



Political and Social Conditions of Albania During the 1920s

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Abstract

In the 1920s, Albania was one of the least developed countries of the Balkan peninsula, despite its good geomorphological conditions, geographical position, and the proximity of civilized peoples. The Albanian region extended along the eastern coast of the Adriatic, is crossed by tributary rivers of this sea and is naturally open to influences from Western Europe; discrete mountain barriers separate it instead from the East. As a result of this geographical feature, its social development should have been more in tune with the Mediterranean civilizations than with the Balkan ones. The historical events - having linked the region to the hegemony of eastern states in the last fifteen centuries - did not favor the natural anthropogeographic development of Albania based on Western and Mediterranean civilizations. The aim of this paper is to give a description of the political and social conditions of Albania during the years after the First World War, specially the 1920s. The primary source used in the paper is the military archive in Rome.

Keywords: political conditions, Albania, ethnical influences, Mediterranean countries

1. Introduction

The earliest Hellenic influences affected only the countries south of the Skumbini; they were soon to be superimposed on the Latin civilization, naturally destined to spread in Albania. With the Macedonian hegemony overthrown in Pidna (168 BC), Romanism spread throughout the Balkan peninsula, penetrating, and radiating mainly along the Via Egnatia. Albania, as a country of transit between Rome and the provinces of the East, saw thousands of legionaries pass through its valleys and the oldest Roman military colonies in the Balkan countries were built in its territory. It seems that the Latin language, laws and civilization asserted themselves only in the coastal area, in the large valleys and in the flat basins of the interior, since - it is noted by the writers of the time - even to the Romans the mountain tribes appeared rebellious to any authority and always at odds with each other but ready to unite against any invader. However, not even the mountain escaped the influence of the Latin civilization which, not having been able to penetrate it by force, also spread among the tribes through religion: Christianity not only consolidated and expanded the dominion of the Latin civilization, but supported this last even when Albania, detached from Rome, became the scene of the struggle, first between the Catholic Church and the Greek Church, later between the latter and Islam.

2. Social Conditions and Historical-Geographical Causes

With the division of the Roman Empire (395) the secular period of subjection to the Balkan and eastern states began for Albania, however the vestiges of Romanism were not completely erased. In fact, especially in Albania, numerous traces

of remains of civil works remain of the Romanization of the Balkan peninsula, in the social conditions, in the language and even in the ethnic structure of those peoples. The ferments left by the Latin civilization were later to favor the penetration and development of Italian influences in the contacts caused by the brief Swabian, Norman and Angevin dominations, by the Crusades and by the trades of our maritime republics. Not even the Turkish domination managed to interrupt the natural relations between the West and the Balkan peninsula. In fact, the repercussions of the Renaissance were felt beyond the Dinaric Alps, regardless of recent influences deriving from the world conflict (1914-1918), up to the first years of the century. XIX with the Italian trade Western civilization penetrated from the Adriatic through transversal routes towards the Danube basin. However, once the impulse from the centers of origin ceased, the currents coming from the West had to stop in the face of natural resistances and be reduced to their own zone of expansion, that is, to the Adriatic coast, without however making themselves felt in the interior of Albania.

Considering that under the Byzantine, Slavic and Turkish hegemonies even the oriental civilizations failed to establish themselves due to the contrast between the political situations and the geographical conditions of the region, in Albania - with the exception of some coastal countries - the social conditions continued foundation the primitive civilization of the prehistoric Illyrian tribes.

However, some local effects deriving from contacts with other Balkan peoples are undeniable, limited to the countries of easier penetration. The basin of the lakes of Prespa and Ohrid and Epirus are in fact characterized by Balkanism, derived from the classical Byzantine civilization which, in decline, lost its intellectual splendor and material prosperity and assimilated manifestations of oriental life.

The Turkish-Oriental influences were then felt not only in the peripheral areas but also within the country, in general, negatively. La Porta, unable to establish itself with the backward Ottoman civilization, attempted to dominate Albania by suffocating any attempt at independence and weakening its demographic and economic structure. Having abandoned its natural and social division, the country never saw the completion of its ethnic-linguistic fusion. The Turkish domination, skilfully exploiting local and personal particular interests, always overwhelmed the Skipetarian national sentiment. The partial conversion of the Albanians to Islam, provoking religious strife and forcing the best elements to emigrate, contributed to wearing down the population. Meanwhile, the Ottoman government frequently confiscated and blackmailed the landed property of the Catholic Albanian emigrants, grouped it into large estates and assigned a part of it to families that enjoyed its favour. Thus the patriarchal regime was superimposed on the patriarchal feudalism. These variations of the primitive social state only affected the central and southern part of the country where, on the archaic substratum of the tribe, feudalism still survives, although in recent years it has gone here and there evolving towards more advanced economic forms and in south-eastern Albania has been declining with the spread and affirmation of the organization in free municipalities as in the civilized Mediterranean countries. Northern Albania, on the other hand, was able to defend itself from Ottoman penetration; where the tribal organization is still firm, the most widespread religion is Catholic.

In essence, the civilizations of the neighboring peoples superimposed themselves on the original fundamental regime of the tribe only along the coastal area and in central and southern Albania and above all modified the formal part of this organization without completely canceling the substance.

Through the 1914-1918 world war and the post-war diplomatic events, Albania has preserved the political emancipation it had achieved since 1913. It owes its independence to the high national sentiment of its people, a sentiment that not even the secular enslavement managed to choke. But the country has not yet been given the solid state organization that can ensure its life and civil development. Albania is essentially going through an inevitable crisis of adjustment, a crisis which, in international respects it can be considered overcome thanks to the ability of its politicians, is instead in full development as regards the internal organization.

Since November 1918 - as soon as the European war ended - the Albanians reaffirmed - with the favor and interest of Italy - their desire for independence, convening the National Assembly and entrusting their cause and their fate to a provisional government. Despite the fact that this government often passed more or less violently and with foreign interference from one president to another - it was able to defend national interests at the Peace Conference, the Conference of Ambassadors and the League of Nations and obtained since 1921, against the aspirations of neighboring states, recognition of the independence and sovereignty of Albania. Having settled its international position, Albania had to be organized within the territorial borders which, although not including all the Skipetara people of the Balkans, had by now been assigned to it. With the fundamental statute of 7 March 1925, the National Assembly finally determined the constitution of the state in the parliamentary republican form.

In this way, the country was given a unitary government in consideration of the variety of social conditions, but a cantonal organization would perhaps have responded better to the different regional needs. The local administration was

organized taking the Italian and French as a model; the territory is divided into prefectures, sub-prefectures, municipalities and villages but the tribal organization in Gegnia has not been demolished. The armed forces were organized into regular departments (gendarmérie), commanded by Albanian officers trained during the war in bands and volunteer departments at the service of the warring parties.

However, Albania is still far from reaching the structure proper to civilized countries. The juridical relationships are not regulated by the same law, since among the tribes of northern Albania the Law of the mountain based on ancestral customs is always in force.

In central and southern Albania Turkish laws are in force together with some more rooted uses.

The still primitive economy and human activity, the practically nil works of civilization and culture, the lack of uniformity of the language, the widespread prejudice and superstition, the precarious sanitary conditions which favor the spread of serious diseases (tuberculosis, typhus, cholera, malaria, etc.), Albania lacks an educated and prepared class to organize it stably and solidly in a short time.

Above all, the division of the social organism, aggravated by religious differences, opposes the establishment of an autonomous and strong state. In truth, the surviving north-Albanian tribes and the inhabitants of the dissolved central and southern ones who have inherited their individualistic characteristics are rebels against any form of state authority: not even Scanderberg managed to make the stimuli of their particular interests fade away and cement them in a single mass to oppose the common enemy in the cause of national independence. To arouse in the Albanians the awareness and feeling of national solidarity, it would be necessary to put an end to the separatist tendencies, progressively dissolving the organization into tribes, placing the whole population and the territory in the best possible way within the state organism and valorising the undeniable excellent qualities deriving from population itself, precisely from that ancient social form. To this end, violent means would not be valid: the dissolution of the patriarchal regime, the classification of the dissolved tribes in the State will be the inevitable consequence of the penetration of the currents of civilization in the valleys and mountains, when they are open to contacts with advanced and when provided institutions will raise the cultural level of those populations.

3. Ethnical Population and Influences by Civilizations of Other Peoples

a) Turkish-Oriental influences.

The populations of southern Albania (Toschi) differ from those of the north (Gheghi), not only in ethno-linguistic respects, but also for a strong liberal spirit, for the tendency to sociability in relations with other nationalities, relationships also facilitated by the physical characteristics of their territory. Thus the Turks managed to penetrate among them, spread Islamism and arouse hatred and contempt towards the Catholic Gheghi blood relatives; under the pretext of differentiating them from the latter, the Porte also replaced their former tribal chiefs with agents loyal to the sultan and provided with full powers, later subjugating them to Ottoman law. Therefore the formal part of the original tribal organization was slowly disappearing among the Toschi, but the spirit of the patriarchal system is not extinguished, although it is fading from Skumbi towards Calamas. In fact, in times of wars and revolutions, the tribe also resurrected in southern Albania in its characteristic military organization, supported by the authority of certain leaders, whose names are linked to all the exceptional facts of Albanian life.

The names of the ancient tribes are still in use as local denominations and often their territory coincides with current circumscriptions. Numerous manifestations of life, even in normal times, are then marked by atavistic customs. On the contrary, in some regions judicial power is recognized in the traditional forms of the pleknja (council of elders), which still today in Ljaberia (south and east of Vlora), Himara, Kurveles etc., has the authority of a special court to resolve civil and criminal disputes, applying the ancient customary laws. Not even the organism of the foundation family of the tribe underwent changes as a result of the conversion to Islam and the introduction of Turkish laws in fact the Toschi Muslims, except for some beys who lived in Constantinople, are monogamous. And with regard to religion it must be noted that the religious sentiment among the Muslims of Albania is less elevated than the patriotic one: the latter together with the feelings of pride and independence derived from the patriarchal organization have pushed many southern Albanians towards a religious sect with a liberal character (Bektachism).

The Ottoman penetration in the Balkan peninsula in general and in Albania (excluding Gegnia) in particular then had quite negative economic and social consequences in fact from the centralization of land ownership in the hands of the few beys an economic form derived (beilicalismo) which, relying essentially on large property, he pitted against a few landowners the mass of poor peasants (cifici). Beilicalism took on different aspects: in central Albania it only transformed the tribe into a feudal clan, whose head (generally coming from the local Angevin nobility) still today performs the

functions of paternal judge, acts as arbiter in disputes and has the to draw men and lead them in case of need to war. On the other hand, in the surroundings of Dibra, in the coastal area, in Metoja, in Kosovo Polje and in Macedonia, the former beys exercise ruthless control over the cifici, forcing them into the harshest enslavement.

Belial feudalism (ciflik), which has now disappeared in the free countries of the Balkan Peninsula, has also evolved in Albania through just and equitable pacts between land and work and here it is overcome with the division of large estates, redeemed by the peasants with the resources of the 'emigration. However, in most of central Albania (Mati, Tirana, Fushë etc.) it also maintains the forms of landownership in the absolute power of the former beys, concentrated in Tirana, Elbasan and Dibra. In these districts entire villages are feudal property, in southern Albania instead numerous ciflik are by now organized in free communes, and similarly to the communities that arose at the time of Scanderberg, they are governed more or less democratically by a council of elders headed by a miftar .

While in Macedonia the economic subjection has left in the peasant the imprint of the exploited people (raia), the characteristic Albanian spirit of independence, which in the upper Gegnia is still manifested in the autonomy of the tribes and in the individualism of the inhabitants, has not not even attenuated in the Toschi. The cifici of Muzakja, Dibra and Metoja are generally Serbo-Croatian and Aromanian.

b) Influences of Balkanism.

The influences of the Balkan civilization affected a large strip on the south-eastern border, corresponding to the basin of the lakes of Prespa and Ohrid and the basins of the upper Devoli, upper Vojusa and Calamas, where all traces of the ancient organization have now disappeared patriarchal and customs civilized.

In the countries of the basin of the lakes the peaceful fusion of Romanism with the pre-existing elements and with the invading people soon brought this region to a high degree of wealth, prosperity, culture and social education, Korça, an important center of the area, it thus became the most cultured and wealthiest city in Albania. Instead, the exclusive influence of Balkanism in Epirus appears mainly in the attachment to the comfortable city life, in the commercial spirit and in the desire for profit which also give a certain elasticity in moral conceptions, in distrust and deceit, in bigotry and in the tendency to discussion on religious questions, in the lack of spirit of adventure and combativeness, in the scarce feeling of duty, solidarity and responsibility and consequently in the prevalence of selfishness in every action, in the upper hand of superstition on religion among the Orthodox and in fanaticism and intolerance among Muslims. Epirus owes this evolution, not beneficial in every respect, to the Greek nationalism spread through the Orthodox Church, that is, the Ecumenical Patriarchate which also had interference in the civil government. But even in these countries emigration brings its beneficial effects with the achievement of economic independence and reawakening, against the Hellenic propaganda, the Albanian national sentiment.

c) Influence of Mediterranean and Italian civilization.

Like the entire Adriatic-Dinaric coast, the Albanian coastal area was affected for centuries by the influence of Western civilizations, therefore it presents a more evolved social organization, which conceals the original archaic substratum. In the commercial and maritime activities of life, the influence of Italian civilization is most evident. In this field Scutari and Durres have already achieved a high degree of progress due to the active trade with the Adriatic ports, Elbasan and Valona are also quite developed, on the contrary Alessio, Kruja and Tirana, Kavaja and Pekinj are still significantly backward. In these cities, some manifestations of life, while always based on local foundations, have an external Mediterranean characteristic: that is, the spirit of industry has penetrated, that of commerce is becoming more refined, the exploitation of the soil is more rational than in the past, the house from the lines of western architecture, offers greater convenience, education is not entirely overlooked.

But the most important imprints of Western civilization are in the spread of the Catholic religion and in the use of the Latin alphabet.

4. Political and Religion Conditions

The influence of religion on the political and social conditions of Albania has been significant. The difference in religious denominations, which now makes unitary state organization more difficult, has in the past undermined the same ethnic structure, in that religion - sometimes degenerating into fanaticism in the Albanians, as in general in primitive and simple peoples - has given rise to real fratricidal struggles, these struggles have been erroneously mistaken for clashes of race, due to the frequent confusion in the East between religious and ethnic affiliation. This explains how the ethnic fusion of the skipetari into a homogeneous mass has not yet been achieved.

Albania, as a country of transit between the East and the West, inevitably had to assume differentiated human manifestations also in the religious field.

The ebb and flow of different peoples on its territory, its intermediate position between peoples of different religions and the greater or lesser geographical penetrability of its districts explain the current religious division of its population.

Neglecting minorities and the inevitable melting pots, Albania can be divided religiously into three zones, roughly corresponding to the northern, central and southern parts of the country. From the summary distribution of the inhabitants according to the professed confessions, the consistency of the various religions shows that Muslims are just under 2/3 of the population and that the rest is half Catholic and half Orthodox.

The Catholicism spread by the Church of Rome throughout the country was fought and partly replaced by orthodoxy and Islam, but it has never been eradicated from the northern Albanian mountains, thanks to the impenetrability of these districts and the attachment of the Gheghi to the traditions, so much so that among this population there is a good number of crypto-Catholics. Only in the coastal area, in the Prizren basin and along the Drin valley, countries of easy penetration, was it partially overwhelmed. The Catholic clergy, generally coming from the Italian seminary of Scutari, are quite educated and have considerable authority over the population of the tribes.

Islam envelops the Catholic area to the east and occupies - except for a few islands that still resist - all of central Albania. Muslims are generally Sunnis, not fanatics on the contrary indifferent and after the fall of the Ottoman government there have been no more cases of violence and intolerance, previously provoked by the Turks. Muslim religious authorities do not enjoy great prestige. In countries where Muslims mix with Catholics there is mutual respect and marriages between individuals of different confessions are frequent, so that there is often the coexistence of two religions in the same family. Only in the Catholic Mirdite tribe and among the Muslims of the Kavaja district have there been manifestations of fanaticism. Among the Muslims of central Albania, from Kruja to Gjirokastro, a religious sect has arisen, the bektashi, to which Christians are also admitted.

The followers of Betashism are well regarded by the population and considered as spiritually superior men because free from prejudices, independent of religious authorities and the sultan, they always kept alive the flame of Albanian nationalism. The number of them is not even approximately known: the Muslim religious authorities - like the Catholic and Orthodox ones - for fear that the census by the Bektashi could serve as propaganda in favor of the latter, have always opposed it. The Greek-Orthodox Church conquered the majority of the Tuscan populations and pushed itself along the Adriatic coast up to Durazzo; the Orthodox religion is notably widespread also on the north-eastern borders, where, however, it is mostly Serbian and Bulgarian in the minority. As among the Catholics, there are crypto-Orthodox around Elbasan and in the Spat. The Greek clergy are generally intellectually deficient. The senior prelates mainly deal with politics.

With the exception of Catholicism, the other religions served in Albania as an instrument of enslavement but although they also adopted another powerful means for this purpose, i.e. the school, they failed to overwhelm national sentiment but only to accentuate separatism, to make it more difficult and delay the achievement of political independence.

5. Conclusions

The secular Ottoman domination did not change the Albanian ethnic structure: on the contrary, it made the process of absorption of the immigrant Slavs easier and faster, since those who did not want to reject Christianity, left the country - like a part of the Catholic Albanians themselves - to escape persecution by the Islamized confreres. None of the great migratory currents that characterize the historical events of this era in the Balkan Peninsula poured into Albania: this country, poor in resources, disturbed by anarchy and religious conflicts, already largely Islamized, could not offer hospitality to Christian refugees expelled from their countries by Turkish harassment and cruelty. Only in the surroundings and in the city of Scutari and in the Sjaks did trade and agriculture, favored respectively by river-lake communications and soil fertility, attract Mohammedan Serbo-Croatian (Mukagjir) traders and peasants who emigrated from Montenegro and Bosnia Herzegovina for escape from Christian hegemony. However, these are minorities of Slavs in the process of rapid Albanianization for marriages with the indigenous element. Instead in the Moraca valley, which remained Albanian until the early years of the century. XIX for language, religion and life in general, the Slavs have assimilated the original Albanian inhabitants.

While the Skipetari managed to prevail over the Slavs almost everywhere, they did not resist the Greek penetration towards the south-eastern border, which began in the Turkish era. The Hellenization of the Toschi, already predisposed by ancient Greek influences, was inevitable. The south-eastern land borders of southern Albania did not lack penetration routes from the Adriatic coast inwards and it was precisely from the aerial ones that the influences of the Orthodox church, Greek nationalism (no vi.) and of the Hellenic language, causing the Albanians of Epirus - like the numerous

confreres who emigrated to other regions of Greece - to have become Hellenized, without however the Skipetara ethnic structure having undergone variations due to the work of Hellenic blood. Basically, the population of southern Albania, even in countries where the Greek language, civilization and religion has spread, remains ethnically Albanian, speaks its own language and uses the Greek one only in business relations with the Greeks.

In conclusion, the original ethnic characteristics of the Illyrian tribes were modified in Albania only in the north-eastern part of the country by Slavic blood, in the central and southern part by Latin blood and in Epirus by the proximity of the Greeks. The Albanians therefore remain the purest champions of the Illyrian race, for their physical and moral qualities (resistance, sobriety, intelligence, spirit of initiative, combativeness, etc.) and for the secular resistance to absorption by other peoples, also politically predominant, are to be considered neither degenerate nor in decay, but in full vitality.

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