215, fl. 1-10.

7. *Ibidem*, 1935, dos. 185/1, fl. 77, 113, 115-117, 160; 1938, dos. 97, fl. 50.

8. *Ibidem*, 1935, dos. 185/1, fl. 77.

9. *Ibidem*, fl.18, 99, 180; Fondi 252 of 1936, dos.678, fl.4.
10. *Ibidem*, Fondi 251 of 1939, dos.70, fl.17-20, 346-347.
11. Hakif Bajrami, *op.cit.*, pp.187-189, Articles V and VII.
12. Hamit Kokalari, *op.cit.*, p.34.
13. *AQSH*, Fondi 251 of 1926, dos.101, fl.9, 28-29.
14. *Ibidem*, 1938, dos.107, fl.135-138.
15. *Ibidem*, 1922, dos.102, fl.213; 1923, dos.206, fl.8081; 1924, dos.102, fl.3-6; 1924, dos.289, fl.4, 11; 1935, dos.185/1, fl.204-206, etc.
16. The Central State Archive of the Republic of Albania possesses a wealth of material relating to this problem. It is gathered mainly in Fond No.251, but also in other deposits.
17. Dr.Bogdan Krizman, *Elaborat dr.Ivo Andrica o Albaniji 1939 godina*, in: "Casopis za suvremenu povijest", Zagreb, 1977, No.2 (24), Year IX, p.82.

