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The Italian Policy in Epirus (1861-1918)

The interest of Rome in the region of Epirus dates back to the establishment of the Italian state in 1861. The Italian kingdom was not able to compete with other major powers in distant markets and to undertake overseas campaigns. Therefore, it sought an outlet in the vicinities of the Balkans and of the Middle East. Unfortunately for Italy, even in these areas, any direct confrontation with Germany (which had invested heavily in its policy towards the East), Great Britain (the economic leadership of which was undoubted because it was based on Egypt and on the control of the canal of Suez) or France (which had concluded the first capitulations to the Sultan and had deep roots in the area) was unthinkable. The only way left to Rome was to attempt to take advantage of the competition between the Great Powers.

The eastern Adriatic coast was a favourite target for the Italians because of its geographical proximity, the dominant role of Genoa and Venice in the region in previous centuries and the apparent inability of the Ottoman Empire to meet the requirements of the time. The control of this area was to become one of the major objectives of the Italian foreign policy for a long time. Moreover, many Italo-Albanian intellectuals, who lived mainly in the former Kingdom of Naples and Sicily, made a propaganda campaign to influence the public opinion.

The first (incomplete) proof of Italian ambitions appeared in 1862. Then, King Otto of Greece sent a delegation in Rome implementing a more dynamic foreign policy towards the Ottomans. The Greek side proposed to the Italians to send troops to the area under Giuseppe Garibaldi immediately after the uprising of the people of Epirus, Thessaly and Macedonia against the Turks. In this uprising, the Albanians would participate as well, while Greece and Serbia would declare war on the Sultan. This project had attracted

the interest of many Italian leaders. In July of that year, a bilateral agreement between the Greek Army Minister Dimitrios Botsaris and the representative of the Italian King Stefano Turr was signed. Unfortunately, the text of the contract contained several vague points and implied the support of France for the success of the ambitious project. Paris had never taken seriously into account the abovementioned agreement. At the same time, King Otto was dethroned and thus the plan was never implemented.

In March 1878, Constantine Lombardos (representative of the Greek Prime Minister Alexander Koumoundouros) travelled to Rome for talks with Italian political leaders on the Eastern Question. In February 1878, the Treaty of St. Stephen was signed, which provided, *inter alia*, the integration of the territories of Kosovo and Albania to Bulgaria, Montenegro and Serbia. This possibility caused the reaction of the Italo-Albanian intellectuals led by Francesco Crispi and the mobilization of Albanian nationalists. All these wished the formation of an autonomous Albanian state within the Ottoman Empire. Crispi stated to the Greek ambassador in Rome (named Paparrigopoulos) that Greece should be ready to occupy Epirus in collaboration with Italy. In addition, Rome would send its troops in Albania in order to prevent the occupation of Bosnia by Austria-Hungary.¹ Crispi's proposals (who was then foreign minister) to the Greek government were repeated by several Italian leaders and led to strong reactions from the other Great Powers, especially Great Britain.

The Congress of Berlin (June-July 1878) was the turning point for the Italian foreign policy in the region. Rome realized that Vienna would never agree to carry out her plans for the northern coast of the eastern shore of the Adriatic. Therefore, she turned her interest to the

1. German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck asked Crispi whether he would agree to the occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina by the Austrians. The Italian politician strongly opposed to such a possibility and Bismarck proposed the occupation of Albania or any other area of the Adriatic by the Italian troops in return. Since then, Crispi had included the occupation (or integration in the Italian sphere of influence) of the region among the immediate priorities of his policy. He wrote in his diary: "Albania has all rights to become an independent state and more (rights) than Serbia and Bulgaria."

area of today's Albania. Since then, Rome is in permanent confrontation with Athens for this region. The Italian diplomacy was against any annexation of Epirotic land to Greece, during the sessions of that Congress. Moreover, Rome sent in the area Colonel Giovanni Sironi, who was a famous writer of military geography. He came into contact with Muslim beys and many officials of the Ottoman administration. Later on, he expressed an opinion against the Greek proposal for the liberation of the Epirotic coastline. His effort was successful and so Corfu was isolated from the rest of the Hellenic kingdom. Moreover, the Italian consul in Preveza drew up a memorandum against the possible annexation of Epirotic lands to Greece.

Following the success of her policy in the Congress of Berlin, Rome had drawn up a program of spreading the Italian culture and increasing her commercial activities in the region through her diplomatic delegations in Durres, Ioannina, Monastiri, Preveza, Shkodra and Valona. The spreading of the Italian language would be achieved through the Italian schools, which opened in Skodra (1881) and Durres (1888). Also, Rome had succeeded in introducing the teaching of Italian language in the Romanian school of Ioannina and she reinforced in many ways the functioning of Albanian schools (e.g. Italian envoys distributed free books and clothes to students). Moreover, the Italian diplomacy sought (unsuccessfully) to guarantee certain rights in the region with the signing of the Triple Alliance with Austria-Hungary and Germany, in May 1882. Although her effort failed, Rome did not stop trying. As a result, the Italian diplomacy achieved her goal after five years on the occasion of renewal of the treaty. In February 1887, the Italian government came to an agreement with the Austrian one, according to which the special Italian "interest" for Albania was accepted under the conditions of both Treaties of Reichstadt and Budapest. Rome made officially known her aspirations for the region by the speech of foreign minister before the Italian parliament, in December 1900. These statements had not caused any serious international reactions and three years later the Italian General Staff had considered the possibility of occupation of the territories of Albania. At the same time, the Italians stepped up the anti-Greek propaganda through the "Albanian National Society"

and its journalistic organ of *La Nazione Albanese*. Also, strong anti-Hellenic activities were developed by Jeronimo de Rada through the columns of the newspaper *L' Albanese d' Italia*. Finally, anti-Hellenic articles were published in many Albanian newspapers, based in Italy (such as *The Albanian Star* and *The Albanian Flag*).

In the early years of the 20th century, Rome had focused her policy in the economic field. Several Italian banks (such as “Banca Commerciale”) opened branches in the area, while several well-known commercial and manufacturing companies (like that of Giovanni Bombrini & Leopoldo Parodi-Delfino) became active in the region. Rome facilitated in every way any company wishing to operate in Epirus. As a result, a shipping company and a commercial company had been established in Preveza. These efforts caused strong reactions from the Greeks of Epirus, who managed to frustrate the establishment of an Italian school in Ioannina and to prevent the introduction of the Italian language in Zosimaia School. Finally, the reactions of Greek Epirotes led to the failure of the attempt to establish a branch of an Italian bank in Ioannina. At the same time, Athens was attempting to keep a low profile in order to avoid a direct confrontation with Rome.

The success of the Young Turks movement (July 1908) was a serious obstacle to the implementation of the Italian plans. The situation became really complicating for the Italian leaders, when a sudden event changed the course of events: the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina by Austria-Hungary, in October of that year. Rome resented and secured Vienna's consensus in an agreement, which provided that if Austria-Hungary integrated Novi-Pazar as well, Italy would be equally satisfied in another area in the Balkans. This agreement gave a major boost to the Italian plans. Note that throughout the period 1900-1911, several Italians bribed many Ottoman leaders in order to torpedo any attempt of Greek-Albanian approach.

The Italian-Turkish War of 1911 was a temporary obstacle to the Italian efforts. The Italian diplomacy watched with dismay the Albanians to remain neutral in the conflict, after what she had done in their favour. The Italian envoys had even secured promises of the Ottoman officials to provide amnesty to the instigators of the revolts

of previous years, not to mention the allocation of economic and educational privileges. Luckily enough (for Rome), the ottoman government had not kept her promises and Albanian nationalists organized a new uprising in the spring of 1912, which shortly prevailed in Kosovo and the region of Skodra. As a result, the Turks accepted to sign an agreement with the Albanian nationalists in Skopje, which conferred certain privileges to the Muslims living in the area (in August 1912).

In October of that year, four Balkan states declared war on the Ottoman Empire. Initially, the Albanians rebelled and proclaimed their intention to preserve the territorial integrity and freedom in their areas. Gradually, however, (and in fear of the rapid advancement of Greek and Serbian troops) they were the only people in the Balkans, who cooperated with the Ottoman forces. Conceiving the gravity of the situation, some leaders of the nationalist Albanian movement rushed abroad to secure diplomatic support. Rome and Vienna reacted favourably to the Albanian case. The Italian diplomacy (primarily) and the Austrian one (in the second rank) believed that the Balkan states were instruments of St. Petersburg and therefore they faced with a strong suspicion their victories over the Ottomans. Soon, Rome decided to ignore the ambiguous attitude of the Albanian nationalists in the recent past and to offer her support to Ismail Kemal, who proclaimed the independence of Albania in Vlorë, on November 28th, 1912.

Both Rome and Vienna coordinated their actions and managed to elicit a positive decision for the Albanians from the Conference of Ambassadors, which had met in London to resolve the outstanding issues of the First Balkan War. In particular, this Conference had adopted the establishment of an autonomous Albanian state, without, however, to define its borders, on December 20th, 1912. The Italian representatives had supported strongly the claims of Albanian nationalists. The latter spoke of an Albania, which would extend from Montenegro to the Gulf of Amvrakikos!

Indeed, the Austrians but mainly the Italians had frequently invoked the threat of entrance into a war for the sake of the region.

Therefore, Vienna and Rome achieved their goal. However, the Italian diplomacy was not pleased with this great success and only a few days later it signed a secret agreement with the Austrians in order to coordinate the actions of both governments for the establishment of an independent Albanian state (on December 31st, 1912). In the new state, the two countries would maintain equivalent spheres of influence. This agreement (ratified by the Treaty of Rome, on May 8th, 1913) was an open challenge to all the other Great Powers.

At the same time, the fighting continued and the Greek army, led by the Crown Prince Constantine, captured Ioannina and marched to the north, liberating Korça, Gjirokastra, Tepeleni and Saranda, in February 1913. The triumphant advancement of these Greek troops provoked the reaction of Rome, which required from Athens to forbid Constantine to continue to the liberation of Valona. Venizelos showed that he complied with the wishes of Rome and then the latter raised a new claim. The Greek army had to withdraw from Gjirokastira to ensure fully Valona for the Italians! The Greek sovereignty should not extend beyond the Gulf of Sagiada. In March, the Montenegrins occupied Skodra, in defiance to the contrary “advice” of Italy and Austria-Hungary. In April, the Italian foreign minister Marquis Di San Giuliano threatened Greece with war if her army gained control of the east side of the Strait of Otranto. He made it clear unequivocally to the envoy of the Greek government George Theotokis. Next month, the Italian Marquis told the Greek foreign minister that the Greek Government had to take into account that the “fair” aspirations of Italy for Epirus would be always included in the program of all Italian governments. The same day, strong rumours circulated in the Italian capital on the imminent seizure of Valona and Saranda by Italian troops. Then, the policy of Rome had become challenging for many in Europe, i.e., the French politician Georges Clemenceau who wrote that Italian leaders used to change the ethnological maps of Epirus against the Greek inhabitants of the region.

In the Conference of Ambassadors, the Italian representative Marquis Guglielmo Imperiali presented the draft of his country on the borders of the Albanian state. France, Great Britain and Russia did accept the Italian proposal. At the same time, Marquis Di San

Giuliano stated shamelessly to the Greek Chargé d'Affaires in Rome, Kaklamanis: "I admit that even today Gjirokastra and Korytsa are Greek, but the rights of a small country like that of Greece cannot supersede the interests of a Great Power like Italy." But, the Italian plan was rejected by the states of Entente. However, the whole matter was the subject of discussions and debates among the representatives of Great Powers in the Conference of Ambassadors.

The close Italo-Austrian cooperation had caused the convocation of Russia with the French. St. Petersburg had drawn up a plan, under which Greece would take the valley of Delvino, Saranda and Konitsa. This project had caused panic in Rome, where it was understood that her excessive ambitions had begun to concern the European diplomacy. The Italians fled hastily to the Austrians. The two governments produced a new draft, which met about 80% of the Italian claims and caused euphoria in the Albanian nationalists. On May 9th, 1913, representatives of Italy and Austria-Hungary suggested the withdrawal of the Greek army from Delvino, Gjirokastra and Korca (which would be annexed to Albania) and in return, Greece would gain a few extra kilometres on the coastal zone, extending sovereignty to the Gulf of Ftelia. In Athens, this proposal caused turmoil and King Constantine refused to withdraw the victorious troops (which he had commanded) from the liberalized parts of Epirus. Venizelos was in a difficult position and expressed his strong complaints to London. The British foreign minister Lord Edward Grey assured the Greek ambassador in London (named Ioannis Yennadhios) that Italy would never be left alone to settle the fate of Epirus.

However, the British assurances proved worthless. The Italian diplomacy intelligently linked the issue of Epirus with that of the Aegean islands, which had not yet been finally awarded to Greece. In June, Marquis Imperiali submitted a new proposal, under which his country would accept the immediate return of the Aegean islands (which were liberated and occupied by Greek troops) to Greece, if the other Great Powers endorsed the plan of May 9th. Moreover, Rome suggested a pro-Hellenic settlement for the status of the Dodecanese, which she had under control from the previous year. Ultimately, the issue of the new state borders remained open and on May

30th, 1913 the Treaty of London was signed. This treaty terminated the First Balkan War. It also provided that Albania would be on the security of the Great Powers and a commonly accepted sovereign would rule her.² Also, it was decided to appoint an international commission audit, to send Dutch officers for maintaining order and to establish an international commission in order to delineate borders of the new state. Italy and Austria-Hungary had reacted strongly against the establishment of that committee and their representatives in the Conference of Ambassadors argued that this should set only minor details of the delimitation line. According to the Italian representative, Korça should be given to Albania in advance. The intransigence of the two governments on this issue and the fact that Greece had acquired large areas in Macedonia from the Bulgarians (in the Second Balkan War) led Lord Grey to forget his promises and to join with the Italo-Austrians. Unfortunately, he did not confine only to this but he influenced the French and the Russians to accept the assignment of Korça to Albania. The Italian government assisted his effort, by threatening with an immediate delivery of the Dodecanese to the Ottomans and blocking the return of the Aegean islands to Greece. It was a brutal blackmail.

The committee for the delineation of the borders of the newly created state began her work in October. At the end of the month, the representatives of Vienna and Rome warned Athens that they would not tolerate the lack of cooperation of local residents and they would consider Albanian all the villages whose inhabitants would follow such a policy. This international committee had worked in a climate of intense wrangling among her members mainly in northern Albania for a short period. The advent of winter and the continuing disagreements among the members of the committee led to the suspension of its work. Then, its members decided to move to Florence, where they would delineate the southern borders of Albania with the help of maps. On December 17th, the Protocol of Florence was signed, which awarded large areas to Albania, including Gjirokastra and Korça. In Athens, this Protocol caused serious tension between King Constantine and Prime Minister Venizelos.

2. In July 1913, the German Prince William of Wied was selected.

Finally, the North Epirotes did not pay any attention to the exhortations of the Greek government and rose without her assistance. In February 1914, the government of the self-proclaimed "Autonomous Republic of Northern Epirus" was established. The Albanians were divided as Essad Pasha had formed a second government in Durres since December 12th, 1913. Soon, they were defeated militarily and chose the path of compromise with North Epirotes, following the Italian "advice." This compromise led to the signing of the Protocol of Corfu, in May 1914. According to this protocol, the North Epirotes would enjoy many privileges, which would secure their Greek identity. The Greek character of the area was expressly stated and a special administrative organization of the provinces of Gjirokastra and Korça was provided. Unfortunately, the protocol had never been effectively implemented by the Albanian state.

The diplomatic process had not prevented the Italians from intensification of their propaganda, notably through their consul in Ioannina Domenico Nuvolari. At the same time, the Italian diplomacy played the role of the unsolicited adviser of Albanian nationalists. Initially, she persuaded their leaders to compromise with the Greeks in Northern Epirus and then she tried (unsuccessfully) to mitigate the terms of the settlement, shortly before the signing of the Protocol of Corfu. Then, the Italians tried to conduct fully Albanians to secure the lead over their Austrian "allies."³ At the beginning, they organized the uprising of the Muslim fundamentalists against the new ruler of Albania in the central regions of the country, King Wilhelm (Prince of Wied). Rome considered him as Vienna's puppet and wanted his dethronement. The Italian policy had resulted in the acute reaction of Vienna and it caused a serious breakdown in bilateral relations. The leader of the rebels Essad Pasha was arrested and was deported to Italy. However, the insurgents were not put off and they

3. Marquis Di San Giuliano revealed quite clearly the goals of the Italian diplomacy in statements in front of the members of the Italian Parliament, on December 12th, 1913. "Albania itself has little importance, but the possession of her ports and coasts from Austria would made her automatically dominant in the Adriatic Sea."

extended their activities to the south, violating the terms of the Protocol of Corfu. The North Epirotes decided to liberate Korça with their own forces. Also, other armed groups of North Epirotes liberated several villages near Valona and they occupied Berat temporarily, on September 14th. But the situation in Europe had already changed dramatically.

On June 28th, 1914, the Crown Prince of Austria-Hungary Franz-Ferdinand and his wife Archduchess Sofia were assassinated in Sarajevo. Vienna had sent an ultimatum to Belgrade, because the interrogations of her authorities had demonstrated the involvement of several high-ranking Serbs in the crime. The Serbian government (led by St. Petersburg) did not meet all the conditions and Vienna had declared war on Belgrade.

In August 1914, the First World War began between two blocs, which had been set up many years ago. The first consisted of Austro-Hungary, Germany and Italy and it was called the “Triple Alliance” or the “Alliance of the Central Empires.” Its establishment was dated from the 19th century. The second was the “Triple Entente” or the “Entente Cordiale” and it consisted of France, Great Britain and Russia. That coalition was also formed since the 19th century. The only state that did not enter the war (as it ought to) was Italy. Prime Minister Antonio Salandra stated that his country would remain neutral. In fact, the Italian government believed that there was an opportunity to trade-off her entry in war. So, she started negotiations with the two blocs to ensure maximum benefits and to meet all her imperialist plans. Moreover, the government avoided a collision with a large group of Italian public opinion, which had peaceful tendencies. Devotees of such peaceful views were mostly the Socialists and their newspaper *Avanti*, whose director was Benito Mussolini.

Gradually, the Italian public opinion began to support the participation of the country in the war against her official allies (i.e., Austrians and Germans). Strangely enough, Mussolini played an important role in this movement, as well. After a while, the Italian government began negotiations with the two rival camps, “having put Italy to public auction.” Finally, the British and the French “tendered.” They offered the southern Tyrol-Trentino, Trieste and also

the peninsula of Istria, the neighbouring islands of Dalmatia, the ports of the Adriatic, the control over the Albanian case, the final sovereignty over the already occupied by the Italians (since 1912) Dodecanese Islands, the province of Antalya in Asia Minor, a part of the German colonies in Africa and post-war reparations. In April 1915, the Treaty of London was signed, according to which Italy got the above-mentioned areas in writing.

However, Rome was still negotiating with Vienna until one week before the signing of the Treaty of London. Meanwhile, various Italian politicians reassured Berlin that their country would never fight alongside the enemies of Germany! The Italian government sought to gain time in order to prepare her troops. It also aimed to ensure the people's consent through the well-orchestrated campaign of war-mongering Press. Finally, on May 3rd, 1915, Salandra denounced the Treaty of the Triple Alliance. Twenty days later, he declared war on Austria-Hungary. The entire Italian attitude at that time was characterized as either "a unique example of treason in international history" (Proclamation of the Emperor Franz-Joseph II of Austria-Hungary) or as turning Italy into "the whore of Europe", a country which refused to honour her signature.⁴

In Albania there was an intense internal turmoil and King Wilhelm was forced to leave the country in September 1914. The Greek troops (with the permission of the British) recaptured Northern Epirus to ensure the interests of her Orthodox residents. In return, Rome secured a license to ashore troops in Valona. In December 1914, the Italians took over this port, the island Sason and several villages in the Albanian hinterland. Afterwards, there was a short period, in which the battles had come to a standstill. This period ended with Italy's entry into the war.

The Greek Prime Minister Dimitrios Gounaris decided to hold elections in the region simultaneously with the parliamentary elections in the rest of Greece, on May 31st, 1915. The election of nine North Epirotes delegates caused the wrath of Rome. The Italians ac-

4. J. Nehru, *Glimpses of World History* (London: Lindsay, 1949), 615; St. Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914-1945* (in Greek) (Athens: Filistor, 1995), 536.

cused the Greek government for breaking the law, because the occupation of the region by the Greek army was temporary. Therefore, Venizelos (who had resumed duties of Prime Minister once again) expelled the delegates of North Epirotes from the Greek parliament, trying to avoid a further deterioration of the Greek-Italian relations.

Nevertheless, the proximity of the troops of both countries on Epirus had caused tensions and aggravated the bilateral relations. In June 1915, troops of Serbia and Montenegro invaded and occupied a number of cities, including Elbasan, Pogradec, Skodra and Tirana. The Albanian nationalists fled in panic to Italy, where they were reserved a warm welcome. Rome had to change her policy in order to achieve her goals. But she had not enough time. In October, the Serbs suffered a tumultuous attack by the Austrians. Their army was defeated and it began to decline towards the southwest. The states of Entente had already thought about establishing a new front in the region and the Italian government proposed the landing of Allied troops in Valona. Unfortunately for Rome, her proposal was rejected. British and French landed their forces in Thessaloniki but they failed to assist substantially the persecuted Serbs. Rome proposed to send more troops in the region on the pretext of protecting the retreating Serbs.

Finally, London and Paris accepted the Italian proposal and a special unit had been formed under the leadership of General Bernotti. The name of this unit was “Corpo Speciale Italiano d’ Albania.” The Italian diplomacy succeeded the withdrawal of Serbian troops from the area. It should be noted that the Italian soldiers did not want to fight the Austrians and they preferred to run away with their friends, the Albanian nationalists. In February 1916, Italian troops and the forces of Essad Pasha left from Durres to Italy. In the area rested only a few divisions, near Aaos River. As a result, the Austrians got Durazzo.

A month earlier, the government of Stefan Skouloudis had accepted the delegates of North Epirotes, who were elected in the parliamentary elections of November 1915.⁵ The official reception of

5. In the elections of November 23rd, 1915, the Liberals did not participate. The new government of Stefan Skouloudis assured the states of Entente that Greece

these delegates angered Rome and foreign minister Baron (Giorgio) Sidney Sonnino protested angrily to his colleagues of the states of Entente. Initially, the Greek Government had shown her capacity to resist the pressures but eventually she was forced to retreat. However, Athens had taken another important step, moving the issue of a royal decree, with which Greece officially annexed Northern Epirus, in April 1916. The Italians became really angry, indicating that this area would be permanently awarded to Greece after the end of the war. The Italian ambassador in Athens Count De Bosdari made a formal demarché to protest on the action of various Greek rebel forces against Albanians in Epirus.

Athens rejected the demarché as totally unfounded. The latter sent troops to occupy areas, which were under the Greek administration. This action caused the anger of Athens. The Italians claimed that they had no confidence in the army of neutral Greece. Moreover, they wanted to get full control of the telegraph and telephone network in the region to prevent the possibility of a surprise attack by the Austrians. It was clear even to the most malicious observers that the Italian claims were specious.

In August 1916, the Italians occupied the villages of Drymades and Paliassa and the city of Tepeleni. Next month, the Italian troops entered Delvino, Gjirokastra, Himara, Premeti and Saranda. The Greek government protested unsuccessfully. The behaviour of the Italians to the occupied areas was openly hostile to their Greek inhabitants. In particular, they expelled the Greek authorities, they drove away the Greeks from public services and they shut down the Greek schools. The tension was high in Epirus. In Athens, the climate was hostile to the Italians. However, Rome asked the Greek government of Alexander Zaimis to give permission to her troops to pass from the Greek territory in order to supply the Allied troops in the Macedonian front (October 1916). Of course, Athens denied because Greece was still neutral. Meanwhile, Venizelos had left Athens to Crete. Then, he moved to Thessaloniki. The movement of "National Defence" (Ethniki Amyna) had already broken, but its

would continue to remain neutral. At the same time, elections in Northern Epirus took place and 18 delegates were elected.

popularity was initially limited only to the Aegean islands, Crete and Thessaloniki. However, supporters of Venizelos were organizing in several parts of Greece. In Korça, they managed to prevail and they expelled the official Greek authorities.

Rome did not react because Korça was out of her immediate objectives and military capabilities during that time. Italians encouraged the Albanian bands, which were moving towards the city. A few days earlier, they had destroyed the city of Moschopolis. Rome sent her troops south of the Greek-Albanian border of 1913. The Italian army captured Delvinaki and Kalpaki (in January 1917), Konitsa (in February) and Sagiada (in March). Over the next few months, the interest of Rome was turned into the Austrian front. Paris took advantage and helped the Venizelists to expand their control in many parts of Epirus and in some Aegean and Ionian islands. It is significant that French troops were settling in every area then “joined” the movement of Venizelos.

In early June, General Ferrero proclaimed Albania an independent state under the protection of the King of Italy. Rome had failed to ensure the Allied approval for this initiative but it had calculated the momentum. Allies (mainly the French) said nothing in order to secure the Italian consent on the dethroning of King Constantine. Russians protested against this initiative but their position was considerably weakened after the dethronement of Tsar Nicholas. Italians were encouraged and invented new excuses to occupy Ioannina and the whole region to Metsovo, in the coming days. At the same time, several Italian circles promoted the organization of the Vlach-speaking separatist movement of Pindus and of Muslim Chams. The Italian vice-consul in Ioannina went to Grevena and Trikala, which were found in the buffer zone between the official Greek state and the “state” of Thessaloniki. There, he was seeking the support of the Vlach-speaking inhabitants in the form of a request for seizure of their lands by the Italian troops. Moreover, the Italians handed out wheat to residents of the buffer zone to ensure their favour.

On May 30th/June 12th, 1917, King Constantine was forced to leave his throne after intense backroom machinations of the French. The next day, Prince Alexander came to the throne and after a few

days Venizelos and his team arrived in Athens from Thessaloniki. The Cretan politician was sworn in as Prime Minister of Greece and he declared war on the Central Empires, on June 15th/28th.⁶ Italy was now an ally of Greece and Venizelos demanded the withdrawal of her troops in Epirus beyond the line fixed by the Protocol of Florence. At the beginning, Rome seemed willing to discuss this possibility provided that she would retain control of the triangle of Pogoni until the end of hostilities. Moreover, the Italian government demanded not to install the Greek authorities in the region! Athens refused because the triangle of Pogoni was contractually guaranteed to Greece. So, Venizelos proposed an international arbitration.

At the same period, an allied conference took place in Paris on the developments in the Balkans. It was decided the simultaneous departure of the French and the Italian troops from Epirus except for the area of Pogoni, which would remain under the Italian control until the end of the hostilities. The Italian consul in Ioannina organized several manifestations of Muslims and Vlach-speaking inhabitants. The Italian military commander in Parga published a proclamation, which emphasized the importance of the Italian occupation for the safety of Albanians. These Italian actions caused the reaction of the Greek government. After the withdrawal of the French troops from the Greek territory, Italian troops were obliged to evacuate those areas of Epirus that were under their occupation in mid-September, applying the decision of the Conference in Paris.

However, Italian troops remained in Pogoni. Their commander-in-chief stated to the Greek governor of Ioannina that the stay of his troops in the area would be temporary. Moreover, the Italians remained in Northern Epirus, as well, where they adopted further measures against the Greek residents. These measures consisted of the closure of all Greek schools, the displacement of many elders and educated North Epirotes to Italy and the installation of many Muslims in the region. In addition, a local court was established, in which the Albanians had the majority. Finally, Muslims were allowed to submit complaints against North Epirotes for crimes having

6. The "state" of Thessaloniki had declared war on the Central Empires as early as November 1916.

been committed before the start of the Italian occupation.

Until then, the Greek government had implemented a more moderate policy, while a division was installed in Ioannina immediately after the departure of the Italians. The latest developments had caused a general outcry of the Greek people and the government was obliged to harden her policy. On September 16th/29th Athens protested angrily to both the British and the French governments. The latter decided on the eve of the French troops in Korça to prevent further deterioration of the Greco-Italian relations. Rome adopted a softer stance, arguing that it sought to annex the area but only to preserve the independence of Albania and to prevent the interference by a third force in the region. Indeed, the new Italian ambassador in Athens Baron Romano Avezzana tried to dispel impressions and adopted a new, tempered profile. The Albanian question was referred for discussion to the Peace Conference.

In conclusion, the Italians had expansionist ambitions in the region of today's Albania from the early years of the establishment of their state. This policy, though it took various forms during the years 1861-1939, was followed by consistency in her objectives by every Italian government of the period. Unfortunately, the study of historical events shows that the fulfillment of the vision of Rome sacrificed the rights of the Greek inhabitants of Northern Epirus, who are still waiting for implementation of the agreements.

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