

REFLECTING ABOUT THE CIVIL WAR IN ALBANIA

Alba Kreka

University of “Fan S. Noli”, Korçe. Albania, akreka@unkorce.edu.al

Abstract: Albania was considered "a wild province" by the British missions that served in the "land of the eagles" during the Second World War. First, the Italian occupation and then the German occupation created the ground for the anti-fascist national liberation war, carried out by various political forces operating in the country at that time. This paper aims to analyze the approaches and controversies of the civil war in Albania through the lens of British military missions' (SOE) official documents, Albanian archival documentation as well as from the literature of various authors. Referring to this documentation, the beginning of the civil war in Albania is related to the capitulation of Italy in September 1943 and the arrival of the German army, which occupied Albania, Yugoslavia and Greece in three weeks. Domestic political situation in Albania was strained because off encountered difficulties in creating a common front by the nationalist forces. The main rivalry was between a part of National Front called Balli Kombetar (BK) and Albanian Communist Party (ACP). BK was a republican, liberal and nationalist wing organization with an anti-communist program. Meanwhile, ACP identified itself with the National Liberation Front. In the vortex of these events, in August 1943 it was organized a meeting called “Mukje Meeting” due to the name of the village where it was held. The two rival political forces concluded an agreement, which lasted only one month; the communists cancelled it under the directives of the Yugoslavs because it meant equal power for both political forces and territorial unification with Kosovo after the war. These and other decisions were officially announced at the next conference organized by APC, called Labinot Conference II (September 1943). At the Central Archives of Albania it is found a circular - letter of October 1, year 1943 addressed to the APC Committees. Through it Enver Hoxha, as the secretary of APC opposed the union of BK forces with National Front, describing them as enemies. From this moment and on began the civil war. The confrontations are confirmed by the reports of SOE addressed to the British Foreign Ministry; it was reported that only 10% of the British weapons given to the communists were used in the war against the Germans, while the rest, 90% of them were used to fight the opponents (BK). Communist historiography denied the existence of civil war by censoring the history learned by Albanians for 45 years. After the fall of the communist regime, it was a necessary reviewing and rewriting the history of Albania. Even today, historians share different opinions regarding the period of World War II and especially the (in)existence of the civil war. The fact that Albania has had a civil war reflected in the struggle for power, just like the countries of the region, does not at all diminish the organization of a liberation war and its commitment to the Allies. To reflect about this period of Albania's history, we will refer to historical facts, arguments and various sources, which prove the existence of the civil war even after the liberation of the country. In January 1945, when the Germans had left Albania, it happen another confrontation, known as the Battle of Tamara. In the time when the victory of the communists was a fact and they were full of glory, this event is interpreted as the last step towards the power. With the coming of the communists in power, the civil war was replaced by the class war, which marked countless victims during the entire communist dictatorship.

Keywords: civil war, reflections, national liberation war, political force.

1. INTRODUCTION

World War II in Albania officially began with the Italian invasion on April 7, 1939. This is an eventful period full of different interpretations because of many factors. During the Italian occupation it was created Albanian Communist Party (ACP) and the National Front Party named Balli Kombetar (BK). The civil war in Albania has long been an open debate for many different researchers and historian. The debate is related to the existence or not of the civil war. Some historians support the line of the existence of the elements of the civil war, while others support the line of a real civil war in Albania. The civil war in Albania isn't a classical one, with defined fronts and lines; sometimes it is revealed as partisan war, sometimes as frontal war and many times as a camouflaged war. Communist historiography has anathematized the image of the nationalist forces, characterizing them as collaborators with Nazi-fascism. The attack against them is argued as an attack against the invaders and their collaborators. BK it was described as an organization where the participating people were reactionary men; such an accusation was confirmed by Enver Hoxha at the second meeting of communists in Labinot village. The main responsibility for the start of these clashes must be sought to APC Secretary E. Hoxha, who gave the order to liquidate the National Front. The question of the possession of power was the main factor in the clashes of political forces during the civil war. Interests for Albania's future of both political wings were different; APC demanded the establishment of a

communist regime, while BK and the nationalists demanded the establishment of a multi-party system. These views would further deepen the contradictions between them.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The aim of this paper is to analyze the contradictions about the civil war in Albania during World War II. The research question in this article relates to the open debate about the (in)existence of the civil war. *Can a civil war take place when a country is occupied? Did a civil war take place in Albania during the Second World War? Was it a real civil war or the elements of such a war?* The methodology used in this research is interpretative, characterized by objectivity and constructivism. The research has a representative character because it compares the data of Albanian authors, as well as data of foreign authors regarding the existence, life expectancy and organization of this civil war in Albania.

3. RESULTS

The civil war in Albania began in autumn of 1943. The majority of Albanian and foreign authors argue, based on foreign and domestic archival data, the existence of this civil war during the years 1943-1945. Some other Albanian historians argue that the existence of some confrontations between political forces cannot be taken for granted to accept this war. Based on the Albanian archival documentation as well as the data of the British SOE reports, the civil war in Albania took place in the same time with Albanian occupation by Germany. It has been a tough war with many victims; most of them have not been rehabilitated yet.

4. DISCUSSIONS

Albania was listed as an allied country that fought Nazi-fascism to the end. Such a war was carried out as part of the national liberation war under the conditions of an occupation. At the same time, the civil war took place, which is widely considered as a struggle for power between rival forces or groups within the country. (Gjeçovi, 2014) In the case of Albania, the civil war took place under the cloak of national liberation war. Some Albanian historians have their opinion regarding this civil war; according to them, the main premise of having a civil war is a free and unoccupied country. (Gjeçovi, 2014) Based on this reasoning, there is a need to consult other sources, which prove armed confrontations between nationalist forces, specifically BK and communist forces, PKSH. The first clashes were to take possession of the military materials that the Italian army had left behind. The capitulation of Italy put political forces in a dilemma over the possession of war materials. Anyone who was able to possess this material would gain a significant advantage. (Boçi, 2020) There were several confrontations between them in Gjirokastrë, Vlorë, Elbasan, Korçë, Berat. The Italian forces were attacked on September 14, 1943 in Grehot village by BK forces under the direction of Hysni Lepenica; the attack failed because of the intervention of the communists. Hysni Lepenica and some other BK combatives died during this action. The terrain to start the civil war had been prepared and the communist forces had taken all the necessary measures. Members of the National Liberation General Council were distributed in different regions of Albania to establish national liberation councils in favor of communist propaganda among the population. The National Liberation Army (hereafter NLA) managed to pose quantities of weapons and materials from the retreating Italian army and from the British missions too. In this way, the communists felt superior to BK to the extent that they could declare war against them.

The war between them was a civil war and not a war against the invader; it was organized even more after the Labinot Conference. (Butka, E djathta dhe e majta në luftë, 2016) This Conference was held on September 4-8, 1943 in Labinot and discussed the attitude to be taken towards BK, (Dezhgiu M. , Shqipëria nën pushtimin italian (1939-1943), 2015) which was presented as an organization with reactionary people in it. Against the nationalist forces of BK were brought some accusations of collaboration with the fascist invaders; some communism slogans such as "*Who is not a communist, is a fascist*" served to this purpose. This opinion was also reinforced by the secretary of the ACP, Enver Hoxha, who tried to invalidate the role of BK during the war. The main responsibility for the beginning of these clashes should be sought from Enver Hoxha, who gave the order to ruin BK in October. (Fischer, 2000) This is easily proven by a circular - letter of 1 October 1943, founded in the Central Archives of Albania, addressed to the APC Committees. Meanwhile, Mukje Meeting is considered a prelude to further events. This agreement signed by both political forces meant equal representation, the undertaking of joint military actions, the resolution of the border issue with Kosovo and the establishment of the political regime after liberation. One of the main reasons of rejecting Mukje Meeting was the intervention of Yugoslav Communist Party (YCP) representatives in Albania, Popovic and Mugosa. (Butka, Dritëhije të historisë (Polemikë me Kristo Frashërin), 2012) They were the ones who intervened to unite the communists under the Albanian Communist Party. In some cases, they determined the positions of the ACP before and after Mukje Meeting. (Dezhgiu M. e., 2021) One of the points of Mukje Agreement mentioned the term "Ethnic Albania", which meant a possible union of Albania with Kosovo after the

war. According to Popovic: "The issue of Kosovo belongs to YCP". (Lalaj, 2011) In that time, ACP hadn't established a dominant position in Albania; in order to achieve this goal there was a need of YCP's help. Under these circumstances, they risked breaking relations with the Yugoslav communists if they continued to insist on Kosovo issue. Enver Hoxha, in a letter he sent to Stalin in August 1949, stated that the issue of Kosovo could not be discussed during the war, because Yugoslavia was an ally of the Albanian people. (Boçi, 2020) Since the union of Albania with Kosovo during this period was a political tool of the Italian authorities to gain the sympathy of the Albanians, Enver Hoxha said that the people of Kosovo should fraternize with the Serbo-Montenegros to fight fascism, with the hope that after the war they would join Albania. (Dezhgiu M. , Shqipëria nën pushtimin italian (1939-1943), 2015) Regarding the issue of Kosovo, the nationalist forces represented by Mit'hat Frashëri said that they were neither for "Greater Albania" nor for "Little Albania", but for ethnic Albania. (Dezhgiu M. , Mbledhja e Mukjes ne kuader te ceshtjes kombetare, 2009); this was a clear objective.

Being a struggle for power, the civil war confronted two main political forces against each other. ACP aimed to establish a popular regime after the liberation of the country, so cooperation with the nationalists meant sharing power with them. BK aimed to establish a multi-party system after the war, creating the opportunity to take power through free elections in Albania. ACP has identified itself with National Liberation War as well with National Liberation Army (NLA). Propaganda was essential in realizing the goals by ensuring the support of the people on the one hand and damaging the nationalists on the other. In the letter sent to Ymer Dishnica on August 6, 1943, Enver Hoxha stated that their policy towards BK had to change. The ground had to be prepared for the start of the civil conflict, but the propaganda should blame BK. (Boçi, 2020) The reaction of BK's structures was immediate. On 7 October 1943 Mit'hat Frashëri notified the provincial committees to respond in the same way and to systematically propagandize the people to learn the truth.

The situation created by the civil war used by German forces to disunite Albanians. They offered to the nationalist forces weapons to use against the communists, but only a part of them accepted this offer. Meanwhile, the Allies tried to engage even more in this conflict. According to the British SOE mission, General Davis took a statement from BK to be more engaged in the fight against the Germans. (Boçi, 2020) Regardless of the efforts of the British missions to reduce the commitments of the parties in the civil war, it didn't succeed. During Enver Hoxha's meeting with British General Davis on November 11, 1943, he insisted to fight BK, King Zog and his supporters. This attitude was confirmed by Reginald Hibbert too. (Hibbert, 1993) Such commitments became concrete on October 21, 1943 in the battle of Golem. The 1st Assault Brigade commanded by Mehmet Shehu and Mugesha (under the pseudonym "Sali Murati") attacked the nationalist forces of Tëfik Cëri and Isa Manastirli. This battle was gained by the communists, who executed 65 nationalists. (Butka, E djathta dhe e majta në luftë, 2016) There were other confrontations in the area of Mallakastre, on 3 November 1943, where the I-st Brigade attacked the nationalist forces located near Ballshi, causing human and material losses. According to the memoirs of Franko Benanti, in this area, on November 15, the communist forces faced the German forces (helped by BK's forces). This attacks ended with the retreat of the communist forces. (Benanti, 2012) In November 1943 a battle took place in Dukat village of Vlora between the I-st Brigade and the nationalists; about 14 partisans and 8-10 nationalists were killed. (Butka, E djathta dhe e majta në luftë, 2016) The civil war was intensified and this situation was used by the German forces, which intervened to help BK during the Winter Operation. (Fischer, 2000) This operation began in November 1943, attacking on partisan forces in the area of Peza, Dibra, Berat and Mallakastre. (Dezhgiu M. e., 2021) The attacks against communists continued in Çermenike-Shëngjergj-Martanesh area; The 3rd Battalion deserted and went to the side of the nationalists, attacked by them too. During January, these hostilities spread further into Southern Albania, causing heavy losses to the communist forces. (Dezhgiu M. e., 2021) These are some of the moments that communist historiography accused BK and other nationalist forces for collaboration with the invaders.

Throughout 1944, other battles took place in Central and Northern Albania, where the positions of the nationalists were weaker due to independent movements organized by Northern leaders. The reorganization of the communists had resumed thanks to the military discipline and the help of the British missions. The decision to continue attacks against those independent movements was taken at the Congress of Permet. Muharrem Bajraktari fought German troops under the Dibra League and wasn't engaged with National Liberation Front. The 5th Brigade received instructions to attack Muharrem Bajraktari's forces and the movement of Kryeziu Family by surprise, taking care not to spread the news among the people. (Butka, E djathta dhe e majta në luftë, 2016) Such an attack, at a time when the Kryeziu movement was fighting against the Germans, turned out to be fatal. According to the British documentation of that time, the destruction came during the month of October. (Kapri, 2017) Such attacks involved Zogist forces too, eliminating one by one its most important bases. The main confrontations were in Shupal, Mat, Lura, Macukulli, Tujani, Qafë-Shtama, Kurdarië, Xibra, Fullqeti, etc. In the attack carried out in the village of Kurdari, on July 21, 1944, the communist forces were hit by the Zogist forces in cooperation with the people of Kurdari. As a sign of revenge, civilians were shot and their houses were burned. (Kapri, 2017) These successive

defeats worsened the position of the nationalist forces. From July to August were carried out military operations in Berat, Gramsh, Pogradec, Fier, Lushnje, Gjirokaster, Delvine, etc. According to maps compiled by British officers from March to October 1944,² (Kapri, 2017) the territory controlled by NLA grows more; they penetrated into Central and North Albania taking Elbasan and Dibra. Until October, NLA established its influence almost in all Albanian territory. The areas of Malësia e Madhe, Kelmendi and Dukagjin had a great interest for NLA, because they were under direction of local mountaineers, which gathered volunteers from all over Albania in Shkodër to organize the resistance against the communists.

Although the path to power was clear to the communists, the confrontations between communists and BK continued even during 1945. By this time, the Germans left and regardless of Albanian liberation it took place Battle of Tamara, started on 1 January 1945. The national liberation forces entered to Malesia e Madhe and attacked the nationalist forces of resistance in this province. On 31 January 31, Kelmendi province was attacked by communists in collaboration with YCP. Those confrontations brought a large number of victims and are evidences of the existence and severity of Albanian civil war.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The period of August-September 1943 is the beginning of the first confrontations between Albanian political forces. The communists were the ones who rejected the decisions of Mukje Agreement as well as advancing further by declaring war on the nationalists of BK and any other non-communist individuals and parties too. The official data of the civil war was 1 October 1943. The first clashes began in the South of Albania, because the positions of nationalist forces of BK were stronger in this territory. Some difficulties of BK nationalists displayed in organization and military discipline, internal diunity which led to the further loss of their positions. During 1944, the civil war was enlarged to the rest of Albania. Some of independent nationalist movements As Dibrane League and Kryeziu Family were attacked by communists. After them, them, the confrontations were focused on Legality Party, because of its engagement in two fronts, against the communists and against the Germans too. Successive victories of the communists influenced the expansion of their territory, controlling most of Albania until October 1944. Meanwhile, the nationalists were defeated and despite their efforts to secure aid from the British missions, they were not supported militarily by them. The civil war in Albania had the characteristics of an ideological war, where both sides aimed to gain superiority and support through propaganda. Ideological interests and differences between them led to the outbreak of this civil war. ACP was influenced and directed by YCP during the organizing of this party, as well in the further decision making. This Yugoslav influence is mentioned in secret archives of the British missions too. This document, available only to officers during the war, stated that the main author of the beginning of Albanian civil war in Albania was a Serbian communist named Ali Dushanovici (Miladin Popovici), from Peja. The civil war in Albania is no exception to the civil wars in the region as well. After all, in a civil war the opposite parties aim to gain superiority over each other toward the power. The civil war in Albania turned out to be devastating to Albanian people as well, because they had to get a position during civil war.

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² *Po aty*, 161, 163-164.