

EUROPE

AND THE

ALBANIAN

QUESTION

P. N. Pipinelis

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Although written during the last phases of World War II, this reference book is nonetheless pertinent today. Mr. Pipinelis has carefully outlined the geographic, ethnographic and diplomatic aspects of the Albanian problem which had its beginnings at the end of the first Balkan War (1913).

The true diplomatic scenery surrounding the creation of the artificial state of Albania is not well known to the student of Balkan history due to a scarcity of English language reference books on the subject. Those books which do exist are either antiquated or expressions of Albanian nationalist views and are, for the most part, compilations of research by Albanian-American scholars.

For this reason this second edition of the well known book by P. Pipinelis is needed, and the addition of a detailed index and a set of six maps will aid the reader's understanding.

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Chicago essays on
World History and Politics

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* ΣΥΛΛΟΓΗ *
ΕΥΑΓΓΕΛΟΥ ΠΡΙΩΝΗ
ΔΩΡΕΑ ΑΠΟ ΤΟ ΣΥΛΛΟΓΟ
ΚΑΣΤΑΝΙΑΝΗΣ ΠΟΤΟΛΙΟΥ

BY
P. PIPINELIS

SECOND EDITION



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+++ Boundary claimed by Greece 1913



INTRODUCTION

In the dramatic events enacted in the Balkans a leading part was played by Albania. It was in that country that there began on Good Friday 1939 the politico-strategic pincer-movement within which the whole Balkan Peninsula was destined two years later to lose its independence and to be handed over to the crushing tyranny of the aggressors. It was from Albania that the Italian dictator let loose his insolent offensive against Greece, on the 28th October 1940.

The strategic and political bridgehead that Italy had established many years earlier on the eastern littoral of the Adriatic thus fulfilled the aims that had dictated its creation. The Axis Powers knew that from their bases in the uplands of Albania they would be able without much difficulty to sever Yugoslavia's communications towards the South, and, by occupying Salonica, to deal a mortal blow at Greece; by tradition and by the natural inter-working of circumstances the firm friend of Great Britain in the Eastern Mediterranean.

There is no need to elaborate the point that Italy's aggressive policy was aimed in that direction. A glance at the map shows that that was the route of conquest towards the East at which the nationalists of Rome were continually striving with so much deliberation and fanaticism. Moreover, was it not the historic route, invariably followed in earlier centuries by so many others as they advanced to the conquest of the East?

However, the Axis's operations against the Balkans, as indeed all its operations in the present war, had to go through two clearly defined stages, the one paving the way for the other: a) political neutralization or conquest of the requisite strategic bases from which the actual military operations might be launched with greater security, and b) military action. The former stage prepared, and was a necessary condition of, the latter stage. Thus, the policy of political neutralization and domination of Albania made it possible for the Italian armies to be in the heart of the Balkans even before war had broken out. They had no need to undertake hazardous and costly operations for the invasion of the inhospitable shores of the Eastern Adriatic. Nor did they need to transport their war material and supplies through sea-lanes over which the supremacy

of British sea-power cast its shadow. At the moment when the offensive had to be launched the Italian army was already stationed close to the Greek or Yugoslav frontiers, with its forces already grouped under peaceful conditions; its aerodromes were equipped and the roads ready to receive its military transports. Only a signal was needed for the invading army to be set in motion in the midst of peace, or, at most, "a frontier incident", such as the one that the Fascist leaders demanded of the Military Command in Albania on the eve of Italy's aggression against Greece.

The Axis Powers were in fact well aware of the importance of terrain and of geographical conditions generally in the application of their policy of conquest, as was proved by their whole course of action before and during the war. They were well aware of the consequences to the comprehensive time-table of their operations that would result from a protracted resistance offered at a strong geographical point. They were acquainted too with the extremely difficult problems that must arise, in a war against an enemy possessing the mastery of the sea, from the fact that their military transports would be effected across wide intervening stretches of water, and would therefore be exposed to great hazards. Finally, they were aware of the facilities that are afforded—and conversely of the difficulties that are created—if the aerodromes of a country are available to one or other of the adversaries.

It was for these reasons that the Axis Powers always required the way to be prepared, through diplomatic and economic action, at those very points where the natures of the terrain presented serious difficulties that might make necessary the employment of larger forces than was desirable or practicable, and thereby entail loss of time and consequent strengthening of the enemy, together with other disadvantages. All the interdependent operations, political and military, undertaken by the Axis, from the re-occupation of the Rhineland in 1936 down to the seizure of Prague and the occupation of Rumania, Bulgaria, etc., virtually constitute a single politico-strategic plan, deliberately conceived with a view to neutralizing the difficulties of the terrain and preparing the most favourable conditions for the decisive blow against the principal adversaries.

The very fact of these endeavours on the part of the Axis in itself exposes the fallacy of the theory, which has of late received much support, that the importance of terrain and geographical features has very greatly declined as the result of the

most recent technical developments, and will disappear completely when the new organization of Europe becomes a reality.

Technical developments, however, make new modes of action available no less for defence than for attack, while terrain remains a constant factor (other things being equal) for the one side as for the other. Consequently, it may involve a greater military effort and larger forces of men, and because of its nature a longer period of time may have to be expended. The factors of time and effort necessarily exert a vital influence upon the wider plan of campaign.

Thus, at the present time no-one surely can doubt that, for example, Russia's occupation of the Baltic countries or of a relatively small belt of Finnish territory in Karelia, or the Germans' loss of two whole months in Greece and Yugoslavia greatly affected the Russian campaign. Particularly in the case of small countries, whose resistance mainly depends upon the aid given to them by the Great Powers, a defence prolonged for a few weeks, or even days, can be of vital significance. It is only if collective peace were to be fully secured by means of an international organization that the significance of terrain, in relation to defence, would be reduced to a minimum. Such security, however, is not yet available.

The Axis Powers were, of course, well aware of these considerations. In the case of Albania, therefore, the political neutralization of the country was held to be an indispensable preliminary if their aggressive design against the Balkans was to be accomplished under the most favourable conditions possible.

Political neutralization was achieved only after long labours, and as a consequence of the special conditions prevailing in that country. As early as the year 1926 a form of protectorate had reserved to Italy complete freedom of action. In the diplomatic sphere the rest of Europe was being estranged from Albania, and Italian influence soon succeeded in establishing at Tirana a kind of enclosed political camp, within which Italy might without hindrance prepare her plans. From that moment the Balkans virtually ceased to belong to the Balkan peoples. The invader had secured a bridgehead in the heart of the Balkan family, and this fact created a gulf between its various members.

How was this made possible? How did Italy contrive to acquire a political monopoly in Albania, and how was she able to exercise that monopoly for more than 10 years without serious complications arising within the country? How was it that for so long Europe accepted or tolerated the maintenance of this

bridge-head, which in itself revealed the aims that had dictated its establishment?

These questions, summarizing as they do the whole of the Albanian problem, must of necessity be answered, if solution of this problem at the end of the present war is to be founded on the sole basis capable of assuring a measure of permanence: past experience.

The Albanian drama during this war has consisted in a combination of two principal factors: 1) Albania's geographical position, and 2) the internal conditions under which the Albanian nation came into being and acted from the time of the Balkan wars onwards. An endeavour will be made to analyse from these two angles the events that have affected Albania.

It is, of course, beyond dispute that geography has stamped the mark of disaster or tragedy upon the careers of many peoples. Among these must certainly be counted the Albanian people, from the moment when great world Powers began to arise to the West of the Balkans - Powers whose political radius was clearly intended to embrace the East.

Nevertheless geography cannot explain everything. Account must be taken also of conditions peculiar to each people: political, social and cultural conditions determining its position in the world and as if directing its destiny. In Albania the latter factor, as will be noted, played a significant part, and it was precisely the one that the Italian invader exploited, in order to attain his purposes with greater ease and security.

In full cognizance of the country's internal conditions Italian diplomacy worked systematically and indeed diabolically to intensify internal antagonisms and to aggravate economic and racial difficulties, so that it might the more easily gain domination over the country.

Viewed in this light, the Albanian problem is seen to be a much wider one; it can no longer be examined within the narrow limits of a purely military offensive undertaken against a small and unarmed state. Its true significance cannot, however, be grasped unless the whole question be considered in both its aspects simultaneously: the geographic and diplomatic aspect no less than the political and internal one.

EUROPE AND THE ALBANIAN QUESTION

When, in 1912, the victories won by the Balkan States against Turkey had brought the Balkan question to the fore-front, no one in Europe was ignorant of the special complications surrounding the Albanian problem.

The idea that it was possible for Albania to be a self-contained State, and for this State to live in independence, was one that was not seriously entertained by anybody. As early as November, 1912, the British Minister at Belgrade, Mr. Ralph Paget, was reporting to his Government: "All the information which I have been able to glean is to the effect that the Northern Albanians are an unruly, turbulent lot. The Southern Albanians are quieter, but all are considered unfit for self-government An autonomous Albania—which, I gather from the Austrian Minister, his Government have some idea of placing under Turkish suzerainty—is likely to be a source of trouble in the future, owing to Austrian and Italian intrigue." (1)

"How Austria and Italy could ever have believed in the possibility of creating such a State and setting up a working government there, I have never been able to understand. I was staying lately in a country-house in Austrian Silesia, the Larish's, where the German Emperor had paid a visit last September. I heard he had spoken openly there to all he met about Albania, saying the triumph claimed by Austria in getting the State of Albania accepted by the Powers would be short-lived, that Austrian policy in the Adriatic was foolishness; and that the wise thing to have done would have been to let Serbia spread to the seacoast and make herself responsible for keeping the Albanians in order.

This would have relieved Austria of an impossible task; it would have given reasonable satisfaction to Serbian aspirations; and it would have given Serbia so much to do at home that she would become a harmless neighbour with whom it would have been easy to live in peace." (2)

That these remarks of the Emperor William were not inspired merely by one of his habitual caprices is proved by the

¹*British Documents*, IX, II, No. 257

²B. D. X, p. 90

German diplomatic documents, in which we see him repeatedly intervening in opposition to Austrian designs in Albania.³ On the 7th November, 1912, he telegraphs to his Foreign Minister, von Kiderlen-Waechter, expressing disapproval of Austria's attitude towards the Albanian question. The dangers that Austria discerns in the advance of the Serbs to Durazzo are, he says, imaginary. At all events, he himself does not intend to apply the 'casus foederis' to Durazzo and Albania. The 'casus foederis' covers each ally's own possessions, not its claims. Two days later, on the 9th November, the Emperor sends a telegram of similar tenor to his Chancellor, Bethmann—Hollweg, and concludes by proposing an autonomous Albania under a Serbian prince.

The idea of an independent Albania was not even deemed worthy of discussion.

Hilmi Pasha, the famous Inspector-General of Macedonia and later Foreign Minister, who was then Turkish Ambassador at Vienna, doubtless knew more about all these developments. In conversation with his British colleague, de Bunsen, he explained in detail that for at any rate many years to come Albania will be wholly incapable of existing on her own resources. Hilmi estimated the country's annual revenues at 5-10 million francs. and, as will be seen, this figure was substantially correct. On the other hand, in view of the condition of the country, some 10,000 gendarmes were required for the maintenance of order, and their upkeep would entail an expenditure of at least Seven millions francs. What then would remain for the Prince of Wied's civil list and for the administrative expenses of the country?

"Austria-Hungary and Italy must make up their minds to find some 12 or 15 millions of francs a year to make good the deficit." (4)

Austria-Hungary had no occasion to find any money for this purpose. In time, however, Italy came to learn how accurate were Hilmi's estimates, while Albania, no less than the rest of Europe, was not slow to appreciate the political and diplomatic significance of the economic reality which Hilmi had outlined. At all events, the facts of the matter were from that time not unknown. There was, indeed, a strange and very eloquent coincidence in the figures of the estimated revenues. Von Tchirsky, the German Ambassador at Vienna, speaking at about

³*German Diplomatic Documents*, (1871--1914). Vol. IV, pp. 120-1.

⁴B. D. X, p. 201.

this time to de-Bunsen, told him that, according to his calculations, 15 millions francs would be required annually for the government of the country, and that he did not believe that in the first years Albania could produce more than one-third of this sum.⁵

The British Government was not unaware of this situation. In an important report, dated the 31st December, 1913, and submitted by Sir E. Crowe, who was then serving in the Foreign Office, to Sir Edward Grey the Albanian problem is stated in unequivocal terms for the consideration of the British Government. The necessity of continuous economic support for Albania, due to her inability to live on her own resources, at any rate at the beginning, figures as the basis of the report. At the beginning of the report, the question is raised whether it is to Great Britain's advantage to undertake heavy financial commitments for the preservation of the independence of a country in which she has no direct interest. In addition, if Great Britain takes an active interest in Albania, she cannot do so except with a view to the latter's independence. Consequently, in giving her support to the independence of Albania, a support which will entail financial sacrifice, Great Britain is in danger of coming into conflict with Austria and Italy, and doubtless also with Germany, who in this matter will wish to help her allies; whereas, by abandoning Albania to her fate she would indirectly be promoting friction between Austria and Italy, who would inevitably come into conflict in Albania.

In presenting the question in this downright manner Sir E. Crowe did not himself provide an answer to the dilemma. The phrasing, however, of his report makes it appear that he inclined in favour of abandoning Albania. Sir Edward Grey was obviously referring to such a meaning when he noted in the margin of the report; "My own inclination is in accord with Sir E. Crowe's minute, and I would come to that decision and act upon it at once, if Russia and France had not to be considered."⁶

Moreover, Sir Arthur Nicolson, writing at about the same period to Sir C. Harding, appears to regret the decision on Albanian independence which Great Britain had been compelled to adopt on account of Austria: "It is true that we have agreed to the institution of an Albanian State, but I do not think that this somewhat artificial creation will have a very long life. Albania never has been a nation, and there are too many diverse

⁵B.D. Vol. X. p. 84.

⁶B. D. X, p. 85.

and antagonistic elements within it to afford hope that it will be possible to establish a stable state. There is little doubt that before long it will break to pieces and Austria and Italy will then take steps for establishing their respective spheres of influence or even go so far as to annex those portions which they may think necessary."⁷

The Russian Government's view was not dissimilar, as appears from a reply given by M. Sazonoff, then Minister for Foreign Affairs, to the British Charge d' Affairs (November, 1913):

"....it was impossible to take this newly created state seriously, or to imagine that it would be feasible to make a regularly constituted state out of a collection of uncivilized tribesmen."⁸

For this reason the Russian Government perceived from the first moment that Austrian policy aimed at the formation of such a State precisely in order to facilitate its subordination to the biddings of Austria and Italy. Hence, even when the Russian Government realised that, in the face of Austrian insistence, the annexation of Northern Albania to Serbia and of Southern Albania to Greece was impossible, it endeavoured to ensure that at any rate the Sultan's authority should be preserved. In a report submitted by the Russian Government to the British Government we find it stated unequivocally that "le futur prince, pour affermir sa position devra nécessairement s'assurer d'un appui ailleurs qu'en Albanie, un appui que le Cabinet de Vienne sera tout disposé a lui accorder", and further "C'est en s'inspirant de toutes ces considérations que le Gouvernement Impérial croit devoir se prononcer en faveur d'une Albanie neutre, franchement autonome, confiée a l'administration d'un Vali Turc et placée sous le contrôle international européen."⁹

An even better interpretation of Russian policy in the matter was given by Iswolsky, at that time Russian Ambassador in Paris: "As regards the future of Albania," he remarked to the British Ambassador, "I am entirely in favour of our leaving Austria to try the adventure of an 'independent' or 'autonomous' Albania. Not for one moment do I believe that it is possible to group those wild and lawless mountaineers in an autonomous state. Who will be able to govern them? who would be able to bring them to heel? Constant anxiety will arise. Never-

⁷B. D. X, p. 50.

⁸B. D. X, p. 59.

⁹B. D. IX 2, p. 562.

theless, let us try the experiment. Let us leave Austria for a further twenty or thirty years to carry on her machinations through her consuls or the local Catholic priests in Albania. It will be a spectacle for Europe and also an open wound. One thing is certain, it will lead to friction between Italy and Austria in the Adriatic, and that is a result for which Russia will feel no regrets." A few months later, the Italian Foreign Minister, the Marquis di San Giuliano, in the face of the chaos to which the situation in Albania had been reduced, suggested to the Russian Government the dispatch of detachments of international troops; he received a reply from Krupenski the Russian Ambassador in Rome, to the effect that it was not considered desirable that Russian troops should bolster up a state to the creation of which Russia had assented in London only for the sake of peace, and in spite of her view that it was a compulsory error (*erzwungener Irrtum*), which, even if it finally proved otherwise, would merely result in the establishment of a new Moslem State under the suzerainty of Turkey. Approximately similar views were expressed at that time by Monsieur Sazonoff to M. Psychas, Greek Minister at St. Petersburg.

Moreover, this view of the Albanian question was so generally accepted that even the famous Bulgarian nationalist, Rizoff, a former Minister at Berlin, writes, in the introduction to his well-known work on the ethnological, historical and political frontiers of the Bulgarians, that the part of Albania lying south of the river Scumbi together with Valona must be given to Greece, and Northern Albania with Durazzo to Serbia.

But the most authoritative testimony to the failure of Albania to have a self-contained national existence comes from the Ballplatz itself, where, as is well-known, the idea of Albania's independence was first conceived. This is what Freiherr von Mussulin, who directed the Kultus-Politische Abteilung of the Austrian Foreign Ministry from 1910-16, and who by reason of his special qualifications had most to do with the Albanian question, wrote about Albania in his book dealing with the events of that period, "Das Haus am Ballplatz".

"With a complete disinterestedness the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy maintained throughout the whole area of Catholic Albania a network of Churches and schools; it trained school teachers, built schools and repaired and founded churches. In conformity with the very nature of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, our cultural activities in Albania had as their sole objective to foster and exalt the spirit of Albanian nationalism.

We could not seek to impose any influence, whether German, Slav or Hungarian. Our only purpose was to raise the cultural and material level of the Albanian nation and to train it in self-administration and independence. The practical English made fun of our hobby. If we did have any political objective, for which we expended so much effort and so much money, it consisted in preventing any other foreign power from establishing herself in Albania and thus becoming mistress of the Albanian littoral. We wished to strengthen the national spirit of the Albanians and to render them capable of offering successful resistance to a possible foreign invasion Today (1924) it has become obvious that we were mistaken in our estimate of the Albanian people's capacity for development, and of the possibility that this people would, in the near future, create a national life of its own, transcending the opposition of North and South. The purpose at which we aimed could not be accomplished either by means of civilizing influences or by means of political counsels or material subsidies; it could be accomplished only by the establishment of a real protectorate. We failed, however, to decide in good time to take such a step, and at the period with which we are now dealing it was too late."¹⁰

¹⁰*Das Haus am Ballplatz*, p. 148.