

B. K O N D I S

THE NORTHERN EPIRUS QUESTION
DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The outbreak of World War I found Albania in a chaotic situation. The revolt of the Moslem inhabitants of Central Albania had made the position of Prince William of Wied highly precarious¹. The Prince had no authority beyond the confines of Durazzo and needed economic assistance. The great powers, however, were in no position to intervene and the Prince on 3 September 1914 abandoned his Kingdom².

The departure of William of Wied left Albania in the barest shadow of legal government. Northern Albania was under the control of local chieftains, while the Moslem insurgents controlled central Albania and wished to reestablish Turkish rule in the country with the assistance of the Young Turks³.

The activities of the insurgents caused great concern to Venizelos who was afraid that they might extend their activities to Northern Epirus thus coming to a clash with the local population. This fear forced the Greek prime minister to consider the reoccupation of Northern Epirus in order to prevent violence against the Greek population by the Moslem irregulars⁴. The situation, however, was greatly complicated by the well-known Italian interest towards Albania. At this point the Italian government wished for strategic reasons to take hold of the harbor of Valona which it had long coveted⁵. Thus, the Italians notified the great powers that Italy, as the sole signatory of the Statute creating the Albanian State which had not become involved in the war, was the proper Power to take steps to prevent the occupation of Albanian territory⁶.

1. Basil Kondis, *Greece and Albania, 1908-1914*, Thessaloniki 1976, pp. 128-132; Gazmed Shpuza, *Kryengritja fshatare e Shqipërisë së mesme 1914-1915* (The Peasant revolt in central Albania, 1914-1915), Tirana 1986, pp. 77-78.

2. J. Swire, *Albania: The Rise of a Kingdom*, London 1930, pp. 230-232.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Public Record Office. Foreign Office (FO) 195/2245/45, Vice-Consul at Monastir to Constantinople Embassy, Monastir, 6 July 1914.

5. FO 421/294, nos. 94 and 95, Elliot to Grey, Athens, 12 and 14 October 1914.

6. Ministero degli affari esteri, *I documenti diplomatici italiani* (DDI), 5th Series: 1914-1918, Volume I, Rome 1954, nos. 837 and 880.

Undoubtedly Rome was looking for a pretext to occupy Valona as compensation for a possible territorial expansion of Austria-Hungary in the Balkans.

The Italian pressures forced the Entente powers to approve the occupation of Valona. Edward Grey, however, pointed out to the Italian government that the state of anarchy prevailing in Northern Epirus had transformed that region into a field where bands of Moslem irregulars organized predatory raids and exerted violence against the Christian population, and that it was necessary therefore that the Greek government should likewise be authorized to send military forces to Northern Epirus, in order to prevent massacres⁷. The Italians were not so eager to consent to Greece's occupation of Northern Epirus. However, the reluctance of Italy to Greek intervention was overcome on the understanding that the step was taken only in the interests of order, that the decisions of the Ambassadors' Conference regarding Albania were still valid, that the occupation was temporary, that Greek forces would evacuate the area on demands by the Allies and that Greece accepted the occupation of Valona by the Italians⁸. Thus, at the end of October with the consent of the Entente Powers Greece reoccupied Northern Epirus, while at the same time Italy occupied the island of Sasseno and two months later Valona and its hinterland⁹.

At this point and especially after the entrance of Turkey in the War on the side of the Central Powers and the second occupation of Belgrade by the Austrians, the Entente Powers, on 5 December 1914, offered the whole of Northern Epirus to Greece in order to induce her to abandon its neutrality and enter the war on their side¹⁰. These negotiations brought no concrete results as Venizelos asked for guarantees against an attack by Bulgaria, especially Rumania's guarantee¹¹. After the Italian occupation of Valona, on 28 January 1915, Great Britain, France and Russia, for the purpose of indicating to Albania and the other Balkan states that they had not disinterested themselves in Albania, and in order to reserve their rights of modifying at a

7. FO 371/2009/55845, Grey to Rodd, London, 6 October 1914 and FO 371/2009/57096, Rodd to Grey, Rome 7 October 1914; DDI, 5th Series, I no. 886.

8. Archives of the Greek Foreign Ministry (A.Y.E.), 1914, A/5, Report of general Papoula to Foreign Ministry, Premeti, 1 November 1914.

9. Pietro Pastorelli, *L'Albania nella politica estera italiana, 1914-1917*, Naples 1970, pp. 18-20.

10. FO 371/2241/269, Elliot to Grey, Athens, 7 December 1914.

11. Eleutherios Venizelos, *The Vindication of Greek National Policy*, London 1918, p. 76.

later date and concurrently with Italy, the position set up by the London Conference of Ambassadors in 1913, decided to urge the Greek, Serbian and Montenegrin governments to abstain from any intervention in Albania unless absolutely necessary to protect themselves against an attack from that country, as the Allies reserved to themselves the right to decide, when peace was re-established as to the definitive regime¹². Also, Italy was informed of this step, and was asked not to extend her sphere of action on the Albanian coast.

Despite the attitude of the Entente Powers and the fact that Greek occupation of Northern Epirus was temporary, Venizelos believed that the whole problem would be solved to Greece's favor. This belief was further strengthened after the signing of the Treaty of London on 26 April 1915 and the concessions made by the Entente Powers to Italy in order to enter the war on their side. Article 6 of the Treaty granted to Italy full sovereignty over Valona, the island of Sasseno and surrounding territory of sufficient extent to assure the defence of those points from the Voiussa to the north and east approximately to the northern boundary of the district of Himara on the south. In article 7 of the same instrument Italy undertook that, if she obtained Istria, Trentino and Dalmatia and if the central position of Albania were reserved for the establishment of a small autonomous neutralized state, she would not oppose the award of Northern Epirus to Greece and the division of northern Albania between Serbia and Montenegro. Italy, who was to be charged with the conduct of the foreign relations of Albania, also agreed to leave sufficient territory to the east of Albania to ensure the existence of a frontier line between Greece and Serbia to the west of Lake Ochrida. The coast from the southern boundary of the Italian territory of Valona, as far as Cape Stylos was to be neutralized¹³.

The negotiations which preceded the Treaty show that by central Albania was meant the Moslem regions then ruled over by Essad Pasha, the chieftain of the region, the main catholic area of Scutari and Mirditia being left to Serbia to provide her with an access to the sea, and Northern Epirus being left to Greece.

The terms of the Treaty of London soon became known to the Albanian nationalist leaders who decided to form national committees with the objective

12. FO 371/2238, Note of the Entente Powers, London, 28 January 1915.

13. J. C. Hurewitz, *Diplomacy in the Near East: A Documentary Record: 1914-1956*, Vol. 1, Princeton 1956, pp. 11-12. For the Albanian Problem and the Treaty of London, Pastorelli, *L'Albania nella politica estera italiana*, pp. 19-32; Muin Çami, *Shqipëria në marrëdhëniet ndërkombëtare, 1914-1918* (Albania in international affairs, 1914-1918), Tirana 1987, pp. 145-152.

to stop partition of their country. Such committees were formed in Durazzo, in Scutari and in places outside Albania, as in Bucharest, in Sophia, in the United States and even in Switzerland. Their political objectives were: to secure the independence of Albania as proclaimed in November 1912, to protect the territorial integrity of the Albanian state as defined by the Ambassador's Conference in London and to include to the frontiers of the state all Albanian regions which were left outside as a result of the decision of the Great Powers¹⁴. Whereas the Albanian nationalists had common political objectives, there existed no unity among themselves. Some of them favored the Central Powers and others the Entente. However, the majority of them wished to remain neutral in order to protect better the Albanian interests¹⁵.

In the meantime, since the fall of 1914 central Albania was in a great state of anarchy, as a revolt was taking place against Essad Pasha. The insurgents sought to overthrow Essad and govern through local committees under the direction of Turkish officials¹⁶. While Essad Pasha remained besieged at Durazzo, he asked Italy, Greece and Serbia to supply him with arms and munitions¹⁷. The Italian government provided some arms but not enough to enable Essad to defeat the insurgents, and also refused to allow Italian marines to land at Durazzo¹⁸. Venizelos, on his part, despite Italy's opposition, sent rifles and munitions to Essad in Durazzo, delivered by the warship "Eli" which sailed there on the pretext to protect Greek citizens¹⁹. By assisting Essad, Venizelos hoped in return to have his help in the struggle for the realization of Greek national objectives in Albania. However, nothing concrete developed as the Italians protested against the presence of the Greek warship outside Durazzo and Athens was forced to withdraw it in spite of Essad's objections²⁰.

The Serbian government, also, wanted to intervene and help Essad defeat

14. Albanian Academy of Sciences: Institute of History, *Historia e Shqipërisë* (History of Albania), Vol. III, Tirana 1984, p. 162.

15. *Ibid.*

16. J. Swire, *Albania: The Rise of a Kingdom*, p. 239.

17. Çami, *Shqipëria në marrëdhëniet ndërkombëtare*, p. 146; George Leon, "Greece and the Albanian Question at the outbreak of the First World War", *Balkan Studies*, 11.1 (1970), p. 79.

18. Çami, p. 147.

19. A.Y.E., 1915, A/5, no. 105, Psaroudas to Venizelos, Durazzo, 4 January 1915; For the struggle against Essad Pasha see G. Shpuza, *Kryengritja fshatare e Shqipërisë se mesme 1914-1915*, passim.

20. A.Y.E., 1915, A/5, no. 454, Venizelos to Psaroudas, Athens, 14 January 1915.

the insurgents²¹ but at this point, January 1915, the Entente Powers objected to such an operation and Belgrade was forced to postpone the advance of the serbian army into Albania. However, after the signing of the Treaty of London the situation changed drastically as the serbian government thought its interests were threatened in Albania and in the beginning of June the Serbs crossed the frontier and occupied most of the territory controlled by the insurgents including Pogradets, Elbasan and Tirana but not Durazzo which was left under the control of Essad Pasha²². At the same time Montenegrin troops took possession of the whole Scutari region. Thus by summer of 1915 the actual position in Albania corresponded roughly with the terms of the Treaty of London.

When in November 1915, as a consequence of Bulgaria's entry into the war, Serbia was being gradually overrun by enemy forces and it seemed likely that she would have to retreat through Albania, it was of vital importance to the British to have a friendly country through which Allied communications with Serbia could be maintained, thus they proposed that Albania should be promised the formation of an independent Albanian state organized on the cantonal basis under the protection of Italy. This amounted to the extension of the Italian protectorate from the small Moslem state contemplated in the Treaty of London to a state, bounded roughly on the north by the Montenegrin frontier and on the south by a line drawn from the mouth of the river Voiussa to the southern extremity of lake Ochrida, comprising the catholic as well as the Moslem tribes. It was felt that Greek susceptibilities precluded the alteration of the status of Albanian territory south of the line mentioned²³. Naturally the Italians concurred in this arrangement, holding that Montenegrin claims to Scutari could not be overlooked and agreeing that Greece should be left in possession of the line then occupied including Himara and Koritsa²⁴. The French and Russian governments refused, however, to agree to such an extension of the Italian protectorate over Albania, and the proposal was dropped.

In January 1916, after the Austrian conquest of Montenegro and the collapse and retreat of the Serbian army through Albania to Corfu, the Austrian

21. For the relations of Essad Pasha with the Serbian government see Sh. Rahimi, "Mar-rëveshjet e qeverisë serbe me Esad pashë Toptanin gjatë viteve 1914-1915" ("The negotiations of Essad Pasha Toptani with the Serbian government during the period 1914-1915"), *Gjurmime albanologjike*, History, Vol. 6 (1976), Prishtina 1977, passim.

22. Swire, *Albania*, pp. 249-250.

23. FO 371/5726, Paper on British policy on Albania from 1912 to June 1920, London, 12 April 1921.

24. *Ibid.*; S. Sonnino, *Diario, 1914-1916*, Bari 1972, p. 272.

troops overran the greater part of Albania, including Durazzo, while Italy retained control of Valona and Greece of Northern Epirus, as the Austrians did not advance beyond the zone occupied by the Greek army since Greece was still a neutral country.

In the meantime Greece had strengthened her position in Northern Epirus by establishing order and being in good terms with the inhabitants. In the elections of 31 May 1915, won by the Liberal Party, nine deputies from the area were elected in the Greek Parliament but Venizelos did not allow them to take their seats since he wished not to violate the understanding of October 1914²⁵. Yet in August 1915 he declared in the Parliament that "only colossal faults could separate Northern Epirus from Greece"²⁶. However, after the elections of December 1915 and the formation of a government headed by Stefanos Skouloudis deputies from Northern Epirus were allowed to sit in the Parliament. In February 1916, Athens substituted civil officers for the military authorities of occupation and the following month, by Royal Decree, formally annexed Northern Epirus to the Greek Kingdom²⁷. Following this incorporation Italy and the other allied powers made strong representations to Athens as a result of which the Northern Epirot deputies were unseated²⁸.

In the spring of 1916, the question of Northern Epirus was further complicated by the pro-German stand of the Skouloudis government²⁹. The surrender of Fort Roupel to the Bulgarians on 28 May 1916, without offering any real resistance, caused great concern to the Entente Powers, which accused Athens of complicity in the Bulgarian occupation of Roupel and they were convinced that there existed a secret agreement between Greece and the Central Powers³⁰. Moreover, on 21 June, a collective note was presented to the Greek government demanding:

"...

1. The real and complete demobilization of the Greek army, which is to be placed on a peace footing with the least possible delay.

25. Georgios Ventiris, *Η Ελλάδα του 1910-1920*, Vol. 1, Athens 1929, p. 338.

26. Venizelos, *The Vindication of Greek National Policy*, p. 76.

27. Ph. Philon, *The Question of Northern Epirus*, Washington 1945, p. 15.

28. *Ibid.*

29. For the internal dissension in Greece and her relations with the Great Powers see A. F. Frangoulis, *La Grèce et la crise mondiale*, 2 Vols., Paris 1926; Phocas Cosmetatos, *The Tragedy of Greece*, London 1928; George Leon, *Greece and the Great Powers, 1914-1917*, Thessaloniki 1974.

30. Edouard Driault and Michel Lhéritier, *Histoire diplomatique de la Grèce de 1821 à nos jours*, Vol. 5: 1908-1923, Paris 1928, p. 242; Leon, *Greece and the Great Powers*, p. 361.

2. The immediate replacement of the present ministry by a caretaker government which would offer all the necessary guarantees for the loyal application of benevolent neutrality.
3. Immediate dissolution of the Chamber of Deputies, followed by new elections within the time limit provided for by the Constitution but after general demobilization has restored the electorate to its normal conditions.
4. Replacement, in accord with Powers, of certain police officials whose attitude, inspired by foreign influence, had facilitated assaults on peaceful citizens as well as heaping insults on the Allied legations and their nationals"³¹.

At the same time Italy in a separate note demanded that the demobilization of the Greek army should be applied and in Northern Epirus³². The new prime minister Alexandros Zaimis accepted the Allied demands and the army, including the units in Northern Epirus, was being put on a peace footing³³.

At this juncture Italy, taking advantage of the internal conflict within Greece and the tense relations between the Entente and the Greek government, occupied the districts of Himara, Santi Quaranta, Delvino, Argyrocastro, Premeti, Erseka and Leskoviki on the pretext that the Greek forces could not resist the advance of the Bulgarian army³⁴. It is evident that the surrender of Roupel to the Bulgarians opened the way to the Italian occupation of Northern Epirus. Very illuminating is a report of Lambros Koromilas, minister of Greece at Rome, who reported that the Italians were ready to think that the Greek government would retreat to the Bulgarians in Epirus as it had done in Macedonia³⁵. Moreover, Venizelos declared in the Greek Chamber on 13 August 1917 that the loss of Northern Epirus came as a result of the betrayal in Macedonia and the surrender of Roupel³⁶.

After the establishment of the provisional government on 9 October 1916

31. FO 371/2620/126515, Enclosure, Entente note, 21 June 1916.

32. Edith Stickney, *Southern Albania or Northern Epirus in European International Affairs, 1912-1923*, Stanford California, 1926, p. 63; Leon, *Greece and the Great Powers*, p. 373.

33. Stickney, p. 63.

34. A.Y.E., 1916, A/5/VII, nos. 8921 and 10207, Prefect of Yannina to Foreign Ministry, Yannina, 12 September 1916 and 18 December 1916; FO 371/2623/208316, British Embassy (Elliot) to Foreign Office, Athens, 12 October 1916.

35. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Διπλωματικά Έγγραφα, 1913-1917*, Athens 1920, no. 134, Koromilas to Skouloudis, Rome, 17 May 1916.

36. Eleutherios Venizelos, *Πολιτικά Υποθήκαι*, edited by S. Stefanou, Vol. 2, Athens 1969, p. 64.

at Thessaloniki, Venizelos was once again able to turn his attention to the problem of Northern Epirus. In an interview to the Italian newspaper "Secolo" on 1 December 1916, the prime minister, after explaining that his attitude towards Italy had always been friendly, he noted:

"I consider that our national claims on Northern Epirus are in no way incompatible with the vital interests of Italy, which push her to possess the mastery of the entrance to the Adriatic. This mastery is assured to Italy by the possession of Valona and by that of island of Saseno. As regards Valona so long as December 1913 I had assured the Marquis Di San Giuliano that Greece would be perfectly content with an Italian annexation of Valona. Similarly I had never dreamt of raising difficulties as to the occupation of Sasseno, but Northern Epirus is another matter. Its possession is for us an ethical and patriotic question. Delvino, Argyrocastro and Koritsa have always been true centers of Hellenic civilization. When the Conference of London obliged me to withdraw our troops from Northern Epirus, I obeyed without raising objections. When I again sent troops there I did so, taking advantage of the upheaval produced by the war, after having come to an understanding with the Italian government, not directly, it is true, but through the medium of one of the Powers of the Entente. Believe me, I would never have sent Greek troops into Northern Epirus without the consent of Italy, a consent given me, I repeat, by the intervention of a Power very friendly to you. In any case, I declared to all Powers, the Central Empires included, that the occupation of Northern Epirus on the part of our troops did not imply a desire to establish a *fait accompli*, that I respected the decisions of the Conference of London, and the question of Northern Epirus ought to be submitted, together with all the other questions, to the general peace conference"³⁷.

Despite Venizelos' conciliatory attitude the Italians extended their occupation to areas of Epirus which comprised part of the Greek Kingdom, moving as far as Yannina. The Greek government, cut off from the Entente, was obliged to agree to the withdrawal of both the civil and the military authorities from the areas occupied by Italy — though this was not done without protest. The situation grew very serious, especially since the Italian authorities did not confine themselves to the military occupation of these regions, but proceeded

37. FO 371/3156/158242, Memorandum on Greco-Italian relations, Foreign Office, 19 August 1918.

to abrogate all the Greek powers of authority, closing the Greek schools, removing Greek flags and raising Italian ones in their place³⁸.

In Epirus popular feeling was strongly Venizelist, the Italians were extremely unpopular and it was generally thought that their policy aimed at the permanent occupation of Epirus. For this reason there was a very keen desire to see the other Allied Powers represented in the occupation as a guarantee of its temporary character³⁹. The Italian occupation was particularly suspect to the Greeks as tending towards the creation of an autonomous Albania, of which the Greeks would constitute a subject and oppressed element. The occupation of Epirus forced the Greeks to make various manifestations against the Italians. This agitation took an acute form in a proclamation by a committee of representatives of Yannina calling the population to arms to resist the Italian advance:

"... the whole of Epirus is in distress on account of the occupation by the Italians of Yannina its capital, and of other parts of the country. If military reasons render necessary the occupation of Epirus, the people can be reassured only by the presence of detachments of the forces of the Protecting Powers, and of authorities of the Provisional government, in whom alone centres the confidence of the Epirotes. In case our demand meets with no hearing, we decline all responsibility for the possible consequences of the acts of the people of Epirus, who have always been noted for their patriotism, and who, in spite of their desire to avoid all conflict with an allied army, and to create no difficulties to the Protecting Powers, are determined to sacrifice themselves to the last man, rather than accept the occupation of their territory by a forcing nation to which they are not bound by any tie whatsoever"⁴⁰.

Meanwhile, on 3 June 1917, at Argyrocastro, the commander of the Italian army in Albania, general Giacinto Ferrero, proclaimed the unity and independence of Albania under the protection of the Italian king⁴¹. This pro-

38. FO 438/10, no. 80, vice-consul Hole to Elliot, Yannina, 6 June 1917; A.Y.E., 1917, A/5/X, no. 4345, Prefect of Yannina to Foreign Ministry, Arta, 13 June 1917. There are many documents dealing with the persecutions of the Greek population by the Italians in Northern and Southern Epirus.

39. FO 438/10, no. 80, Hole to Elliot, Yannina, 6 June 1917.

40. FO 371/2879, Proclamation of the people of Epirus addressed to the Protecting Powers, Yannina, 5 June 1917.

41. For the text of the proclamation see Swire, *Albania*, pp. 272-273; FO 371/2881/111964, Rodd to Foreign Office, Rome, 4 June 1917.

clamation reflected a change in Italian policy. In 1915, in the Treaty of London, Italy had agreed to share Albania with Serbia and Greece. By 1917, however, she had no intention of doing so; Rome feared the creation of a large Southern Slavic state which might replace Austro-Hungary as her adversary in the Adriatic. Consequently, Italy was determined to put a stop to the Slavic threat by laying claim to as large as possible a part of the Adriatic coast and by creating a large Albanian area between the Slavs and the sea.

This action of the Italian government caused great concern in Greece, as it was considered that Italy was taking advantage of internal Greek strife in order to achieve her old ambitions regarding Epirus. The provisional government at Thessaloniki, expressing its protest to the Protecting Powers noted that the protectorate concerned exclusively Northern Epirus and constituted a flagrant violation of the engagements of Italy towards Greece⁴². Indeed, when in the autumn of 1916 the Italian troops occupied the area, the Italian government gave formal assurances at Athens that the occupation had a purely military character and would not, in any way, modify the international status of Northern Epirus⁴³. While denouncing Ferrero's proclamation the provisional government hoped that "the expected disapprobation of Italian excesses may originate with the Italian nation itself, which, faithful to its liberal traditions, would thus dissociate itself from the responsibility of having desired to become, in its turn, a predatory people"⁴⁴.

At this point, the Serbian government, also, protested against the Italian action and notified the Allied Powers that it favored Albanian autonomy excluding any protectorate in favor of any power⁴⁵. As the Entente Powers had not been consulted beforehand, they did not give any official recognition to the Italian protectorate. Very characteristic is the fact that the Kerensky government, in view of the proclamation about Albania, thought to be desirable that France, Great Britain and Russia should agree to make a collective protest to the Italian government formulated in the following terms:

"That in their opinion the whole Albanian question is a problem which closely affects interest of Albanian nation, of the Allies and of peace.

42. FO 371/2878/117815, Greek Memorandum to Foreign Office, Thessaloniki, 10 June 1917.

43. A.Y.E., 1917, A/5/X, no. 4242, London Embassy to Foreign Ministry, London, 6 June 1917.

44. FO 371/2878/117815, Greek Memorandum to Foreign Office, Thessaloniki, 10 June 1917.

45. A.Y.E., 1917, A/5/X, Text of Serbian protest dated 5 June 1917.

That declaration made by Italy without previous consultation with Great Powers allied to her is considered by latter as a unilateral act, by which France, Great Britain and Russia cannot feel themselves bound.

That in consequence governments of Great Britain, France and Russia must reserve to themselves the right to make a definite pronouncement at a later date when time has come"⁴⁶

Despite Russia's desire for a collective protest at Rome nothing concrete developed as the British government had the opinion that there should be no official action taken but unofficially should demand an explanation from the Italians. Indeed the Italian foreign minister Baron Sidney Sonnino gave definite assurances that the proclamation was to be considered as a military episode and that there was no question of a protectorate in the diplomatic sense but only of the protection or guarantee of Albanian independence, with a reserve as regarded Valona. The main objective of Italy was that no other country should establish itself in Albania⁴⁷.

The main concern of Sonnino was to solidify Italian ambitions in Albania, fearing French intentions in the region of Koritsa⁴⁸ and suspecting France's ulterior motives concerning the interior Greek problem. Italy wanted Greece to remain neutral; if the country did not join the Allies, it would not participate in the postwar territorial settlements and Rome would be free to satisfy its aspirations in both the Balkans and in Asia Minor. Thus, as early as June 1916, Italy warned that she would not tolerate Venizelos' return to power⁴⁹.

The Greek leader, knowing Italy's intentions, was not satisfied with Sonnino's assurances and spoke in very strong terms against the Italian action, emphasizing Greece's rights to protect her national interests⁵⁰. The situation was becoming very tense as Sonnino's attitude and his undisguised support of King Constantine put a great strain on Venizelos, who was anxious for a Greco-Italian understanding. However, after the dethronement of King

46. FO 371/2881/114425, British Embassy (Buchanan) to Foreign Office, Petrograd, 6 June 1917.

47. FO 371/2881/115265 and 121793, Rodd to Foreign Office, Rome, 9 and 14 June 1917 respectively.

48. The Koritsa problem will be discussed further down.

49. FO 371/2620/112035, Rodd to Grey, Rome, 7 June 1916; FO 371/2620/110254, Elliot to Grey, Athens, 7 June 1916.

50. FO 371/2879/124629, Elliot to Foreign Office, Athens, 22 June 1917; A.Y.E., 1917, A/5/X, no. 1176, Genadius (Greek Minister at London) to Balfour (British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs), London, 20 June 1917.

Constantine and the return of Venizelos to power, the situation changed completely. The prime minister could propose to Rome an understanding on all matters pending between the two countries. As no strategic reason appeared to justify the military occupation of Epirus, Venizelos asked for its evacuation and the immediate reinstallation of Greek authorities. If the Italians insisted that occupation of Epirus was about corollary of French advance into Thessaly, he would see that the Italian troops should retire simultaneously with the French⁵¹. Rome accepted the Greek proposal and promised to withdraw its troops beyond the Greek frontier of 1913, with the exception of the triangle enclosing the kaza of Pogoniani, which the Italian military authorities considered necessary to retain for strategic reasons as commanding the road from Santi Quaranta to Koritsa⁵². To the Greeks such a demand was not justified, considering that Greece was an ally of Italy, and was able by her own means to watch over the enclave commanding the road, the use of which would remain at the disposal of the Italians. Venizelos, however, in order to give proof of his goodwill, consented that the enclave should remain in Italian occupation, provided the Greek civil administration were reestablished in it⁵³. Sonnino could not accept the Greek point of view for strategic reasons, but gave assurances that the enclave would be restituted at the end of the war⁵⁴. In these circumstances Venizelos had no alternative but to appeal to the arbitration of the other Allies since he could not settle the problem direct with Italy. On 25-26 July 1917, at an interallied conference in Paris, Lloyd George, the British prime minister and Alexander Ribot, the French prime minister, pressured strongly Sonnino, who agreed that Italy and France should simultaneously evacuate Greek territory in Epirus and Thessaly but emphasizing that Italian occupation of the triangle formed by the Santi Quaranta and Koritsa roads and the Epirus frontier should be provisionally maintained in the interests of security⁵⁵.

Throughout the period of the negotiations with the Italians, Venizelos

51. FO 371/2879/128574, British Embassy to Foreign Office, Athens, 28 June 1917.

52. FO 371/2879/133859, British Embassy to Foreign Office, Athens, 6 July 1917; A.Y.E., 1917, A/5/X, no. 4244, Foreign Ministry to Embassy at Rome, Athens, 14 July 1917.

53. A.Y.E., 1917, A/5/X, no. 4244, Foreign Ministry to Embassy at Rome, Athens, 14 July 1917.

54. *Ibid.*

55. A.Y.E., 1917, A/5/II, Proceedings of Inter-Allied conference, Paris, 25 July 1917; A.Y.E., 1917, A/5/X, no. 2165, Embassy at Paris to Foreign Ministry, Paris, 26 July 1917. For a detailed account of the Proceedings see Yannis Mourellos, *L'intervention de la Grèce dans la Grande Guerre, 1916-1917*, Athens 1983, pp. 217-222.

was greatly concerned with the fact that Rome was arming the Albanian population of Yannina with rifles and bombs. This, in his opinion, was part of a far-reaching plot designed to secure the permanent Italian occupation of the region, as the Italians expected that immediately after their troops had left Yannina the newly-armed Albanian population would rise and proclaim the annexation of that part of Epirus to Albania. Italy, on her part, would use the fighting which would ensue as a justification for a renewed Italian occupation of the area⁵⁶. Venizelos' fears, however, proved unfounded as by the middle of September the Italian army withdrew from southern Epirus with the exception of the Epirot triangle⁵⁷.

In the meantime the situation in Northern Epirus still under Italian occupation had become very critical. The Italian authorities had started a systematic persecution of the Greeks in spite of their abiding and submissive attitude. All Greek schools were closed and replaced by Albano-Italian ones; the Albanian flag, backed by that of Italy, was hoisted, various oppressive measures were adopted against the Greek population, and Greek notables were deported to Italy. The Italians settled Moslems from the north in order to alter the composition of the population and harrassed Greek traders⁵⁸. On the other side, every regard was paid by the Italians to the Albanians with a view to their pronouncing in favor of annexation to Italy. Mixed local administration and judicial council had been established by the occupying forces, which however had taken care to secure an Albanian majority. Moreover, they allowed the Albanians to prosecute for acts said to have been committed prior to the occupation, thus enabling them to extract heavy fines from any well to do Greek⁵⁹.

The occupation of the area caused great anxiety to the deputies from Northern Epirus who protested against the Italian actions and requested the Greek government to take the necessary measures for the protection of the

56. FO 371/2879/164734, Foreign Office to British Embassy at Athens, London, 17 August 1917; A.Y.E., 1917, A/5/X, Prefect of Florina to Foreign Ministry, Florina, 17 August 1917.

57. FO 371/2879/170446, British Embassy to Foreign Office, Athens, 13 September 1917; A.Y.E., 1917, A/5/X, no. 6690, Foreign Ministry to Rome Embassy, Athens, 19 September 1917.

58. FO 371/2623/208318, British Embassy to Foreign Office, Athens, 12 October 1916; A.Y.E., 1916, A/5/VII, no. 10207, Prefect of Yannina to Foreign Ministry, Yannina, 2 January 1917.

59. A.Y.E., 1916, A/5/VIII, no. 10207, Prefect of Yannina to Foreign Ministry, Yannina, 2 January 1917.

Greek population, which had been driven out in order to make it appear that Northern Epirus was part of Moslem Albania⁶⁰. On 31 July 1917 those deputies appealed to Venizelos and asked to take their seat in the Greek Chamber of Deputies. Very illuminating is the memorandum which they addressed to the Chamber:

"While all the nations of the world are fighting beside the powerful states who represent individual independence and the freedom of nations; while Greece has put herself beside the Protecting Powers, her natural allies, Northern Epirus is in peril. Its Hellenic character is called in question as well as the authenticity of its representatives".

The memorandum went on to speak of the diplomatic necessity, which had brought about the creation of the Albanian state at the expense of the inhabitants of Northern Epirus, and, referring to the Protocol of Florence, declared that from all time the Epirotes had preserved their Hellenic character. Consequently, it was impossible for the representatives of Northern Epirus to have been excluded from Chamber, especially as they had sat it in January 1916.

It was argued that the deputies would not disobey the voice of the mother country if she ordered them provisionally to abstain from taking their seat in the Chamber. However, they would never recognize any master or conqueror in Northern Epirus and declared that the population of the region would entangle themselves into a fresh struggle⁶¹.

This memorandum made a profound impression on the entire population of Greece but Venizelos, on 6 August in the Chamber, had regretfully to refuse to admit the deputies from Northern Epirus to its deliberations:

"The moving appeal of the deputies of Northern Epirus not only goes straight to our hearts but also to the soul of the entire nation. Unfortunately the policy of the government which succeeded to the Liberal Cabinet, caused the withdrawal from Northern Epirus of the Greek occupation which the Liberal government in Greece secured during the early months of the war, not only with the consent of one of the groups of the belligerents, and of one member of the opposing group, but with the toleration of the other Powers of which the

60. A.Y.E., 1917, A/5/X, no. 189, Protest of deputies from Northern Epirus, Athens, 25 January 1917.

61. A.Y.E., 1917, A/5/X, no. 5128, Appeal of deputies from Northern Epirus to the Greek Chamber, Athens, 31 July 1917.

latter group was composed. To-day, as unfortunately we possess no international title to Northern Epirus, nor even the military occupation of it, we cannot admit the deputies of Northern Epirus to this Chamber without subverting international law and creating international complications. However, even if we have no international title to Northern Epirus, even if the military occupation which we had obtained at the beginning of the war no longer exists, we have other ties which bind us to this district, unwritten ties it is true, but more powerful than any decision of man and any agreement of nations. Our nation is united to this part of unredeemed Greece not only by the history of thousands of years but by ethnography and by the firm decision of the majority of the population not to cease to be Greeks and not to submit to foreign rule.

If these ties could not be considered sufficient by the old state of affairs, I suppose that now as Greece shares in the great European war, ready to undergo the necessary sacrifices in the common struggle, as at the forthcoming Peace Conference, Greece will not be judged by default but will be represented, it is difficult for us to imagine that our national rights to Northern Epirus will be ignored, since these are in full accord with the aims for which the Allies are carrying on the war"⁶².

In spite the prime minister's optimistic views about a positive solution of the Northern Epirus problem the outlook was not very promising. The Italians were consolidating their position while Venizelos had to follow a passive policy as he had to turn his attention to the organization of the Greek army and its participation in the operations of the Eastern Army in the Macedonian front against the Bulgarians, Austrians and Germans.

In the meantime events in Koritsa, the only region of Northern Epirus not occupied by the Italians, were developing contrary to Greek objectives. After the establishment of the provisional government at Thessaloniki, Venizelist sympathizers at Koritsa expelled the royalist authorities and took control of the city⁶³. At this point the fate of Koritsa greatly concerned Venizelos, who feared an occupation of the town either by the Italians advancing from the south or by Albanian bands coming from the north. The Greek prime minister, anxious to save Koritsa, sent Pericles Argyropoulos as a representa-

62. FO 371/2879/166033, British Embassy to Foreign Office, Athens, 7 August 1917.

63. Pericles Argyropoulos, *Απομνημονεύματα*, Athens 1970, p. 223.

tive of the provisional government in order to prepare the defense and the reorganization of the administration⁶⁴. Meanwhile Albanian bands, which were cooperating with the Austrians, had burned Moschopolis and threatened to do the same to Koritsa. Thus, the above events forced Argyropoulos to ask Venizelos for the despatch of military forces for the defense of the city⁶⁵. The Greek government, however, was in no position to send reinforcements, as general Maurice Sarrail, whose troops of the Eastern Army covered the region of Koritsa, not only opposed the sending of Greek troops but, for purely strategic reasons, the French general demanded that Argyropoulos should leave and surrender the town to a French officer⁶⁶. At this juncture, mid November 1916, Venizelos had no alternative but to comply with the general's demand and to withdraw from Koritsa. The Greek leader desperately needed the French assistance in order to confront the serious problems which had arisen with the Italian government, which not only refused to recognize the provisional government of Venizelos but offered to send to the Macedonian Front a much larger number of troops than that of the Greeks⁶⁷.

The surrender of Koritsa to the French, which had been done for purely strategic purposes, had unforeseen political consequences. On 10 December 1916 the commander of the French troops, colonel Henri Descoins, with the approval of Sarrail proclaimed the independence of the "Republic of Koritsa" under French military protection and he vested authority to an Administrative Council which proceeded to close all Greek schools of the region and to persecute the Greek element of the city⁶⁸. Moreover, the French military authorities established a gendarmerie and a militia which in case of military necessity would be placed under French command. Albanian was declared to be the official language and the flag of the "Republic" was to be the traditional flag of Scenderbeg combined with the French tricolor⁶⁹.

The question is, why did Sarrail sponsor the creation of the "Republic of Koritsa"? It is evident that large-scale disturbances in the area would have

64. *Ibid.*, p. 225.

65. A.Y.E., 1916-1917, A/5/VII, Argyropoulos to Venizelos, Koritsa, 24 October 1916.

66. Argyropoulos, *Απομνημονεύματα*, p. 233.

67. A.Y.E., 1916-1917, A/5/VI, no. 640, Alexandris to Politis, Rome, 14 December 1916.

68. A.Y.E., 1916-1917, A/5/X, no. 324, representative at Premeti to Prefect of Argirocastro, Premeti, 25 April 1917, and memorandum of Constantinos Skenderis, ex-deputy from Koritsa to Foreign Ministry, Athens, 14 May 1917.

69. Henri Descoins, "Six mois d'histoire de l'Albanie (novembre 1916 - mai 1917)", *Revue d'histoire de la guerre mondiale*, 7-8 (1929-30), pp. 327-328.

hindered military operations there, thus French occupation of Koritsa was imperative if only to prevent the Austrians from turning the Eastern Army's left flank and to discourage them from moving into the region. Moreover, with tranquility assured, fewer French troops would be needed there⁷⁰. On the contrary, the presence of the Greek army in Koritsa would create problems for Sarraïl as the Albanian bands would cause disturbances with their attacks against the Greek positions⁷¹, at a time, February 1917, when the left flank of the Eastern Army would undertake operations against the Austrians and the Bulgarians in the region of Koritsa-Monastir⁷².

These arbitrary activities of ~~general~~ Sarraïl were disavowed by the French government and, on 16 February 1918, his successor repealed the independence of Koritsa and reopened the Greek schools. In short, I would like to note that Venizelos from the start of the war tried to prevent a foreign occupation of Northern Epirus. However, in spite of his efforts his plan failed as a result of the internal dissension in Greece which, to a great extent, determined the occupation of the region not by the Greeks but by the Italians and the French.

70. *Ibid.*, pp. 332-334.

71. *Ibid.*, p. 332.

72. Greek General Staff: Directory of Army History, *Ο ελληνικός στρατός κατά τον πρώτο παγκόσμιον πόλεμον, 1914-1918*, Vol. 1, Athens 1958, pp. 227-232.