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WHY AND TO WHAT EXTENT DID THE GOVERNMENTS OF GREECE AND SERBIA SEEK TO PREVENT THE EMERGENCE OF THE ALBANIAN STATE?

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The Albanian state came into existence under extremely precarious conditions during the chaos of the Balkan Wars. As the Balkan Allies drove Turkey from Europe, Montenegro, Serbia and Greece rushed to divide Albanian-inhabited lands between themselves. At the same time, Italy and Austria-Hungary also wished to add Albanian lands to their own spheres of interest. Thus, these powers hastily agreed to recognise a quasi-independent Albania, just as Albania's neighbours were homing in to achieve their respective goals. Despite repeated warnings, Serbia had continued to occupy northern Albanian territory, whilst at the same time the Greeks had captured the town of Korca, and the Montenegrins were entrenched around the town of Shkoder, which they hope to annex.

Thus the frontier issue was particularly complex because the Balkan allied troops were in military possession of the regions in dispute. In return for Serbia's retreat Austria reluctantly agreed that the districts including the towns of Peja, Djakova, Prizren and Dibra should be ceded to Serbia. Greece received the large southern region of Chameria, whilst in the north frontiers of the Albanian state were pushed back to the town of Shkoder and the surrounding territory, so leaving over half its population in the north and south outside its borders. Therefore, the December 1913 Protocol of Florence that decided the frontiers of the new state satisfied neither the Albanians nor their Balkan neighbours.

States, like people, are ambitious entities – once created, self preservation becomes an all important factor. This preservation is sometimes best achieved by expansion to secure strategic and economic security. This was particularly true in the case of Serbia whose frustrations had been enhanced by the so-called ‘Pig War’ of 1906, when Austria placed an embargo on the transportation of Serbian livestock into the monarchy, and also by Austria’s annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1908. The loss of Bosnia was a bitter blow to Serbian nationalists as it made the acquisition of what they regarded as their national land even more remote. Serbia therefore turned her attention southwards towards Macedonian and Albanian lands, with the eventual aim of gaining a coastal outlet on the Adriatic Sea. Her strategic considerations were designed to prevent the growth of Albania into a potential rival under Italian tutelage.

Before Albania’s borders could be formally agreed, the First World War broke out. Using border incidents as pretexts, the Montenegrins entered Shkoder, whilst the Serbs occupied central Albania. Serbia continued to regard Albania as an abortive creation which deprived her of vital territory; she also had a similarly low regard for the Albanian people themselves. Having just got rid of the Turks from Europe, the Albanians were regarded not as a separate nationality but as mere vassals of the Ottoman state to be disposed of just as the Turks had been. In trying to understand Serbian attitudes it must be remembered that northern Albania was not only of strategic and economic importance to Serbia, it was also of great psychological and emotional importance because it contained not only the site of the infamous ‘Battle of Kosovo Polje’ in 1389, but also numerous Serbian monasteries which had served in the preservation of Serbian national consciousness and as symbols of her historical continuity. During the Balkan Wars, the liberation of Kosovo Polje had revived the historical significance of the area.

Therefore, Serbia had strong emotional as well as economic reasons for seeking to prevent the emergence of an independent Albania, which might have been able to press for the inclusion of Kosovo into her territory. The new Yugoslav state of December 1918 had no settled frontiers and was in conflict with all her neighbours over disputed territory. But by now she had several ports on the Adriatic and Kosovo was firmly a part of Yugoslav territory. Henceforth, the attention of Yugoslavia and the Serbs was concentrated on the conflict with Italy in the north and also Macedonia.

Greece

Meanwhile, Greece had also emerged from the Balkan Wars with a heightened sense of achievement and possessed the urge to move forward into those regions she considered to be rightfully hers. Greece's ambitions in the north-west Epirus region had been frustrated in 1881 when, after protracted negotiations during which Austria and Italy fought against Greek expansion, Greece was finally made to accept a frontier that gave her most of Thessaly but only the territory around Arta in Epirus itself. In 1885 Greece made an attempt to recover the rest of Epirus by mobilising her army. The Gt. Powers immediately demanded Greece demobilise. When the Greek government refused, a blockade was established and the government capitulated, turning its attention to other national goals in Macedonia and Crete.

The national programme in Greece was expressed by the Megali Idea – the plan of expansion to include all Greeks within one state – and for some the revival of the Byzantine Empire and acquisition of Constantinople. The next chance to incorporate more Greeks within Greece came during the Balkan Wars, when amongst her other acquisitions, Greece annexed Epirus including Jannina. As with the case of Serbia, the period between the end of the Balkan Wars and the beginning of the First World War saw Albania's frontiers fixed in theory but not in practice. Although Greece remained neutral until 1917, Greek troops occupied southern Albania in October 1914. The Allied Powers consented to this in the hope of winning Greece over to their side, but only on condition that Greece withdrew whenever the Powers requested her to do so.

Unsurprisingly, Greece ignored the conditions stipulated by the Allies and in February 1914 the Greeks of northern Epirus declared their independence under the leadership of Zographos, the former Greek foreign minister. Finally, in April 1916, a Royal decree announced the incorporation of the territory inside Greece. At this point, the Allies had to force Greece out of southern Albania. Italy then occupied the area. At the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, Venizelos and his colleagues energetically negotiated Greek claims, whilst Italy obstructed almost all Greek claims to southern Albania and also organised armed bands and anti-Greek propaganda in Greece itself. Italian policy in Albania was clearly aimed at the establishment of a central administration leading to an Italian protectorate over the whole country. The Powers had decided that the Albanian frontier should be drawn on the basis of nationality. Greece, however, had insisted that southern Albania was ethnically Greek, giving a population of 115,000 Greeks as opposed to 110,000 Muslims. Yet these figures were meaningless because all Albanians

who went to Greek schools were counted as Greeks, so were all those who were Christian Orthodox, as were those who merely knew the Greek language.

There is no doubt that Hellenism was deeply rooted in southern Albania and numerous Greeks lived as far north as Berat. The distinction between them and the Albanians depended upon language, religion and national feeling. The Albanians emphasised that those who spoke Albanian were Albanians. This was opposed by the Greeks who maintained that after 1788 Ali Pasha of Jannina had promoted the Albanian language by enforcing Albanianisation in the form of religious and intellectual oppression. Greek arguments, however, were backed by the great number of Greek schools in northern Epirus which sustained Greek language and culture. Venezelos, who as a Cretan had experienced the feeling of an unredeemed Greek, argued that since “neither race nor language could determine nationality, then national consciousness alone should be considered.” Bluffing, Venezelos even suggested holding a referendum in Epirus, which it transpired was only a diplomatic move in order to create a sense of confidence about existence of a Greek majority. But the Greek authorities in Epirus warned Athens that the Greeks would have no chance of gaining a majority in the countryside and it might even be difficult in the towns.

These nationalistic claims could not mask the more important strategic and economic arguments that raged. Greece argued that if Italy was given Korca, she would acquire a bridgehead into Macedonia and thus dominate Balkan politics. The Italians on the other hand claimed that Greece wanted all the coast between Vlora and Corfu for purely military reasons, given that between Corfu and the opposite coast was a potential naval base, which could only be controlled by the possession of both Corfu and the Epirus coastline. If Greece gained control of this coast, she would effectively control the entrance to the Adriatic – a situation that the Italians could not tolerate. Greece also asked for a frontier line passing north of the Albanian town of Permeti as the commerce of this area was directly connected with Saranda and Jannina. Venezelos was always eager to try and reach a Greco-Italian agreement. Therefore, in January 1919 Italy offered to support Greek claims to the Dodecanese Islands and Smyrna, if Greece accepted the loss of northern Epirus, except for Korca which Greece would retain.

Venezelos, however, had to decide where Greek priorities really lay – in Albania or in Asia Minor. The annexation of northern Epirus was just one of several Greek aims at the Paris Peace Conference. Greek public opinion had a growing territorial appetite; the War had ended too soon for Greece and she had hoped to have inflicted more damage on Turkey and thus be able to ask for more concessions at the peace table. As it happened, Venezelos remained

convinced that the Greek claim to Smyrna took precedence over northern Epirus and even over the recovery of Constantinople! Greece had no particular aversion to the notion of an Albanian state, provided it was located in central Albania and remained independent, which she assumed would not be possible.

For both Serbia and Greece, the chief concerns of both governments had been maintaining the balance of power in the Balkan Peninsular and this required the acquisition of more territory regardless of ethnic continuity. Both countries had strong economic and strategic reasons for rejecting the formation of Albania, but both used their historical, nationalistic and emotional arguments to try and achieve their desired results.

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