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THE STRUGGLE OF THE ALBANIANS OF KOSOVA AND OTHER AREAS OF THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA FOR SELF-DETERMINATION AND NATIONAL UNIFICATION DURING WORLD WAR II

After the fall of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1941, the Albanian territories were distributed among three states on the basis of the Vienna Agreement¹ between the German and Italian foreign ministers.

The larger part of these territories was placed under Italian occupation and attached to Albania, which had been occupied since 1939. These regions were divided into four prefectures based in Peje, Prishtina, Prizren, and Diber, 14 subprefectures, and 143 communes. Together with the areas of Ulqin and Tuz, they covered more than 11 780 square kilometers and about 820 000 inhabitants, 75 percent of them Albanians².

The District of Mitrovice, including the areas of Mitrovice, Podujeve, Vushtri, and Tregu i Ri, was attached to the area of German occupation, under the quisling Serbian state of Nedic. This area included 135 000 inhabitants, of whom 81 000 or 60 percent were Albanians³. Besides the districts of Shkup and Kumanove, parts of the districts of Gjilan, Kacanik, Viti, Presheve, and Bujanove, with an Albanian population of 130 000⁴, were given to fascist Bulgaria. With this new division of their territories, the Albanian people remained divided among several states. In order to increase its own influence, the Yugoslav Communist Party (YCP) attempted to exploit the dissatisfaction aroused by this step, especially in the areas under Bulgarian and Serbian occupation.

On the basis of the Atlantic Charter that guaranteed the rights of the peoples to self-determination following their participation in the struggle against fascism also heeding the promises of the YCP and the Albanian Communist Party (ACP), the Albanians of Kosova and other areas of the former Yugoslavia responded to the call to join the armed struggle against fascism, in the hope that they would in this way realize their right to selfdetermination and national unification. While all agreed in the necessity of a liberation struggle, there is no doubt that it was the Albanians of the Bulgarian occupation zone who were most disposed to fight fascism, because of their very difficult conditions and circumstances. It was not by chance that the first person to be declared a hero of the people by Yugoslavia was Bajram Shabani from Kumanove, who was killed fighting the Bulgarian invader on 14 October 1941⁵.

Communism had a stronger influence on the Albanians of these areas after the foundation of the ACP. Communist ideas were spread by a considerable number of civil servants and intellectuals, especially teachers who came from Albania after 1941, most of whom were ACP sympathizers⁶. There is no doubt that in this period leadership of the armed struggle in Kosova by the ACP would have considerable

aided the progress of the war, and would have helped toward realizing the right to self-determination, unifying the ethnic Albanian territories, and avoiding conflict among the different currents of Albanian politics.

However, the decision "to accept the call of the YCP for the population of Kosova and other Albanian territories in the former Yugoslavia to join the war under its leadership, trusting that the YCP would apply after the war, as it had promised, the principle of self-determination to the point of secession"⁷ cost our people dearly.

From the start, the YCP and its leadership, through its emissaries, made every effort to foil all attempts toward Albanian national unification. In their activities, the Yugoslav communists were guided by national interests, which was not true of all the Albanian communists.

At this time the YCP mentioned the Albanians in almost all the summons issued to the peoples of Yugoslavia, calling them a people and not a nationality or national minority. The Albanian communists and their sympathizers, trusting in the principle of the self-determination of the peoples that was also reaffirmed in Josip Broz's famous article published in the newspaper "Proletar" in 1942⁸, responded to the YCP's summons to war at a time when they enjoyed much greater national and economic rights.

The development of the Antifascist National Liberation War in Kosova was accompanied by the formation of single-nationality armed units such as the Zenel Hajdini and Emin Duraku bands and the Bajram Curri battalion, while the Albanians of Ulqin and western Macedonia closely cooperated with the Albanian and Yugoslav National Liberation Armies. Later, larger military units were created in Kosova, while the political, military, and state authorities possessed independent state and political structures identical to those of the other peoples of Yugoslavia. All these authorities, the Kosova Provincial Committee, the Command Staff of the National Liberation Army, and the Provincial National Liberation Council for Kosova and the Plain of Dukagjin were a sign and guarantee that after the war the Albanians would achieve their inalienable right to self-determination and national unification.

It is important to note that these developments were subject to interference by the YCP Central Committee, which through its emissaries in Albania and Kosova such as Svetozar Vukmanovic-Tempo, Miladin Popovic, Dusan Mugosa, Velimir Stojnic, etc., did everything to put the political situation in the Albanian territories under total control. Their purpose was to undermine the development of the antifascist struggle in Albania and Kosova, to encourage division among the different currents of Albanian politics, and to counter aspirations to national unification by putting class and party allegiances first. Tito and the YCP Central Committee used every means and made major concessions in order to draw Draza Mihajlovic into the struggle, but an entirely different attitude was maintained toward the Albanians. The Yugoslav emissaries even brutally intervened to annul the Mukje agreement of August 1943 between the representatives of the Albanian General National Liberation Council and the Balli Kombetar, which among other things sanctioned the Albanians' right to self-determination and, as a result, the creation of ethnic Albania⁹. The creation of a common pannational antifascist front did not interest the YCP, which evinced ambitions to annex not only Kosova, but Albania itself. For this reason, the Yugoslav leadership and Vukmanovic Tempo were committed to the destruction of this genuine kernel of

national unity¹⁰. In such a situation, nationalist and democratic Albanian forces, seeing that it was not possible to create a common front with the communists because of the latter's severe dependency of the YCP, were forced to lay new plans and make new efforts to realize national aspirations. Under the new circumstances that arose after the capitulation of Italy, the founding assembly of the Second League of Prizren was held in Prizren on 16 September 1943, attended by representative delegates from all the Albanian territories as well as from Diber, Prizren, Prishtina, Peje, Mitrovice, etc¹¹. The organization's aim was to defend the liberated areas and the integrity of the Albanian territories¹². The forces of the Second League of Prizren especially attempted to realize this aim between September and November 1944, when the border was pushed to the line of the Shkup-Bujanovc railway, which approximated to the ethnic border.

The activities of the Second League of Prizren appear to have seriously upset the plans of the communist forces and the leaders of the National Liberation War in Kosova and Albania. In order to minimize this organization's authority, Fadil Hoxha published in the newspaper "Lirija" in October 1943 an article announcing the holding of a national liberation council for these areas, which was to "ensure us total freedom and independence"¹³.

The decision to hold this conference was made by a meeting of the Council of the Kosova YCP Provincial Committee at Sharr on 4-6 November 1943. The conference was held in Bujan in the Highlands of Gjakove between 31 December and 2 January 1944¹⁴. A total of 49 delegates attended the conference, 43 Albanians and six Serbs and Montenegrins, a proportion in accordance with the composition of these territories' population.

The conference's most important document was the Resolution which observed that "Kosova and the Plain of Dukagjin represent a territory largely inhabited by the Albanian people, who still today, as always, wish to unite with Albania. We therefore consider it our duty to show the correct path the Albanian people must follow in order to realize their aspirations. The sole path by which the Albanian people of Kosova and the Plain of Dukagjin can unite with Albania is by a common struggle with the other peoples of Yugoslavia against the occupier and his lackeys, because this is the only way to win the freedom in which all peoples, i.e. the Albanians too, will be able to declare their own destiny with the right to self-determination to the point of secession"¹⁵. The decisions of the Conference of Bujan were contested by the YCP Central Committee, whose own strategy planned not only for the preservation of the old borders of Yugoslavia, but their expansion¹⁶.

Thus, in a letter of 18 March 1944, the YCP Central Committee drew the attention of the Kosova Provincial Committee to the fact that "you should not have created a provincial committee, because your territory is not a complete district (...). The character of the Provincial National Liberation Council is not clear from the Resolution. This council can only be an initiative and an organ of the political unity of the masses, but we cannot dare to give it an executive character even though it must lead the councils where they exist"¹⁷. As for handling the national problem, the Provincial Committee was instructed to accept the guidance of the Second Meeting of the Antifascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia (AVNOJ), which "ensure the equality of all the peoples and give them the right to self-determination"¹⁸.

This letter further insists that "there should be not talk of unification with Albania and defining the border between Albania and Yugoslavia, which are both under occupation"¹⁹.

However, P.Jovanovic, secretary of the YCP Provincial Committee, opposed more directly the Albanians' aspirations and the status that Kosova had achieved during the war. In total agreement with the standpoints revealed by the YCP at the end of the war, he stressed that on the basis of the decisions of the Second Meeting of the AVNOJ "the Albanians of Kosova are guaranteed the rights of a national minority"²⁰. It is interesting to note that this is the first time during World War II that the Albanians of Kosova are called a national minority.

The decisions of the Conference of Bujan were welcomed in Kosova and the other Albania territories. The Albanians hurled themselves into the Antifascist National Liberation War in order to realize these aspirations, fighting not only for the liberation of their own territories but also on other fronts in the north of Yugoslavia. From Kosova alone, 53 000 fighters were recruited in various military formations. Their struggle and their blood made an important contribution to the common cause of the peoples of the antifascist alliance.

1. Agreement signed in Vienna on 21-22 April 1941.
2. *Fletorja Zyrtare*, No.129, 29 August 1941.
3. Ali Hadri, *Narodno-oslobodilacki pokret na Kosovu 1941- 1945*, Prishtina, 1970, pp.82-84.
4. *Ibidem*.
5. Ramiz Abdyli, *Bajram Shabani*, monografi, Shkup, 1976.
6. Fehmi Rexhepi, *Me ditar dhe pushkë në revolucion*, in: "Shkëndija", No.18-19, Prishtina, November-December 1980, p.20.
7. Xhelal Gjeçovi, *Marrëdhëniet shqiptaro-jugosllave në vitet e Luftës Antifashiste Nacionalçlirimtare, nëntor 1941 - nëntor 1944*, Tirana, 1986, p.147.
8. J.B.Tito, *Çështja kombëtare në dritën e Luftës Nacionalçlirimtare*, in: "Proleter", December 1942.
9. *Historia e popullit shqiptar*, II, Prishtina, 1969, p.714.
10. Fehmi Rexhepi, *Si u tradhëtuan shqiptarët gjatë dhe pas Luftës së Dytë Botërore*, in: "Veprimi", Preshevë, Year I, No.2, p.13.
11. Tahir Zajmi, *Lidhja II e Prizrenit*, Bruksel, 1964, p.39; Ali Hadri, *Lëvizja Nacionalçlirimtare në Kosovë 1941-1945*, Prishtina, 1971, p.332.
12. Zajmi, *op.cit.*, f.45.
13. "Lirija", October 1944; "Zbornik", I, vol.19, d.55, p.296-300.
14. Ali Hadri, *Këshillat Nacionalçlirimtare në Kosovë*, Prishtina, 1974, p.68-70.
15. *Narodni Odbor Autonome Kosovske-Metohijske Oblasti 1943- 1953*, Prishtina, 1953, p.10.
16. Yugoslavia achieved this goal by enlarging its borders by 8 262 square kilometers at the expense of Italy, see: *"Vojna Enciklopedija"*, 4, Beograd, 1972, f.79.
17. Letter signed by Milovan Djilas for the YCP Central Committee: "Zbornik",

I, vol. 19, Beograd, d. 104, p. 462-463.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*, p. 464.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 723.

Following the occupation of the Yugoslav-Albanian border in April 1941, the overwhelming part of Kosovo and of the other Albanian territories was absorbed in Albania, which was under Italy's occupation. This coincided with the time of a world-wide conflict and confusion, but it practically coincided with Italy's losing the majority of a European ethnic regions. In spite of the circumstances in which this modelling of the political map in this corner of Europe occurred, the boundaries that originated this about, and increasing the previously fixed ones into practice had, and the national criteria, which in this case put in the foreground of for the redrawing of territories and which in general were accepted by the former and member states, the existence of the national issue of the Albanian people as an element of their ethnic territories was not incorporated in Albania's framework as other ethnic territories, as has occurred in other cases with geo-political changes that took place in that period and from which some parts of the Albanian nation suffered a great loss being included in the German zone, respectively under Serbian and Bulgarian occupation and administration. These developments and movements of territory were not put into life by the Albanians and consequently they cannot bear any responsibility whatsoever for them.

But the Albanian territorial unification did not acquiesce by the great fascist alliance member countries, that in principle were against territorial changes obtained by means of arms and force. In the Atlantic Charter they formulated the democratic principles in international relations and understood that no territorial modification would take place without the freely expressed consent of the interested peoples and that all people would enjoy the right to freely choose their form of government.

In order to realize their national aspirations, the Albanians in their capacity as citizens of the democratic republics in the Balkan Peninsula as well as in the political forces leading the armed struggle in both countries. The Declaration of the Buzan Conference (17-11-1944, 22-01-1945) signed Kosovo together with a resolution closely linked with its general structure and as an element of the Balkan self-determination. The worldwide struggle against the conduct of the regional territorial structure in Kosovo as a destiny, such as Albanian majority and the rights of the Albanian living on those territories to those with Albania, was a direct result of the war against fascism, conducted in the spirit of a national and political act, because it was directed to a legitimate demand for territorial unity of the people living in those territories. This act was supported by all the categories who represented the national structure of the population of that region. Unquestionable of course, preceding and not hindered by the representatives of the British empire, included.

In spite of the danger of the political forces of both countries, the Albanian question in former Yugoslavia remained a pending inter-ethnic problem.

...the right to decide on their own future should be respected. The Yugoslav government, which had a hand in the decision...

However, Plovidin, secretary of the YCP Provincial Committee, opposed more so only the Albanian aspirations and the status that Kosova had achieved during the war. In total agreement with the standpoint recorded by the YCP at the end of the war, he stressed that on the basis of the decisions of the Second Meeting of the AVNOJ, the Albanians of Kosova are guaranteed the rights of a national minority.¹¹ It is interesting to note that this is the first time during World War II that the Yugoslavs of Kosova are called a national minority.

The decisions of the Committee of Experts were welcomed in Kosova and the other Albanian territories. The Albanians joined themselves into the Antifascist National Liberation War in order to realise these aspirations, fighting not only for the liberation of their own territories but also on other fronts in the north of Yugoslavia. From Kosova alone, 53 000 fighters were recruited in various military formations. Their struggle and their blood made an important contribution to the common cause of the peoples of the antifascist alliance.

1. Agreement signed in Vojvodina, 20-22 April 1941.
2. *Flakinja Zbore*, No 1, 17 August 1941.
3. Ali Hadri, *Narodna Odbor Narodnooslobodilačka u Kosova 1941-1945*, Prishtina, 1964, p. 81-84.
4. *Ibidem*.
5. Ruzica Andjeli, *Batran Shaban*, monograph, Shkup, 1976.
6. Pehin Rexhepi, *Me dhe dhe pushtet e revolucion* in "Shtetdija", No 18-19, Prishtina, November-December 1980, p. 7.
7. Xhefit Gjocovi, *Marxsheniet shqiptare gjatë Luftës Antifashiste Nacionalshrinistare*, editor 1947, second 1948, Tirana, 1986, p. 147.
8. J.B. Thaçi, *Çështja Kombëtare në dritën e Luftës Nacionalshrinistare*, in "Pialen", December 1942.
9. *Historia e popullit shqiptar*, II, Prishtina, 1969, p. 714.
10. Pehin Rexhepi, *Si u trashëgim shqiptarë gjatë dhe pas Luftës së Dytë Botërore*, in "Vopriat", Prishtina, Viti I, No 2, p. 13.
11. Tahir Zaimi, *Lidhja II e Dytë*, Beograd, 1964, p. 39; Ali Hadri, *Çështja Nacionalshrinistare në Kosovë 1941-1945*, Prishtina, 1971, p. 352.
12. Zaimi, *op. cit.*, 545.
13. "Liria", October 1944, "Zbore", 1, vol 19, 4.55, p. 296-300.
14. Ali Hadri, *Këshillat Nacionalshrinistare në Kosovë*, Prishtina, 1974, p. 68-70.
15. *Narodna Odbor Antifashiste Komuniste Metohijske Oblasti 1943-1945*, Prishtina, 1953, p. 13.
16. Yugoslavia achieved this goal by enlarging its borders by 8 262 square kilometers at the expense of Italy, see, "Večna Enciklopedija", 4, Beograd, 1972, p. 12.
17. Letter signed by Mujo Dylja for the YCP Central Committee, "Zbore",