

The Consolidation of Albanian Nationalism: The League of
Prizren 1878-1881

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History Honors Thesis
University of Michigan

2007

Acknowledgments

Upon the completion of this thesis, I would like to acknowledge the following people for their help and support. Many thanks go to Professor John Fine who has very kindly assisted me with advice and support through the duration of this project, from the proposal all the way down to the final details. I would also like to thank my family for their understanding and relentless support. And finally words go to my friends who suggested materials and contributed to the editing. I dedicate this project to those close to my heart.

Introduction

This thesis examines the emergence of an Albanian identity in the face of the threatened absorption of the territory inhabited by Albanian speakers by the neighboring Slavic and Greek states. The threat erupted when the Russians in a war against the Ottomans successfully marched through what was to again become Bulgaria enroute to Istanbul. The overwhelmed Ottomans sued for peace and signed a dictated agreement providing a major redrawing of the Balkans at San Stefano in April 1878. The newly created Bulgaria received much of Macedonia, penetrating into territory inhabited by Albanian speakers. The other European powers could not accept these new arrangements and demanded a new settlement which was to be carried out by a new conference at Berlin that July. Various powers and Balkan states drew up proposals, some of which also claimed territory lived in by Albanian speakers.

In the Ottoman empire people were defined religiously and it was only in the 19th century that many Balkan Christians began to switch their identities from a religious (i.e. Orthodox or Catholic) to a semi-language-based (for the various languages being spoken needed defining and standardizing) ethnic one. Albanian speakers were slow to make this change since a majority were Muslim (either Sunni or Bektashi) content with the Ottoman definition of community. But the threatened expansion of Greece, Serbia, Montenegro and now Bulgaria into Albanian-speaking lands threatened not only Muslims but also the Albanian Orthodox and Catholics.

The idea of an Albanian ethnicity or national identity encompassing people of varied religions had not yet taken root. However, there were a few individuals who had expressed such ideas before 1878. Between the 1820s and 1840s Naum Veqilharxhi

attempted to write the first primer for the Albanian language or Evetar, a book which was well received in parts of southern Albania. He urged Albanians to study their language to lift the country out of its backwardness. Then in the decades before 1878, two Italo-Albanians Jeronim (Girolamo) de Rada and Dhimiter Kamarda (Demetrio Camarda) spearheaded an Albanian nationalist cultural movement. In his works such as Skanderbeg (1872) de Rada sang praise to the Albanian glorious past, a mix of history of legend, where the heroic figure of Skanderbeg became a symbol for hope and an Albanian Renaissance;¹ Dhimiter Kamarda on the other hand focused on language. In his scientific study of 1864 *Saggio di gramatologia comparata della lingua Albanese* Albanian is presented as an ancient language.² But now in the 1870s faced with the nationalist claims of their neighbors, certain Albanians responded. A number of Albanian notables in Istanbul formed the “Central Committee for the Defense of the Rights of the Albanian Nationality” in the winter of 1877. In collaboration with Albanian businessmen and local leaders the intellectuals in Istanbul then called, as we shall see, a meeting in Prizren to make representation to the powers about “Albanian territory.”

This period and its events, clearly of great importance for the eventual creation of an Albanian state in 1913, have attracted the attention of scholars, chiefly of the American of Albanian origin, Stavro Skendi of Columbia University who in 1967 published his monograph the *Albanian National Awakening* and the Albanian scholar Prof. Kristo Frasherri who published his *Lidhja Shqiptare e Prizrenit (The Albanian League of Prizren)* in 1997. Skendi concludes that the League was instrumental in developing an Albanian national identity. Its program for Albanian autonomy influenced

¹ See Stavro Skendi *The Albanian National Awakening* p. 116 Princeton: Princeton University Press 1967

² Stavro Skendi *The Albanian National Awakening* p. 117

the political thinking of the future generations. Prof. Frasheri's account is much more extensive than Prof. Skendi's and the two arrive at more or less the same conclusions. However, Prof. Frasheri's work is infused with a greater degree of nationalist sentiment and that he somewhat exaggerates the popularity of the movement among Albanians, whereas Skendi presents a more realistic approach.

Having had a chance to spend a month in the archives of Tirana in the summer of 2006, it seemed exciting to re-examine this important moment of identity transformation around 1878 particularly since Skendi's work on the League did not focus very extensively on some of the primary literature that I have used. Most of the documents have been published in a collection called *Documents et Materiaux* in Studia Albanica no.1 published in Tirana by the Academy of Sciences of the Albanian Popular Socialist Republic in 1978. The collection was compiled by the historians S. Pulaha, A. Kondo, and K. Prifti.

This thesis, then, is based on my re-examination of the sources about the Albanian awakening. Fortunately I have found that Skendi did not take fully into consideration the fact that some of the appeals Albanians made to the Great Powers and the Ottoman administration were already demonstrating a strong sense of identity. There also appears to be a sense of slight disagreements between Ottoman decisions and documents and the assumptions that Skendi makes with regards to their timeframe. Because Skendi's account of the League was brief due to the much broader extent of his work, I have attempted to make a closer analysis of some key primary documents so as to present them in a greater depth.

Chapter I

Identity in Albania: Paving the Way to the Establishment of the League

The notion of identity is crucial for any people that wish to distinguish themselves from other ones. To justify identity people often look for roots in the past, key elements that represent both continuity in a territory and a sense of unity among its residents as a defined majority among them. This is the precise stage at which Albanian leaders and leading intellectuals of the 1870s found themselves before the formation of the League of Prizren. One of the primary goals of that organization was to define an Albanian identity with a majority status and represent it to the Powers whose attention the League was demanding. Before presenting the formation and the program of the League, it is worthwhile to take a glance at perceived notions of identity among the region's populace, prior to this date, 1878, in order to better understand the mindset and the conditions that brought about the birth of this organization.

Albania in Antiquity

Albanian popular tradition traces its historical heritage to the Pelasgic and Illyrian peoples that once inhabited the western parts of the Balkan Peninsula. Though this is questioned in some ongoing studies, most scholars do link the origin of the Albanian people to the Indo-European tribes known as the Illyrians. These fierce, warlike tribes all sharing a dominant common language and culture had settled into the north western Balkans including modern Albania as early as the seventh century B.C.³

These territories stretched northward bordering the Danube, and reached the southern shores of the Adriatic and Ionian seas forming the region of Epirus. In antiquity, Herodotus wrote that, "Epirus is inhabited by non-Greek peoples who speak a barbarian language." Indeed it was this non-Greek language which was later going to be one of the

³ Vickers, Mirana The Albanians : A Modern History p.1 London 1999

distinguishing elements setting the Albanians apart from other nationalities of the Balkan Peninsula. These barbarians⁴ were descendants of earlier people who had called themselves Pelasgic, meaning older than the earth. In addition, Homer mentions that some of these Illyrian tribes like the Dardans, the Taulants, and the Enkelejds, were allies of King Priam and Hector in protection of Troy. Albanians also consider King Pyrrhus, to whom the phrase “Pyrrhic victory” is linked, as an Illyrian. When his father the king of Epirus was murdered, young Pyrrhus fled to the neighboring kingdom of the Taulants and was brought up by their King Glaucus until he returned to reclaim his father’s throne⁵. His wife Brikena was the daughter of the Dardan king Bardhyl⁶.

In time like the rest of the Balkan peoples, the Illyrians succumbed to Roman rule. Much known for their restless vigor and their warlike nature they became a fine source for future soldiers for the Roman armies. In the first centuries after the birth of Christ, the Roman Empire regularly recruited soldiers in the Province of Illyria. Some well known Roman emperors like Diocletian, Constantine the Great and Justinian were from families of Illyrian origin.

The earliest attempt to link the modern Albanians to the ancient Illyrians was made in 1774 by the Swedish historian Hans Erich Thunman in his book Untersuchungen ueber die Geschichte der Oestlichen Europaischen Voelker (Research on the History of Eastern European Peoples). Using Roman and Byzantine historical sources as well as linguistic and onomastic evidence, Thunman was able to conclude that the Albanians were the autochthon descendants of the ancient Illyrian populations who were never Romanized like the Daco-Thracian populations, forefathers of the Romanians. An

⁴ In antiquity, Greeks used this term to refer to foreigners.

⁵ Andi Nasto *Histori e Hershme-Pellazge, Ilire dhe Epirote* Albasoul 1997

⁶ Dardan territory encompassed modern north-eastern Albania as well as Kosove.

Austrian linguist, Johannes Georges von Hahn further supported the theory of the Illyrian origin of Albanians in his work Albanesische Studien (Albanian Studies) in 1854. In the course of time many other historians, archeologists, and linguists have provided further arguments supporting the theory that the Albanians and their language are modern day descendants of the Illyrians. By 1878, Albanian thinkers who influenced the League used the following arguments:

1. Albanians live in the territories once inhabited by the Illyrian tribes. There are no historical sources pointing to the movement of Albanians from elsewhere to become settlers of these territories.
2. Components of Illyrian linguistic elements such as names of objects, tribes, names of people etc known can be found in the Albanian language.
3. The relationships of Albanian with ancient Greek and Latin testify that Albanian was formed and developed alongside these two languages along the shores of the Adriatic and the Ionian Seas⁷.

One of the latest attempts in this ongoing effort to establish a link between these civilizations is a book entitled Ancient Illyria recently published in London. The project was spearheaded by a mixed group of Albanian and American scholars headed by Auron Tare, an Albanian journalist and historian. It is a study of unpublished documents and includes the book Illyrian Letters, written by the renowned archeologist Sir Arthur Evans. This work sheds light on the society and the culture of these predecessors of Albanians.⁸

⁷ In 1864 Dhimiter Kamarda published his linguistic study *Saggio di grammatologia comparata della lingua Albanese* showing its antiquity as well as attempting to demonstrate its close relationship to Greek. See Skendi Albanian National Awakening p. 117.

⁸ “Shqiptaret Dorezane te Ilireve” (Albanians Descendants of the Illyrians) Gazeta Shqiptare September 30, 2006.

Much encouraged by studies like those of Thunman and Von Hahn which were published and circulated decades before the commencement of the League, Albanian nationalists and champions of the League were eager to employ the conclusions and findings of the academics as they constructed their claims of an Albanian identity. Perhaps the best example can be found in Sami Frasheri's work Albania: What it Was, What it Is, and What it Will Be. Sami Frasheri was a well known Albanian thinker, publicist and journalist who contributed much to the standardization of the Albanian language. Along with others in Istanbul he founded the Society for the Printing of Albanian Letters in September 1879. The society's work supported the development of the Albanian alphabet and schools. Sami Frasheri was also one of the most prominent activists of the League of Prizren. He also contributed to the standardization of modern Turkish.

The first section of his book, *What Albania Was, What it Is, What it will Be* discussing the Illyrians and Epirotes says, "Ancient Illyria did not stretch through all of Albania (in the modern sense), for it did not extend south beyond the Vjosa River; in the north though, it is much larger....because it stretched along the Sava River reaching the end of the Adriatic by including Bosnia and other countries. The territory south of the Vjosa and into the fringes of Ambracia (Gulf of Arta), or the southern part of modern Toskeri⁹, was called Epirus¹⁰". He mentions that the two regions were ruled by different kingdoms, but claims that they did not differ from one another in character. Epirotes and Illyrians spoke the same language that Albanians speak today, claims Frasheri.

"According to the writers of ancient Greece, Illyrians and Epirotes did not differ from

⁹ Toskeri is the southern part of Albania. Its northern counterpart is known as Gegeri.

¹⁰ See Sami Frasheri Shqieria: C'ka Qene, C'eshte, E c'do te Behet Tirana: Shtepia Botuese Mesonjetorja e Pare 1999 edited by Kastriot Mahilaj.

each other in any way, they lived and were like the modern Albanians, without any difference; they spoke the language which we speak today”¹¹. Sami Frasheri was aware of the importance for Albanians to establish a link to their territorial presence in antiquity. The fact that recent studies had shown a link between the Albanians and the ancient Illyrians came at an opportune time indeed.

The Middle Ages

The provinces of Illyricum, as they were known, were under Byzantine administration. The Slavic invasions and settlement in the Balkans greatly changed the demographics of the Peninsula. Illyrian settlements were affected by the invasions; with time the assimilation to the Slavic elements affected the indigenous populations in most of the Balkans. In time Slavic states were to be established. A lot of intermarriage probably took place, and with it a mutual cultural exchange that would shape the Balkans for centuries to come. The Serbian kingdom of Stefan Dusan which collapsed in 1355 had at one time encompassed the recently war ridden territory of Kosovo and expanded southward into Vlore, Albania¹². This possession by a medieval Serbian state over Albanian populated territories became the foundations of nationalist claims in the 19th century. The Serbs and Albanians both sought the highly disputed territory of Kosovo. A battle fought in the fields of Kosovo in 1389, the *Battle of Kosovo Polje* in which a number of Balkan princes organized themselves in a united front against the advancing Ottomans. The Ottomans were victorious and the Serb leader Prince Lazar was killed. The battle became a major theme in subsequent Serb heroic epics. The battlefield and the

¹¹ Ibid p. 11

¹² Vlore is also the ancient Roman dominated Illyrian port of Aulon.

numerous cultural monuments (particularly the monasteries erected by Serb king gave great importance to Serb nationalist claims to this territory. As recently as 1989 when Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic visited Prishtine, the provincial capital of Kosovo, he commemorated the fallen in the Battle of Kosovo Polje and very soon thereafter, Kosovo lost its autonomous status.

It is interesting, however, that the League's headquarters were set in Prizren, a city in Kosovo. Albanian historian Kristo Frasheri notes that Prizren was chosen as the meeting site to counter Serb claims that the city belonged to them. In the 14th century, Prizren served as the capital of the Serb state for a couple decades, but by the 1870s it had an Albanian majority population¹³. Needless to say, these nationalist attitudes defined the struggle for national expansion and subsequently national preservation for the Balkan countries in the late 19th century.

With the decline of Byzantine power and influence in this area, the Ottomans appeared. By the late 1300s and early 1400s, the Ottomans had already penetrated into what later was to be Albania. The population was divided into a Catholic North, and an Orthodox South. The feudal lords ruling in Albania typically shifted their confession according to whichever power's influence they were coming under: Catholic if they were dealing with the Venetians or Greek Orthodox if the Byzantines. But more or less, these religious lines were drawn up on a North-South basis. Before the Ottomans could really establish themselves in Albania, they had to reckon with the Albanian Prince of Kruje (Kroya) Scanderbeg (1443-1468) and the rule he established over the neighboring principalities.

¹³ See Prof. Dr. Kristo Frasheri Lidhja Shqiptare e Prizrenit (p. 81) Tirana: Shtepia Botuese TOENA 1997

Over the centuries, the figure of Scanderbeg assumed epic proportions in Albanian folklore. One heard his stories everywhere¹⁴. For 25 years Scanderbeg successfully withstood Ottoman advances turning the period between 1443 and 1468 into one of the most brilliant in Albanian history. Scanderbeg was born Gjergj Kastrioti (George Kastrioti), son of the feudal lord Gjon Kastrioti whose dominions stretched over north-eastern and central Albania. As a child Gjergj was taken hostage by the Ottomans to be brought up at the court of Sultan Murad II, in exchange for which his father Gjon was able to remain governor of his lands. In time, the young Gjergj converted to Islam, and rose in rank and prominence eventually becoming a powerful general. He was given a new Muslim name *Iskander* and the Turkish title *beg*, becoming Scanderbeg. During a military campaign in Nis (modern-day Serbia) against the Hungarian prince John Hunyadi, Scanderbeg who was commander of an army unit defected and with an entourage of 300 loyal warriors made his way to his father's castle fortress Kruje (Croya). He returned to his faith, Catholicism, and on November 28, 1443 as he stood in the castle of Kruje he proclaimed independence from his Ottoman overlord the Sultan in Constantinople.

Sources call Scanderbeg among other things King of Arberia¹⁵, or Prince of Epirus. How far did his influence extend though? On this writers differ. For example, in *Invention of a Nationalism: Myth and Amnesia* Piro Misha tries to play down the figure of Scanderbeg as a ruler of all Albania. His rule, Misha argues, did not extend beyond central Albania. Says Misha, "As with most myths, his figure and his deeds became a mixture of historical facts, truths, half-truths, inventions and folklore. Skanderbeg was

¹⁴ These stories became part of the Albanian folklore and even children's books like Mitrush Kuteli's *Tregime te Mocme Shqiptare* (Old Albanian Folktales).

¹⁵ Arberia is the medieval name for Albania.

made a national hero although his action had never really involved all Albanians. Neither Kosovo nor most parts of the south were ever included. An attempt he made in 1455 to take the city of Berat (southern Albania) in fact failed.”¹⁶ Moreover a few Greeks and Serbs have attempted to identify Scanderbeg as one of their blood. The Greek claim largely follows his being addressed as the *Prince of Epirus*, Epirus being a medieval Greek-ruled region and hotly contested after the 1870s as to whether it should be southern Albania or northern Greece.

However, Misha overlooks certain facts. Scanderbeg attempted to establish a sense of unity among the ruling feudal families in Albania and environs. Soon after his return to Croya in March of 1444, at Scanderbeg’s request the local nobles convened at the Cathedral of Saint Nicholas in Lezha to proclaim the *Beselidhja e Lezhes* (The League of Lezha¹⁷). The goal of the convention was to forge unity among the leading feudal lords in their struggle against the Ottoman threat. The lords swore their allegiance to Scanderbeg and recognized him as their leader. Among them were such leaders of families like: the Arianitis of south Albania, the Dukagjinis of the Albanian highlands, the Crnojevices of modern-day Montenegro, the Balshas of Shkoder (north-western Albania), the Topias, and Muzakas (holders of south-central Albania around Berat).¹⁸ It is obvious that the character of this League was an anti Ottoman one. In order to cement the ties that were made at the League, Scanderbeg entered into various alliances, including marriage ones. He himself married Donika, the daughter of Gjergj Arianiti the famous leader of southern Albania whose revolt against the Ottomans in 1433 had attracted the

¹⁶ See Piro Misha “The History of Albanian Myth Production” in *Albanian Identities: Myth and History* (p. 33-49) edited by Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers and Bernd J. Fischer. London: Hurst and Company 2002

¹⁷ Illyrian Lis, or Roman Lissus

¹⁸ In reference see Kristo Frasher’s *Historia e Skenderbeut* Tirana: Shtepia Botuese TOENA, 1999

attention of the Christian West.¹⁹ In addition, he allied his family with that of the Topias, lords of Berat, by marrying his youngest sister Mamica to Muzak Topia . One of his older sisters Jella (Yella) had already been married to the Crnojevic heir. Crnojevic ruled over Montenegro or Zeta (then including Kosovo). His other sisters Angelina and Vljajka had been married earlier into the Arianiti and Balsha families.²⁰

Regardless of the intimate details, one thing remains certain: Scanderbeg was widely recognized as leader of people in Albanian-speaking territories against the invading Ottomans in the 15th century. He mounted a 25 year-long struggle losing only one battle (that of Berat in 1455), keeping the Ottoman advance at bay. Most Albanian fortresses were not to fall to the Turks until 1479, nine years after Scanderbeg's death on January 17th, 1468.

Over time Scanderbeg has been given a lead role by Albanian nationalists as a symbol of national unity. Using episodes out of the Middle Ages is a fairly common aspect of Balkan nationasm. Piro Misha botes that Scanderbeg's transformation into a national hero made him "the embodiment of the myth 'of continuous resistance' against their national foes."²¹ His identity as a Christian prince and the alliance he forged with the Kingdom of Naples and the recognition he received from the Venetians and the papacy, were all used to affirm the European identity of Albania.²² In Sami Frasheri's Albania: What it Was, What it Is, What it Will Be one sees the degree to which

Scanderbeg's figure was elevated by the nationalists of the 19th century. In a section of

¹⁹ Skendi The Albanian National Awakening p.1

²⁰ See Prof. Luan Malltezi's "Lidhjet Familjare te Kastrioteve dhe Mamica" Revista Univers of the Albanian Institute of Islamic Thought, No. 6, 2005.

²¹ See Misha in Albanain Identities: Myth and History p. 43

²² Due to the efforts of the Arberesh émigrés in Calabria, the descendants of the Albanians who left the country after the death of Scanderbeg, Scanderbeg was also portrayed as a defender of the Christian West against the Ottoman threat, sometimes being called "Athleta Christi" (Champion for Christ) by Pope Nicholas before 1468. See Skendi in Albanian Naitonal Awakening page 4.

the book devoted to Scanderbeg's rule Frasheri writes, "Scanderbeg who gave and will give his entire life to the honor of Albania, this incomparable man was but a child when he fell in the hands of the Turks and was brought up in the Sultan's court; not yet a man he demonstrated such bravery and deeds in the Ottoman army as to astound the whole world, wherever he went he defeated (others) and no one could stand up to him," (p.17). Elevated to mythical proportions, Scanderbeg became the perfect national symbol for the 19th century Albanian nationalists who then were urging their fellow countrymen to look away from their Ottoman past, and trying to convince Europe that this man who was the "Champion of Christendom" was proof of Albania's cultural affinity to the Continent. Some of the nationalist writing that ensued from the League of Prizren seemed to suggest that Christian Europe owed a debt to Albania because of Scanderbeg's contributions.

Ottoman Rule

Ottoman penetration in the Balkans had already begun towards the end of the 14th century. They had established a foothold in parts of Albania before Scanderbeg's revolt in the 1440s. However, their conquest was not to be complete until the end of the 10 year-long resistance movement in 1479, eleven years after Scanderbeg's death. Ottoman rule in Albania would last until 1912. Some major changes occurred under the Ottomans and under their administration the nationalist movement for independence began.

The coming of the Ottoman brought a new faith to Christian Albania. Stavro Skendi says, "Many of the lords who remained in the country espoused Islam in order to preserve their positions, and a part of the population naturally followed the nobility in its

conversion”²³. Ottoman rule did not necessarily spell doom to the Christian Orthodox population in Albania. Sultan Mehmed II had taken the Patriarchate of Constantinople under his protection after the fall of the Byzantine Empire in 1453, and the Orthodox were naturally favored over the Catholic population who was associated with Catholic Europe, the enemy of the Ottoman Empire.

Conversions to Islam followed particularly in the lowlands which had been borderlands between Catholicism and Orthodoxy. Unlike their countrymen who were more or less secluded in the mountainous regions and highlands, folks in the lowlands were more accessible for Islamic propagation. Conversions were more commonplace in the towns, while the villages remained predominately Christian longer. Skendi says, “The majority of the converts were men. Women although married to Moslems, often retained their Christian religion, and were a factor in creating a good feeling between the members of the two faiths. In some instances the followers of the Prophet contributed toward the support of the parish priest, as the majority of them had Christian wives.”²⁴ Traditional reasons explaining the conversions that followed have been: to avoid paying taxes, to have the opportunity to advance up the social and administrative scale for “in the Ottoman empire the political-economic basis was religion and not nationality,” as well as the fact that both Catholic and Orthodox believers lacked intelligent and inspiring clergymen to tend to the needs of their flock²⁵. However in the late 17th and 18th centuries both the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church began founding in a few towns educational institutions for their communities. Over the next centuries, though Catholics

²³ Skendi *The Albanian National Awakening* p. 7

²⁴ Instances of intermarriage still occur nowadays esp. in the region of Lure in the Diber district. In reported cases, brothers living under one roof profess different faiths. Ibid p. 8

²⁵ Ibid

and Orthodox remained, many people in Albanian lands converted to Islam because of the millet system. Each religious community was headed by its religious leader. As a result, people identified themselves with the various religious communities. In the 19th century, this would be a challenge to Albanian nationalists who sought to make Albania and the League the primary identity.

Also, conversions happened because of harsh reprisals carried out by the Ottoman administration. The pasha of Ipek forcibly removed Catholic inhabitants of northern Albania into the plains of southern Serbia after a failed Serb revolt in 1689 and the flight of many Serbs to the Hapsburg Empire. The transferred villagers were forced to convert over to Islam. Moreover, other conversions to Islam occurred gradually over the centuries.

Bektashism was accepted with more enthusiasm in Albanian lands than in other Balkan regions. “This Moslem pantheistic order is believed to have originated in the thirteenth century in a frontier region of Anatolia, where Christianity, Islam... coexisted.”²⁶ It came to Albania during the 15th century and became popular with the Janissary troops which accompanied the Ottoman armies. The tolerant principles of this Moslem sect combined with its belief that all peoples of the Porte worshipped the same God, eased the conversion of former Christians. Further conversions to Bektashim were to follow during the rule of Ali Pashe Tepelena of Janina (1787-1822), regional governor known for his autonomist tendencies against Ottoman centralization efforts. In time Bektashism would become a powerful driving force in the Albanian nationalist movement of the late 19th century.

The overall religious picture in 19th century Albania under the Ottomans was something like this: the Catholics were confined to the north with the city of Shkoder as

²⁶ See Skendi Albanian National Awakening p. 13

their center. Muslims were a majority in Kosovo and in central Albania. Southern Albania was home to Bektashis, Sunni Muslims, and Orthodox Christians who resided primarily in the cities of Korce and Gjirokaster. Stavro Skendi says that, “this religious composition was destined to play a predominant role in Albania’s evolution.” As nationalist ideals were preached to the general populace, it was imperative to find a way to push religious differences aside.

In matters of administration Ottomans differed on policies of local vs. provincial government. Where Muslim communities were found, autonomy was practiced on a local scale, but on a province-wide basis the Ottomans tried to retain control. This was challenged in regions with large numbers of local Muslims. Albanians and Bosnians had predominately Muslim populations. Until the centralist reforms of the mid 19th century, it seems that the Porte was content in leaving the Christian populace to their own affairs as long as they paid their taxes and dues. Muslims in the South with their local councils had control of governance in their lands. The Geg highlanders of the North traditionally ruled themselves according to their tribal structure dictated by the ancient Code of Leke Dukagjin, a local lord who lived during the 15th century. The *besa* or word of honor was a central concept to the mountaineers who were subject to the jurisdiction of the Code (including the areas of Upper Shkoder, and Dukagjin comprising Mirdite). The central unit was the *fis* or tribe and everyone was loyal to a particular tribe. The oldest male member of the tribe is also the head. Individual tribes could also be organized under another territorial-political entity known as the *bajrak* or banner. In turn, several tribes united in wartime under a single *bajraktar*. His duties included leading his highlanders into armed conflict and the Bajraktar served eventually in tax-collection as well as other

regulatory matters. Skendi claims "...that each bajrak constitutes an autonomous state governed by customs and other juridical regulations basically common to all the other *bajraks*."²⁷

In southern Albania similar autonomy was accorded to the local rulers by the Porte. The tribal organization had declined much earlier among the Tosks of southern Albania, though remnants could be found in scattered villages. The Orthodox Christian Himariotes and Suliotes (now in northern Greece) enjoyed relative autonomy. Their only obligations to the Porte included paying the tribute in one lump sum and sending soldiers to the Sultan in time of war. No more than 1,000 troops could be sent.²⁸

Office holding was barred to Christians who rendered their obligations through the religious hierarchy's millet organization. They were also allowed to organize themselves into guilds, run private business enterprises and enter the liberal professions. Muslim students attended local medresses (seminaries), whereas Catholics and Orthodox in areas with schools could attend their own religious schools. "In the nineteenth century, when the Greek state was formed, the Greek schools increased in number and expanded northward [into Ottoman territory]"²⁹. Similarly Catholic schools were sometimes run by foreign Franciscan missionaries.

These were the general social conditions from the 15th to the early 19th century. The autonomy of local rulers was then challenged when the Ottomans threatened by decline tried to centralize their administration. Dissatisfaction with Ottoman rule and the new reforms grew leading to armed resistance. Nationalist movements that sprang up

²⁷ Skendi *The Albanian National Awakening* p. 14

²⁸ There were Christians among these soldiers. In addition, highlanders of the North were also obligated to send troops to the Sultan. *ibid* p. 16

²⁹ *ibid* p. 17

resulted in new Balkan states like Greece and autonomous Serbia. Their ideals caught the attention of young Albanian nationals as well. The changing political situation of the 1870s resulting from the Russo-Turkish war prompted Albanian leaders to begin thinking about their own future.

Times of Change

As was mentioned above, until the beginning of the 19th century the Porte had left much of the local administration in the hands of the local Muslim landholding beys. There had never been a single ruler over the whole of Albania.³⁰ The tide began to change with the ascent of two dynasts in North and South Albania: the Bushatlis of Shkoder and Ali Pasha Tepelena. The two increasingly asserted their own autonomy and Ali Pasha Tepelena succeeded in “creating hereditary principalities almost independent of the Sultan”³¹. Ali Pasha Tepelena expanded his holdings and authority over southern Albania, and into regions of what are now northern Greece and western Macedonia and ruled with his sons for 32 years. This led to open conflict with the Sultan. Mustafa Pasha Bushatliu was arrested and allowed to live in Istanbul unharmed after 1831, but his southern compatriot was beheaded in 1822 and his head was sent to Sultan Mahmud II.

During their rule, unrest and turmoil began to develop among the beys and agas who had been overshadowed by the two dominant pashas. Despite the two’s defeats, other powerful Muslim families of Albania also resisted the centralizing efforts of the Porte. Unrest soon followed, especially in the south when the local rulers were told that they would not receive payment for their participation against the Greek Revolution. “In 1830 Mehmed Reshid Pasha, the Turkish Commander-in-Chief, invited all southern beys

³⁰ Skendi [The Albanian National Awakening](#) page 21

³¹ *ibid*

and agas to Monastir on the pretext that they would be rewarded for the Greek campaign. Five hundred of them were treacherously murdered in one day (August 26, 1830).³² In spite of this, revolts continued throughout the south, and government officials were killed in great numbers. Other leaders in the North were deported to Asia Minor, but resistance to the Sultan's reforms thus only intensified.

When Abdul Mejid succeeded to the throne as Sultan in 1839, he issued the *Hatti Sherif of Gulhane*. This edict provided for increased taxes and the formation of a new army making military service compulsory for Muslims for four years. This was the offspring of the *Tanzimat* reforms of the preceding Sultan who had sought to centralize the state's power according to European models. The new edict read, "...to establish laws to regulate the contingent to be furnished by each locality..., and to reduce the term of military service to four or five years."³³ A provision for tax payments was made also: "...that henceforth each member of the Ottoman society be taxed for a quota of a fixed tax." Fearing anger from the local populace in Albania the Gulhane edict was never fully implemented there, and was initiated only gradually. But its proclamation provoked an intense response from the Albanians. It was a shock to the Albanian mountaineers who until now had paid low taxes, had enjoyed autonomy, and had provided soldiers to the Sultan only in times of war. In 1839 the population of Prizren expelled its governor out of anger. Other revolts broke over the next decade in Shkup (Skopje), Tetove, Prishtine, and Gjakove. People were opposed to the "new draft, the new taxes, and the centralistic

³² Skendi *The Albanian National Awakening* p. 23

³³ See Mustafa Reshid Pasha "The Gulhane Edict" published November 3, 1839. Translated by J. C. Hurewitz. In *Diplomacy in the Near East and Middle East. A documentary record: 1535-1914*. Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1956

policy of the regime”.³⁴ Southern Albanians resented the fact that Albanian functionaries were not assigned locally but were sent off to serve in Anatolia. Revolts were put down and followed by Ottoman reprisals, internments and jailing.

To make matters worse these reforms were followed by others, in particular the edict of Hatt-I-Humayun in 1856. Some of the later ones were “detrimental to the territorial unity of Albania”.³⁵ Prior to the 1830s, southern Albania was ruled as the *eyelet* (province) of Janina which included the cities of Berat, Gjirokaster, Arta; its territory sometimes included Thessaly. Northern Albania was subjected to even more complex administrative divisions. It belonged at various times to the eyelet of Rumeli. Later in 1865, new administrative reforms occurred and now Albanian territories were divided into three vilayets (provinces) Shkoder, Janina, and Monastir which were further subdivided into sandjaks [districts ruled by a mutesarif]. These administrative changes had political goals toward Albania. Stavro Skendi writes:

While in other parts of the empire the changes were usually made for the purpose of a better collection of taxes, in Albania they appear to have had a political aim. The warlike Albanians occupied a strategic position in the Balkans; it was necessary therefore to prevent their unification. This policy of the Porte, particularly in the nineteenth century when nationalism was on the rise, in the Balkans, seems to account for the frequent changes in the administrative division of Albania,³⁶

Before the Congress of Berlin convened in 1878 another vilayet of Kosovo was created. It was not just Albanian territory for it encompassed Nis and Novi Pazar, both predominately populated by Slavs. In the south, the Thessalian region of Larissa was attached to the vilayet of Janina. Skendi summarizes these policies: the Porte purposely

³⁴ Skendi *The Albanian National Awakening* p. 23

³⁵ See Skendi *The Albanian National Awakening* p. 26

³⁶ *ibid* p. 27

avoided the creation of homogenous Albanian vilayets which would only give it further grief.³⁷

Furthermore, unlike their Balkan neighbors, Albanians were not allowed to have their own schools. The edict of Hatt-i-Humayun in 1856 had made provisions calling for the “equal treatment in education to all peoples of the Empire”.³⁸ In the meantime foreign schools were not only allowed to remain in place, but new ones opened up each year.³⁹ “It was in the interest of the Porte and the Patriarchate of Constantinople to keep the Albanians divided on the basis of creed”⁴⁰.

At the same time though, nationalist ideas had already begun to emerge outside the borders of Albania. The Arberesh in Italy, descendants of Albanians who had fled to Calabria in southern Italy after the death of Scanderbeg, propagated nationalist ideas through the literature they produced in the middle of the nineteenth century. Free to express their cultural feelings, and having had more exposure “to Western ideas of enlightenment and nationalism than Albanians in the mother country”, the Arberesh were early champions of the national cause.⁴¹ Notable among them were names like Jeronim De Rada (Girolamo de Rada), Dhimiter Kamarda (Demeter Camarda) and others. Indigenous Albanians who had learned of the nationalist trends among other Balkan nations had “begun to think about the fate of their country in the event of a collapse of the Ottoman Empire”⁴².

³⁷ Skendi The Albanian National Awakening p. 27

³⁸ *ibid* p. 18

³⁹ See Kristo Frasheri Lidhja Shqiptare e Prizrenit page 24

⁴⁰ Skendi The Albanian National Awakening p. 18

⁴¹ *ibid*

⁴² *ibid* p. 18

The foundations of Albanian nationalism had been laid by one Naum Veqilharxhi or Naum Panajot Bredhi, a native of Vithkuq in the district of Korce. The young Veqilharxhi immigrated to Walachia with his family, as many other literate Orthodox families of the south had done before them. He is said to have participated in the Greek Independence Movement in 1821, and thereafter he relocated himself in Bessarabia working as a lawyer and dedicating himself to the Albanian cause.⁴³ In 1824 Veqilharxhi began working on an Albanian alphabet, and later on he published his *Evetar* (Alphabet). Concerned by the lack of Albanian schools, Veqilharxhi stressed the need to develop an alphabet for the Albanian language, since it was written either in Greek or Arabic letters. A written Albanian language was the necessary precursor for cultural and political development.

His *Evetar* was published in 1844 and received quite well in Korce, Berat and Permet. Part of Veqilharxhi's grander vision saw an Albanian nation, with its own language, customs and history, as well as territory. Some of his feelings are expressed in a letter he addresses to young Albanian boys.⁴⁴ He begins by saying, "The best invention of Man is the process of learning itself... We know that men of all races increasingly strive to build and develop their language and use it as a tool of learning."⁴⁵ Why should Albanians stand apart from other races, he asks? "The crucial point is that Albanians do not know their own heritage; not only are they unable to write in their own language, they cannot even pray to the Lord in the language each of them tasted with his mother's milk,

⁴³ It is safe to assume that Veqilharxhi had probably been influenced by nationalist ideas during the Greek Revolution in which he took part. "He was a member of *Philiki Etairia* (Friendly Society), a secret revolutionary organization that contributed to the preparation of the Greek War of Independence." See Myslim Islami's Naum Veqilharxhi: Ideologu i Pare i Rilindjes Shqiptare pp. 133-137.

⁴⁴ *A Preface to Young Albanian Boys*

⁴⁵ See Myslim Islami Naum Veqilharxhi: Ideologu i Pare i Rilindjes Shqiptare pp 133-137.

as other nations do.” He goes on to say, Albanians have been learning other languages but not their own. Veqilharxhi urges the boys to learn their own language: “It is no secret that people around the world prefer to study their own language and find it most useful, and learn foreign languages by necessity only, as foreigners should strive to learn ours.” He explains his own efforts to create an Albanian alphabet and to purge the language of various foreign words. Finally, he encourages the boys to take up the study of their own language to, “curb foreign sarcasm about the lack of an alphabet and writing in our language.” Albanians, “will shortly join the civilized world, prove that our land is idle no longer and show ourselves as men of great honor.” The learning of one’s own language makes a man honorable. Although he was poisoned by people connected to the Orthodox Church while he attempted to found a cultural organization in Istanbul, Veqilharxhi’s ideas would be taken up by the patriot Jani Vreto in the 1870s when he and other Albanian activists established *Shoqeria e Shkronjave* (The Istanbul Society of Letters).⁴⁶

Conclusions

After the Ottomans increasingly centralized their administration setting off revolts and retaliations, Albanians grew weary of their situation. Their plight was enhanced by the denial to them of such rights as establishing their own schools, and the subdivision of their territories by including other nationalities in the four vilayets set up between 1865 and 1878. The territorial unity of Albania was greatly thus broken. The unstable political situation made the future seem uncertain. After the Russo-Turkish conflict was over in 1878, it became increasingly clear that Albanian territories were to be broken up according to the decisions of the Treaty of San Stefano and the Congress of Berlin and

⁴⁶ Myslim Islami Naum Veqilharxhi: Ideologu i Pare I Rilindjes Shqiptare pp. 133-137.

divided among their neighbors. Each neighbor and its Great Power “sponsor” was vying for political influence in the strategic Balkan peninsula. No longer certain about the continuity of the crumbling Ottoman Empire, some Albanians began thinking that proper action needed to be taken to address this impending political threat. The road was being paved for the establishment of an organization that would properly deal with these issues.

Chapter Two

Albania between San Stefano and the Congress of Berlin

Road to San Stefano

The impending fall of the Ottoman Empire was obvious to all foreign observers by the mid 1870s. Nationalism in the Balkans was on the rise, and the Ottoman administration obstinately resisted any attempts at increasing autonomy in places like Bulgaria, Macedonia and Bosnia Herzegovina. Very soon revolts sprang up all across the Balkans and expressing concern for her “Orthodox Christian brethren” Russia encouraged Serbia and Montenegro to declare war on the sick man of Europe. Austria-Hungary and England could not restrain Russia from pursuing military conflict with Turkey for much longer as the atrocities of May 1876 in Bulgaria incensed anti-Turkish feeling.⁴⁷ The Great Powers made one last attempt to preserve peace in the Balkans by proposing a set of terms to Turkey known as the London Protocol in March 1877, but the Ottoman government turned it down, preferring war with Russia over “humiliating conditions.” With the war’s conclusion in the winter of 1878, the political map of the Balkans was about to change forever as the defeated Ottomans faced peace terms dictated by Russia in the Treaty of San Stefano on March 3, 1878. The fate of Albanian populated territories hung on the balance. Before we go into further details about the outcome of the Treaty of Stefano it would be useful to describe what constituted Albanian territory at that time.

Definitions of Albania

Owing to their unique political position at this time, it is not as easy to define Albanians as it is to define other nationalities like the Greeks or Serbians for example. At this time Greece was an independent state and Serbia was autonomous. Both had

⁴⁷ See Stravro Skendi [The Albanian National Awakening](#) p. 31

Orthodox Christian populations and spoke their respective languages. In the Albanian case, Albanian speakers were territorially divided among four Ottoman vilayets: Kosova, Janina, Shkoder, and Monastir each of which included other populations. As we saw earlier, Albanians belonged to different religious confessions of Muslims (both Sunni and Bektashi) and Christians (Catholics and Orthodox). The Ottoman registers “are not of much help for this purpose as they were based on religion, and all Moslems, whether Albanians, Bosnians, or Turks, fell into one category.”⁴⁸ The primary criterion which crossed over these differences was language. In a memorandum of 1877, the Austrian consul in Shkoder F.Lippich lays out the northern and eastern border areas where Albanian is spoken. Excerpts of it follow.

The [Albanian] northern linguistic frontier runs from west to east, ...somewhat below Antivari, above the mountain ridge and the northwestern corner of the Shkoder lake, following the Sem upstream above Fundina through Kuci to Vasojevic and Kolasin; the latter two districts, although Serbian-speaking in the majority, still seem to be in part of Albanian origin-perhaps the only instance of slavization of Albanians....In its further course, the linguistic frontier moves from Kolasin to Gusinje and Plava, upstream the Ibar river to Rozaj, then from Suhodol and Gulgovik to Duga Poljana, on the Rogosna plateau, west and southwest of Novi Pazar, where it climbs the districts of Vucitern, Kurcunli and Prokoplje up to the Serbian border and descends again to the Toplica, reaching its junction with the Bulgarian Morava....on the course of this river [Morava] and the Moravica....bending westward and running along the southern slope of Karadag through the Lepenc pass. It then crosses the Vardar valley near the junction of the Treska with the Vardar, and pursuing the Treska through the sandjak of Monastir, it runs along its boundary with Dibra as far as the northern shore of the Lake Ohrid, from where it turns westward to the Shkumbi River and pursuing it winds up on the Adriatic Sea.⁴⁹

As we shall later see, the Treaty of San Stefano proposed giving some of these areas to Serbia, Montenegro and Bulgaria. There is no indication that the memorandum had any influence on Albanian demands or the League.

⁴⁸ibid

⁴⁹ Skendi cites the relevance of this memorandum as “It [the memorandum] may be held sufficiently reliable on account of the special interest of Austria-Hungary in this portion of Albania and Lippich’s personal knowledge of it.” See Stavro Skendi The Albanian National Awakening p.32

Albania and the Treaty of San Stefano

As the Russian and Turkish signatories took leave after having made peace between the two empires, a surge of anxiety loomed over the various Balkan nations. Of the measures taken by the treaty, the major one concerned the reshaping of the political map of the Balkans. The Serbs, Greeks and especially Bulgarians were anticipating huge territorial increases to their borders, while others like Albania were apprehensive of annexation by its neighbors. “The San Stefano Treaty accorded to the Balkan Slavic nations large pieces of Albanian-inhabited land.”⁵⁰ Russia was going to ensure its imperial goals of establishing its hegemony in the Balkans to oust the Ottomans and gain through its clients an outlet into the Mediterranean. No Balkan states or inhabitants of Bosnia, Herzegovina, Albania or Macedonia had been invited to participate in the discussions of the Treaty or to give their own political suggestions of the future.

Through the Treaty the Ottoman Empire lost eighty percent of her possession in Southeast Europe.⁵¹ Romania, Serbia and Montenegro received their full independence. Additionally, according to Article 6 of the Treaty, Bulgaria was made into an extremely large autonomous principality that would be tributary to the Sultan. Russia expected Bulgaria to be its puppet to provide for its hegemony in the Balkans. So Bulgaria was given extensive territory at the expense of Turkish, and potentially Serbian, Macedonian and Albanian lands. The map below illustrates the new political borders in the Balkans according to San Stefano.

How were all these changes going to affect Albanian-speaking territories?

Although the greater part of Albanian-speaking territories were to remain under Ottoman

⁵⁰ *ibid*

⁵¹ See Kristo Frasheri in *Lidhja Shqiptare e Prizrenit* p.58

administration, peripheral areas were to be partitioned among Serbia, Montenegro, and Bulgaria.⁵² Northern Kosovo and the vicinities of Mitrovica would be incorporated into Serbia. Montenegro would take over the district provinces of Ulqin (Dulcigno), Kraja (Kraya), Anamal, Hot, Gruda, Tuz, Kelmend, Gucia, Plava, and Rugova with large Albanian-speaking populations. And finally Bulgaria would completely take over the vilayet of Monastir which included the areas of Diber, Korca, Pogradec, Struga, Kercova, Gostivar, Tetovo, Kumanova, and Kacanik.

From an administrative point of view the Treaty of San Stefano threatened to further break down the communications between various Albanian-speaking territories. Whereas before they had been divided among four vilayets of the Ottoman Empire, now they were down to three that of Monastir being incorporated in Bulgaria. Of the three that remained in the Ottoman Empire, the vilayet of Janina in the south was to be subject to a reform. According to article 15 of the Treaty, this vilayet would now be administered according to the same regulatory measures granted to the island of Crete in 1866. The historian Kristo Frasheri states that, “Ultimately this meant that Albanians were going to be ruled by different regulations thereby making their political, economical, social, and cultural relationships even harder.”⁵³

Albanian Reactions to San Stefano

The general opinion among politically aware Albanians at this time was not only that the decisions at San Stefano were detrimental to Albania’s territorial integrity, but that the Powers had blatantly denied the existence of an Albanian nationality by

⁵² ibid

⁵³ See Kristo Frasheri Lidhja Shqiptare e Prizrenit p.59

presenting a series of propositions to the Ottomans to cede Albanian lands to the Slavic nations in the Balkans. These decisions produced Albanian rage and anger at the Russians and the Slavic nations anxious to expand on Albanian soil. While the conflict was going on, the Serbian, Montenegrin, and Bulgarian armies terrorized the Albanian population living in the lands they had invaded. The Austrian-Hungarian consul Nettovich stationed in Antivari remarked that while in other parts of the Balkans the primary targets of the terror had been local Muslims, in Albania not even Christians were spared. Peasants living in these areas were not permitted to work their lands, and by March of 1878 famine had become a real threat. The consul said “the situation is deplorable”.⁵⁴ Tens of thousands of people from these areas had fled to Kosovo and other regions free from hostilities, waiting to return to their own lands or to move elsewhere in case these lands remained ceded to other Balkan nations. Some sought shelter in Shkoder, thousands of others left for remote locations like Thessaloniki, Istanbul, Izmir, Adana and Syria.

The Albanian response to all of this was quick and intense. Up to this point Albanian revolts had been directed against new centralist reforms of the Ottoman administration. Now the fear of being partitioned among these other Balkan states led Albanians toward an ever increasingly nationalistic movement. The primary goal of the movement was “simply to defend the integrity of the Albanian lands.”⁵⁵

The organization of opinion against San Stefano took on different forms. Leaders expressed indignation by appealing to their own local or regional interests, but also by making emphasizing the damages San Stefano would bring on to the Albanian people as

⁵⁴ See Nettovich (HHSTA/PA). Antivari, 23 March 1878, according to Lippich (HHSTA/PA). Rapport nr. 28 Shkoder, 1 April 1878. See Kristo Frasher Lidhja Shqiptare e Prizrenit p. 60

⁵⁵ See Charles and Barbara Jelavich The Establishment of the Balkan National States (p.244) Volume III London and Seattle: University of Washington Press 1986

a nation. Even before the fighting stopped, a group of very prominent Albanian leaders, intellectuals, and government officials living in Istanbul convened to form a secret committee known as “The Central Committee for the Defense of the Rights of the Albanian Nationality,” or the Istanbul Committee for short.⁵⁶

The group was composed of both Christians and Muslims and some of its more important members like Abdul Frasheri and Vaso Pasha were later to play leading roles in shaping the League of Prizren. During the first couple weeks of 1878, the Istanbul Committee drafted a program that would initiate a “league” resembling a political and military organization concerned with the protection of Albanian territories from foreign invasion as well as to fight to create a unified Albanian vilayet (out of the four already existing ones). According to the program, Albanians would not take part in the armed revolt against the Ottoman Empire as other subjects i.e Serbia, Montenegro, and Bulgaria were doing, but were instead going to focus on uniting the four existing Albanian vilayets to combine them into one. It was in Albanian interests to remain in the Ottoman Empire, because Albanian lands would thereby not be divided among different Balkan nations. Forming a unified vilayet under Ottoman rule was the first step in eventually forming an Albanian state.⁵⁷

In the meantime, anxiety in the Albanian vilayets was escalating. Though as a hopeful sign, the other Great Powers had demanded a meeting to revise San Stefano in the hopes of balancing the interests of the British, Austro-Hungarians, and Russians in

⁵⁶ There is a disagreement as to the time the group actually formed Stavro Skendi contends that the group formed after the San Stefano Treaty was reached, and there is reason to believe that the group was formed earlier. Kristo Frasheri argued that the group had already formed in December 1877 in order to carefully monitor every move of Balkan nations on Albanian soil. Its goal was the creation of an Albanian state and the safeguarding of Albania’s territorial integrity. See K. Frasheri Lidhja Shqiptare e Prizrenit p.53.

⁵⁷ For full reference see Kristo Frasheri Lidhja Shqiptare e Prizrenit p. 52-53.

the Balkans and to ensure that Istanbul remained within Ottoman rule. The old treaty was now to be revised at the Congress of Berlin which then met from June 13 to July 13, 1878.

Albania and the Congress of Berlin

Apprehensive of the outcome, the local Albanian groups appealed to the Great Powers in hopes of them acting to safeguard Albanian territorial interests. As the date of the Congress drew near, the number of appeals increased greatly. The many memoranda and telegrams addressed to the Great Powers state the people's firm resolve to be left as they were as well as frequent references to having an Albanian identity.

One such appeal is the one that the British ambassador in Istanbul, Layard, and his Austro-Hungarian counterpart Zichy received from the inhabitants of Diber (a city in north-eastern Albania) in April 1878. In the telegram the Dibrans expressed their fierce opposition to the city's annexation by Bulgaria. They made it clear that their lands were Albanian and could not be part of Bulgaria. "The Kaza of Diber was composed of more than 220,000 Moslems and 10,000 Christians, all of them Albanians. Rather than be incorporated into Bulgaria, the people preferred to be annihilated."⁵⁸ At this time, the natives of Dibra did not wish to separate themselves from the Ottoman Empire

Then during May many more memoranda followed. The Catholic and Muslim citizens of Shkoder appealed to Vienna to support them in opposing Montenegrin advances on Albanian lands. In the Kosovo province, citizens of Gjakove, Gusinje, and Ipek (Pec), as well as Prizren (the city in which the League was going to meet) strongly protested their division between Serbia and Montenegro.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ See Skendi *The Albanian National Awakening* p. 34

⁵⁹ *ibid*

Meanwhile members of the Istanbul Committee expressed great concern over the future of the Albanian lands. A clearly nationalist agenda was growing out of the rank and file of this group. They expressed great concern over the fact that the Treaty of San Stefano made no mention of the Albanian people whatsoever. The Frasheri brothers, Sami and Abdyl, argued that this was a deliberate intention of the Great Powers, the first step towards the complete annexation of Albanian lands. Sami, also known as Semsetin Sami in Istanbul, wrote in the Turkish newspaper *Tercuman-i-Hakikat* that Bulgaria would stretch toward the Adriatic Sea and that,

As one understands from the map of San Stefano, after [Russia] *bulgarizes* middle Albania, the parts that remain in the North, meaning the sandjaks of Prishtina, Prizren, and Shkoder [Russia] will give to Serbia and Montenegro, whereas the southern parts, meaning the sandjaks of Preveza, Janina, and Gjirokaster [Russia] will give to Greece thus eliminating Albania and wiping her off the map forever.⁶⁰

These patriotic circles also blamed the Porte for the current situation. Had the administration responded positively to the many uprisings against centralization decades ago, and had it allowed Albanians to be governed as part of one Albanian populated vilayet, Albania now would not be facing the danger of annihilation. Observing that the Ottoman Empire was in a vulnerable situation, Abdyl Frasheri basically preached that Albanians should take the matter into their own hands. If the Ottomans could not defend them now, then they would not do so in the future either agreed Sami Frasheri⁶¹. The uprisings that had begun years before in resistance to centralistic reforms were now to take a completely different direction. The common and intense anger at the treatment the Albanians received at San Stefano would very soon be channeled towards the formation of a League which would work hard to consolidate Albanian anger into a movement

⁶⁰ See Semsetin Sami in "Arnavutlugun Amagi" in *Tercuman-i-Hakikat* (January 3, 1878)- A.S. Levend. Semsetin Sami, Ankara, 1969, p. 117-118. Kristo Frasheri Lidhja Shqiptare e Prizrenit p. 60

⁶¹ See Kristo Frasheri Lidhja Shqiptare e Prizrenit p. 60

bound on a common Albania. As a result, the first sparks of a national identity were beginning to develop among Albanians.

As months went by, there were expectations that the Congress of Berlin would address things a bit differently. The territorial grants made to Bulgaria would be curtailed. The Great Powers Germany, Great Britain, and France would also support Greece's territorial claims. Among them were territories of southern Albania. As the Treaty of San Stefano was being reexamined, Balkan states rushed to Berlin to present the Powers proposals in support of their own nationalist programs. But in Albania, there was no representative body. To defend the Albanian cause publicly was very difficult to do as well. Ottoman policy made it impossible for Albanians to have an independent media outlet where they could discuss their own difficulties and let alone detail some kind of a national agenda. Getting proposals published outside of the Empire also posed difficulties. The European media tended to favor claims of the Balkan states. Academics contend that even well into the 20th century Albania remained utterly unknown to most Europeans, as remote a region as Tibet. This fact explains why Balkan states were by and large successful in their propaganda.

Voicing Albanian Opinions

Voices emerged nonetheless. Some in the form of collective protests via memoranda and telegrams directed to the Great Powers, others in the form of publications or products of political meetings often arranged through the personal connections of the few political activists and members of the Istanbul Committee. The most notable members, the two Frasheri brothers Abdyl and Sami and Pashko Vasa (or

Vaso Pasha) appealed to the Great Powers by publishing a range of articles dealing with the Albanian cause. Sami's writings appeared in Turkish newspapers like *Tercuman-i-Sark* and *Tercuman-i-Hakikat* while Abdyl's appeared in *Messenger de Vienne* and the Turkish newspaper *Basiret*.⁶² Pashko Vasa had already gained an international reputation as an Albanian activist thanks to a number of works he wrote in the years leading up to the League which he had published in French, English, and Italian. Some of his works dealt with the history of the region as in *Esquisse historique sur le Montenegro d'apres les traditions de l'Albanie* (Historical Sketch of Montenegro According to Albanian Traditions) published in Constantinople in 1873. Others dealt more specifically with the Albanian cause. One such The Latin Alphabet Applied to the Albanian Language discussed the possibility of constructing an Albanian alphabet based on the Latin alphabet (*L'Alphabet latin appliqué a la langue albanaise* published in Constantinople in 1878). As the League progressed his work was directed at the current crisis.⁶³ In 1879 he published an article "The Truth on Albania and Albanians: Historical and Critical Issues" in London. As Robert Elsie says, Vasa:

...presented briefly the main ideas of the Albanian patriots of that time about the origin, history, social structure, customs and the contemporary situation of the Albanian nation.⁶⁴

This presentation was made in the hopes of explaining to the Great Powers that the partitioning of Albania created a grave injustice. He drew borders of what was considered Albania:

⁶² Examples of their writing will follow up in the course of this thesis.

⁶³ Reference to his writings will follow up as they become relevant to the arguments presented.

⁶⁴ See Pashko Vasa "The Truth on Albania and Albanians" 1999 reprint by the Centre for Albanian Studies, London, introduction by Robert Elsie.

Upper Albania commences at Antivari (Bar), embraces all the Catholic tribes of the North and the districts of Ipek, Pristina, Katchanik, Uskub, Perlpe, Monastir, Ohrida, and terminates at Elbassan. Lower Albania begins at Elbassan, and extends as far as the Gulf of Preveza.

Pashko Vasa tried to portray an Albania with historical continuity and a united political purpose. He referred to the fifteenth century to depict the campaigns of Skanderbeg as a heroic stand of all Albanians against foreign domination.

The Epirotes, the Macedonians, and the Illyrians, that is to say, those of pure Pelasgic race whom foreigners in modern times have designated Albanians, united themselves under one patriotic idea and in the fifteenth century put up the most decisive resistance to Ottoman domination. In fact at that time, the whole of Albania took up arms to defend the independence of the country.

The historical interpretations which the “Truth about Albania and the Albanians” presented were going to prove useful in forging together the sense of a national identity necessary for the League to push in its programs in the years to come. These notions were reinforced by his stating that there was no difference between northern or southern Albanians, and that *the religion of Albanians is Albania*. It is obvious that Pashko Vasa wanted to steer public opinion towards the idea of national unity. As a member of the Committee of Istanbul, he also proposed the unity of all Albanians in a single vilayet which they could autonomously administer while remaining a part of the Ottoman Empire. These were some of the ideas to which the Albanian public was being exposed to.

Abdyl Frasherli too was an active writer and a political ideologue. In April and May of 1878 Abdyl took to the political forefront of the Committee writing a series of articles and undertaking a number of political tasks in support of the Committee’s agenda. As a deputy in the Ottoman Parliament, it was quite natural that he would assume that role. In a letter to Count Andrassy, the Austrian Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Austro-

Hungarian consul Oculi stationed at Janina reported that A. Frasheri was the founder of the “Albanian National Party” or the Istanbul Committee as it was otherwise known⁶⁵. In one of Abdyl’s articles which appeared in *Messenger de Vienne* on April 26, 1878 he argued that Russian interests after the Treaty of San Stefano would have dangerous repercussions for the Balkans. Contrary to its promises, Russia was not the savior she claimed to be. Her purported support for the Slavic peoples of the Balkans was nothing more than a mask by which she would eventually expand over the rest of Eastern Europe. Those most threatened by this expansion were the, “Greeks, Albanians, Romanians, and even the Bulgars themselves, the Serbs, and Bosnians, which now seem to be the favorites of the modern occupier but which will fall to a kind of slavery that will make them long for their past sooner or later.”⁶⁶ This article spelled out the danger that Albania was facing. According to Abdyl, while all other Balkan nations had at least one great power whose support they could rely on, Albania the oldest of the Balkan nationalities had no one to speak for her. The problem lay in that neither the Ottoman Empire nor the Great Powers acknowledged the existence of Albanians as members of one national entity because they were divided into different religious groups, and therefore Russian expansion in this area threatened to annihilate the Albanian nation.⁶⁷

Articles that followed defined the increasingly nationalistic platform of the Istanbul Committee. In April and in May his pieces continued in appearing on the pages of *Messenger de Vienne*. They said that Albanians were, “...a solid nation”, a people with a unity that was at once:

⁶⁵ See Kristo Frasheri [Lidhja Shqiptare e Prizrenit](#) p. 66

⁶⁶ See Abdyl Frasheri in *Messenger de Vienne* nr.17 April 26, 1878 in Kristo Frasheri [Lidhja Shqiptare e Prizrenit](#) p.23

⁶⁷ *ibid*

historical⁶⁸, linguistic⁶⁹, territorial⁷⁰ and cultural⁷¹, distinct from other neighboring countries, equipped with the willingness to win its national independence, to protect its territorial wholeness, to develop its own language and to enter the path to civilization as soon as possible.

In articles that he submitted to the Turkish newspaper *Basiret* he warned the Ottomans that as a national entity in every sense of the word, Albanians reserved their right to self-determination. The Ottomans therefore did not have the authority to keep Albanians from protecting their own lands even though they had signed the Treaty of San Stefano. If at the Congress of Berlin, the Ottoman administration would be forced to cede Albanian territories, “Albanians will resist till not one of them is standing anymore.”⁷² This was a foreboding tone of the military response coming in the future. In his writing A. Frasheri claimed to be speaking in the name of all Albanian people, and that these were not just his own views.⁷³

The Committee of Istanbul was very much interested in securing potential allies. The Treaty of San Stefano not only had not made any concessions to Greece, but it granted Greek parts of Thessaly and Macedonia to Bulgaria. Greece seemed like a potential ally. At the end of 1877, A. Frasheri had tried in vain to convince the Greek delegate to Istanbul Skoulodis that the formation of a Greco-Albanian alliance would prove formidable in stopping Slavic expansion in the Balkans, but the Greek side could not accept anything but a federation presided by the Greek King Jorgos (George).

⁶⁸ *ibid* nr. 18 May 3, 1878 in Kristo Frasheri Lidhja Shqiptare e Prizrenit p. 68

⁶⁹ *ibid* nr. nr. 23 June 7, 1878 in *ibid*

⁷⁰ *ibid* nr. nr. 18 May 3, 1878 in *ibid*

⁷¹ *ibid* nr. 23 June 7, 1878

⁷² See A. Frasheri in *Basiret* nr. 2416 Istanbul April 21, 1878 in Kristo Frasheri Lidhja Shqiptare e Prizrenit p. 68

⁷³ See Kristo Frasheri Lidhja Shqiptare e Prizrenit p.68

Worried that this setup would only lead to the realization of the Megali Idhea (Great Idea or Greater Greece) in southern Albania, Abdyl Frasheri saw it as entirely unfit for Albanian aspirations. Ever since the Greek politician John Colettes had proclaimed the hotly contested region of southern Albania also known as Epirus a part of the Megali Idhea, the footprint for a Greater Greece, in 1846 Greeks had been eying this territory to make their own. But this was a region with an Albanian majority. Here Ali Pasha Tepelena had risen to prominence in the early 1800s and given aid to the Greek Revolution of 1821. The cities of Janina, Gumenica (Igumenitza), Preveza and the Gulf of Arta were populated by Albanians. In spite of his former failure, Abdyl appealed to the Greeks once more through two articles which he published in May in *Messenger de Vienne*. Again he said, that as long as the Greeks abandoned their claims to southern Albania, a Greco-Albanian alliance could prove beneficial to both in halting Slavic expansion on their lands. But if Athens would not be temperate in its territorial aspirations with regard to Albanian lands, then “it would serve Russian pan-slavism: [Greece] would not only damage Albania, but [itself] as well.”⁷⁴ He tried to persuade the Greek government that although they had their own nation, from a military perspective Greeks and Albanians were not very much different. Their population in numbers did not differ very much, and because half of the Greeks lived in Ottoman occupied lands, Athens could not mobilize troops as easily as Albanians could. A union would be beneficial to the Greeks, Frasheri said. Albanians were not any less determined to fight

⁷⁴ Abdyl Frasheri in *Messenger de Vienne* nr. 21 May 24, 1878 in Kristo Frasheri Lidhja Shqiptare e Prizrenit p. 69

for their self-determination than the Greeks had been half a century earlier.⁷⁵ Frasheri also did not fail to mention the help that Albanians had given to the Greek cause earlier.

Formation of the League's Parties and their Ideologies

Articles and such formal protests were made right up to the beginning of the League on June 10. These months saw the development of tendencies and political attitudes towards possible reaction before the Congress of Berlin could make any decisions with regards to Albanian lands. Although the road to some kind of a political unit was not clear cut, attempts were being made to consolidate the different safety committees which had sprung up after the initial stages of San Stefano. The Istanbul Committee had come up with the idea of a *Beselidhje* (or League) organized according to Albanian custom in which leaders of the land would strike up a *besa* (oath or agreement) to work for a common cause. Their plans had been laid out in December of 1877 and their platform had been publicized through member's articles (Pashko Vasa, the Frasheri brothers, and other). Abdyl Frasheri, leader of the Committee, outlined the three biggest challenges facing the Albanian provinces: safeguard territorial integrity, revitalize its poor economy and emerge out of the cultural backwardness that characterized the country. Out of these three goals, the last two could be put aside until the territorial integrity of Albanian lands was secured. That was the immediate challenge. Once that was achieved, it would be up to the Ottoman administration to formally unite the four vilayets into one and give this Albanian vilayet some concessions that would strengthen it politically. Ideally, this vilayet would have a special state budget for its affairs and Albanian would be the official language of the administration. Abdyl's belief was that this would also be

⁷⁵ See Kristo Frasheri *Lidhja Shqiptare e Prizrenit* p. 70

in the benefit of the Ottomans themselves. And if the European Powers accepted these demands he wrote in *Messenger de Vienne*, “the day will come when Europe will be convinced that Albanians serve the cause of humanity and civilization better than any other people of the East,” and that they “will always be the best vanguard against Russian pan Slavism.”⁷⁶

However, the Istanbul Committee had not obtained any kind of permission or support by the Porte in conducting their affairs or any of their plans. It was easy for the Ottoman administration to see through the autonomist ideas of these Albanian intellectuals. Some of the group’s members were high ranking Ottoman officials as well. Although members tried to appeal to the sympathies of the Porte, as in the article above for example, the Porte’s obstinate refusal in recognizing the Albanians as a nationality was an indication that in order to succeed with these plans, they would have to take matters in their own hands. Inflamed as the population was, it was going to be easy to organize a military response if Albanian demands were not respected in Berlin. Although the Committee thought that its goals could be reached without entering in armed conflict with the Ottoman administration, it determined to protect Albanian lands with arms against other Balkan nations and the Porte if it was going to allow their lands to be ceded.⁷⁷

Notwithstanding its apparent patriotism, not everyone in Albania agreed with the Istanbul Committee. Two other leading groups had platforms of their own next to the Istanbul Committee’s League platform. The League would include members of the three groups and all their programs converged on some points.

⁷⁶ See Abdyl Frasheri in *Messenger de Vienne* nr. 22 May 31, 1878 p. 5

⁷⁷ See Kristo Frasheri Lidhja Shqiptare e Prizrenit p. 71

Closer in view to the Istanbul Committee, were the so called “patriotic moderates.” The people that fell in this category were leaders of the conservative elite, large landowners, and big business conglomerates like: Ali Pashe Gučia, Hasan Pasha Tetova, Jashar bey Shkupi, Iljaz Pasha Dibra, Jusuf Karahsani, Selim Beg Bushati, Mahmud Pasha Bicaku, Omer Pasha Vrioni, Maliq Pasha Libohova, Vesel Pasha Dino, Engjell Coba and others.⁷⁸ They were led by two driving interests: preserving the integrity of Albanian lands and their own business interests within the Empire. They were less revolutionary in spirit than the “radicals” of the Istanbul Committee and more committed to being a part of the Porte because of their own commercial interests. But like the Istanbul Committee they favored the formation of an Albanian League and the defense of those Albanian lands that were in danger of being ceded. The creation of a unified vilayet did not play the role of eventual state formation in their eyes. This group was much more reluctant towards the idea of autonomy at this stage. “They conceived the Albanian League not as a national political front cloaked with stately attributes, but as a federation of provinces created to collaboratively combat the chauvinist aims of their neighbors.”⁷⁹ Whereas the Istanbul Committee only supported the protection of Albanians within the confines of the four vilayets and the creation of an ethnically Albanian vilayet, these conservative leaders were pushing for the protection of Albanians even in areas where they were a minority of the local population. As a group, these leaders enjoyed wider popularity and support with Albanians for a number of reasons. For one they were better known than members of the Istanbul Committee as most of them

⁷⁸ Note that this group is representative of a wide distribution of Albanian lands. Ali Pashe Gučia came from Kosovo (northern Albanian lands). H. P. Tetova and J. Shkupi I. P. Dibra represented the lands now lying in Macedonia Tetovo and Skopje in the east. S. Bushati and Engjell Coba came from Shkoder, northwest Albania. Omer Vrioni, Maliq Libohova and Vesel Dino came from southern Albania.

⁷⁹ See Kristo Frasher Lidhja Shqiptare e Prizrenit p. 72

were large provincial landholders. Some like Ali Pashe Guçia and Iljaz Pashe Dibra had been active leaders in the armed revolts of the 1840s and 50s, and were known for their resolve in defense of Albanian interests. Others like Selim bey Bushati (Bushatliu) and Maliq Libohova came from historically leading Albanian families. The Istanbul Committee saw in them very pragmatic allies. The moderates were men of prestige and popular appeal, and the interests of the two groups converged in the most important contexts.

The third group was composed of the “Sultanist circles”. The rank and file of this group was feudal lords and Muslim clerics that identified themselves with the Ottoman administration. The most prominent members were high ranking officials of the local administration.⁸⁰ They enjoyed considerably less support than either the moderates or the radicals among the populace. Nonetheless, small numbers of Muslims who did not want to be detached from the Caliphate supported the sultanist group. These reactionaries enjoyed full support of the four Valis (governors of the vilayets), they controlled the local gendarmerie, the city garrisons and were put under constant Ottoman pressure through bribes and political threats to carry out imperial policy during these troubled times. This faction was opposed to the territorial disintegration of Albanian lands. However with them, the primary interest remained the protection of Muslims. They should not fall under Christian governments. Not only Albanian Muslims fell under this category, but Bosnians, Turks and Pomaks as well. The idea of a league worked for them as long as it would function within the parameters of the Porte’s jurisdiction. The League would have to be a Muslim League for all Muslims of the Balkans, and the Porte favored this position much more than that of an Albanian nationalist movement. “Through them the militarily

⁸⁰ Often, they weren’t of Albanian blood.

weak Porte hoped to kill two birds with one stone: to hinder the formation of an Albanian organization which would make it possible to acknowledge Albanians as a nationality, and to mobilize Albanians as well as other Muslims living in the peninsula in opposing in an illegal manner not so much the few lands that were offered Montenegro but instead the much larger provinces offered the Principate of Bulgaria, as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina which were going to be taken over by Austria-Hungary very soon.⁸¹ As soon as these conflicts would end the Porte promised to make some concessions to the Albanians.

In spite of the fact that neither the moderates nor the radicals could fully agree with the reactionaries, they were included in the preparations for the League. The fact that this group had Ottoman backing meant that the League could begin its operation without opposition from the start. That was the hope of the radicals anyways. When A. Frasheri and others had asked the Ottoman administration for permission in organizing an Albanian League in December of 1877, the Porte had turned their request down. Their meetings had been carried out in full secrecy. Each of these extreme wings was hoping to outsmart the other in the League, and that's why at the beginning they chose to come together at Prizren.

Conclusion

The period between the Treaty of San Stefano and the Congress of Berlin was marked by considerable anxiety over the fate of the four Albanian-populated vilayets. Constant appeals were made to the Porte and Great Powers to take into consideration Albanian rights before making any concessions to Balkan states. Three ideological camps

⁸¹ See Kristo Frasheri in Lidhja Shqiptare e Prizrenit p.73

concerning the future of Albanian lands began to take root at this time. In spite of their differences, the three groups sought each other out and agreed to present their views in the League they were about to form in Prizren on June 10, 1878.

Chapter Three

The League and its Life

The beginning

Arrangements for the formation of an Albanian League had been underway for some time in the spring of 1878. The Istanbul Committee had agents operating throughout the Albanian territories⁸², and ties had been made with the two other participating groups, the patriotic moderates (prominent chieftains and the landholding elite) and the reactionaries (Muslim clerics and administrators who enjoyed the backing of the Porte). All three would meet in Prizren on June 10, 1878 at the local medrese (Muslim school). The Ottoman authorities showed no opposition to the convention, and in fact they “encouraged” the League’s initial meetings.⁸³

Most of the delegates at the League belonged to one of three elites: the large landowners, mountain chieftains, and local religious authorities. “The delegates were chosen under considerable political and administrative pressure from the four Valis who gave preference to the feudal lords and the Sulltanist clerics.”⁸⁴ Because of time and distance not all delegates were able to be there on the 10th. Mainly representatives from the northeast and eastern Albania were able to get there on time. The delegates of Shkoder were delayed for a couple days, and from the South only two men attended initially. One of them was Abdyl Frasherî, the politician deputy of Janina who was soon going to become the Leagues’ dominant figure and leader of the nationalist faction. Holding favorable position in the Porte, Muslim landowners from Bosnia Hercegovina and Novi Pazar attended. Because of the presence of the reactionaries and the moderates who by and large saw themselves as subjects of the Porte, it looked at the outset as if the

⁸² Kristo Frasherî writes that this all-nationality group had asked the Porte’s approval to create an Albanian League. The Porte would only concede to an Islamic League of the Balkans which would operate under its control, however. See *Lidhja Shqiptare e Prizrenit* p. 80

⁸³ Stavro Skendi *The Albanian National Awakening* p. 36

⁸⁴ See Kristo Frasherî *Lidhja Shqiptare e Prizrenit* p.80

League may have an Islamic character. In offering its encouragement, the Porte may have hoped that this League would be an Islamic League of the Balkans in protection of the Muslim faithful and that the Albanians would be the allies of the Bosnians who were threatened with absorption into Austria-Hungary. The Istanbul Committee was still operating in secret at this time “in order to avoid pressures on the part of the Turkish government.”⁸⁵ In the beginning all parties were interested in the protection of the territories that were threatened by San Stefano. The individual tendencies of these groups would become more apparent in the months to come.

According to Kristo Frasheri, the city of Prizren was quite a sight to behold on June 10th. Great festivity and celebration greeted the visitors. Some arrived as early as June 4th, while others were being delayed in Istanbul. The Porte wanted to apply as much pressure as possible to make sure that Albanian nationalist feelings would not play a part in the proceedings. Some of them like Abdullah Pasha Dreni, Ali bey Gucia, Iljaz Pasha Dibra were from the vilayet of Kosovo, while others like Mustafa Pashe Vlora and Vesel bey Dino were representatives of the Janina vilayet. Some of these men, says K. Frasheri, who had been called to Istanbul by the Porte remained to account for their views remained firm in their patriotic feelings, though some of them yielded to Ottoman pressure. Nonetheless, a meeting was underway by early June and an initial program had support.⁸⁶

The meeting was opened on June 10 by A. Frasheri “who invited the Albanians to unite for the defense of their country which was in danger.”⁸⁷ Initially they the proposed League as a vanguard of Albanian rights, with a central committee based in Prizren.

⁸⁵ Stavro Skendi The Albanian National Awakening, pg. 36

⁸⁶ Kristo Frasheri Lidhja Shqiptare e Prizrenit p.85

⁸⁷ Skendi The Albanian National Awakening p.36

Branches of this League would be established in each of the vilayets, but ultimately administered under the central committee in Prizren. This “close committee”, as it was called, would be composed of the following men: Sheh Mustafa Tetova President, with Ali Bey Guçia, Iljaz Pashe Dibra, Mejderiz Omer Effendi Prizreni, and Sulejman Vokshi as cabinet members. Most of these men were central to the life of the League at one time or another during its three-year-long activity.

The League's Program

The first program that emerged from the early meetings of the League was called the *Kararname* (Charter of Decisions). Resolutions for a program were drafted time after time though, depending on which group prevailed and the political tension and pressures coming from the outside world.⁸⁸ Versions of the program appeared first on July 2nd and later in the Turkish journal *Tercuman-i-Sark* in mid September. Even though the programs changed, the decisions taken during the first meetings established the League as a semi-authoritative organization, still acknowledging the Sultan as an overlord. Each of the local committees was responsible for the collection of tithes, enrolling men for combat in case of war, buying food, and the distribution of arms and ammunition.⁸⁹

A document written in Turkish dated July 2nd sheds light on the military preparations that the League would undertake in response to foreign intervention and the ceding of lands. A German translation of it was found at the German consulate in Skopje. Written in the name of the League, it begins by saying that the League does not want to acknowledge any other government beside the Sublime Porte. “In the event that our

⁸⁸ Decisions of the League were responses to the politics of the Porte, the Great Powers, and the ambitions of other Balkan nations.

⁸⁹ Skendi [The Albanian National Awakening](#) p.37

demands for Serbia and Montenegro to withdraw from occupied lands are not heeded, we will proceed to the use of arms and the recapture of those territories ourselves.”⁹⁰ Five corps of the military troops would be deployed in Shkoder, Skopje, Kosovo, Jenibazar and the Hercegovina. The document provides the number of troops to be raised in each of these regions. Ten thousand troops from Sarajevo were allocated for the protection the Gacko-Trebinje line (Bosnia-Hercegovina). Finally each of the corps would receive its commands from the League at the outbreak of conflict.⁹¹ Those who did not respond to the call or fled combat would face death.⁹² During the early meetings of the League, the influence of the reactionary group, the Muslim clerics and administrators who had the support of the Porte, is known to have been strong hence the assumption that troops would also be deployed in Bosnia and the insistence of acknowledging the Sultan’s authority over the League.

Whereas both the reactionaries and some of the moderates gave full support to the decisions in the *Kararname* because they paralleled the Porte’s own agenda, the radical group had other designs. The delegates of Shkoder, when they arrived, are accredited with changing the plans of the League. “A new draft was presented (now also taking into consideration the decisions of the Congress of Berlin), where the ideas of Abdyl Frasherri about the formation of an autonomous Albanian vilayet were included.”⁹³ Delayed the Shkoder committee was not able to attend the first meetings. But before its arrival, this

⁹⁰ See *Documents et Materiaux Studia Albanica* Nr. 1 (p.178-179). Tirana, 1978. Compiled by S. Pulaha, A. Kondo, and K.Prifti.

⁹¹ *ibid*

⁹² Skendi *The Albanian National Awakening* p. 38.

⁹³ See *Programi i Lidhjes Shqiptare te Prizrenit* translated by Mary Kitroeff taken from Stefanaq Pollo and Selami Pulaha’s *Akte te Rilindjes Kombetare* (Tirana: Instituti i Historise, Akademia e Shkencave te RPSSH, 1978) pp. 62-63.

group known for its “more advanced political thinking”⁹⁴ and multi-religious composition had directed a memorandum to Lord Beaconsfield, the British Prime Minister at the Congress of Berlin “claiming the territorial integrity of Albania and its independence.”⁹⁵ This memorandum tried to make a case for the existence of an Albanian identity as justification not only for the protection of the country’s territorial integrity but also for its independence.

Defeated but never vanquished by the Turkish arms, our fathers preserved their independence, their national character, their traditions, their language; in spite of the religious difference, the Albanian be he Catholic, Orthodox, or Muslim greatly hates Turkish as well as any other foreign domination...⁹⁶

The memorandum laid down the various threats that Albania faced not only from her Balkan neighbors, but also from the Great Powers. For example, the Austrians eyed the Albanian-populated ports of Antivari (Bar), San Giovanni di Medua (Shen Gjini), Durrës, and Vlorë so that they could convert the Adriatic into a sea under their own influence. Because the Albanians had no representation at the Congress of Berlin, only Great Britain who was greatly interested in keeping the Ottoman Empire intact was likely to come to their rescue. That is why this group of Albanians appealed to Lord Beaconsfield. Having its own identity, Albania opposed any kind of annexation. It did not even provide a Turkish justification. Though the letter supported the status quo as territory under the Ottoman Empire, it appealed for a different form of government. The words independence, autonomy, and finally administration through an international commission appear. Nonetheless, the letter made it clear that from its point of view, Albania had its

⁹⁴ Skendi *The Albanian National Awakening* p. 38

⁹⁵ Refer to Italian text in *Documents et Materieux* in *Studia Albanica* Nr.1 (pp. 168-176). Tirana, 1978
Compiled by S. Pulaha, A. Kondo, and K. Prifti.

⁹⁶ *ibid*

own national identity and that the Powers convening in Berlin should allow the Albanians to decide their own fate. They had a right to rule themselves and protect what was theirs. Ultimately this kind of nationalist thinking would be emphasized and promoted in the years following 1878. These demands were the first steps towards an Albanian Renaissance.

On June 20, other Albanian members of the Istanbul Committee addressed another memorandum to the Great Powers in Berlin. "It concerned the preservation of the territorial integrity of Albania and the application of reforms." Like the Shkodrans, this group depicted the Albanians as belonging to one nationality regardless of religion. "The existence of Albania" could be proved by "history, language, and ethnography." The Istanbul Committee wanted this nationality to remain a part of the Ottoman Empire without ceding any of its lands to other countries, and ultimately govern itself autonomously.⁹⁷

The nationalists were well aware that Albania lagged behind significantly when it came to internal developments and education. As was mentioned earlier, schools in Albanian had been forbidden, even though minorities were allowed to run schools in their own language according to Ottoman law. So, one of the other progressive ideas that the radicals and moderates pushed for was education in the Albanian language. On its own, in 1879 the Istanbul Committee established the Society of Letters with the task of constructing an Albanian alphabet. These ideas accompanied by the wish that Albania remain a part of the Ottoman Empire found their way to the League's new program,

⁹⁷ See *Documents et Materiaux Studia Albanica* Nr. 1 Tirana, 1978 (pp. 176-177)

published on September 15th in the Turkish newspaper *Tercuman-i-Sark*. Many of these points were to be preserved during the next few years of the League.⁹⁸

The first point in the program maintained that the League “would preserve the right of the sovereignty of...the Sultan over Albania and not....cede to the neighboring peoples an inch of Albanian territories.”⁹⁹ The next step would be the formation of a single vilayet, “the Vilayet of Albania which will consist of the vilayets of Kosova, Shkodra and Janina.” The League acknowledged the need for capable and uncorrupt administrators. The governor to be appointed should, “[be] educated, capable and honest, and [have] a good knowledge of the situation and the needs of the country and the habits and customs of the population.” In the previous few years, Albanians had grown weary from the inept local administration, and the centralizing reforms that threatened especially the local autonomy of the mountaineers. These local administrators also needed to be suitable in other ways to serve the populace. Functionaries were needed “who have a good knowledge of the language of the country, to the point of understanding the demands of needy persons and being able to talk with them without an interpreter.”

The program sought to deal with traditional lines of division in Albanian society. “The local population must elect on an equal footing, without taking into account religious or class distinctions, the nahiye [regional] councils.” One way to unite all Albanians under their own administration and succeed in the process of eventual state formation would be to overlook religious differences. The fact that the program made

⁹⁸ For full reference to this text see *Programi i Lidhjes Shqiptare te Prizrenit* translated by Mary Kitroeff taken from Stefanaq Pollo and Selami Pulaha's *Akte te Rilindjes Kombetare* (Tirana: Instituti i Historise, Akademia e Shkencave te RPSSH, 1978) pp. 62-63.

⁹⁹ *ibid*

room for the organization of “a national army, without taking into account religious distinctions” hinted that some of the ideologues in the League were looking ahead politically. This Albanian vilayet would integrate all Albanians into one administrative body that would be creating its own identity. The promotion of the Albanian language in administrative institutions and schools would contribute further to this identity. For the time being Albanians were still subjects of the Porte, but work was to be done to establish an Albanian identity in this region. Article 6 of the program says,

The Ottoman language will remain the official language in correspondence between the vilayet and the Sublime Porte. Nevertheless, the councils of the magistracy must use the Albanian language....In the secondary schools that presently exist in Albania, as in those that will be established later on, together with the study of the Ottoman language, the sciences and the arts, courses for teaching the students to read and write the Albanian language must be introduced. A part of the vilayet’s revenues must be allocated to the propagation and the furthering of education, which will permit Albania to emerge from the ignorance in which it finds itself.

Articles 4 and 5 laid out the plans for the administration. Number 4 states this, “the local population must elect on an equal footing, without taking into account religious or class distinctions, the *nahiye* [regional] councils...The latter must, in the same manner elect the *kaza* councils, which, in turn, must elect the sandjak councils. As for the Grand Council of the vilayet, it shall be elected by the sandjak councils.” Article 5 details that the local councils will send elected members to the vilayet’s capital (city unspecified) to “inform the vilayet’s Grand Council of what the population needs for its existence, the reforms which must be carried out, as well as the faults and mistakes of the employees.” Then this council will choose a General Prosecutor to “render justice.”

Southern branches established

In order to consolidate the League and broaden its support base, Abdyl Frasheri traveled to his native village of Frasher near Permet. Since southern Albania had not been heavily represented at Prizren due to the long distance, Abdyl's idea was to gain the persuasive influence of the local Bektashi dervishes in order to establish local branches of the League and committees that could be brought into solidarity with the north. A large majority of the Muslims living in the south belonged to the Bektashi order of dervishes, an Islamic sect with Shia leanings. With the abolition of the Janissaries in 1826 they had fallen out of favor with the Porte and had been expelled from the capital. Then they retreated to southern Albania where they had support. Abdyl, "knew that he could have the majority of the Moslem Albanians of the south on his side if he won the Bektashi *babas* to the cause...Not identifying themselves with the official religion of the state, Sunnism, the Bektashis were more nationally minded."¹⁰⁰ And so after impressing Baba Alush of the *tekke* in Frasher with his ideas, Abdyl was able to assemble Albanian representatives from all over the south in Frasher in the summer of 1878.

This meeting in Frasher of Orthodox Christians and Muslims decided to establish branches of the "Albanian League" throughout the south in preparation for the defense of the region, and also to send troops to the north if they were needed. Initially, Janina was chosen as headquarters for the southern branch of the League, but over time Preveza and Gjirokaster emerged as the more practical centers. At Frasher, "the more enlightened

¹⁰⁰ See Skendi *The Albanian National Awakening* pg. 41-42.

It is worthy noting that the Bektashis and their ideas would have a lot of influence in the so-called Albanian Renaissance. They became beacons of religious tolerance and nationalist ideas. Themselves Bektashis, the Frasheri brothers dedicated a lot of their work to the national movement. Naim wrote the long poem *Qerbela* (Karbala) to parallel the situation between the Shiat Ali and the oppressor Muawiya with the more modern relations between Albania and the Porte.

elements prevailed, and the patriotic group, headed by Abdyl, could act more openly than in Prizren.”¹⁰¹

Decisions at Berlin and displeasing the Porte

Hoping that the resistance which the Albanians were mounting against the expansion of the Balkan nations would make an impression on the Great Powers and lead them to think over the fate of Ottoman lands in Europe, the Porte had showed its support for the League in the beginning. However, signs of disapproval emerged whenever the nationalist tendencies of the radicals and some of the moderates sprang up. For example, when the Shkoder committee known for its patriotic leanings came home from Prizren on July 7, it held a meeting open to the public. This committee composed of Moslems and Catholics like Preng bib Doda¹⁰² seemed threatening to the Ottoman administration in the city. “When the vali (Governor General) of [Shkoder] summoned the Albanian committee and told it not to rely on the assistance of the Porte, it was an indication that Istanbul disapproved of the national policies of the committee.”¹⁰³

As the Congress of Berlin made its decisions regarding the fate of Ottoman lands in the Balkans, tension was bound to build up. In late July, Austria-Hungary geared up for an invasion to take over its assigned Bosnia and the Ottomans feared that Austrian troops would penetrate into Novi Pazar. In its first program, the League had made some plans for the possible defense of Islamic Bosnia. There were even rumors for a while that an Albanian force was heading that way in August, but practicality demanded otherwise.

¹⁰¹ *ibid*

¹⁰² Preng bib Doda was the Kapedan (captain or chieftain) from Orosh of Mirdite. The Catholic tribes of Mirdite and Malesi e Madhe (Great Mountains) in Shkoder had shown a lot of resistance to the centralist reforms of the Porte.

¹⁰³ Skendi *The Albanian National Awakening* p. 39

Austro-Hungarian interests in northern Albania were well known. “The importance to Austria-Hungary of northern Albania as a counterpoise to Slavism is also shown in the memorandum of 1877 by F. Lippich [Austrian consul in Shkoder].”¹⁰⁴ The Congress of Berlin had decided that Bosnia would go to the Austro-Hungarians, and that the “Great Bulgaria” of San Stefano would not acquire Macedonia. Thus the Bulgarian threat to eastern Albania was removed. Serbia was no longer a threat either. Berlin allowed it to retain only the lands it had occupied already. But even though, the Ottomans had tried to keep the Montenegrin and Serbian government away from Albanian lands, “the boundaries of Montenegro became a serious problem”.¹⁰⁵

After prolonged discussions at the Congress, Montenegro did increase its borders by expanding into Albanian-speaking regions even though it had never entered these areas in times of war, much less inhabited them. The head of the Turkish delegation Caratheodory Pasha argued against this expansion. “Passing to the cession of Antivari to Montenegro, he held that the Montenegrins would be able to stay there only by force, against the wishes of the population. He then alluded to incessant reciprocal attacks between Albanians and Montenegrins, announcing that on this point the Porte had received disquieting telegrams.”¹⁰⁶ The Ottomans even argued that were Montenegro to obtain Albanian lands, it should leave alone those areas which were not Orthodox by faith. But at the end the Congress conceded that Montenegro receive the Muslim and

¹⁰⁴ Skendi The Albanian National Awakening p.48

¹⁰⁵ *ibid* p.49

¹⁰⁶ *ibid*

Catholic inhabited areas of Antivari, Podgorice, Plave, Gusinj, in addition to Kuc and Triepsh.¹⁰⁷

Additionally, southern Albania was targeted by the Greeks. The Greek foreign minister Deliyannis, a representative at the Conference demanded Crete, as well as the regions of Thessaly and Epirus. Even though both the French and the British showed favoritism toward the Greeks, it was ultimately left up to the Ottoman and Greek governments to come to an agreement about the Greek frontier question at a later date.¹⁰⁸ So the decisions at Berlin left Albania facing two threats of dismemberment: an immediate one at her northeastern frontiers, and an unsettled one in the south.

It was ironic that this European Conference set out to design peace between the Russian and Ottoman empires, was to lead to decades of scathing brutality in the Balkans. “As far as Albania was concerned, the frontier decisions of the Congress could not but be opposed by the Albanian League.” Albanians who were close to the disputed border regions were alarmed and stirred to great anger by the decisions at Berlin.

Preparations were underway so that the League could effectively meet these dangers ahead of time. The northern branches of the League responded swiftly. In Shkoder the League looked after manpower, donations and weapons. When its delegation to the League returned to the city on July 7, the delegates delivered an address to its citizens informing them of the preparations they were going to make to resist Montenegrin advances. Among others:

“ 3. All able bodied men, one per family, should take up arms....4.The sandjak of Shkoder should provide 30,000 men, the mountain areas included. 5. 30,000 men from

¹⁰⁷ Skendi *The Albanian National Awakening* pg. 51

¹⁰⁸ In case the two parties could not reach an agreement, then the Great Powers would intervene as mediators.

the districts of Tirana, Elbasan, Ohrid, Mat, and Diber should be sent to Shkoder to form a single corps with the contingent of this sandjak. 6. The points of dispatch for the corps will be Prizren, Ipek, Kosovo, Novi-Pazar and Shkoder....¹⁰ The death penalty is established for anyone who does not heed the appeal of this committee to take up arms...against the enemy.”¹⁰⁹

In Gusinje and Plave, the inhabitants were resolved to fight to the death. Meetings were also held in the neighboring areas in Kosovo. In response, Montenegro seemed impatient to penetrate into these areas. By August of that year, the Great Powers yielded to the pressure by establishing the “Commission for the Delimitation of the Turco-Montenegrin Frontier.”

At this time, an apparent deviation from its previous “Islamic” character took place within the League. Two months earlier, the League had spoken of the military support of Bosnia, but in the face of Montenegrin threats it was going to be difficult to also come to Bosnia’s aid. During a meeting that was held on August 19, 1878 with regard to military help to Bosnia, “The opinion of the patriots finally prevailed: the Albanian forces could not go to the assistance of Bosnia because they were needed for the defense of Albania.”¹¹⁰

The following month, another blow was dealt to the Porte. It was becoming increasingly clear that the League would not allow any kind of foreign intervention in the perceived Albanian territories. The Porte was worried that the Albanians would not yield to the Congress’s decision and also worried that the Great Powers would then not see the

¹⁰⁹ See *Documents et Materieux Studia Albanica* Nr. 1 Tirana, 1978 : « Decision du Comite national de la Ligue a Prizren sur les mesures administratives et militaires a prendre pour garder l’integrite territoriale de l’Albanie » p. 180-181. Documents were compiled by S.Pulaha, A. Kondo, K. Prifti

¹¹⁰ *ibid*

Porte as collaborating with the decisions of Berlin. In late August, the Ottomans dispatched to Prizren Mehmed Ali Pasha, a notable northern Albanian with friendly ties to some members of the League in hopes of his persuading them to make it easier on the Porte to do her job. On hearing of his mission in Albania, the League held a meeting and agreed that they would not accept his proposals and would work to dissuade him from continuing his mission. In case he should refuse, then armed forces would block his way, without physically harming him.¹¹¹ He met with the League's Central Committee in Prizren, but obtained no positive response from them. His arrival in Gjakove (close to Plave and Gusinje) was greeted with hostile protests and members of the League politely urged him to leave the city. Refusing to abandon his mission, Mehmed Ali Pasha accepted the invitation of Abdullah Pasha Dreni, a prominent member of sultanist circles and stayed in Gjakove. There local leaders, bribed with titles and positions, sent Mehmed Ali Pasha a defense unit of considerable size. Outraged at this obstinacy, around 15-20 thousand Albanian rebels surrounded Abdullah Pasha Dreni's residence.¹¹²

Fighting broke out on September 6th, and the envoy, his host, and two companies of Turkish soldiers were killed. In response to Abdullah Pasha's death, Pashko Vasa wrote that "I think that any chief who would attempt to damage or modify the national sentiment would have the same fate..."¹¹³

The League's demonstration of its militant nature thereby alarmed not only the Porte but also the internationals involved. The events also led to rifts within the League. Their differences were becoming all the more apparent. Says Skendi, "The Albanian

¹¹¹ See Kristo Frasheri Lidhja Shqiptare e Prizrenit p. 145

¹¹² According to Kristo Frasheri, these numbers are reported in Russian diplomatic sources. See Lidhja Shqiptare e Prizrenit p. 153.

¹¹³ See Text of the memorandum in Zichy to Andrassy, Constantinople, 22 October 1878, No 82E, Geheim HHStA, PA xvii/35 in Skendi The Albanian National Awakening p. 58

Turcomans were disturbed because the movement was going too far and Turkey viewed with uneasiness the anti-Turkish manifestations taking place in the various towns of the Gegs.”¹¹⁴ In the months to come, the League took an increasingly nationalist character. On October 14, 1878 League delegates from Dibra wrote the Ottoman government demanding that it acknowledge Albania “as an autonomous vilayet, so that it could safeguard its national territorial integrity and to guarantee the future of the country.” Worthy of note is that this letter signed by men who were all Muslim acknowledged as Albanian territories irrespective of their religious composition. Says the letter:

It is superfluous to note that this population of 2 million found in the sandjaks of Shkoder, Novi Pazar, Prishtina, Skopje, Monastir, Dibra, Berat, Gjirokaster, Preveze and Janina known under the name Albania, all speak the same language. She [Albania] is made up of two tiers of Muslims and one of Christians.¹¹⁵

Another memorandum that has been attributed to Pashko Vasa addressed to Zichy, the Austrian ambassador, in Istanbul on October 22, 1878 Vasa uses an assertive voice in reference to the Albanian people and the League’s popular appeal.¹¹⁶ The memo’s intent is to inform Zichy about how the Albanians feel about the decisions affecting Albania taken at Berlin. A threatening tone is already present in the first sentence. “The Albanian people has been at all times an eminently warrior people.”¹¹⁷ In reference to those who had claimed ambitions to Albanian soil Pashko Vasa said, “The states of Greece, Montenegro and Serbia are too small to aspire to the annexation of Albania: the conscience of the Albanian people revolts against the idea of submitting to one who has

¹¹⁴ *The Albanian National Awakening* p. 60

¹¹⁵ See *Documents et Materieux Studia Albanica* Nr. 1 Tirana, 1978 : « Extrait de la decision que prit la Ligue albanaise a Dibra a demander au gouvernement ottoman la reconnaissance de l’Albanie en vilayet autonome, afin de sauvegarder son integrite nationale et territoriale et garantir l’avenir du pays. » pg. (181-183). Documents compiled by S.Pulaha, A. Kondo, K. Prifti.

¹¹⁶ See *Documents et Materieux Studia Albanica* Nr. 1 Tirana, 1978 : « Memoire d’un representant du Comite d’Istanbul adresse a Zichy, amabassadeur de l’Autriche-Hongrie a Istanbul. » (pp. 183-185) Documents compiled by S. Pulaha, A. Kondo, K. Prifti.

¹¹⁷ *ibid*

not the force of a giant, nor the breadth of a vast empire, or traditions of great military exploits.” The League’s origin emerged from this sentiment, according to Vasa. “[The League] is not inspired by individuals, it is produced by the conscience of all...and it has been irresistible.” Notwithstanding Pasha’s obvious nationalism, the League’s popularity was on the rise and the Albanian people had begun to demonstrate their readiness to combat threats against their lands. Events like the one in Gjakove, where the populace was greatly aroused against Ottoman administrators, had provided people like Vasa with convincing arguments that Albanians were quite likely to “fight to the death”. At this time, the Porte was sensitive to these warnings it was receiving.

In the winter of 1878, the Ottomans were put in a very difficult position. Prince Nicholas of Montenegro demanded that the Ottomans take action and hand over Podgorice (today’s Montenegrin capital) and Shpuze that November. In his support, the Russians and Germans put pressure on the Ottomans to withdraw from these areas. As much as it wanted to comply, the Porte had to conceal details that it was sending another envoy to Shkoder (Mazhar Pasha) to order the handing over of the two areas. Afraid of strong reactions by the Albanians, Mazhar Pasha was able to procure the ceding of Podgorice and Shpuze considerably later in February 1879.

When it came to other Albanian territories, the Ottoman authorities proved unable to cooperate with the Montenegrin demands. For them it was too dangerous to meddle with Plava and Gusinje, for they had seen what happened to Mehmed Ali Pasha in Gjakove the previous autumn. Albanian sentiment in these two regions ran so high that the Ottoman authorities suggested to the Delimitation Committee that it examine the matter over again. The League notified the Commission that “any demarcation of the

Montenegrin boundary could not be effected without [the League's] assent.”¹¹⁸ Initially, the two towns were supposed to be ceded in December 1879, but the Ottomans changed their minds at the last minute. They feared Albanian resistance, and if the Montenegrin Prince then tried to invade Gusinje, Ottoman soldiers “might side with the Albanians.”¹¹⁹ Thus the Porte still did not dare to oppose the League. When the Montenegrins did not heed the Ottoman response, the League sent forces led by Ali Pasha Guçija (of Gusinje). Although each side claimed victory, the Montenegrins were not able to take the towns. The tide had definitely turned. This military confrontation was additional proof of the League's growing authority and ability to mobilize action.

What took place next would only intensify feelings on both sides. Seeing that it was going to take stronger pressure than had been exerted until now to make the Albanians yield, the Great Powers conceived another plan to satisfy Montenegro. This plan drafted in June 1880 by British Consul General Green and his Austro-Hungarian colleague, Consul General Lippich, in Shkoder avoided the Plave and Gusinje problem by calling for new territories to be handed over to the Montenegrins instead.¹²⁰ This idea was not opposed by the officials in Cetinje (then Montenegrin capital). This plan “involved the cession to Montenegro of territory to the west of the Lake of Shkoder, so as to include Ulqin [Ulcinj] and the seacoast as far as the mouth of Bune [Bojana] river. The plan had been mentioned to some north Albanian leaders, who had intimated that they would not be reluctant to agree to it if the powers would guarantee to them some form of local self-

¹¹⁸ Skendi *The Albanian National Awakening* p. 60

¹¹⁹ *ibid*

¹²⁰ Ottoman officials had put forth the idea that new other be given to Montenegro in place of Plave and Gusinje.

government.”¹²¹ Plans were also made for a British/French naval demonstration of force in the coast of Ulqin, in case the Albanians proved as obstinate as they had in Plave and Gusinj.

Other plans were made to force the Porte to cooperate. The Powers, it seemed, were adamant about getting their way this time around and they expected the Ottomans to be firm. Plans were made to threaten the Porte if it hesitated. “Busch, Germany’s Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs, noted in his diary that the British consuls had been ordered to let the Albanians know that, if they remained quiet, England would act in favor of Albanian autonomy.”¹²²

To the League, this matter of Ulqin brought new problems. The moderates thought that any further military action would exhaust the Porte’s patience. Opposition would be fruitless. The “extremists” of Shkoder, ever true to their characteristic zeal firmly stated that they would not relinquish these new areas without a fight. They appointed Jusuf Aga Sokoli to lead a force above Ulqin “and prepare trenches for battle.”¹²³

Meanwhile the Great Powers pursued a policy of patience in the hopes that the Ottomans might be persuaded. Thus August and most of September 1880 passed. The Porte was not showing signs of cooperation even after it received three “harshly worded”¹²⁴ notes. When these tactics appeared fruitless, the Great Powers implemented an impressive naval showdown on the waters off Ulqin. The combined French and British naval fleet sailed under the command of British Vice Admiral B. Seymour sailed from its

¹²¹ See Skendi The Albanian National Awakening p. 65.

¹²² L. Raschdau, *ed., op.cit.*, p. 236 in Skendi The Albanian National Awakening pg. 64.

¹²³ Skendi The Albanian National Awakening p. 65.

¹²⁴ The Albanian National Awakening p. 65.

previous station in Dubrovnik to Ulqin in September 1880. The inhabitants of Ulqin naturally opposed this, and so strongly that they managed to persuade the Turkish commander, Riza Pasha, to inform the Powers that, “if the Montenegrins entered the city he would attack them.”¹²⁵ The naval demonstration ultimately failed.

At first, this seemed to be another victory for the Albanians and the Ottomans as well. But this was to be short lived. When the British cabinet met on September 30, two days after the failed demonstration it resolved to threaten the Ottomans with an invasion of Smyrna (modern Izmir) “by the allied fleet” if the Porte did not compel its subjects to obey the international decision.¹²⁶ This was a very clever decision, for the Porte would obviously not favor the Albanians over an invasion of its own Mediterranean coastline. In November 1880, the Porte sent Dervish Turgut Pasha to Shkoder where he summoned the leading citizens of Shkoder (as well as of those of the surrounding mountain areas including Ulqin) to inform them that Ulqin should be given up. He could not persuade the Ulqinaks (inhabitants of Ulqin). They remained just as resolute as they were before. The battle over Ulqin signaled to Albanian opinion that it had the responsibility to protect its lands. When the Pasha’s forces approached Ulqin with 10,000 troops on November 22, the Ulqinaks responded by opening fire on them.¹²⁷ In spite of the brave resistance by the Albanians¹²⁸ the Ottoman forces were able to put them down armed rebellion and arrest the local leaders of the League. Hodo Pasha and Preng Bib Doda, the overlord of Mirdite

¹²⁵ For full reference see also the letter the Ulqinaks (Dulcignots) sent to the Powers in protest of the naval demonstration. The Albanian National Awakening p. 65.

¹²⁶ Skendi The Albanian National Awakening p. 67.

¹²⁷ Skendi The Albanian National Awakening p.68

¹²⁸ For extensive account of the battle see Kristo Frasherri Lidhja Shqiptare e Prizrenit pg. 339-345.

who had allied with the League's branch in Shkoder were sent into exile¹²⁹. Ulqin was handed over to the Montenegrins in the following days.

For the first time, the League was acting on its own. International pressure was so intense that the Ottomans had to let the Albanians down. Therefore various Albanian leaders turned to a path of self-determination. Antagonism became much more open between the League and the Porte.

Situation in Epirus

The situation in southern Albania was alarming too. Much like the Montenegrins, the Greeks were very anxious to incorporate Epirus into Greece. Greek bands had already attempted the "liberation" of Epirus before the Congress of Berlin had decided to postpone the question of the Greco-Turkish frontier in Epirus side for a later date. Violence broke out in the village of Lekures in Sarrande (a south Albanian city on the Ionian coast), and the British intervened, informing the Greeks that they would support the Greek cause if they ceased fighting.¹³⁰ Four days following the Congress of Berlin, the impatient Greek government contacted the Ottomans to initiate talks. Their appeal was ignored, until the French appealed to the Porte on their behalf late in December 1878. Both sides agreed that a committee of Greeks and Turks delimit the frontier. The Ottomans even chose a prominent southern Albanian, Abbedin bey Dino¹³¹ as a commissioner. The two parties met at Preveza on February 5, 1879.

The southern branch of the League meanwhile readied itself for action. Leaders of the League started agitating in Janina and Preveza. Abdyl Frasherri was present there as

¹²⁹ Preng would not be set free for another twenty years.

¹³⁰ See Skendi *The Albanian National Awakening* pg. 40.

¹³¹ Abbedin bey Dino was the Commissar of Brusa in Istanbul.

well. A meeting was held in Frasher, and then a larger one in Preveza where Abbedin Dino was influential. The Greeks blamed him for delaying the talks between the two sides. The conventions in Frasher and Preveza attracted a large number of people from all over Epirus. Their aim was to speak of “Albania as a whole in order to provide Muhtar Pasha [the Ottoman Commander-in-Chief in Epirus] and his colleagues with conclusive arguments that they would not cede to Greece even an inch of Epirus.”¹³²

A month before the Greco-Ottoman meeting, the League’s leaders discussed the fate of Epirus and decided to appeal to the European Powers against ceding Epirus to the Greeks. If their considerations were ignored, then they too like the northern Albanians would defend their lands militarily with the League’s full support.¹³³

Discussions about Epirus were prolonged for some time. Again there were signs that the Porte supported the Albanians. The main dispute centered on Protocol No.13 of the Congress of Berlin. According to the Ottomans, the protocol did not say the Empire owed anything to Greece, and that the ceding of Epirus was dangerous because of the potential hostilities that could break out between Greece and the local people, especially after they had so vigorously demonstrated in Preveza against the potential Greek annexation. The Porte then offered the Greeks an insignificant piece of land along the frontier, but the enraged Hellenes dropped the negotiations.

In the meantime, the League took full advantage of the interrupted negotiations and sent its delegates Mehmet Vrioni and Abdyl Frasheri to represent its interests to the signers of the Berlin Treaty in the spring of 1879. During their visit to various European cities, the delegates addressed a memorandum in May 1879 to the governments of France

¹³² The Albanian National Awakening pg. 71.

¹³³ Ibid

(May 3), Germany (May 19), and Austria-Hungary (May 29). It began by saying that since 1821, the Greek government had long put a lot of effort to prepare for the annexation of Epirus and the Hellenization of the Albanian people. The memo¹³⁴ described how the Greeks went about this:

...by protecting bandits and those who incited the Christian populace of Thessaly to become insurgents against the Ottoman government....Regardless, these criminal tendencies produced no effect...[in 1866] the Hellenic government organized throughout different district of Epirus and Thessaly revolutionary committees which distributed arms and munitions to the inhabitants in great amounts....The Greek bands received these commands from officers in the Greek army and other regulars. Nonetheless, in the Ligoria affair of 1878 it was remarkable that the Christians of Epirus were precisely those who repelled the aggressors...

Deliyannis the Greek prime minister had claimed that all of Epirus, Thessaly, Macedonia, and even Constantinople belonged to Greece in a memorandum presented at Berlin. The Congress took the Greek case under consideration and then recommended the cession of the districts of Preveza, Narda, Margarit, Paramithia, Parga, and Janina with no regard for the opinions of the Albanian people.

Vrioni and Frasheri, both radicals of the League, said that it “is known that the Albanian people are older than the Greeks....The testimony of the most celebrated historians of antiquity, Herodotus, Thucydides, and Strabo fully confirm this historical truth and the books of the greatest modern geographers [referring to F. Pouqueville and J. G. von Hahn] corroborate this testimony of the ancient authors.” The language used here is quite charged with resentment at the Greeks for trying to Hellenize the Albanian people. It makes references to specific events in the past like those involving General Grivas in 1854. It is clear that the authors were determined to show the European Powers that the

¹³⁴ For full reference see *Documents et Materiaux Studia Albanica* Nr. 1 Tirana, 1978: “Memorandum de la Ligue albanaise adresse aux puissances qui ont signe le Traite de Berlin,” pp. 186-188. Compiled by S. Pulaha, A. Kondo, K. Prifti.

people in Epirus are Albanians, who opposed annexation by Greece. “ The Albanians have long preserved their country, their nationality, their language, and their traditions...having repelled the Romans, the Byzantines, and the Venetians.”

This nationalist rhetoric was to show that the Albanians would fiercely oppose incorporation into Greece. Therefore, the government of the French Republic, which is a “just government, would do well to take into serious considerations the authors’ humble observations.”¹³⁵ On the other hand, the nationalist rhetoric purposely depicted Albanian identity as having existed for centuries, a view continuously advanced in the various memoranda issued in name of the League. Fictitious or not, it was a necessary tactic that mimicked that of the other nationalist movements that had gone before. Making a link with the past was crucial if an Albanian state was going to emerge. This idea of a common and historical identity provided the grounds for the recognition of the Albanians as a nationality, a people entitled to determine their own fate.

The strategies used by the League were generally successful in preserving Albanian territories. The intense protests, demonstrations and the realistic threats to militarily defend of Albanian lands put considerable pressure on the Ottomans. Following the very lengthy discussions, it was finally agreed in 1881 that the district of Arta should be given to Greece. The rest of Epirus remained in Albanian (i.e. Ottoman) hands until 1913.

¹³⁵ For full reference see *Documents et Materiux Studia Albanica* Nr. 1 Tirana, 1978: “Memorandum de la Ligue albanaise adresse aux puissances qui ont signe le Traite de Berlin,” pg. 186-188. Compiled by S. Pulaha, A. Kondo, K. Prifti.

The League's Downfall

The southern branch of the League tended to be more politically advanced than the northern. At the meeting in Frasher in the summer of 1878, the southern branch had already proposed the idea of administrative autonomy. The Istanbul Committee even earlier approved of the idea, and that view had been published in the Turkish newspaper *Tercuman-i-Sark* in September 1878. These ideas became more broadly accepted in the North when the frontier with Montenegro became a problem. The northern branch of the League met in Prizren in October 1879 to discuss the program that the South had proposed and ended up adopting it. "Autonomy was becoming paramount as territorial questions were being resolved one way or another."¹³⁶ A conference in Gjirokaster held on July 23, 1880 reaffirmed the same positions as the League's program. The Albanian League was going to press for autonomy and oppose any encroachment on Albanian territory whether in north or south by arms.

Tensions however between the different factions of the League developed as time went by. When it came to the question of defending Ulqin or submitting to the will of the Powers, the different sides were deeply divided. The "radicals" of Shkoder were in favor of armed resistance as were the citizens of Ulqin itself. But the moderates were divided over the matter. At a meeting held in Diber on October 8, 1880 representatives voted to send troops to Ulqin and proclaim autonomy. Two conservative landholders Sadik Pasha Dibra and Xhemal (Jemal) Pasha Mati¹³⁷ were opposed, while patriotic moderates like Iljaz Pasha Dibra, Ali Pasha Gucija and Esad Pasha Tetova were in favor. In the voting, the pro-autonomy party lost 5 to 3 to the status-quo party. Both parties ended up sending

¹³⁶ Skendi *The Albanian National Awakening* pg. 91

¹³⁷ Jemal Pasha was the father of the future king of Albania, Ahmet Zogolli.

different resolutions to the Sultan.¹³⁸ But by this time the idea of an Albanian identity had definitely taken root.

But the Porte was afraid of this growing sense of Albanian identity, and ultimately ended up opposing it. In the beginning it appeared that the League was not going to oppose the Porte's aims, but the intense protests and rebellions against the decisions of the Congress of Berlin increasingly drove members in the other direction. The Porte well informed about this development in the League became more concerned.

On November 14, 1878 the vali of Kosovo wrote the Ottoman government about the decisions taken in Dibra by the Albanian League on the town itself and Toskeri (south Albania) regarding the formation of an autonomous Albanian vilayet.¹³⁹ The letter reported that Abdyl bey came to Dibra as a representative of the League's Committee in Toskeri. In the next paragraph the vali lays out the structure of the proposed Albanian vilayet. "On the outside, it appears that this idea rests on good intentions," the vali says. There are problems, however. The frequent rotation of Ottoman officials had created confusion among the people. He explains that the Albanians' dissatisfaction with the latest Ottoman centralizing reforms was leading them to the idea of their own autonomous vilayet. Autonomy, according to the vali, would put authority into the hands "of a people...deprived of the honor of being civilized and cultured." But he cautioned the Ottoman government, that unless care is taken to appease the Albanians, they too like the Cretans were going to increasingly lean towards the idea of autonomy.

¹³⁸ Skendi *The Albanian National Awakening* pg. 94

¹³⁹ For full text consult *Documents et Matériaux Studia Albanica* No. 1, Tirana 1878: « Relation du vali de Kosove a la Preseidence du Conseil des Ministres sur les decisions prises a Dibra par les representants de la Ligue albanaise pour Dibra et pour la Toskerie en vue de former un vilayet autonome albanais » pg. 201-203. Original in Basbanlik Arsivi, Istanbul (former Bb. A. I.) Sadaret husuzi maruzati. Ta 5 z.

A year later, on November 5, 1879 the Council of Ministers dispatched a letter to the Sultan's court, to inform him that the Albanians had resisted surrendering Plave and Gusinj to the Montenegrins and the measures that needed to be taken in order to repress the resistance.

[The valis of Monastir and Kosove] continue to inform us that...the population continues to oppose the abandonment...of these territories. Authorities in the country inform us that we must still continue efforts to accomplish this goal...Our delegates have confirmed the news that the Montenegrins are preparing to attack. For this reason, the Porte is obligated to apply the clauses of the Treaty.¹⁴⁰

The letter indicates that the revolts there are dangerous. The violation of the Berlin Treaty to defend a "small parcel" like Gusinj- a resistance which could spill into the whole of Albania- was against the interests of the Empire. Countermeasures needed to be taken in advance to avoid dangerous consequences: it must not seem as if the Porte was orchestrating the resistance. Marshal Gazi Muhtar Pasha must inform the Albanians officially that the Porte was obliged to hand over these lands. Five battalions from Anatolia should be dispatched to Gusinj in preparation for any kind of a situation.¹⁴¹

The letters show that the Porte had been watching the developments of the League quite closely. At first the local valis were worried about the popular dissatisfaction with the Porte, and as the threats to their lands become physical the Porte worried that tension would escalate to its own detriment. The Porte planned to take measures against continued resistance that was impeding its obligations to the Congress of Berlin. After investigating the fortifications put up at Hot, Grude and Kelmend in the early spring of 1880, the Council of Ministers proposed sending an emissary to Shkoder

¹⁴⁰For full letter consult *Documents et Materiaux Studia Albanica* No. 1, Tirana 1978: "Le Conseil des Ministres informe la Cour du Sultan de la resistance des Albnaïa a Plave et Guci et des mesures a prendre pour sa repression » p. 205-207. Original in Bb. A.I. Karadag Defteri.

¹⁴¹ Ibid

accompanied by troops to persuade the Albanians to abandon their fortifications. Three goals had to be accomplished: “to make an inquiry; if there are any mistakes by the Ottomans, to give Albanians advice; and if the advice produces no effect, then employ constraint.” Four imperial battalions were to be dispatched to north Albania immediately to keep order.¹⁴² The letter was sent on April 26, 1880. Hodo bey, a leader of the Shkoder branch of the League is mentioned here as one of the insurgents. He was sent into exile later that year by Dervish Pasha after the rebellion in Ulqin.

In the months before Ulqin was handed over to the Montenegrins, the Porte grew increasingly worried. In June 1880 the prefect of Prizren sent a dispatch to the Presidency of the Council of Ministers proposing the expulsion of the League’s directors from Albanian territories and sending troops to repress the League.¹⁴³ In less than a year, that same prefect would find himself expelled by the League. It is likely that he sensed what was coming. By August, the vali of Kosove was writing that the League was recruiting men and building an army in case of foreign aggression and planning to suppress Ottoman governmental institutions.¹⁴⁴ The vali was probably referring to the results of the Gjirokaster Conference earlier in July where both the southern and the northern branches of the League had decided for autonomy and therefore the formation of its own army. The culmination came when the Sultan ordered the Minister of War to go to

¹⁴² Full letter in *Documents et Materiaux Studia Albanica* No. 1 Tirana, 1978 : « Le conseil des Ministres demande d’envoyer a Shkoder un emissaire particulaire, avec une suite de forces militaire pour contraindre les Albanais a abandoner les fortifications occupees a Hot, Grude et Kelmend » p.211-213

¹⁴³ See *Documents et Materiaux Studia Albanica* No. 1 Tirana, 1978: “Copie de depeche du prefet de Prizren a la Presidence du Conseil des Ministres, par l’intermediare du vali de Monastir, ou est propose le chatiment des dirigeants de la Ligue albanaise et l’envoi de forces militaires pour sa repression » p. 217-218. Original in B.b. A. I. Sadaret resmi ma’ruzati 18 b. 1927 No. 1104.

¹⁴⁴ See *Documents et Materaiux Studia Albanica* No. 1 Tirana, 1978: “ Depeche du vali de Kosove envoyee a la Sublime-Porte. Elle informe sur les operations de la Ligue pour former l’armee et supprimer les institutions gouvernementals ottomanes » p. 219-220.

Albania at the head of troops to force the Albanians to hand over Hot and Grude to the Montenegrins and to take measures for leaving Ulqin.¹⁴⁵

The League Self-administered

The Porte's reaction signaled that the League was taking a path towards self-administration. And, indeed, after the Montenegrins took Ulqin significant changes took place in the League.

The central committee was reorganized and commanding positions passed into the hands of resolute autonomist elements, such as Sheh Omer Prizreni, Sulejman Vokshi, Shuaip Age Spahiu, and others. The League then decided to remain in opposition to the Porte, denying the authority of its officials and refusing to send recruits.¹⁴⁶

When Dervish Pasha, the Turkish marshal, disbanded the Shkoder branch, the League itself radicalized. A wide resistance movement sprang up. It began in Prizren. The Ottoman mutesarraf and his staff were expelled from their posts and were replaced by the League's own men. The male citizens of Ipek, Prizren and Gjakove were told to be ready for war if and when the Ottoman troops advanced there. The Ottoman officials of Skopje were notified to leave their posts in December 1880. By January 4, Sulejman Vokshi, a member of the League's cabinet, marched in the city and occupied it. The railway director there was told to interrupt all military transportation to and from Mitrovice. The Porte had recalled to Istanbul the current Governor and named someone else in his place. But the Albanian rebels turned down this proposal for a new governor. Taking advantage of the Governor's absence, the League acted as the ruling authority. Jashar Bey became the leading figure of the League in Skopje.

¹⁴⁵ See *Documents et Materieux Studia Albanica* No. 1 Tirana, 1978 : « Ordre du sultan a envoyer en Albanie le ministre de la guerre a la tete de forces militaires. Il devra obliger les Albanais a livrer au Montenegro Hot et Grude, ou bien a prendre des mesures pour l'abandon d'Ulqin.

¹⁴⁶ Skendi *The Albanian National Awakening* p. 97.

Then in a matter of thirty days all of Kosove, and parts of the Sandjak (including Novi PazarP) had come under the League's control. The Albanian forces captured Prishtine, the capital of Kosove, on January 18, 1881. The Governor General there was also recalled to Istanbul.

Next Abdyl Frasheri visited Dibra in February. On his way to Prizren, he decided to stop in this town which like Prizren had also revolted. Frasheri tried to influence the local branch of the League. Events there turned completely in his favor after someone attempted to assassinate him on orders from the Porte. The rebel population expelled the local Turkish administration along with the mutesarraf and his supporters.¹⁴⁷ This incident immediately stirred up further anti-Turkish sentiment.

At this time, "the seat of the Central Committee of the League, which had virtually assumed the reins of Government, was transferred from Prizren to Dibra- a more central position- where closer and more intimate relations could be established between the Ghegs and the Tosks of Southern Albania."¹⁴⁸ Ten thousand Albanians were ready to move to the South armed to fight along the Greek frontier, should anything happen. In fact, M. Valentine Chirol, a Frenchman who was traveling through Epirus at this time wrote that the League had formed an Albanian Committee in Athens over the winter of 1881 in order to establish a direct link with the Greek government and therefore represent its views.¹⁴⁹

The League had finalized its divorce with the Porte. Every action taken in late 1880 and the subsequent winter confirmed this. Ali Pasha Guçia, now the Commander in

¹⁴⁷ See Skendi *The Albanian National Awakening* p. 98

¹⁴⁸ See M. Valentine Chirol *Twixt Greek and Turk: Jottings from a Journey through Thessaly, Macedonia, and Epirus in the Autumn of 1880* p.265 Chapter XIV: The Albanian League. London and Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons 1881

¹⁴⁹ *ibid*

Chief of the League's forces had led the insurrection which spanned Prizren, Gjakove, Ipek, and Dibra. A good part of northern Albania had fallen under its sway. "The well-informed inhabitants of the Shkoder province saw in the movement a tendency on the part of its leader to acquire control of the north, and thus prepare himself for a more efficient defense against eventual aggressions...especially from Montenegro."¹⁵⁰

Meanwhile the wealthy landowners of central Albania, like those in Tirana and Elbasan, remained more or less passive to the movement because they felt no direct threat to their territories. They were also indifferent to the plight of the Catholics of Shkoder; the protection of those Albanians was not in their interest because in their districts, Christians were second class citizens. Moreover, these beys expected that the Porte would soon react and send troops to quell the Albanian insurrection.¹⁵¹

Feelings ran high in South Albania. There were even plans to proclaim independence under the patronage of Austria-Hungary. The League's advocate, Abdyl Frasherri proposed drawing the borders of Albania by occupying the Kacanik pass and Janina at the same time. A petition sent to the Great Powers on April 15, 1881 usually seen as the brainchild of Abdyl Frasherri, was meant to notify them of the Albanian people's decision to obtain autonomy and defend militarily their territory against the forces of Dervish Pasha, sent to Albania to repress the League. Its message was that: "Since Albania is in Europe, it should take part in [the European affairs] while preserving itself and the Albanian nationality."¹⁵² According to the League, Albania aspired to

¹⁵⁰ See Skendi *The Albanian National Awakening* p. 100.

¹⁵¹ Skendi *The Albanian National Awakening* p. 101

¹⁵² Consult *Documents et Materiaux Studia Albanica* No. 1 Tirana, 1978 : « Memoire de la Ligue albanaise de Prizren adresse aux Grandes Puissances pour leur signifier la decision du peuple albanais a obtenir l'autonomie et defendre par les armes le pays contre les troupes de Dervis pacha, envoye a reprimer la Ligue » p. 191-192.

become European, freeing itself from Ottoman rule and becoming a European country in its own right someday.

These actions and this verbiage did tell the Sultan something. By mid 1880 he had commissioned a special committee to study the situation in Albania, and at the end of May the committee proposed the creation of a unified vilayet of Albanians “as a susceptible measure of paralyzing the activity of the League of Prizren.”¹⁵³ But the Ottomans gradually changed their minds. Dervish Pasha, a promoter of centralist policies, went to Istanbul to persuade the government not to make “any concessions to the Albanians, but to repress their movement by force of arms.”¹⁵⁴ Public opinion in Istanbul supported Dervish Pasha’s ideas and the Sultan yielded to the pasha’s persuasions. In the spring of 1881, the Porte decided to send the same man who had repressed the resistance in Ulqin to destroy the League and bring the Albanians to their knees once again.

The events unfolded very quickly. First the Ottoman commander in Skopje, Ibrahim Pasha, destroyed the League’s local branch arresting its leaders and exiling them to Rhodes. Then on March 23, 1881 Dervish Pasha entered the city and assured its citizens that the Porte was interested in their welfare. These were times of trouble for the Empire, and if citizens brought any further trouble, Dervish Pasha would not be merciful; insurrection would be violently crushed. By the end of April, at the head of 10, 000 troops, Dervish Pasha made his way into Kosove heading for Prizren.¹⁵⁵ The League’s troops occupied the Cernoljeva which led to the plain of Kosove in order to stop his advance. But after two days of fighting, the Turks entered Prizren. With the leaders of the

¹⁵³ See full report in *Documents et Materiaux Studia Albanica* no. 1 Tirana 1978: “Relation du Conseil de Ministres envoye a la Cour sur la formation d’un vilayet uni a la Rumelie, comme une mesure susceptible de paralyser l’activite de la Ligue de Prizren,” p. 213-216

¹⁵⁴ Skendi *The Albanian National Awakening* p. 103

¹⁵⁵ Skendi *The Albanian National Awakening* p. 104

resistance in the north, Dervish Pasha avoided the typical punishments. He urged them to reconsider their current views. They should give up the idea of autonomy, leaving Albania return to its former state. In addition, he made some of them handsome promises: Hasan Pasha of Tetova would become the mutessarif of his city, while Ali Pasha Guçia would receive the same office in Ipek. The two men accepted these offers

In an apparent attempt to regain favor with the Albanians, the cunning marshal also promised the Albanians some of what they had been trying to accomplish themselves. Among these were “special privileges which would preserve their national existence, that their recruits would remain in their own country to protect it and that the officers serving there would be of Albanian origin up to the rank of colonel.”¹⁵⁶

Abdyl Frasheri along with some other leaders, however, was not treated so kindly. To the man who had vigorously campaigned for Albanian unity, the Porte meted out the death sentence. Dervish Pasha was intent on capturing the former deputy of Janina. Abdyl was captured while trying to flee to England and sent to Dervish Pasha in Prizren accompanied under heavy guard. His sentence was soon reversed to life imprisonment, but five years later Abdyl was released and retired in Istanbul until his death in 1894. The president of the League, Hadji Ymer (also Omer) Efendi of Prizren fled along with Rauf Efendi of Tetova. Their families paid for their actions, however; by being exiled to Thessalonica.

Then gradually Dervish Pasha occupied Gjakove (in May) and then later Dibra (in September). In Dibra, the League’s leaders were also arrested and sent to Istanbul. In the South, similar methods were used to crush the League.¹⁵⁷ The Governor General of

¹⁵⁶ Skendi The Albanian National Awakening p. 105

¹⁵⁷ Skendi The Albanian National Awakening p. 107

Janina, Mustafa Asim Pasha, was ordered by Istanbul to spread rumors that Janina was no longer in danger of being taken by the Greeks. Important leaders in the south were also bribed with high positions, as in the North. Many more were arrested in May and sent to a prison in the Dardanelles until their release two years later.

In order to keep the population from revolting, the marshal made certain concessions. Sons of chieftains were sent to Istanbul to become part of the Sultan's honorary guards; some reforms were also made in Dibra. The mountain regions, however, were not subdued. They continued to rule themselves as they had since times immemorial. However, a mood of depression overtook the country. People were especially saddened by the fate of Abdyl Frasheri.¹⁵⁸ Resentment grew in the face of Ottoman corruption, tax extortion, and the denial of freedoms which the citizens had enjoyed before.¹⁵⁹ Thus this intervention cost the Porte a lot. Many of its Albanian subjects had lost faith in its leadership and many yearned for the sense of identity that the League had provided them with. "The faith in the capacity of the Porte to hold the possessions which remained in Europe or give Albania the necessary security against her enemies had vanished."¹⁶⁰

Thus closed this chapter of Albanian history. What had the League accomplished? The League had sought to provide Albanians with a sense of identity, and unity. In the final year of its life, it had furthered a radically independent identity from that of the empire. At a time when the empire had to choose between supporting its subjects or fulfilling its international obligations, the League had had no trouble in resolving to protect Albanian lands. The League's call appealed to Albanians across religious lines,

¹⁵⁸ See Skendi *The Albanian National Awakening* p. 105

¹⁵⁹ Skendi *The Albanian National Awakening* p.106

¹⁶⁰ *ibid*

and it was the first modern organization which attempted to construct an Albanian national identity. This organization, which arose in defense of Albanian territorial interests in the wake of the Russo-Turkish war of 1878, sought to mould Albanian politics towards the creation and the consolidation of a multi-confessional and uniquely Albanian national identity. It was crushed in the end, but the Ottomans could not really erase the sentiments it left behind. Thanks to the League, Albania's inhabitants were no longer as they had been before. Things had changed. M. Valentin Chirol remarked that:

Albania now seems to hold her destinies in her own hands: she can shape them according to her own bent. Is the national feeling, the consciousness of a national duty, strong enough to overrule the distracting influences of tribal jealousies and sectarian differences, and combine for a supreme effort all the heterogeneous elements divided by the traditions of secular rivalry? Those who know Albania best are disposed to say Yes.¹⁶¹

¹⁶¹ See M. Valentine Chirol Twixt Greek and Turc: Jottings from a Journey through Thessaly, Macedonia, and Epirus in the Autumn of 1880, p.267, Chapter XIV: "The Albanian League", London and Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons 1881.

Conclusion and Epilogue

In its three year life span, the League of Prizren was an organization whose program and goals evolved. The League began as a united response to the threat of territorial dismemberment sanctioned by the decisions of the Treaty of San Stefano and the Congress of Berlin. This threat drew together the groups that convened in Prizren: northern Albanians and southern Albanians, men who were local administrators, business conglomerates, Muslim clerics, politicians, chieftains, and large landowners. They came together to save their lands and had differing ideas of how to do this. In its earliest form, the League's program was dominated mostly by forces faithful to the Porte and focused on threatened Muslims. They sought to protect the interest of Balkan Muslims elsewhere in Bosnia, and the Sandjak of Novi Pazar. But as the threat to Albanian lands became imminent following the Congress of Berlin, this focus was abandoned and the League exhibited an increasingly nationalist outlook. Patriotic and less religiously conservative League members pushed for putting all Albanian lands into a single autonomous Albanian vilayet within the Ottoman Empire.

Little by little, however, the League came to channel the feelings of restless Albanians tired of decades of ineffective Turkish reforms, corruption, the loss of local autonomy; and finally in 1878 the threat of territorial loss to their ultranationalist Balkan neighbors led them into conceiving an Albanian identity, determined to decide its own fate. Local branches of the League and prominent members in 1878 and the years following appealed to the European Powers to recognize Albanian rights and not permit the absorption of their lands. These appeals referred to an Albanian past with a historical continuity to their present day. The findings of contemporary philologists like J. G. von

Hahn fueled their nationalist arguments. Thinkers and members of the political elite like Vaso Pasha, Sami Frasheri and Jani Vreto founded the Society of Letters in Istanbul in 1879 to support the creation of an Albanian alphabet and schools. “And every nation which has not written its language and has no letters of its own is still barbarian...The letters which this society will print will be letters of learning Albanian.”¹⁶² An Albanian press was born at this time as well. Anastas Kullurioti, a man of Albanian origin living in Greece, established and edited the newspaper *I foni tis Alvanias* (The Voice of Albania) between September 29, 1879 and August 23, 1880. This newspaper written in Greek supported the League’s autonomist program. “Our objective is the union and the autonomy of Albania,” wrote Kullurioti on March 22, 1880.¹⁶³ The newspaper featured articles on the Albanians’ glorious past. “The Albania of Skanderbeg became an invincible citadel to defend the freedom of Europe against the tyranny and the obscurantism of the Ottomans.”¹⁶⁴ The newspaper kept Albanian immigrants informed on the developments in Albania and it embraced progressive thinking. “We don’t want Albania to be mentioned solely as a fictitious name, but to have it acknowledged as a real living Albania, with a great fighting spirit. We don’t want its rights and its aspirations to be ignored. We want the moral and material development of Albania.”¹⁶⁵

The League gradually parted ways with the Porte. The first indication of this occurred when its forces seized the tower of Abdulla Pasha Dreni and murdered the Porte’s envoy Mehmed Ali Pasha who ignored the protesters in Gjakove, who demanded

¹⁶² *Kanonizme e Shoqerise te Shtypuri Shkronja Shqip* Istanbul, 1879

¹⁶³ See Zihno Reso *L’activite d’A. Kullurioti* *Studia Albanica* no. 2 p. 45, Tirana: Academie des Sciences de la RPS D’Albanie. 1978

¹⁶⁴ See Zihno Reso *L’activite d’A. Kullurioti* *Studia Albanica* no. 2 p. 48, Tirana: Academie des Sciences de la RPS D’Albanie. 1978

¹⁶⁵ No. 2, October 6, 1879. See Zihni Reso *L’activite d’A. Kullurioti* *Studia Albanica* no. 2 p. 46, Tirana: Academie des Sciences de la RPS D’Albanie. 1978

that he abort his mission. When the Porte finally yielded to international pressure and agreed to hand over Ulqin, there was nothing left to do but for the League to break with the Ottomans. In its last few months, the League initiated a full blown revolt against the Ottomans seizing cities in Kosovo and northeastern Albania. The southern branch of the League also resisted Greek attempts to annex Epirus. By this time the League's administration had fallen into the hands of patriotic moderates and the radicals. In captured cities like Skopje, Prishtine, Dibra, and Prizren the Ottoman officials were ousted and replaced with Albanian locals. The League in severing ties to the Sultan, thereby necessarily gave rise to an Albanian national consciousness. Although the insurgency was put down by Dervish Pasha's army, the League had succeeded in its main aims. It demonstrated that many Albanians had developed a national consciousness and were capable of fighting for their own fate. Thanks to their firm resolve and action against territorial dismemberment, the League had successfully protected all the threatened territories except for Ulqin, Podgorice and Arta in the south. The Albanian revolts had more than once impressed the European Powers as well as the Porte. "An attempt was made by E.Fitzmaurice, British representative on the Eastern Roumelian Comission, to create a large Albania comprising all the Albanian-inhabited lands of the four vilayets."¹⁶⁶ At one time, the Ottoman Council of Ministers went so far as to draft a proposal for a united Albanian vilayet.

The League's Legacy

The League became an inspiration for years to come in Albania. Political activists and literati took it upon themselves to advance its ideals in the Albanian cause.

¹⁶⁶ See Skendi *The Albanian National Awakening* p. 92-93

The-so called Albanian Renaissance was born and a national consciousness took root. During the 1880s and '90s Albanian schools began to appear. The first Albanian-language school opened in Korce 1887, and then another one there for girls in 1891. In Kosove, the first Albanian school opened in 1889 in Prizren. Cultural and patriotic societies followed. An offshoot of the Society of Letters in Istanbul was founded among Albanians in Rumania by Jani Vreto in 1881.¹⁶⁷ Others like Drita (The Light), Dituria (Knowledge), and Shpresa in Rumania followed. Some notable men, like Naim Frasheri, a Bektashi Muslim and the brother of Sami and Abdul Frasheri, were the very active directors of these societies. Naim was the actual editor of Drita's publications. All of these societies pressed for recognition of Albanian rights, most notably education. "The main aim of the societies [Drita and Dituria] was to serve the national movement by printing and distributing books in Albanian as well as by supporting the boys' school in Korce."¹⁶⁸ Shpresa also did the same thing. The society's secretary Kristo Dako "appealed to the French Foreign Minister, to intervene in urging Turkey to grant the Albanians that which she had already accorded to the other nationalities: the learning of their language."¹⁶⁹ These societies were all active until 1906 when they decided to merge together to form the society Bashkimi (The Union). Like its predecessors, Bashkimi too stated its support to Albanian education, but its real activities centered around the political ideology of an autonomous Albania, or perhaps an independent Albanian state. This politically minded society supported the activity of the guerilla bands (or comitadjis) active throughout Albania. One can see that these societies tried to fulfill the League's

¹⁶⁷ Skendi The Albanian National Awakening p. 146

¹⁶⁸ *ibid* p. 147

¹⁶⁹ *ibid* p. 150

aspirations: the development of a national education and support for the idea of an autonomous or an independent Albania.

Throughout this time, appeals were forwarded to the Porte seeking an autonomous Albanian vilayet. Yet, others still clung to their Muslim identity as was the case of the Assembly of Ipek in 1899. “The purpose of the meeting was to form a union for the protection of their Moslem religion, the Sultan to whom loyalty was proclaimed, and their fatherland. A threat was directed toward any foreign governments.....which might have attempted to attack their country.”¹⁷⁰ However, in the early 20th century Albanians ever more frequently revolted against the Porte’s reforms. Excited by the Young Turks Revolution promises for greater freedoms, patriotic Albanians formed cultural clubs, political organizations, and published their own newspapers. By 1909, the Albanian alphabet was founded at the Council of Monastir. That same year *Normalja e Elbasanit*, a higher institute of pedagogy with director Luigj Gurakuqi opened its doors to future Albanian teachers. Daunted by the increasing prospects for autonomous regions in the Balkans, the Young Turk regime soon tried to curb many of the progressive reforms that it had issued before. Clubs and organizations were shut down, and censorship of the press followed. The populace retaliated through countless revolts between 1910 and 1912 continuously pressing for autonomy. The comitadji bands like those of Cerciz Topulli supported these revolts. Then with the beginning of the First Balkan War in September 1912, when Balkan states united in war against the Ottoman Empire Albanians (still part of the empire) saw their final chance to proclaim nationhood. At the prospects of being divided by the neighboring Montenegrins, Serbs, and Greeks Albanians led by the prominent politician Ismail Qemali decided it was time to separate themselves once and

¹⁷⁰ Skendi [The Albanian National Awakening](#) p. 196

for all from the Ottoman Empire. On November 28, 1912 the ideas that began with the League were proclaimed in Albania's declaration of independence which was recognized a year later at the Conference of London.

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