Kosovo in the First Balkan War

Shpend Avdiu*
Bujar Dugolli**

Abstract: October 1912 brought dramatic developments in the Balkans, as Serbia, Montenegro, Bulgaria and Greece created an alliance with the intent to occupy territories of the Ottoman Empire. Offering a documented point of view, based on archives and other historical documents, this paper addresses some of the political and military developments of Balkans War, specifically in the Vilayet area of Kosovo, an autonomous territory within Ottoman Empire. Further on we address the Serbian military operations in Kosovo and Macedonia, where the majority of population was ethnic Albanian. In spring of 1912, the Albanian population of Kosovo started an overall uprising for liberation from the Ottoman Empire. Notwithstanding their will to fight together with other Balkan nations against the Ottomans, Albanians were not accepted within the alliance. This article addresses the crimes committed by Balkan armies, specifically Serbian army against Albanian civil population.

Key words: First Balkan War, Kosovo, occupation, Alliance, Ottoman Empire.

The Beginning of the First Balkan War

The Balkan League reached a secret agreement with the intent to start the war against the Ottoman Empire. Its main objective was both the invasion of lands governed by Ottomans in Balkans and their expulsion

* Shpend Avdiu has a Master’s of History and is a PhD Candidate at the University of Prishtina’s Institute of Albanology in Prishtina
** Dr. Bujar Dugolli is an Associate Professor at the Department of History, University of Prishtina.
from Europe. The League was established under initial Russian influence. On November 1909, Russia and Italy had concluded an agreement in Racconigi, known as the Racconigi Bargain sending the message that they will act together concerning problems in Balkan.¹

With the annexation of Bosnia by the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1908, Serbia lost its hope to gain access to the Adriatic Sea through this country. The only alternative of Serbian expansionist policy was middle Albania, respectively Durres. Even though this was only an early Serbian idea, after forging Balkan League this project was seem to be viable.²

On the 29th of February 1912, Serbia and Bulgaria signed what is known as “The Treaty of Friendship and Alliance between Bulgaria and Serbia”, consisting of seven articles and a secret annex with five additional articles. In its first article, the treaty guaranteed their reciprocal sovereignty and territorial integrity. In the second article of the treaty, the countries agreed that, in case of an attack by a third party, they will help each other without any limitations, whereas the fourth article required reaching a mandatory military agreement to ensure the treaty’s implementation.³

This treaty, in its secret annex, foresaw the division of Ottoman Empire’s European territories, inhabited mostly by Albanians. The two

countries planned their territorial expansion: Serbia was to take over territories to the north and west of Char mountains, while Serbia recognizes Bulgaria’s right to territories all the way to the east of Rhodopes and Struma river. Nevertheless, agreement was not reached for territories between Rhodopes and Char mountains, where the division of territories between two countries was expected to take place later. In case of failure to reach an agreement for those territories, the arbiter between two countries would be the Russian Tsar, who would divide those territories based on both parties’ interests.

On the 17th of May 1912, Bulgaria signed a treaty with Greece as well, known as Treaty of Alliance and Defense, consisting of four articles and one entry.4 In the first article, they pledge that in case of a military attack from the Ottoman Empire they would help each other. This treaty would be valid for three years with the possibility of extension for one more year and should be completely secret.5 Before the official commencement of Balkan war, Serbia together with other Balkan countries conducted a great diplomatic activity through their representatives with the Great Powers. On September 18, Serbian envoy in London, Grujic, had informed British minister of exterior, Sir Edward Grey about the outbreak of the First Balkan War against Ottoman Empire.6

By the end of September 1912, Montenegro also joined the Balkan Coalition, signing a military convention with Bulgaria on September 27th,

---

5 *Ibidem*, p. 102.
and with Serbia, on October 6th.7 Immediately after these agreements, on September 30th, the Balkan states announced a general military mobilization of their armies, followed the next day by the Ottoman Empire.8

The Balkan states’ interests can be clearly understood from a document belonging to the Serbian ambassador in Sofia, dated October 16th, 1912. The main objective was to split Albanian territories and not the expulsion of Ottoman Empire from the Balkans, as pretended by the officials of Balkan countries at that time. Based on this document, Albanian territories should be the main object of bargaining.9 This plan contained a secret article concerning Albania. Therefore, in order to facilitate the task that Serbia has taken upon itself in Albania, the secret article foresees resolving the issue of Albanian population and kuco-Vlachs, to whom, in the last instances, their ethnic individualism such as language, religion, and educational autonomy would be guaranteed. Accordingly, Serbia would occupy and govern Albania, and convert it peacefully into an “autonomous province”, where a sector, Durres, the main port of the Adriatic Sea, would be ceded to Serbia for economic and commercial interests. All other Balkan states agreed to this claim.10 In case the Balkan states had to bargain with Europe, as a last concession, they were ready to accept some kind of

---

8 Ibidem.
9 Agjencia Shtetërore e Arkivave të Kosovës (Further ASHAK), Fondi (Found) (Further F): Sadullah Brestovci (SB), Kutia (Box), (Further K). 8, Dosja (File), (Further D): 9. Memoar sekret. Sofjemë 16 tetor 1912.
minimal sovereignty of the Sultan in Albania. They were ready to accept there a more or less autonomous administrative regime but under Powers’ protection, as was the case with Crete. Anyway, Albania should be the main bargaining chip between the Balkan states and Europe. Of course, it is about an Albania, whose borders would be determined by the Balkan states.\textsuperscript{11}

Aware that Austro-Hungarian interests were directly threatened, and to avoid the potential risk of a military intervention, Balkan states were planning to allow goods to be imported through Albania after the end of war with Ottoman Empire. After European territories of Ottoman Empire would be conquered, Balkan states would redefine their borders.

This plan of the Balkan states came in contradiction to interests of Austro-Hungarian Empire. The latter made it clear to the Entente States that they would not allow Serbia to invade Albanian lands and gain access into the Adriatic Sea. Thus, on November 6\textsuperscript{th}, Austro-Hungarian ambassador in Paris, Count Szécsen, in a meeting with external minister of France, Raymond Poincaré, announced that Austro-Hungary was determined not to allow Serbia to accomplish its goals.\textsuperscript{12}

The Serbian public opinion was also enthusiastic about the idea of expanding the Serbian Kingdom borders all the way to the Adriatic Sea,

including Kosovo, Sanxhak beyond Shkodra, an autonomous Serb province, only as a transitional period.\textsuperscript{13}

After the insurgency on the year 1912, Balkan states were sensitive that Albania could be considered an autonomous state made of four Vilayets: Vilayet of Kosovo, Vilayet of Shkodra, Vilayet of Janina, and Vilayet of Manastir. If Albanians were given time to consult, and the Albanian issue was to be resolved, Balkan states would have had the European door closed and their ambitions for further territorial expansion would have been extinguished.\textsuperscript{14}

Bulgarian press on the wake of the Balkan states propaganda spread many bad ideas against Albanians, after their withdrawal from Skopje. In August 1912, newspaper “Macedonia” writes: \textit{an autonomous province with a majority of uncultured Albanians with three different religions, to whom the only thing they know is wrongdoing and violence. (…) and so the Bulgarian lands will constrict.}\textsuperscript{15} This Bulgarian press propaganda was promulgated while the Balkan League was conducting the last preparationto declare war against the Ottoman Empire.\textsuperscript{16} So, it definitely

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Ibidem.}
\end{flushleft}
can be said that the Albanian insurgency paved the road for a triumph of Balkan states against Ottoman Empire.\(^{17}\)

Before the first Balkan war began, the Austro-Hungarian ambassador in Istanbul notifies minister of exterior, Count Berchtold, that the situation in the Ottoman Empire was not good, whereas the situation in Albania, the hotbed of insurgency was described as abnormal.

The Austro-Hungarian ambassador in Istanbul, Johann von Pallavicini views also Bulgaria, as an instigator of war, but he thinks that very soon this situation would be mitigated because, according to him, Bulgaria is aware that Ottoman Empire had 200.000 soldiers only in Rumelia and their number could increase very soon up to 300.000. It can be said that the Austro-Hungarian Empire had neglected the power that Balkan states had. After those wars, Austro-Hungary had no chance to gain access to the Mediterranean Sea.\(^{18}\)

According to Viennese magazine, “Wiener Bilder”, dated October 6\(^{th}\), 1912, (this magazine disseminated propaganda on behalf of Austro-Hungarian Empire about the great strength the Ottoman Empire had versus the Balkan states) the Ottoman Empire had around 1.683.000 soldiers, whereas Serbia had 352.922, Romania- 287.600, Bulgaria- 190.452, Greece- 150.000 and Montenegro- 37.200.\(^{19}\) However, according to Turkish historiography, the number of Ottoman solders in the Balkans was half that of Balkan armies: Bulgaria had 240.000 soldiers; Serbia 140.000, Greece 100.000, and Montenegro 30.000, with a total of around 510.000,

\(^{18}\) Beqir Meta, Muharrem Dezhgiu, Fatmira Musa, *op cit.*, p. 197.
\(^{19}\) *Wiener Bilder*, Vienna, 6 X. 1912.
while Ottoman Empire in today’s Turkey had 150.000 solders, in Macedonia 90.000, and in Albania 10.000 solders, in total around 250.000 solders, so just slightly more than the Bulgarian army.\textsuperscript{20}

From these ascertainment of Austro-Hungarian ambassador in Istanbul one can grasp the atmosphere of preparation for the first Balkan war. At the same time, from this report it is obvious that Austro-Hungary was engaged to keep the Status quo in Balkans.\textsuperscript{21}

Before October 1912, in Prokuple, close to the Kosovo-Serbia border, a region inhabited mainly with Albanians, Serbia had positioned their army in order to declare war to the Ottomans. Serbia’s aim was not only to invade Kosovo, but also Durres. Thousands of volunteers were gathered in Prokuple, not only from Serbia, but also Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Slovenia.\textsuperscript{22}

After the Balkan League’s war preparations, on September 22\textsuperscript{nd}, 1912, the Sultan had released an order for mobilization of young soldiers to protect Ottoman Empire borders. It is interesting to emphasize that in this document, the main point of border protection with Serbia and the major

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
  \item Beqir Meta, Muharrem Dezhgiu, Fatmira Musa, \textit{op cit.}, p, 197.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
concentration of Ottoman army was in Mitrovica, whereas Serb army concentration was in Prokuple, close to Podujeva.\textsuperscript{23}

Citizens from Prishtina, Skopje and Peja and from some other regions of Vilayet of Kosovo were appealing to the Ottoman Empire to prepare for war. They were willing to give their lives and property just to prevent the occupation by Balkan League.\textsuperscript{24}

On October 9\textsuperscript{th}, “The New York Times” reports by describing the organization of Ottoman army in Istanbul, where Albanians were ready to fight alongside Ottoman Empire side just to thwart occupation by Balkan League. Furthermore, according to this American newspaper, many Albanian immigrants from USA were ready to fight against Balkan armies.\textsuperscript{25}

In another article from November 23\textsuperscript{rd}, this same newspaper, by referring to the Ottoman consul in USA, had stated for “The New York Times”that: “Despite the fact that this war is attempted to be introduced as religious it is not such. For that matter, even Albanian catholic priests have signed up to fight in our side and against our enemies”. \textsuperscript{26} Through the press of the time, even Albanian intellectuals and nationalists joined the call for resistance against Balkan states.

\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Ibidem}, p. 157.
\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Ibidem}, pp. 45-46.
Occupation of Kosovo and Albanian resistance during the First Balkan War

At the beginning of the First Balkan War, on October 8th 1912, based on Serbian army’s documents, its preparation atmosphere could be felt, those documents are chronicles of “forewarned deaths” Preparation of Serbian armies and its placement along all Albanian lands border and creation of a typical atmosphere for attack, by inciting border conflicts and incidents.

The Ottoman state and army’s indifference against Serbian preparation for war and the Albanian concern for the threatening tragedy and their national self organizing without an institutional organizing, (no army and police, no propaganda, no interior organizing, no international allies) was exhausted from the four year war against High Porte. This atmosphere reflects also from a report from Serbian Military Ministry addressed to the mayor of Vranje: “...the war between Serbs and Albanians has stowed last night around six o’clock. The war was instigated by Albanians. The VIIth Serb regiment, were conducting maneuvers, when Albanians fired on them by surprise”.27

According to Serbian reports, Albanians occupied guard towers of Ottoman army along the tri-border all the way up to Motina. Regarding the number of guard towers and border forces in Kosovo-Serbia border, the

---

27ASHAK, F. Arkivii Institutit Historik Ushtarak, Beograd - 1912-1940, K. 2, Elaborati 5-12, viti 1912 -1913.
Mayor of Vranje and Serbian army had no information. On the Kosovo – Serbian border frequent incidents took place at the time. On October 15th from these fights, twelve Serbian soldiers were wounded and sent to a poorly equipped hospital in Vranje. There were no deaths, except the two Serbians who were killed a day earlier. From the Albanian side, there were seven deathshappening on October 14 in the territories of Kosovo”.  

According to this it is understood that incidents were instigated by Serbian army on the border that divided Llap and Gollak with Serbian territories.  

According to Serbian reports, Albanians in the Gollak and Llap vicinity were very organized as they managed to burn the guard towers. The soldiers were concentrated at a location called Maja e Shjixhisë, by Guriimadh in order to stop the penetration of Serbian forces into Albanian territories.  

Resistance from Ottoman Empire`s side in Prepolac, was very tough and strong. Nevertheless, Serbs invaded and burned Podujevo, and the Serbian army advanced very quickly towards Prishtina. According to the Austro-Hungarian Consul, Tayah, the final battle was taking place in Prepallac and Isa Boletini with 400 volunteers helping, before Prishtina has been occupied. According to the same source, the exposed zone from Prishtina up to Plevlje had fallen easily to the Serbs and Montenegrins.  

---

28 ASHAK, F. Arkivi i Institutit Historik Ushtarak, Beograd - 1912-1940, K. 2 Elaborati 5-12, viti 1912-1913.
29 ASHAK, F. Arkivi i Institutit Historik Ushtarak, Beograd - 1912-1940, K. 2 Elaborati 5-12, viti 1912-1913.
After the fall of Podujeva, the Serbian army had advanced all the way up to Kulina. Also, Prishtina was expected to fall into the Serbian army’s control. Considering the geographic structure, after the invasion of Prishtina, other towns like Vushtrri, Mitrovica, Novi Pazar, fell as easily, opening the Serbian army’s path towards Skopje. The Serbs also advanced towards Rashka up to Novi Pazar, where the battle was underway two days prior to overtaking Prishtina. Montenegrin army invaded Gucia and Kuçishtë, the main settlement of Rugova, in their breakthrough towards Peja.\textsuperscript{32}

From Serbian, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman documents, it appears that the occupation of Kosovo was very easily achieved by Serbia and Montenegro. The only serious resistance lasted days and took place at the entrance of Podujevo and Gollak region. After the fall of Prishtina, within four days, Skopje and Kumanovo were conquered. From these documents, it is clear that the Ottoman army in the Vilayet of Kosovo could not withstand the Serbian forces. Even in Podujeva and in Kumanovo, the Ottoman army consisted mostly of Albanian volunteers. Often, even the Austro-Hungarian reports were exaggerated. Austrian Consul from Mitrovica reported that the Ottoman army had launched a force of 10,000 soldiers to protect Prishtina. Within ten days, from the beginning of the attacks until October 26\textsuperscript{th} the Serbian army has occupied all the

Vilayet of Kosovo.\textsuperscript{33} Therefore, it is very indicative the reason why all the information from Consuls, press and Austria-Hungary itself concerning Ottoman strength, were false. On October 17\textsuperscript{th}, during the withdrawal, the Ottoman army demolished all bridges on the road Vranje to Shkup, to hinder Serbian army further penetration.\textsuperscript{34}

On October 22\textsuperscript{nd}, the Serbian army invaded Bujanovc. The Serbian First Army operating in the direction Vranje-Kumanovo-Skopje approached Kumanovo for other military developments. Consequently, Ottoman army withdrew rapidly in Kumanovo.\textsuperscript{35} This march of the Serbian army was lead by Prince Alexander, who, on September 17\textsuperscript{th}, stayed in Nisin order to join the Serbian forces.\textsuperscript{36} Morava brigade commander informed the High command in Nis from Sijarina Mosque, with this report:

\begin{quote}
\textit{In the morning, around eight, from 5\textsuperscript{th} -18\textsuperscript{th} October, 1912, Arnouts have attacked Svirca – the high top of Novak. Around eleven, we dominated this part of the border front. Arnauts are holed up on guard towers. The fighting has continued this afternoon in Mark’ Peak front, which we lost yesterday. Today we reclaimed it. Bervenik is attacked with artillery in order to claim it, too. It is very protected by Arnouts.}\textsuperscript{37}
\end{quote}

Serbian military documents contain significant data concerning initial operations of the Serbian occupation of Albanian lands, starting with Lab and Gollak region. On October 19\textsuperscript{th}, 1912 several squads of the XIX\textsuperscript{th}


\textsuperscript{34} Muhamet Shatri, Ramiz Abdyli, \textit{Dokumnte ruse për Lëvizjen Kombëtare Shqiptare më 1912}, Prishtinë, Institut i Historisë- Prishtinë, 2006, pp. 254-255.

\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Ibidem}, p. 261.

\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Ibidem}, pp. 254-255.

and XI\textsuperscript{th} detachment attacked Podujevo and overtook it on October 20\textsuperscript{th}. Further penetration, due to open terrain, could not be accomplished. During the night of October 19\textsuperscript{th}, the Ottoman army has abandoned the positions around Podujeva withdrawing to the south. On October 20\textsuperscript{th}, Sumadija Division together with Morava Division overtook Podujeva, and marched south of Llap. Serbian military forces joined other parts of the Serbian army in Jablanica, in Bervenik points and Lisica.\textsuperscript{38} Also, on 19\textsuperscript{th} and 20\textsuperscript{th} October, King Petar ordered the Serbian army to approach the border so they would receive further instructions for advancing into the territories of the Ottoman Empire. Ibar Division would march towards Novi Pazar, while the Third Army towards Prishtina.\textsuperscript{39}

The Ottoman army has stationed its forces in two adjacent points: in Mitrovica and near Prishtina. In Mitrovica there were 20 Infantry Divisions of Ferizaj, Mitrovica detachment, while in Prishtina was Prishtine Skopje VII Corps, which had 19 divisions. These divisions were part of the Vardar Army.\textsuperscript{40} On October 19\textsuperscript{th}, the Ottoman army has made changes to its headquarters. Ali Riza, while maintaining the overall command in Macedonia, took the Army General Command against the Bulgarian army.

\textsuperscript{38} ASHAK, F. Arkivi i Institutit Historik Ushtarak, Beograd - 1912-1940, Elaborati 17-19, V. 1913, K. 4. 12 shtator - 24 tetor 1913.
\textsuperscript{40} Edward J. Erickson, \textit{Defeat in Detail: The Ottoman Army in the Balkans, 1912-1913}, Santa Barbara, Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003, p. 170.
in Macedonia. Furthermore, Muhammad Pasha has taken the lead command against Montenegrin troops.\textsuperscript{41}

On October 21\textsuperscript{st}, it was ordered that all Serbian Army head towards Prishtina with the first task, to overtake the Gorge of Tenezhdolt. In Podujevo, the Ottoman army left a battalion flag, about 80 large tents, many crates of ammunition, 80 cows, and other equipment.\textsuperscript{42} From the testimony of a prisoner, during the war against the Serbian army in Kosovo-Serbia border, there were two Nizam Regiments, 6 Albanian Battalions, whereas the 2-3 batteries coming from Mitrovica did not have the opportunity to participate, because they have arrived late.\textsuperscript{43} This shows that the Ottoman Army in the Albanian territories was not organized and was not ready to withstand the Balkan armies.

From reports of the Serbian army, the Albanians fled to Kopaonik. Lieutenant Colonel Andanović, with the Cavalry Division and the Battalion of the XIX\textsuperscript{th} Regiment received orders to descend in Lap, to pursue the rest of the Albanians.\textsuperscript{44} From a report of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Ottoman Empire, on October 22\textsuperscript{nd} to 23\textsuperscript{rd}, Prishtina was overrun by Serb forces and it was expected that very soon Skopje would fall. There, the Serbian army had about 76 thousand troops.\textsuperscript{45} On October 26\textsuperscript{th}, Ottoman documents confirm the conquest of Skopje and Kosovo. Vilayet leaders

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{41} Muhamet Shatri, Ramiz Abdyli, \textit{op cit.,} p. 255.
\end{flushleft}
fled to Thessaloniki soon. On December 15th, a French newspaper published an illustration portraying a French General cheered by Serbian officials in Skopje, indicating that Serbian Army was supported by the French. Serbian army intended to both purge the lands from the Albanian native element and conquer them. Therefore, this invasion was followed with violence by the Serbian army and only in the area of Prishtina, 5,000 Albanians were killed. On the left of Podujevo, Serbian army has taken security measures by the VIth Battalion of the Great Serbian army Regiment. Meanwhile the leader of voluntary units, Captain Sekulic, and Third People's Army had orders to establish Police directorate in the district of Lap, on October 23rd. Fleeing Albanians from this part of Kosovo left a large amount of food and feed, making it easier for Serbs to conquer other parts of the Albanian territories.

After the occupation of Kosovo, Luma and other Albanian territories, the Serbian Army reported on Albanian resistance which continued until the beginning of the First World War. This resistance and especially the Serb crimes during this period are disclosed in Esat Pasha’s correspondence with Serbian military commanders. A lot of massacres are reported, and Toptani appealed to the Serbian army to stop the massacres against defenseless Albanian population. It should be noted that the letter sent by Esat Pasha to the Commander of the Serbian forces of Serb-

---

Albanian border, identifies Esat Pasha as Prime Minister of Middle Albanian Government. Other documents of the time, including the Albanian and European press, reported numerous massacres in this region and other occupied territories. Esat Pasha promised to the Serbian army that he would do everything possible to maintain peace and order at the border between Albania and Serbia, and at the same time, asked for help from the Serbian army as his ally, to keep these territories under control. These requests were made by Toptani at a time when the Serbian army was in pursuit of the Albanians and had penetrated to the border of the province of Mat.49 This persecution of Albanians by the Serbian Army created a great concern and uncertainty in all of Albania. Serbia, according to these documents used harshest possible methods of violence and massacres in pursuit of the Albanians. 50

In this letter to the Serbian army commanders, Essad Pasha appealed in the name of civilization and humanity to stop the bloodshed. Furthermore, according to Essad Pasha, the mutual interest of the two countries was to make a friendly deal to withdraw Serbian forces from Albanian territories without international pressure, respecting the border line established by the London Conference.51 Two months after the Montenegrin war declaration, the Second Balkan War started. The Great

49 ASHAK, F. Arkivi i Institutit Historik Ushtarak, Beograd - 1912-1940 K. 2 Elaborati 5-12, viti 1912 -1913.
50 ASHAK, F. Arkivi i Institutit Historik Ushtarak, Beograd - 1912-1940 K. 2 Elaborati 5-12, viti 1912 -1913.
51 ASHAK, F. Arkivi i Institutit Historik Ushtarak, Beograd - 1912-1940 K. 2 Elaborati 5-12, viti 1912 -1913.
Powers were interested to keep peace in the Balkans, but they failed.\textsuperscript{52} In less than three months, more than 200,000 soldiers were killed, without including civilians. Besides the victims of war, thousands of people became victims of cholera, typhoid and dysentery. The war involved more than 170,000 square kilometers from Albania to Istanbul. The Ottoman Empire fought with the Balkan Orthodox countries on four fronts: against Greeks, Serbs, Bulgarians, and against Montenegro and Serbia in Kosovo and in Shkoder.\textsuperscript{53}

\begin{center}
\textbf{Bibliography:}
\end{center}

\begin{center}
\textbf{Primary Sources}
\end{center}

Agjencia Shtetërore e Arkivave të Kosovës (ASHAK) . (\textit{Agency of State Archives of Kosovo}).

Fondi: Arkivi i Institutit Historik Ushtarak, Beograd - 1912-1940. (\textit{Found: Archive of Institute of Military History, Belgrade, 1912-1940}).

Koleksioni i Sadullah Brestovcit (\textit{Collection of Sadullah Brestovci’s}).


\textsuperscript{52} Misha Gleny, \textit{op cit.}, p. 229.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibidem.
Secondary Sources


