THE ALBANIAN PROBLEM AND THE USA ON THE EVE OF THE PARIS PEACE CONFERENCE IN 1919

Abstract. Nineteen-nineteen was a year of peacemaking and national boundaries were being revised throughout the world. It was also a year of hope, especially for the Albanians, when many people believed that the world could be remade according to Wilson. The year was crucial in the development of Albania. For Albania the story of 1919 is both national and international. On the international scene the problem of what to do with Albania was as always tied to other issues. Albania had been created in 1913 by the Great Powers in an attempt to preserve the stability of the Balkans by preventing the growth of the states which were victorious in the first Balkan War and by maintaining Albania as a foreign dominated balancing factor. This system by which the Great powers maintained their control over the Balkans was broken completely by the First World War. During the peacemaking the Albanian problem became part of both the Adriatic question of Greece and the question of Greek and Italian claims in the Eastern Mediterranean. The aim of this paper is to consider these claims, the influence of Essad Pasha on the eve of the Paris Peace Conference and the American attitude towards the Albanian issue.

Keywords: Albania, USA, Wilson, peacemaking, claims.

INTRODUCTION

In the final months of 1918 Albania had been occupied by Italian troops. It was during this period that Albanians, both at home and abroad, began to work for their national unity in alliance with Italy. The culmination of this activity was the formation of a new Albanian national government in Durres, a government which was friendly towards Italy and which hoped to unite Albanians during the crucial
months of the peacemaking. Much of the leadership of Albania – nationalists, intellectuals, former Turkish officials, wealthy beys – lived abroad and in the Albanian colonies in the United States, Italy, Romania, Turkey and Switzerland. The most important exile group was a federation of Albanian organisations in the United States, the Vatra. Throughout most of the war, the Vatra opposed Italy and often supported Austria-Hungary. There had been much excitement within the Vatra when the Republic of Korytsa was proclaimed and when the Italians issued the Proclamation of Gjirokastra. When the United States entered the war, the Vatra’s support for Austria-Hungary was no longer possible. Instead, most Albanian-Americans now put their hopes behind Wilson’s policy for “national self-determination”.

The Albanian problem was not, however, confined to the meeting rooms and hotels of Paris. A study of the problem must examine local events within that country. Albania was occupied by foreign troops, its neighbors were mobilized on its ill-defined borders, and guerilla bands roamed the country. While Italy and the United States supported recognizing Albania’s pre-war frontiers, Great Britain and France insisted on the partition of Albania, as provided by the Treaty of London (1915), unless Italy was willing to make concessions elsewhere. Albania’s future was contingent on territorial transfers in the Adriatic and Asia Minor. While the peacemakers wasted 1919 in unsuccessful attempts to settle the Adriatic question and to divide of Asia Minor, events occurred within Albania, which would affect the solution of the problem.

It was the American attitude towards Albania, which played an important role during the peacemaking. In fact, the United States, unlike the European nations, entered the conflict without interests in Albania or policy toward our nation. Before the entry of the United States into the First World War there had been no American policy towards Albania and it had never been recognized by the United States. It was only after America’s entry into the world struggle that an American attitude toward the Albanian problem began to develop. More concretely it was in the Inquiry, an organisation which was to begin preparations for the peace settlement, that an American policy towards Albania began to form. Unfortunately, the plans of
the American experts for a solution to the Albanian problem were similar to the Albanian settlement outlined in the Treaty of London.

On the eve of the Peace Conference, the American position had become more favourable to Albania. During the negotiations the United States supported the integrity of Albania within its 1913 frontiers, except for the cession of Gjirokastra district to Greece and Vlora region to Italy. Throughout the negotiations the American refused to allow Albania to be partitioned further. However, the Americans never suggested that Albania should be allowed independence without becoming a mandate under the League. Although there was some discussion of the United States becoming the mandatory power, it quickly became evident that this was not possible and that Italy would receive the mandate. Italy was not the only country to have claims on the Albanian territory. The other neighbouring countries, Greece and Yugoslavia were reluctant to recognize the existing Albanian borders and they clearly expressed their territorial claims in Southern and Northern Albania respectively.

**Greek claims in Southern Albania**

The Paris Peace Conference opened on January 18, 1919, with 27 of the victorious countries represented. Originally, a peace congress that would include the defeated powers was planned to follow the conference, but this idea was later dropped. Thus, Germany and other defeated powers were not allowed representation at the conference. Nor was Russia. The important decisions at the conference was made by a Supreme Council made up of the heads of states and foreign ministers of the US, Great Britain, Italy and Japan. The dominant figures of the conference proved to be the scholarly US President Wilson, the colorful British Prime minister David Lloyd George, and the French Prime Minister, Georges Clemenceau “The Tiger of France”, who was in his late seventies and still a formidable figure (Knopf 1993, p.112).

The Albanian problem was not treated directly by the Peace Conference. Instead, it was discussed as part of the Adriatic question and the question of Greek claims. It was not until the first week in February that issues related to Albania were discussed officially at the Peace Conference. On 3 February the Greek Prime
Minister, Venizelos, presented the claims of his country, and these included two southern districts of Albania around Gjirokastra and Korytsa. These two districts were claimed by Venizelos on grounds of self-determination. The area included, according to the Greek figures, 120,000 Greeks to 80,000 Albanians. Venizelos admitted that many of the “Greeks” included in his statistics did not speak Greek, but he argued that national aspiration, not language or race, should be the true determining factor of nationality.

The national aspiration of Greek Epirots who resided in these two districts was revealed by the large number of Greek schools compared to Albanian schools. Venizelos pointed out that there was only one Albanian school, and it was run by Americans. The reaction of the Council of Ten to Venizelos presentation was generally favorable. The following day the Council of Ten referred the Greek claims to an expert committee. The committee was charged with reducing the questions to narrow limits and making recommendations for a just settlement.

Like other committees appointed to save territorial problems the Greek Committee was uncertain as to its purpose how to proceed. The Council of Ten had instructed the committees to proceed “scientifically” without reference to political considerations. Jules Camben was elected chairman and after some confused discussion it was decided that each of the four powers lay their proposals on the table. This brought the committee back to a type of negation with which they were familiar. Great Britain and France supported giving Greece southern Albania as outlined in the Treaty of London. Italy supported Albanian nationalism and insisted that the 1913 boundaries be maintained. The United States supported a compromise position. The Americans agreed that Greece should annex the Gjirokastra region but insisted that the Korytsa region should remain part of Albania. The Americans argued that Albanians outnumbered Greeks in Korytsa.

The positions adopted by the four delegations were not altered throughout the remaining meetings of the Greek Committee. Instead of using their time to negotiate a compromise political solution, the committee meetings were to hear the claims of all parties interested in Southern Albania. First Venizelos came before the Greek Committee to argue his position. After presenting his case, based on national
considerations, economies and strategic considerations, he even suggested a plebiscite to settle the question. This suggestion was opposed by the Italians and Americans because of the political immaturity of the Albanians and the fact that the French occupied Korytsa.

Since Venizelos had been allowed to testify before the Greek Committee, the Italians, acting as defenders of Albanian nationalism, insisted that the Albanian Provisional Government in Durres be allowed to present their case before the committee. The formalities of the Greek Committee did little to save the Albanian problem and in the long run its divided recommendations were ignored. Yet there was one very important decision made during its meetings which was to have a profound effect on the development of the Albanian problem. Would Albania become independent or would it be given to Italy?

It was decided that Albania would not become an Italian protectorate even though Italy had rights in Albania because of the treaty of London. Under this treaty, Italy would represent Albania in its foreign relations. This was the first time that the Treaty of London and the question of the Albania’s future status had been raised by the committee. Another important action taken by the Greek Committee relating to the Albanian problem was that it would not deal with the border between Albania and Yugoslavia, since this of necessity involved Italian interests. From that time on, the Albanian problem would be treated marginally as part of the Adriatic question. And the negotiators quickly perceived Albania as something to trade to Italy for compromise else in the Adriatic (Woodall 1978, p. 27).

A week later the Greek-Albanian question was assigned to another Committee - the Central Territorial Coordinating Committee. During a meeting of this Committee, Nicolson put forward his plan for an autonomous state of North Epirus and proposed that Greece could hold the autonomous North Epirus as a mandate under the supervision of the League of Nations. On the eve of the WWI, an international agreement was reached at the Conference of Corfu which provided for the autonomy of Northern Epirus under the suzerainty of Albania. This international agreement had been signed by Italy, Greece, France, England, and other powers. This time it would be under Greek, rather than Albanian protection. Because the
American delegates had connected the Albanian question to the Italian-Yugoslavian dispute, Nicolson’s proposal of an autonomous North Epirus was unwelcomed since it would take away territory, which would be offered to Italy. Within the American delegation, the idea that Albania would be given to Italy as a substitute for Fiume had emerged.

With the failure of Nicolson’s plan for an autonomous Northern Epirus, the British put forward another proposal by which Albania would be held as a personal mandate of an Italian prince, the Duke of Abruzzi. Albania would lose no territory but Italy would be allowed to lease the port of Vlora. It was also rejected by President Wilson. Later, when the Albanian delegation gave up on either the United States or Britain taking the Albania mandate, they supported the plan of independence under an Italian prince (Woodall 1978, p. 27). Later the Albanian problem had become so entangled with the Adriatic question that neither the Greeks nor the Italians could obtain Albanian territory or mandates without concessions elsewhere. At the same time, Albania could not be given full independence since the Great Powers hoped to use its territory to encourage compromises elsewhere.

**Yugoslav Claims in Northern Albania.**

Yugoslavia, or more technically correct, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, had come into existence in the few short months between the armistice and the Peace Conference. This recent union of the old Kingdoms of Serbia and Montenegro with the Slavic provinces of disintegrating Austro-Hungarian Empire was at best shaky. There were many centrifugal forces, which threatened to break the union. The worst of these was the competition for power between the Catholic and more highly cultured Croats and the more backward and Orthodox Serbians. Moreover, Italy schemed energetically to divide and weaken its newly formed Adriatic rival by encouraging internal class and ethnic divisions. If this was not enough, Yugoslavia was involved in territorial disputes with six of its seven neighbours. In presenting its memorandum of claims to the Peace Conference, the Yugoslavian delegation demanded that Albania be maintained as an independent state with the frontiers of 1913. Their motive was to prevent Italian control over Albania which would put the Yugoslavians in an awkward strategic position by
placing Italians on Yugoslavia’s northern and southern borders. Furthermore, the Yugoslavians rightly feared that Italy would use her base in Albania to extend its influence and intrigues throughout the Balkans.

Although the Yugoslavian delegation agreed to support the prewar Albania frontiers and Albania independence for strategic reasons, Yugoslavia claimed territory in Northern Albania. Montenegro, the least stable addition to the Yugoslavian State, had long claimed Shkodra and Serbia too, had historical and economic claims to the territory in northern and eastern Albania along the Drini Valley. The addition of northern Albania to Yugoslavia, as prescribed in the Treaty of London, would help satisfy Montenegrin and Serbian demands for war spoils and for another economic outlet to the Adriatic. Moreover, if Italy obtained control over Albania, the annexation of northern Albania would provide Yugoslavia with more easily defended frontiers. Consequently, throughout the peacemaking, the Yugoslavian delegation supported Albanian independence, opposing Italy’s influence over the country and insisting that if Italy obtained a foothold in Albania, Yugoslavia must receive compensation in northern and northeastern Albania (Woodall 1978, p. 28).

**Essad Pasha and the American delegation in Paris.**

The exotic figure of Essad Pasha attracted the attention of the European people since the Young Turk’s revolution. The Press informed that it had been Essad Pasha who informed Sultan Abdyl Hamid for his abdication, which was given a great importance at that time. After the famous surrendering of Shkodra, the biography of Essad Pasha was published by British newspapers like "The Daily News" and "The Leader", while "The Spectator" published a report titled "The Prince of Albania" where they foresaw a great future for Essad Pasha as leader but also as founder of the dynasty in Albania. This publicity not only did not damage Essad Pasha's political figure but also assured him an honorable place as the first Albanian diplomat (Silajxhic 1999, p. 123).

After Essad Pasha went to Selanik, the American diplomacy informed that he intended to organize about 3 000 Albanian soldiers that would fight beside the Allies. Because of the rivalry between Italy and Austria-Hungary Essad was interned
in Italy after which he become very important and was even awarded a medal. According to American diplomacy, Italy protested against his arrival in Selanik (Thessaloniki), fearing that Essad Pasha would give Southern Albania to Greece, even though he had declared that he had liked only Central Albania (Silajxhic 1999, p. 123). Even after his assassination, the Greeks continued to recognize his government presided over by Faik Kodra.

After being rejected by Italy and France, Essad first turned to Serbia. He had always been able to change from one supporter to another and find new allies. Having many supporters in Albania and a willingness to barter Albanian territory for power, Essad remained a power to be contended with. By the summer of 1919 Italy world approach Essad again and ask for an alliance with him. Sonnino followed every move of Essad carefully, but reports as to Essad's success in obtaining Serb subsidies were conflicting. Evidently, the Serbs wanted to keep Essad as an ally, but Belgrade had not yet decided how to use him. In fact, his visit to Belgrade was unsolicited and unsuccessful. Essad returned to Selanik without Serbian support and insisted on French permission to travel to Paris. On his return to Selanik, Essad sent a letter to Wilson and Balfour describing his services during the war, pleading his rights as leader of the Albanian people, and asking permission to head a delegation in Paris. Before deciding to answer Essad's letter, the American diplomats sought information from London about the Albanian. Whitehall described Essad as “a rather undesirable character” (Woodall 1978, p. 127).

Neither the British nor the Americans responded to his plea. While at Selanik, Essad kept an armed retinue and lived in a style beyond his means. He was in financial difficulty after some months. In his deteriorating situation he offered to raise a thousand-man Albanian corps to aid the French to fight the Bolsheviks. Essad again requested permission from the French authorities to go to Paris. One of his major demands in Paris would be for a share of the Austrian reparations to bolster his sagging finances. When he received Essad`s request to come to Paris, Pichon gave him permission to travel to Paris and defend his rights. The French Minister of Foreign Affairs reasoned that this would please the Serbians and that the Italians would prefer having Essad begging in Paris rather than plotting in the Balkans. It is
possible that the French felt some moral obligation to Essad for his services during the war. While Essad was preparing for his journey to Paris, his supporters began circulating petitions in Albania which demanded Essad’s recognition as head of the Albanian government. These petitions were to be sent to the Peace Conference (Woodall 1978, p. 127).

On his arrival in Paris in April 1919, Essad established his headquarters in Continental Hotel, where he called himself the President of the Albanian Government. His arrival frightened the Albanian delegates in Paris. At the Conference, Essad was separated from the delegation of the Provision Government and that of the Albanian colonies in USA, Turkey and Romania that gave their support to the delegation of the Provisional Government presided over by Turhan Pasha and later by Luigj Bumci. He gave interviews, sought audiences and met the personalities of the Peace Conference. The first official meeting of Essad Pasha and American diplomacy was on July 1918, when in a letter sent to the American ambassador in Paris he introduced his case. In this letter, he informed ambassador Sharp that in 1913, there existed two governments in Albania: one was presided over by Ismail bey Qemal possessing only a small territory in the South while the Central Government, under his leadership, enjoyed the support of the majority. Essad Pasha accused Ismail Qemal as a collaborator of the Young Turks while he expressed that Prince William of Wied did not know the mentality and traditions of the Albanian people. His government in Selanik was recognised by France, Serbia and Greece, so after the establishment of an Italian protectorate over Albania he protested to the government of the USA. In the same letter he declared that he was willing to establish relations with Italy under the supervision of England, France, USA and Serbia, having full confidence in President Wilson (Silajxhic 1999, p. 120).

Adding to his prestige, he was received by French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and even by President Wilson, and he regularly issued memoranda to the Peace Conference. Along the discussion, Essad Pasha pointed out that he had fought on the allies’ side for the principles Wilson had declared, and the least he expected from Wilson was that Albania remain within the borders of the year 1913. Essad also asked Wilson to accept a mandate in Albania expressing Albanians’ full confidence
in the US. During the discussion of the Adriatic question in May, the problem of whether or not Essad should receive a formal hearing was brought before the Council of Foreign Ministers. The Americans, Italians, and British were opposed, and Essad was described as discredited at home and abroad. The decision to hear the Albanian was delayed indefinitely and never again brought up (Woodall 1978, p. 129).

This treatment of Essad Pasha caused the reaction of the delegation of the Provisional Government, of the representatives of the Albanian Colonies and that of Telford Erickson, Edith Durham and others. The delegation of the Provisional Government reacted, and the beginning of April, in a note where it was pointed out that Essad Pasha had not received any mandate from the National Committee in Durres, that chose the Provisional Government as a representative of Albania at the Peace Conference. The same reaction came from the delegation of Albanian colonies. The Albanians did not believe in Essad Pasha. They begged the Peace Conference not to pay attention to him, when it is about the Albanian question. Telford Erickson was disappointed with Wilson for meeting Essad and wrote that: "He has not been in Albania for many years and does not represent any other person except himself." (Silajxhic 1999, p. 123). Edith Durham in a letter accused Essad Pasha of favouring the partition of Albania so that he could rule them in one of its parts. Ms Durham confirmed that none of the members of Albanian-English foundation did not support Essad Pasha and that she was following his activity since 1908 and reached to the conclusion that he had never had the support of the Albanian people. Even General Philips declared to the American delegation that only by keeping Essad from mixing with the Albanian question, Albania could be saved by the partition (Silajxhic 1999, p. 123).

The State Department confirmed to gather information about Essad Pasha from the American embassies in London and in Paris. The reports from both embassies described Essad in the same way: as an unimportant man, a born intriguer, a corrupted and discredited disciple of the School of Sultan Hamid and as the most despised man in Albania. No Albanian would fight under his leadership and this was shown by the fact that he dared not put in an appearance within Albanian regions.
From these reports, we can conclude that the American delegation in Paris had a lot of information available to discredit Essad Pasha as a person and his political aims. The reason for Wilson's attitude toward Essad, which brought even the meeting between Wilson and him as a representative of the Albanian people and head of the Albanian government must be explained with Essad’s attachment to the Allies. Essad had fought on their side and in turn they had an agent in Essad Pasha through whom they hoped to fulfill their policies (Silajxhic 1999, p. 123).

Since the beginning Essad had been an ambitious politician whose support came from feudal Moslem landowners in central Albania. He had little support in the north or south. But he was willing to bargain territory in northern and southern Albania for foreign support. For this reason, Essad could usually find friends among those powers who wished to partition Albania. The attitude of France, Italy, Serbia and Greece urged the American delegation to give Essad the same treatment as the delegation of the Provisional Government. Until his assassination in June 1920, there is little more information about his actions in Paris. Much of his correspondence deals with an attempt to receive financial compensation for his services during the war and the damages to his property. This request was finally turned down by the reparations committee in April 1920. (Woodall 1978, p. 226). However, until assassination, Essad remained available in the wings and ready to negotiate with any foreign government, which would allow him to take power in Albania.

**CONCLUSIONS**

After the occupation of Albania by the Great Powers came to an end, the Albanian problem still remained to be settled. This would be one of the first problems to face the new League of Nations. In December 1920, Albania was admitted to the League of Nations but this did not resolve the Albanian problem. The League of Nations refused to enter the dispute concerning Albania’s frontiers because the Conference of Ambassadors reserved for itself the right to draw the boundaries of Albania. But the ambassadors of the victorious Great Powers continued to use Albania as a bargaining chip in its unsuccessful attempt to resolve colonial problems. For another year Albania was subject to border clashes, foreign
intrigues and unstable governments. Finally in November 1921, representatives of Great Britain, France, Italy and Japan signed a protocol describing Albania’s frontiers as those of 1913, with a few minor revisions. Instead of being partitioned, international agreement put Albania into Italy’s orbit. The Albanian people, deceived by the Conference of Ambassadors organised themselves in order to show all the Powers that they knew how to rule their country themselves. Albanian delegates met at the Congress of Lushnje where a new government was formed to rule the country.

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