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THE ALBANIAN QUESTION IN SERBIAN-ITALIAN RELATIONS 1914–1918

Abstract: The rivalry between Serbia and Italy over the Adriatic region also involved Albania as a point of dispute. The political leaderships of both countries were driven by the war aim of putting an end to Austro-Hungarian hegemony in south-east Europe and of preventing any other country from taking its place. Each of the two countries sought for some time to establish its influence in Albania either through a local proxy, Essad Pasha Toptani, or by occupying the parts of Albania considered important for its perceived strategic interests after the war.

Keywords: Albanian question during the First World War, Serbian-Italian Adriatic rivalry

After the London Conference of the Ambassadors of six great powers in 1912/3 and the signing of peace treaties between the warring Balkan states, the issue arose of establishing a government and preparing the new Albanian state for independent existence. In the history of international relations the term “Albanian question” is habitually used for a series of diplomatic crises and political clashes taking place in the as yet not definitively delimited territory of Albania among Albanians themselves, their neighbours and the great powers. The question thus concerned the political future of the Albanian population in the central and western Balkans. The future fate of Albania also figured in territorial disputes between the kingdoms of Serbia and Italy over the eastern side of the Adriatic Sea during the

First World War and at the Paris Peace Conference. Thus this area was the southernmost point of the territory in dispute between the two countries that stretched as far north as Fiume/Rijeka and the westernmost South-Slav regions.¹

In the decades preceding the First World War, and especially in 1913/4, the main rivals for dominance over Albania were Austria-Hungary and Italy among the great powers, as well as Greece and Serbia, Albania's strongest neighbours.² King Nicholas I of Montenegro also harboured ambition of expanding into the Scutari/Shkoder area and northern Albania. His limited resources forced him, however, to rely on other countries for maintaining his own country's influence in Albania; even so, Montenegro had since the end of the nineteenth century been pursuing a very active policy in this respect, especially among the north-Albanian Roman Catholic Malisors. During and after the Balkan Wars, two allies, Italy and Austria-Hungary, went from cooperating in Albania, when their joint pressure had thwarted Serbian-Greek plans for her partition, to an almost open conflict over influence in the newly-created country.³ The foremost war aim of both Serbia and Italy was to suppress Austro-Hungarian influence in all of south-eastern Europe because both saw the Dual Monarchy as their most dangerous rival.⁴ The ruling elites in both

¹ D. R. Živojinović, "The War Aims of Serbia and Italy (1917)", in *Italy's Balkan Strategies*, ed. V. G. Pavlović (Belgrade: Institute for Balkan Studies, 2014), 141. In much the same way, Albania was a disputed area between Italy and Greece besides Epirus, parts of Anatolia and the Dodecanese, see M. L. Smith, "Venizelos Diplomacy, 1910–23: From Balkan Alliance to Greek-Turkish Settlement", in *Eleftherios Venizelos. The Trials of Statesmanship*, ed. P. M. Kitromilides (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 160.

² M. Ekmečić, *Ratni ciljevi Srbije* (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1990²), 144.

³ H. Afflerbach, *Der Dreibund. Europäische Großmacht und Allianzpolitik vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg* (Vienna: Böhlau Wien, 2002), 750–755; D. T. Bataković, *Srbija i Balkan. Albanija, Bugarska i Grčka 1914–1918* (Novi Sad: Prometej, and Belgrade: RTS, 2016), 158.

⁴ Italy's main rival in the Adriatic was neither Serbia nor Montenegro nor even Greece, but rather Austria-Hungary – see R. J. B. Bosworth, *Italy, the Least of the Great Powers: Italian foreign policy before the First World War* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 235–236 – and vice versa, Italy was the most important rival of the Dual Monarchy in Albania – see M. B. Fried, *Austro-Hungarian War Aims in the Balkans during World War I* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 26; S. R. Williamson, Jr., *Austria-Hungary and the Origins of the First World War* (London:

countries saw the solution to this problem in gaining control over the territories deemed strategically important, above all in the western Balkans. As a result, the Albanian question figured prominently in Serbo-Italian relations during the First World War. Gaining control over Albania would have meant a decisive triumph for Italian foreign policy since it had for at least two previous decades been one of the key territories to which both Italy and Austria-Hungary laid claim.

Serbia's pretensions to northern Albania had a relatively short history, in which Italy also played a part. When in 1912, during the war of the Balkan League against the Ottoman Empire, the Serbian forces took some coastal areas in northern and central Albania, Italy and Austria-Hungary's joint diplomatic pressure forced them to withdraw. The result of the war was an enlarged but still landlocked Kingdom of Serbia, exactly what the Serbian government had sought to change in the First Balkan War. In other words, Italy's position in Albania, compared to Serbia's, was more stable both economically and politically because, pressed by her rivalry with the Dual Monarchy, she had developed an extensive network of schools and other tools necessary for creating a sphere of influence, whereas Serbia's connections in Albania were quite recent and still vulnerable.⁵

During the July Crisis which preceded the outbreak of the First World War Albania was in a state of civil war, torn apart by a few opposing factions, which led to the dissolution of the International Control Commission and its departure from Albania in August 1914. The Commission, composed (in 1913) of the representatives of the great powers, had failed to achieve the main goals mostly because of growing disagreements between the representatives of Austria-Hungary and Italy. There had been no final decision on the delimitation of Albania's borders, nor had a stable central authority

Macmillan, 1991), 177. Hence Italian Foreign Minister San Giuliano's stance of opposing Austria-Hungary's expansion unless counterbalanced by territorial compensations for Italy, see Giordano Merlicco, "Italy and the Austro-Serbian Crisis of July 1914", in *Serbian-Italian Relations: History and Modern Times*, eds. S. Rudić and A. Biagini, 128–129.

⁵ On the Austro-Italian rivalry in Albania see H. D. Schanderl, *Die Albanienpolitik Österreich-Ungarns und Italiens 1877–1908* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1971).

been created, which had serious consequences for the new country's internal situation.⁶

Albania was fragmented into several regions controlled by figures such as Prenk Bib Doda, the Mirdita leader in the north, or Essad Pasha Toptani and Ahmed Bey Zogu, Muslim landowners in central Albania, or the leaders of rebels against Prince Wilhelm of Wied.⁷ Various local lords, influential landowning beys, northern tribes and ever more influential Albanian nationalists fought for dominance in the country, trying to win the support of one or another foreign power. All of them were involved in the conflict between the conservative pro-Ottoman faction of central Albania and the Austro-Hungarian-backed government of Prince Wied. Wied's regime collapsed and in early September 1914 he left the Albanian capital Durres.⁸ Internal fighting, accompanied by a series of military interventions and occupations by Italy, Serbia, Greece, Montenegro, Austria-Hungary and Bulgaria, continued until 1920.

Having failed to obtain access to the Adriatic Sea before the First World War, the Serbian government and its leading figure at the time, Nikola Pašić, who usually held the post of prime minister or foreign minister, sought to achieve the best possible solution to the Albanian question, the understanding of which varied with the changing international situation. This means that a "Serbian solution" had to take into account both Serbia's own strength and the decisions of the great powers. Plans ranged from partitioning the territory of Albania to eliminating her as a political entity, with the future border of Serbia moved southward and set either along the

⁶ P. Bartl, *Albanci: od srednjeg veka do danas* (Belgrade: Clio, 2001), 169, transl. from the German original: *Albanien: vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart* (Regensburg: Pustet, 1995).

⁷ M. Schmidt-Neke, *Entstehung und Ausbau der Königsdiktatur in Albanien (1912–1939)* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1987), 30. Of course, this list is not complete. There were also local powerful figures with dubious allegiances in cities such as Lezhe or Elbasan.

⁸ Wied's downfall was the result of Italy's policy of supporting Essad Pasha Toptani and north-Albanian Muslim rebels. See D. T. Bataković, "Essad Pasha Toptani, Serbia and the Albanian Question (1915–1918)", in *Italy's Balkan Strategies*, ed. V. G. Pavlović (Belgrade: Institute for Balkan Studies, 2014), 160; Fried, *Austro-Hungarian War Aims*, 26.

river Mat or the river Shkumbin. The minimum demand in Serbia's plans was a strategic change to the borders established at the London Conference in 1912/3. Yet another outcome considered acceptable by the Serbian government was an Albanian government under Serbia's protection.⁹

Italy, being a great power, had a variety of ambitions in the Mediterranean. Italian ruling circles discussed Corsica, Malta, Nice and Savoy, the establishing of dominance in Montenegro and Albania, the gaining of territory in Ottoman Anatolia, plans for North Africa.¹⁰ Among all of Italy's war aims, however, the eastern Adriatic coast was her first priority.¹¹

The disputed and potentially conflict hotspot area in the context of Serbian and Italian territorial pretensions was central Albania. The Italian government did not object to Serbia's and Montenegro's limited expansion into northern Albania as long as her own ambition to occupy Valona/Vlore and the strategically important island of Saseno/Sazan was not called into question. Each country had its own plans for the future of a mostly Muslim central Albania dominated by former officials of the Ottoman imperial administration.¹²

Albania was important to both Italy and Serbia also because of potential military operations in wartime itself. The pro-Austrian forces in Albania consisted mostly of prominent figures from the former Vilayet of Kosovo, such as Hasan Prishtina, Bajram Curri and Isa Boletini. They recruited and organized units which, supplied by the Dual Monarchy with arms and money, made raids into Serbia in the course of 1914 and 1915.¹³

⁹ Ekmečić, *Ratni ciljevi*, 372; A. Mitrović, *Srbija u I svetskom ratu* (Belgrade: Stubovi kulture, 2004), 194–195 (an English edition: *Serbia's Great War 1914–1918* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2007; Purdue University Press, 2007). Principles underlying Serbia's war aims were set forth in the Niš Declaration which was made public on 7 December 1914. Its text is available in *Dokumenti o postanku Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca 1914–1919*, ed. F. Šišić (Zagreb: Naklada Matice Hrvatske, 1920), doc. 8.

¹⁰ *Decisions for War, 1914–1917*, eds. R. F. Hamilton and H. H. Herwig (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 188.

¹¹ D. R. Živojinović, *U potrazi za imperijom: Italija i Balkan početkom XX veka: studije i rasprave* (Belgrade: Albatros Plus, 2013), 18.

¹² M. Bucarelli, "Allies or Rivals? Italy and Serbia during the First World War", in *The Serbs and the First World War 1914–1918*, ed. D. R. Živojinović (Belgrade: Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts), 248–251.

¹³ Mitrović, *Srbija*, 183–192.

Neutralisation of these units was important for Serbia in order for her army to be able to resist Austro-Hungarian attacks from the north and west. Moreover, their raids could serve as an excuse for Serbian extension into Albania. For Italy, controlling Valona seemed vital not only for naval warfare in the Adriatic but also for controlling the Adriatic after the war. When considering the further evolution of the two countries' war aims, it should be borne in mind that the first war year was difficult for both. Italy would have hardly survived the first war year had the Austro-Hungarian forces not been engaged in Russia as well.¹⁴ Serbia, on the other hand, emerged victorious from the battles of Cer and the Kolubara, but they took their toll, and she entered the year 1915 exhausted and gripped by a typhus epidemic.¹⁵ Even so, her two victorious battles brought a lull in her fighting with Austria-Hungary until October 1915,¹⁶ which gave her some leeway for engagement in Albania.

A goal of Sidney Sonnino, successor of San Giuliano in the office of Italian foreign minister, was to change what he saw as his country's inferior position in relation to Austria-Hungary. His intention was to negotiate the best possible terms for Italy's entry into the war on the side of the Entente in return for abandoning her pre-war alliance with the Central powers.¹⁷ Besides, he believed that every war effort would be rendered meaningless if Austro-Hungary was simply replaced by an ambitious South-Slav state. Italian Prime Minister Vittorio Emanuele Orlando would be of a similar view at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, when he stated that everything would be as unsatisfactory as it had been if Austro-Hungary was simply replaced by Yugoslavia on the other side of the Adriatic. Similar fears troubled the Serbian leadership. Prime Minister Nikola Pašić's concern, which he expressed to the Russian Minister to Serbia, Prince Trubetskoi, as early as August 1915, was that Serbia would shake off the "Austrian yoke" only to fall into Italian hands. It was in these fears on both sides that lay the roots of growing mutual distrust in Serbian-Italian relations during the war years.

¹⁴ Bataković, *Srbija i Balkan*, 32–37.

¹⁵ Gooch, *The Italian Army and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 97.

¹⁶ Bataković, *Srbija i Balkan*, 37.

¹⁷ On the 1914 decision of the Italian government to remain neutral, see Afflerbach, *Der Dreibund*, 845.

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In late October 1914, Italy, still as a neutral country, sent a sanitary mission to Valona which was to serve as a stepping-stone in her expansion plans or, as Prime Minister Antonio Salandra put it, as “a more concrete affirmation of our influence”.¹⁸ This move was meant to send a clear message to the other great powers that Italy was not going to let dominance over Albania slip to any of them or to Serbia or Greece. Italy, taking advantage of the Entente’s being careful not to do anything that would incline her to remain in the camp of the Central powers, used every opportunity to push through her policy.¹⁹ In November 1914 the Serbian government failed in its attempt to obtain the Allied powers’ support for intervening in Albania to consolidate the position of Essad Pasha Toptani, on whom it relied in pursuing her own national interests.²⁰ While Serbia was trying to get the Allies’ support, Italy was negotiating with both camps of the warring European powers in order to effect the transformation of the sanitary mission into the occupation of Valona and the island of Saseno, in which she succeeded by the end of December 1914.²¹ Italian policy in Albania was limited by a disagreement between General Cadorna, chief of staff of the Italian Army, and Sidney Sonnino, Italian foreign minister, because the former opposed Italian involvement in Albania as detrimental to the Italian war effort.²² The situation in the case of Serbia was much the same, because Prime Minister Pašić’s proposal for a military response to the Italian occupation of Valona was rejected by Cadorna’s Serbian counterpart, *Vojvoda* (Field-Marshal) Putnik.²³ These military decisions brought the two countries’ policies to a relative standstill between January

¹⁸ Salandra to Lori, Rome, 21 Oct. 1914, *Documenti Diplomatici Italiani* [hereafter DDI], ser. V, vol. II, doc. 9; Gooch, *The Italian Army*, 70.

¹⁹ N. Guy, “The Albanian question in British policy and Italian intervention, August 1914–1915”, *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 18 (2007), 118.

²⁰ D. Janković, *Srbija i jugoslovensko pitanje 1914–1915* (Belgrade: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1973), 167.

²¹ The island of Saseno was seen as the “Gibraltar of the Adriatic”, see R. J. Bosworth, “Italy and the End of the Ottoman Empire”, in *The Great Powers and the End of the Ottoman Empire*, ed. M. Kent (), 62.

²² H. J. Burgwyn, “Italy’s Balkan Policy 1915–1917. Albania, Greece and the Epirus Question”, *Storia delle relazioni internazionali* 2 (1986), 8.

²³ Mitrović, *Srbija*, 193.

and April 1915, when the secret negotiations between Italy and the Entente powers ended with a treaty.²⁴

Serbia's and Italy's Albanian policy can be analysed on the basis of their respective relations with Essad Pasha Toptani, a former Ottoman army officer and member of a wealthy and influential central-Albanian landowning family, in whom both countries invested their political influence and material resources for their own ends.²⁵ Appointed defence minister in Prince Wied's government, Essad Pasha played one of the leading roles in Albanian politics.²⁶ In the early months of the First World War, Toptani had the support of and agreements with both Serbia and Italy. And he did need support because he was constantly in conflict with his former allies – the rebels against Prince Wied. In November 1914 he received a new portion of financial aid from Italy and in return was expected to resist any form of Austro-Hungarian influence in Albania.²⁷ But he also had important arrangements with Serbia. Under two separate agreements, one signed in Niš on 17 September 1914,²⁸ the other in Tirana on 28 July 1915,²⁹ he took on the obligation to pursue, diplomatically and militarily, a policy of close ties between Albania and Serbia which, among other things, involved the incorporation of some border areas of Albania into Serbia and the formation of a union between the two countries after the war. The position of the Albanian ruler, either as president or monarch, was reserved for Essad Pasha himself.³⁰

²⁴ Janković, *Srbija i jugoslovensko pitanje*, 169–171.

²⁵ Ekmečić, *Ratni ciljevi*, 144.

²⁶ In the first years of Albania's existence as a state, 1912–1914, he was the main rival of Ismail Kemal's Valona government for the position of highest authority in the country.

²⁷ Ekmečić, *Ratni ciljevi*, 385. Serbia also played the card of supporting Ahmed Bey of Mat, future King Zogu, Ekmečić, *Ratni ciljevi*, 389; Bataković, *Srbija i Balkan*, 180–184.

²⁸ The text of the agreement is available in S. Rahimi, "Marrëveshjet e qeverise serbe me Essat pashe Toptanit gjate viteve 1914–1915", *Gjurmime Albalologjike* 6 (1975), 125–127.

²⁹ Bataković, *Srbija i Balkan*, 177–179.

³⁰ Bataković, "Essad Pasha", 161. The assistance provided by the Serbian government was diverse. For example, in early July 1915, Toptani's forces were supplied with 2,000 uniforms and he was given permission to recruit men from among

The state of relations between Serbia and Italy may be read from the concluding article of the Tirana agreement, under which Essad Pasha engaged that he would inform the Serbian government as soon as he should have learnt about possible Italian plans for the occupation of Durazzo/Durres, and prevent that from happening.³¹ Essad Pasha's political tactic of balancing between Serbia and Italy in order to avoid becoming completely dependent on either of the two caused a growing distrust between Serbia and Italy. He made use of their rivalry to obtain more substantial financial support. When asking Serbia for money, he would give to understand that he would turn to Italy if Serbia was unable to help. Of course, the Serbian government chose to supply the money.³² In June 1915, Italian Minister in Durazzo Aliotti reported that Essad Pasha counted on the Italian army to keep Serbian troops out of Albania while calling on Serbia early the same year to intervene in Albania in his favour.³³

The central place in Serbian-Italian relations as regards Albania and, more generally, the Adriatic, was held by the secret Treaty of London³⁴ signed, after long negotiations, on 26 April 1915, by which Italy abandoned the Triple Alliance and pledged to enter the war on the side of the Entente. The terms of the treaty envisaged Albania as a small, predominantly Muslim state centred on Tirana and Elbasan and having the status of an Italian protectorate with Rome having full control over its foreign affairs. Under article six, Italy was to annex Valona and the island of Saseno, the key strategic point which enabled full control of the Adriatic. If the decisions concerning Italian territorial gains were honoured, Italy would not object to the di-

Albanians in Serbia, see *Zapisnici sednica Ministarskog saveta Srbije 1915–1918*, eds. D. Janković and B. Hrabak (Belgrade: Arhiv Srbije, 1976), doc. 9.

³¹ Thus Essad Pasha informed the Serbian government that he had learnt that Italy was going to expand her zone of occupation in August 1915, *Zapisnici*, doc. 27.

³² *Zapisnici*, doc. 51. Expectedly enough, in the course of 1914 and 1915 Toptani received aid from Italy as well, see Hrabak, "Vojne i političke prilike u Albaniji u Prvom svetskom ratu", *Arbanaške studije*, vol. IV (Belgrade: Arhivar, 2006), 15.

³³ Hrabak, "Vojne i političke prilike", 21.

³⁴ *Balkanski ugovorni odnosi I*, ed. M. Stojković (Belgrade: Službeni list SRJ, 1998), doc. 179; D. R. Živojinović, "Srbija i Londonski pakt 1915. godine", in *Dva veka moderne srpske diplomatije*, eds. Č. Popov, D. R. Živojinović and S. G. Marković (Belgrade: Balkanološki institut and Institut za evropske studije), 159–171. See also V. G. Pavlović, *De la Serbie vers la Yougoslavie. La France et la naissance de la Yougoslavie 1878–1918* (Belgrade: Institute des Etudes balkaniques, 2015), 220–229.

vision of northern and southern Albania among Montenegro, Serbia and Greece. In other words, the chief territorial gain in the eastern Adriatic that the Treaty promised to Italy was such that it would have ensured her unquestionable supremacy after the war.³⁵ Once the Serbian government learnt the perplexing but essentially accurate news about the agreement reached in London, the idea of occupying central Albania was back on the table.³⁶ Essad Pasha's calls for help sent in May 1915 were used as an excuse for preparing troops for intervention in Albania.³⁷ In late May, the Serbian troops crossed the border, occupying Elbasan on 4 June and Tirana a week later in Essad Pasha's name.³⁸ It was after this intervention that the abovementioned Tirana agreement was concluded, by which the Albanian state in central Albania was practically to become a Serbian protectorate.³⁹ The Italian response came soon enough. Italian Minister in Durazzo Aliotti reported in the course of October 1915 on Essad Pasha's weak position and urged for Italian military intervention. The Italian army responded. In November 1915, while Serbia's defence against a new invasion by the Central powers, now joined by Bulgaria as a new ally, was collapsing, an Italian division disembarked in Valona and a brigade in Durazzo.⁴⁰ Discontent in Serbian-Italian relations kept mounting. Sidney Sonnino had it relayed to the Serbian Minister to Italy, Mihailo Ristić, that Serbia's actions in Albania were hostile towards Italy, so much so that Serbia might just as well have been Austria's ally.⁴¹

³⁵ The Treaty of London marked the beginning of a cold, diplomatic, war between Rome and Belgrade. See Bucarelli, "Allies or Rivals?", 248.

³⁶ B. Hrabak, "Elaborat srpskog Ministarstva inostranih dela o pripremama srpske okupacije severne Albanije 1915. godine", *Godišnjak Arhiva Kosova* 2–3 (1966–1967), 21–22.

³⁷ Janković, *Srbija i jugoslovensko pitanje*, 172–175.

³⁸ The Allies, now joined by Italy, protested strongly because they were interested in the implementation of the Treaty of London, see Mitrović, *Srbija*, 194; Bataković, *Srbija i Balkan*, 175; Hrabak, "Elaborat", 24.

³⁹ Mitrović, *Srbija*, 193.

⁴⁰ Burgwyn, "Italy's Balkan Policy", 14–16.

⁴¹ Bucarelli, "Allies or Rivals", 258–259.

Serbia's military defeat and Italy's failed expedition in central Albania enabled the Austro-Hungarians to advance further south. In January and February 1916, following the capitulation of Montenegro, Austria-Hungary took Scutari, Tirana, Elbasan (jointly with the Bulgarians) and Durazzo.⁴² Albania remained divided into three occupation zones until 1918: the largest, Austro-Hungarian, in northern and central Albania; the Italian in Valona with its hinterland; and the French zone centred on Korçe. The occupation years were marked by their more or less unsuccessful attempts to win the support of Albanian elites, which, however, were more and more enthusiastic about the ideas of Albanian nationalism and nation-state.⁴³ During this forced intermission in Serbian-Italian relations as regards Albania, Italy devoted herself to pushing Greece out of Epirus. In 1917, however, the rivalry broke out again, and with even higher tensions.⁴⁴

All decisions made in those years reflect the determination of both Italy and Serbia not to give up their respective agendas.⁴⁵ In February 1917 Nikola Pašić sent a memorandum to Serbia's diplomatic representatives – with the caveat not to show it to the Allies – about the government's aspiration for setting the border with Albania along the river Mat, which would make it possible for Serbia to annex the north of the country with Scutari.⁴⁶ The Serbian government also sought to pave the way for Essad Pasha's return to power so that all of Albania could be included in its sphere of influence. Italian ambitions had grown from occupying Valona and Saseno to gaining dominance over all of Albania. The proclamation read by Italian General Ferrero in Argirocastro/Argyrocastro on 3 June 1917 spoke of an independent Albania under Italian protection.⁴⁷ The issuance of the Proclamation

⁴² Hrabak, "Vojne i političke prilike", 25.

⁴³ Bartl, *Albanci*, 172–178.

⁴⁴ Burgwyn, "Italy's Balkan Policy", 28–38.

⁴⁵ Živojinović, "War Aims of Serbia and Italy", 140.

⁴⁶ Mitrović, *Srbija*, 443. Serbia suspected that Italy was setting the stage for establishing control over central and northern Albania through her connections in the Roman Catholic Mirdita tribe, see doc. 195 in *Diplomatska prepiska srpske vlade 1917. godine*, eds. M. Zečević and M. Milošević (Belgrade: Narodno delo, 1991).

⁴⁷ "Italians flied Wied's flag in all places of occupied Albania and Epirus. Especially solemn was the flying of the flag in Argykastro in the presence of Greek and Albanian citizens... The General gave a speech and said that Italy would champion

was prompted by the decision of the Russian government established after the Revolution of February 1917 to disclose various secret agreements, including the Treaty of London, of which the Albanian public had been unaware until the Austro-Hungarian occupation authorities had it translated into Albanian.⁴⁸ After Austro-Hungary had declared an autonomous Albania in January 1916, and France, the Autonomous Republic of Korça in her zone of occupation in December the same year, Italy “raised the bar” by promising an independent Albania.⁴⁹ Yet, to avoid colonial connotations, the Italian Proclamation cautiously spoke of Albania under Italian protection rather than of a protectorate.⁵⁰ In the course of 1917 Italo-Serbian relations went from bad to worse. Thus, on 16 June, Carlo Sforza, the Italian minister to the Serbian government in exile in Corfu, wrote to Sonnino that Serbia would never stop her anti-Italian intrigues in Albania.⁵¹

Finally, the Italian reaction to the issuance, on 20 July 1917, of the Corfu Declaration – an agreement between the Serbian government and the Yugoslav Committee composed of South-Slav politicians from

the principle of nationality, help the unification and independence of Albania, and punish those Albanians who in collusion with some foreign countries were working for their own self-interest and that she would form a special Albanian government with these ends in mind.” It was believed that his reference to punishment was directed to Essad Pasha and Serbia”, see *Diplomatska prepiska*, doc. 202. Italy sought to exclude from the decision-making process concerning Albania all other parties interested in the Albanian question, see D. Šepić, *Italija, saveznici i Jugoslovensko pitanje 1914–1918* (Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 1970), 208; Bataković, “Esad Pasha”, 166–167. The text of the Proclamation in Marković to Pašić, 23 May/5 June 1917, Corfu, conf. A, no. 147, Arhiv Srbije [Archives of Serbia], Ministarstvo inostranih dela [Ministry for Foreign Affairs], Albanski odsek [Albanian Division], 1917, f. V. Moreover, this was a breach of the Treaty of London which only envisaged a “Muslim Albania”, see N. Guy, *The Birth of Albania: Ethnic Nationalism, the Great Powers of World War I and the Emergence of Albanian Independence* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), 137–138.

⁴⁸ Bartl, *Albanci*, 176.

⁴⁹ Sonnino saw it as a direct response to the French declaration, see Živojinović, “The War Aims of Serbia and Italy”, 141. The Serbian side feared that every possibility of advancing into Albania would be precluded if the Italians managed to be the first to occupy strategic positions at Ohrid, see: *Diplomatska prepiska*, doc. 196.

⁵⁰ R. Albrecht-Carrié, *Italy at the Paris Peace Conference* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1966), 296.

⁵¹ Živojinović, “The War Aims of Serbia and Italy”, 143.

Austria-Hungary – concerning the creation of a common state of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, was markedly adverse. Italy deemed Pašić's offer of Trieste, Pola/Pula, western half of Istria, some Adriatic islands and Valona and Saseno unsatisfactory.⁵² Rome saw the Corfu Declaration as anti-Austrian in word but anti-Italian in spirit.⁵³ Neither Serbia nor Italy would give up their respective agendas even during the following year, 1918, or at the Peace Conference. After the breakthrough on the Macedonian (Salonika) front and the military victory, Pašić contemplated the occupation of northern Albania as far as the river Mat in order to be able to achieve his old goals as well as an attempt to bring about Essad Pasha's return to power.⁵⁴ Italy, for her part, which had occupied most of Albania, influenced the installation in late December 1918 of a pro-Italian government in Durazzo headed by Turhan Pasha Permeti.⁵⁵ The Serbian-Italian rivalry in Albania would be finally settled at the Paris Peace Conference in 1918/9.

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Since the shaping of a new map of Europe in Paris constitutes a separate topic, the concluding part of this article will be restricted to outlining the Albania-related process of making decisions by Italy and the newly-created Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (SCS).

Hopeful that Italy would succeed in her attempts to put an end to Albania as a state, Pašić had in fact been hopeful that he would be able to accomplish the plan to occupy Scutari. That plan, however, gradually became an issue of secondary importance.⁵⁶ As a result, the official platform of the delegation of the Kingdom of SCS to the Paris Peace Conference was support to the independence of Albania within her 1913 borders, the purpose of which was to offset the potential Italian sphere of influence in the Balkan Peninsula.⁵⁷ It may be concluded therefore that, to Pašić, Albania

⁵² Šepić, *Italija, saveznici i Jugoslovensko pitanje*, 190.

⁵³ Bucarelli, "Allies or Rivals", 257.

⁵⁴ Bataković, "Essad Pasha", 176.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 178–179.

⁵⁶ A. Mitrović, *Jugoslavija na konferenciji mira* (Belgrade: Zavod za izdavanje udžbenika, 1969), 120.

⁵⁷ *Jugoslovenska država i Albanci*, vol. I, eds. Lj. Dimić and Dj. Borozan (Belgrade: Službeni list SRJ, 1998), doc. 838.

was an “object of compensation” at the Paris Peace Conference. Namely, a different approach would have been hardly possible given that a considerable part of Dalmatia and most of Albania were held under occupation by Italian troops.⁵⁸ There were attempts by the new kingdom to present the border on the river Drim/Drin as its minimum and on the river Mat as its maximum demand.⁵⁹ However, US President Wilson’s opposition to the abolition of Albania as a state eventually led the Italian Giolitti-Sforza government to decide that, now that Austro-Hungary had ceased to exist, Italy could reduce her demands to the island of Saseno – which she needed if she wished to control the Adriatic – on condition that the Kingdom of SCS and the Kingdom of Greece did not interfere in Albanian politics.⁶⁰

The Albanian state was established definitively and decisively in 1920. Conducive to such an outcome was certainly the engagement of Greece in Anatolia, where her war with Mustafa Kemal’s Turkey was on the road to disaster, the preoccupation of the Kingdom of SCS with the attempts to realize its claim to Rijeka, and Italy’s difficult economic situation.⁶¹ As shown by the subsequent course of events, the rivalries during the First World War were a prelude to Italian dominance in Albania. After Benito Mussolini’s Fascist movement took power, two Italo-Albanian treaties concluded as part of Italy’s intended territorial enlargement – the so-called First and Second Pacts of Tirana of 1926 and 1927 respectively⁶² – marked Italy’s return to full influence in Albania despite Kingdom of Yugoslavia’s endeavour to protect its own interests. These treaties were only a prelude to the final conquest and annexation of Albania by Italy in 1939.

The role of the Albanian question in Serbian-Italian relations in 1914–1918 should be looked at from the perspective of coinciding war aims of the two countries which sought to protect themselves against the emergence of a “new Austria-Hungary”. During the war years, however, both increasingly perceived each other as a future Adriatic rival. The 1915 Treaty of London by which the Entente powers made concessions to Italy and the

⁵⁸ D. Bakić, “The Italo-Yugoslav Conflict over Albania: A View from Belgrade, 1919–1939”, *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 25/4 (2014), 593.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 594.

⁶⁰ Albrecht-Carrié, *Italy*, 297.

⁶¹ M. S. Anderson, *The Eastern Question 1774–1923: a study in international relations* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1966), 360.

⁶² S. Mišić, *Albanija – prijatelj i protivnik: jugoslovenska politika prema Albaniji 1924–1927* (Belgrade: Službeni glasnik, 2009) 125–131.

1917 Corfu Declaration which, as it turned out, put Serbia irrevocably on the road to a Yugoslav state, only strengthened the belief of the leadership of each country in the danger coming from the other side of the Adriatic.

