

**THE ALBANIAN ISSUE IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF EUROPEAN DIPLOMACY AT  
THE BEGINNING OF THE XX-th CENTURY**

**Majlinda Peza – Perriu**

University Of Elbasan “Alexander Xhuvani”Albania, majapeza@yahoo.com,  
majlinda.perriu@uniel.edu.al

**Florenca Stafa**

University Of Elbasan “Alexander Xhuvani”Albania, florencastafa@yahoo.com,  
florenca.stafa@uniel.edu.al

**Abstract:** Through this paper we intend to reflect objectively the complexity of the factors that conditioned and determined the political future of Albanians and the new Albanian state that would emerge from the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans at the beginning of the XX-th century. Addressing the path that followed the state-forming process of Albanians for a period of nearly 10 years, and more specifically in the period 1912-1922, we mostly focused on the analysis of European diplomacy decision at the Ambassador's London Conference in 1912 and at the Peace Conference, Paris 1919. Did the Albanians lose or win at the London Conference? Were the Albanians Punished or Rewarded at the Peace Conference? Were Albanians treated as "Orphans of Europe", in addition to the other orphan people of Europe who lost themselves from World War I? Did Albanians feel the support of International Diplomacy in these conferences? These are some of the questions that we will answer in this scientific paper through the examination of a rich contemporary literature. We have been able to reflect to these problems through a research work based on new historical sources, through the formulation of the new theses we have mostly dealt with in the comparative context, countering the approaches and official theses of the first communist Albanian historiography 90-s.

**Keywords:** Albanian affair, independence London Ambassadors Conference, Paris Peace Conference, European Concert.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In March of 1912, with the change of political conditions in Bulgaria and after several bilateral meetings, the signing of a Serbian-Bulgarian alliance was achieved along with a secret annex, which was determined to face the Albanian-Macedonian lands(Duka, V. 2007:186-187).Since June 1912, Bulgaria had been waiting for the evolution of events (Italian diplomatic documents for Albanian history1912 (2019: 391).

A few months later, another defensive alliance was completed, now between Greece and Bulgaria, finalized in May 1912. Meanwhile, in the first days of October 1912, while discussing the possibility of parties in a connection between the Ottoman Empire and Greece, the diplomacy of Athens, at the same time, had entered into negotiations with Bulgaria, which were finalized with a note which was followed on October 6, 1912 by the signing of the alliance between two other Balkan states, Serbia and Montenegro. In this way, at the beginning of October 1912, the Balkan League was created, which without wasting time, declared war on the Ottoman Empire. With the beginning of the first Balkan war, the Albanians were found as one of the sought-after allies(Varoshi, L. 2020:86)

In such a situation, some of the Great Powers, despite being too late to prevent the creation of the Balkan League, were very interested in the creation of such an alliance. Their willingness to prevent a conflict between the Balkan League and the Ottoman Empire was clearly reflected in the diplomatic efforts they undertook in the first days of October 1912, which was also reflected through the adoption of a common consensual resolution by all the Great Powers (Poincare, R. 2006:231). For many reasons, such an attempt by the Great Powers proved to be late, as the day after, the smallest Balkan state, Montenegro began military operations on the border with the Ottoman Empire. The attack on Montenegro by the diplomats of the time was justified by the fact that its demands were of a different nature from those of the other Balkan powers. Such a reality, as Raymond Poincare asserted: ... *It was neither senseless nor unbelievable; but it was not quite impossible to believe that the truth was very different. King Nicholas, just like Montenegro itself, was full of surprises and full of abysses*(Ibid,236). Through such an assertion, we think that the French diplomat, indirectly, was alluding to the diplomatic support that Montenegro had, support that mostly came from a powerful diplomatic actor. In the framework of the creation of the Balkan Alliance, accompanied by the burden of old Balkan rivalries and contradictions, the first spark of the conflict's explosion was precisely given by the smallest state of this alliance, Montenegro. Such an act was followed by Serbia and Bulgaria and on October 18, 1912 by Greece too and definitely marked the beginning of the Balkan War. But the military defeats suffered by the Ottoman army on all the fronts of the battles since the first days of the beginning of the First Balkan War, were accompanied by the rapid advance of the Balkan armies in the interior part of the Albanian

territories. Found in the conditions of the beginning of the First Balkan War, the defeat of the Ottoman army in front of the Balkan armies and the rapid progress of their military armies towards the Albanian cities, the Albanian patriots began to move to be in direct contact with the diplomats of the European powers, in order to ensure the future of Albania.

At this time, the interests of Viennese diplomacy in the Balkans clashed with the claims of Rome's diplomacy. In such a historical context, some local researchers have also appreciated the support offered to the Albanian National Movement by Viennese diplomacy. In the framework of Habsburg pragmatism, the Albanian National Movement in the fall of 1912 was regaining the required potential ally. Therefore, it was at this time that the transition from the platform of autonomy to that of independence became possible. Referring to the Italian researchers on the issue of the formation of the Albanian state, in their concept, the necessity of its formation at that time was considered a need, first of all determined by the favorable geographical position of the country, for the sake of political pragmatism of the two Adriatic powers (Italy and Austria-Hungary)(Baldacci, A. 2006: 181).Geopolitics of the two Adriatic powers were intended to pave the way for Serbian claims to enter to the Adriatic.

Thus, in the circumstances created when the armies of the Balkan states were rapidly invading Albanian territories that were part of the Ottoman Empire, on November 28, 1912, gathered in Vlora Assembly and with the support of Vienna's diplomacy, Albanians declared independence.(The History of Albanians during XX-th century 2017:223).. Meanwhile, the victory of the Balkan states against the Ottoman Empire was accompanied by the Armistice Signature on December 3, 1912(Duka, V. 2007: 25). Already the Great Powers "Concert" to maintain the fragile European equilibrium, would find the solution of the Balkan problems. The territorial claims of the Balkan states and the fate of the new Albanian state, as before, would be in the hands of the Great Powers. The political status of this new state, emerging from an Albanian nationwide assembly and its borders, would be set at the conference that European diplomacy organized in London on December 17, 1912.

The Ambassadors Conference in London represented the first act of compromise between Great Powers for the establishment and acceptance of an Albanian state. Whereas the 1919 Paris Peace Conference of the First World War represented the second act of compromise between the Great Powers to reaffirm once again the status of an independent Albanian state [neutral in the First World War], but regaining in action the diplomacy of the secret treaties.Because in this conference, the Great Powers were represented by their ambassadors, this conference is known as the London Conference of Ambassadors. It should be said that the Balkan states that were directly concerned and affected by the decisions to be taken at this conference were not allowed to be represented. But this did not prevent them from conveying their territorial claims as conquerors when the principle for which European diplomats had agreed had to deal with "the right to territorial compensation" for the victors(Duka, V. 2007: 26). Albania would not be represented in this conference, but hoping much for the support that Vienna Diplomacy would give to the Albanians. The Government of Vlora sent a delegation to London, consisting of M. Konica, Filip Noga, Rasim Dino(The History of Albanians during XX-th century 2017:249).Faik Konica and Fan Noli went as representatives of the Diaspora and Autocephalous Church established in America.It is already known that the support expected from the official Vienna could not be compared with the support that other Balkan states had provided at the time of their creation and in continuity from European states. The most interested parties in the Albanian issue at this conference were Austria - Hungary, Russia and Italy. Austria - Hungary and Italy supported the existence of an autonomous or independent Albania under their influence, which could not be accepted by Russian diplomacy. Russia had historically followed a pan-Balkan policy in the Balkans, supporting the territorial expansion of Slavic states and their demands to secure the Mediterranean Sea, claims that directly violated Albanian territories.

As it is well known, the most dramatic decision of this conference for Albanians, was related to the fact that half of Albanian territories remained outside the Albanian state border. It is true that for the first time the European diplomacy was accepted by the creation of an Albanian state, but this state has pulled out of the ethnic stature an important part of entire Albanians.

Would it be more favorable for Albanians the decision the Great Powers agreed on the first day of the Conference on December 17, 1912, when it was decided to establish an Autonomous Albania under the sovereignty of the Sultan? For this problem, some scholars are of the opinion that accepting an autonomous Albania at the time Albanians had declared independence in Vlora Assembly was a step backwards. While other scholars think the idea that accepting an autonomous Albania was a step in the face of the claims of the Balkan states not to allow the establishment of an Albanian state in Balkan.

We point out that the status of Albania in this conference would also depend on the situation in which the Ottoman Empire was. At the time the Conference of Ambassadors had interrupted the work, in March 1913, with the changes that took place in the cabinet in Istanbul, Muhammad Pasha would ask the Great Powers to intervene to establish peace in the Balkans. Already the "Bosphorus's Sick" was moving rapidly toward capitulation. If the Ottoman

Empire had resisted the attack of the Balkan allies, we would point out that Albania's autonomy would be more favorable to the Albanians and that it could have avoided even its fragmentation. Moreover, autonomy was considered a preliminary stage and a period of state-building experience that would lead to independence. Meanwhile, we have to accept the fact that Albanians, who were mostly Muslims, who had coexisted and had become part of Ottoman administration for five centuries, were not spiritually and morally prepared for an immediate break from the Sultan and Istanbul.

However, in the final decision of July 29, 1913, Albania was declared an autonomous and hereditary principality under the auspices of the 6 Great Powers, excluding any connection with Turkey. Albania gained independence, but it was just a truncated independence.

The Albanian state was born and accepted as a crippled creature and a compromise of the Great European Powers at the London Conference of Ambassadors. The prince of German descent Vilhelm Vidi, who left Albania in September 1914, was placed at the head of this state. The only thing Vidi did for Albanians was that he did not position Albania in any of the European alliances that were created at this time, despite Austria - Hungary's efforts to retreat to itself. If this had happened and Albania would have stood beside the Central Block, the consequences for the Albanian nation would be even more tragic.

The favorable position of the Balkan peninsula, between East and West and on the shores of the Mediterranean, represented the region where the interests and rivalries of the Great Powers clashed at the beginning of the century. XX. It is true that the Balkans had experienced two Balkan wars in the years 1912-1913 and the Great Powers of that time in one form or another, in not a few cases had served as a catalyst for the generation of conflicts in this region, being the umbrella of one or the other Balkan state. Meanwhile, Bulgaria's involvement in the "Great War" in 1915 created the impression that this conflict could be a third Balkan war. But the origin of the Great War was much deeper and earlier than the Balkans of 1914. No Balkan state entered this war out of the interest of one or another European power, - says Misha Glenny, - whose participants, they wondered who would win the global war, Germany or France.

## **2. ALBANIA DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR**

At the time the Great War broke out, Albania's status was that of an independent and neutral state, the result of a compromise between the six Great Powers and governed by a foreign prince, Prince Vidi. In 1914, his power was seriously threatened by the attack of the fanatical Muslim insurgents of Central Albania, who in July 1914 were very close to taking the city of Durres where, in the "konak" [Royal Palace], he had been staying since March of 1914 the prince himself Albanians. Moreover, in August 1914, the request of official Vienna to Prince Vid to attack Serbia was not accepted by him. As Prince Vidi himself asserted, Vienna was ready to pay, in exchange for organizing an Albanian attack on Serbia, through the organization of an uprising in Kosovo (Milo, P. 2013: 40-41). The Prince's steadfastness in opposing Vienna's request meant that he no longer enjoyed her support. Thus, in the circumstances created as a result of internal developments in Albania and the international situation, Prince Vidi left [but did not abdicate] Albania nearly 6 months after he had received the crown of the Albanian throne.

There is the opinion that, for those 6 months that he was in charge of Albania, Prince Vidi did not manage to do anything. He also tried to reform the Albanian army with German instructors (Bello, H. 2021: 468). But, as Fan Noli said in 1924, he could not perform miracles. Perhaps his only merit and the good thing he did to the Albanians before he left, was that he did not position Albania alongside any European alliance, despite Vienna's request to declare war on Serbia (Dervishi, K. 2006: 59). If such a thing were to happen, also because of Prince Vid's origin, the greatest probability was that Albania would align itself with the Central Bloc, which was lost in the Great War. The members of this bloc suffered badly at the Paris Peace Conference, where Albania would have had the same fate. We emphasize that Prince Vidi represented the legitimate power and sovereignty of Albania and the neutrality guaranteed by the six Great Powers at the Ambassadors' conference in London after the First Balkan War.

In the internal plan, the departure of Prince Vid left Albania in the hands of fanatical Muslim insurgents of Central Albania, who sought to place a prince of Turkish origin at the head of Albania. In October 1914, with Serbian support, power passed into the hands of Esad Pasha Toptan, who, after entering the Albanian territory, settled in Durres and dealt with the organization of the Albanian state. Externally, the departure of Prince Vid left Albania exposed and vulnerable to the Balkan neighbors who militarily occupied Albanian lands. At the same time, Albania remained exposed to the claims of the Adriatic powers. The most interested Mediterranean power in this context turned out to be Italy, which had strategic interests in the Balkans. With the outbreak of the Great War, Italy remained neutral until 1915, after the Secret Treaty of London was signed (April 26, 1915). According to this treaty, Albania had gone to the "auction" by being involved in the so-called "Adriatic issue".

In June 1915, the regular troops of the Serbian army crossed the Albanian border. The Serbian troops had no confrontations with the Albanians and Ahmet Zog's troops in the area of Mati. There are opinions that his tribal ties

with Esad Pasha may be the cause of some secret agreement between them. The Serbian army in Qukes was faced with weapons by the forces commanded by Haxhi Qamili, who were forced to retreat in the face of the Serbian military force. Thus, after a few days, Elbasan, Peqin and Shijak were conquered. On June 11, 1915, Tirana was occupied and after two days, the Serbian troops reached the vicinity of Durres, freeing Esad Pasha Toptani from the siege of the insurgent forces of Central Albania (The History of Albania 1984: 153). In June 1915, the Montenegro army attacked the territories in the north of Albania and on June 27, 1915, without encountering any resistance, occupied the city of Shkodra. Meanwhile, after Bulgaria's involvement in the war at the end of 1915 alongside the Central Block, Bulgarian troops invaded Albanian territory. On January 27, 1916, the Bulgarians entered the city of Elbasan, where after the agreement signed with the local government through which the Bulgarians agreed to recognize the national rights of the Albanians, Albanian and Bulgarian flags would be flown in the city (Çami, M. 1969: 29). Meanwhile, in January 1916, the Austro-Hungarian army began the march towards Albania, removing the Montenegro troops from the occupied territories in the north and the Serbian troops in central Albania. Almost a year later, on January 23, 1917, Austria-Hungary declared the autonomy of Albania, guaranteeing the future of the Albanian state under the protection of Vienna (Dervishi, K. 2006: 79).

In such a historical context, with the beginning and universalization of the conflict in the years 1915 - 1917, the independent Albanian state turned into a territorial space where the armies of many warring states came, passed, settled and left. We are not exaggerating if we say that it may be the only case during the Great War, where in the territorial space of a sovereign state, the armies of seven states [Greeks, Serbs, Montenegrins, Bulgarians, Italians, Austro-Hungarians, French ]. Thus, in Albanian historiography there have been several theses regarding the international position of Albania during the Great War, such as: neutrality, autonomy (independence) under the protection of a foreign power; allies of the Entente [France, Britain, Russia, Italy] ( Milo, P. 2013: 247). From 1916 onwards, Albania was divided into four zones of occupation: From the north to Shkumbin stretched the Austro-Hungarian zone, the French zone in the southeast, the Bulgarian zone in the east and the Italian zone in the south of Albania.

### **3. WHAT DID THE ALBANIANS EXPECT FROM THE PEACE CONFERENCE?**

After the start of World War I, the Great Powers, which until 1914 were guarantors of the Albanian state, turned Albania into a battlefield. Researcher Georges Castellan in one of his studies around the Balkans expressed in this way about the state of Albania during the First World War: "Its territory became the object of exchange for the Great Powers. Antanta used it as a bait to attract Greece and later Italy (Castellan, G. 1991: 450). In this context, with the onset of World War I, the Albanian state ceased to exist and the Albanian territory remained occupied until the end of World War I.

Albanians and the Albanian official delegation in Paris demanded the recognition of the Albanian state in its ethnic boundaries, before the decisions of the London Conference of 1913, demanding that the injustices made by this Conference be corrected. But referring to the bargains that were part of European diplomacy during the conference and the fact that the claims of the neighboring countries (the Greek claims of Venizelos and those of Serbs) had the maximum support of England and France, these hopes of Albanians not only remained one dream, but at the same time the Albanian lands were serving as a spoil for compensation for the wonders of the First World War. From this point of view, we can say that Albanians at this conference would mostly try to maintain territorial sovereignty in the boundaries of 1913, borders over which new cleavage agreements were planned.

At the Peace Conference, Albania was represented by the Albanian delegation headed by Turhan Pasha Përmeti, in the capacity of the Albanian Prime Minister and head of the delegation. An important role in the framework of the Albanian delegation in Paris has also been played by the representative of the Albanian Catholic clergy, Luigj Bumçi, who in December 1919 also met with Pope Benedict XV, asking the Pope to intervene with European governments in favor of the Albanian issue. The other representative was Gjergj Fishta, whose contribution was never appreciated in Albanian historiography before the 90-s.

Also the figure of Mehmet Konica and Mihal Turtulli in Albanian historiography before the 90s was not objectively evaluated. In a 1984 edition of the Academy of Sciences it is claimed that Mihal Turtulli and Mehmet Konica did not go before the Peace Conference to demand full independence from the Albanian state. While referring to the new historical sources, it is noted that Mehmet Konica, in an interview with the Italian newspaper *Corriere d'Italia*, states that: "Totality and independence for all of Albania. This is the basis on which we will talk at the Peace Conference by developing our demands ("Sun", (March 12, 1919), no. 1469. Boston Mass).

In addition to the many issues that would be resolved by the Peace Conference, one of the most delicate and directly related to the fate of Albanian lands was the "Adriatic affair".

The Adriatic issue was one of the most conclave issues of this Conference, as it related to two contradictory components: one, on the one hand was the Secret Treaty of London (1915) and on the other hand, the "14 points" of

President Wilson, where one of the most important principles was considered the principle of self-determination of peoples. For this reason, Prof. Puto will call Peace of Paris a “Different Peace”.(Puto, A. 2009: 187).Secret diplomacy continued to function at the conference. Researcher M. Macmillan described the deal between Italy and Greece as an old-fashioned style.This agreement will not be the only one. The European powers in January 1920 would review and re-examine the Italy-Yugoslav interests. This was an initiative undertaken by England and France without the presence of the US to resolve the Adriatic question on the curation of Albanian territories. Anglo-Franco-Italian compromise predicted the partition of Albania. Yugoslavia would take North Albania, including Scodra (Shkodra) which would enjoy autonomy and Greece, in the province of Koritza (Korca) and Gjirokastra. Eventually, on January 13, 1920, compromise was reached between Italy, France and England without the presence of the United States. Under this agreement, Albania would be fragmented under the Treaty of London. River would cross Italy, while Yugoslavia would take North Albania with down town Shkodra, which would enjoy some kind of autonomy. Yugoslavia's objection to this treaty and the signaling of America for it brought about the final and firm opposition and controversy of Wilson. It is quite interesting that Wilson's letter addressed the French and English Prime Ministers, writing to them to resolve the issue, but not at the expense of Albania (Milo, P. 1992: 90-91). Wilson's statements in January-March 1920 were vital to the future of the Albanian people. Through the stance expressed in them, Wilson achieved what Albanians did not prevent him in 1913. He managed to restrain the further fragmentation of the Albanian state for the first time. Finally, we can say that the United States gave a valuable prize to Albania at the Peace Conference. Rather than American diplomacy, it was William himself who vetoed in favor of Albania's independence. The most powerful post-World War II president vetoed a small nation for whom no strategic, territorial or economic interests existed?! A question that still does not receive a full answer today. Maybe Willson made such a decision to show Europe the supremacy of America as a triumphant country to European states after the First World War, as Eric Hobsbawn also claims in his “The epoch of extremes” where he says: "President Wilson ...(Hobsbawn, E. 1997: 35), whose thoughts were perceived as representative expressions of power without which the war would have been lost ... "and at the same time to counter the European politics of secret diplomacy, perhaps by responding to the Albanians with the same coin respecting a common feature with them the word given, the word given to Fan Noli but also motivated by the efforts and perseverance of the Albanian people to Albanian delegations and Albanian diaspora.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baldacci, A. (2006). *Great Albania*, translated into Albanian by Adrian Beshaj e Asllan Saraçi, Tirana: Uegen.
- Bello, H. (2021). *Documents for Esat Pashe Toptanin*, Vol. 1. Tirana: West print
- Castellan, G. (1991). *Balkan History, 14th-20th century*. Tirana. Translated by Arben Puto and Luan Omari.
- Çami, M. (1969) *The anti-perianist liberation war of the Albanian people 1918-1920*, Tirane
- Dervishi, K. (2006). *The history of the Albanian State 1912 – 1925*. Tirana, Press House 55.
- Duka, V. (2007). *History of Albania 1912-2000*, Tirana. “Kristalina KH”.
- History of Albania*, (1984)Vol. I (1912 – 1944), Tirane.
- Hobsbawn, E. (1997) *Extreme Age*, abductee twentieth century 1914-1991, Central European University Press
- Marku, P. (2019). *Italian diplomatic documents for Albanian history*(1912)
- Milo, P. (1992). *Albania and Yugoslavia 1918-1927*. Tirana: Publishing House "Encyclopedic".
- Milo, Pl. (2013). *Foreign Policy of Albania, vol. I. 1912-1939* Tirana, “Toena”
- Poincare, R. (2006). *The First and Second Balkan Wars and the London Conference (1912-1913)*. Skopje-Pristina-Tirana: LOGOS-A,
- Puto, A. (2009) *Political Albania 1912-1939*, Tirana: "Toena"
- "Sun", (March 12, 1919), no. 1469. Boston Mass.
- The Council of Head delegation, The Paris Peace Conference, Volume VIII.
- The Academy of Albanological Studies, History Institution. (2018). *The History of Albanians during XX-th century*, Tirana. Albanological publication.
- The Academy of Albanological Studies, History Institution. (2019). *Italian diplomatic documents for Albanian history 1912*, Tirana. Albanological publication.
- Vilhelm, Prince of Albania. *Prince Vidi. Promemorie mbi Shqipërine*.
- Varoshi, L. (2020). *Phenomenon and Personalities in Albanology*, Naimi, [www.botimenaimi.com](http://www.botimenaimi.com)