Reginald Hibbert

Albania's emergence onto the Balkan scene

For many centuries, until 1912, the Albanians were a nation without a state. They achieved statehood long after all their neighbours had done so. The League of Prizren put forward claims on behalf of the Albanian nation in 1878; but it was only after the Balkan wars in 1912/13 that their long subjection to successive empires —Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman— was brought to an end. Even then, their new state had only a precarious existence. It was overrun by foreign armies in the first world war. After being reconstituted in 1920, it fell under Italian domination in the interwar period and then under Italian and German occupation in the second world war. From that it emerged to spend nearly half a century under a communist dictatorship, increasingly cut off from the rest of the world. At the most, there have been only twenty years in which Albania can be said to have enjoyed an approximately normal, independent relationship with its neighbours, with the wider international community and with all the leading world powers.

Albania's situation has been as precarious internally as externally. The mountainous Gheg north differs markedly in social and cultural organisation from the Tosk south. Three religious faiths —Moslem, Orthodox and Catholic— co-exist in a small geographical space. In the south an ethnic Greek minority is intermingled with an ethnic Albanian population. In the early 20's Fan Noli tried to introduce land reform and failed. After him Ahmed Zogu found himself obliged to look abroad for the resources with which to begin to modernise the country and finished by selling it out to Italy. Class divisions between propertied families and peasantry were very evident until the communist regime levelled everyone to depths of poverty and deprivation after 1945.

Britain maintained a certain interest in pre-war Albania, but it was marginal compared with Britain's interest, as a Mediterranean power, in Greece. When Italy occupied Albania in 1939, the little country's

extinction was tacitly accepted by the international community. During the early years of the second world war, the British Foreign Office (and Britain was the main opinion-former on Albania among the western allies at that time) was inclined to doubt whether Albania would or could be revived as a viable independent state at the end of the war.

From the point of view of the Albanians themselves, the Albanian state failed from the beginning to satisfy their national ambitions. The Great Powers assigned the province of Kosovo to Serbia in 1913, and there it has remained ever since. Kosovo is predominantly inhabited by Albanians (over 90%). When the Albanian-populated western areas of Macedonia* (Dibra, Gostivar, Tetovo, Kićevo) and the Albanian-populated borderland of Montenegro are added to Kosovo, it has to be acknowledged that half the Albanian nation has been left out of the Albanian state. This has distorted Albania's relationship with Yugoslavia (Serbia) throughout its short existence. Albanians have had dreams of a Greater Albania. Serbs (Yugoslavs) have dreamed of absorbing north Albania and joining it to Kosovo, while south Albania would be left to Greece.

Albania's relationship with Greece has not played as important a role in Albania's modern history as the relationship with Yugoslavia, although disputes over northern Epirus have tended to attract more international attention than disputes over Kosovo or western Macedonia. Part of the reason for this is that, after Greece had played a brave part in the early stage of the second world war by defeating the Italians and driving them out of southern Albania, Greece itself was overwhelmed by the German invasion and made virtually no further contribution to the war in Albania. Janina served as a centre from which German forces struck into south Albania, but the Greek resistance forces did not have a missionary zeal towards Albania comparable to that of the Yugoslavs, which was triggered by the latter's preoccupations in Kosovo and Macedonia. Greece has maintained a keen interest in the Greek minority in southern Albania. This has sometimes been expressed in terms of territorial claim; but when Albania survived the war as an unitary state the pre-war frontier was internationally re-affirmed, and

* *Editorial Board:* The terms *Macedonia* and *western Macedonia*, as used in this study, do not reflect the views of this periodical.

disputes between Greece and Albania have since stayed in the realm of minority rights, avoiding the dangerous ground of irredentism.

The questions of Kosovo and western Macedonia played an insidious part in the second world war. The Italians and Germans dismembered Yugoslavia and gave the coveted territories to Albania, so that the dream of a Greater Albania was fleetingly realised. This tended to disarm nationalist resistance in Albania to Italy and Germany. And the nationalist elements were further discouraged from "resisting" when the Yugoslav Communist Party (Y.C.P.) helped to create an Albanian Communist Party (A.C.P.) in 1942. Thereafter the nationalists were inclined to identify "Slav communism" rather than Nazi Germany as the enemy of Albania, whether Greater or Smaller.

Tito and his colleagues thought that an Albanian Communist Party would be helpful in organising a resistance movement among the Albanians of Kosovo. Svetozar Vukmanović-Tempo in Macedonia tried for a time in 1943 to create a Balkan general staff which would bring the communist-led resistance forces in Albania and Greece under Yugoslav leadership. He was frustrated by Greek mistrust of his motives in respect of Macedonia and also by the fact that E.A.M. in Greece had a different concept of resistance from that favoured by the Yugoslavs. Enver Hoxha and his colleagues in the A.C.P. were more amenable. They hoped that co-operation with the Y.C.P. in Kosovo and western Macedonia might be rewarded by self-determination for the Albanian populations after the war. In the event, neither the Y.C.P.'s ambition to raise an effective resistance movement in Kosovo nor the A.C.P.'s hopes for self-determination there were realised. Kosovo remained a Serb appanage. Kosovo and western Macedonia were from the start a cause of uneasiness in relations between the A.C.P. and Y.C.P. The A.C.P. as the junior partner had to conform to the Y.C.P.'s "force majeure", but Enver Hoxha became resistant to "diktats" from the Y.C.P. The A.C.P. and Y.C.P. were not the only ones to encounter frustration over Kosovo. The Quisling rulers of occupied Greater Albania and the nationalist elements who neither collaborated nor resisted hoped that the western allies would rescue their Greater Albania from dismemberment at the end of the war and form a front against "Slav communism": they too were disappointed.

Albania's post-war fate was largely determined by the fledgling

Albanian Communist Party's success in making itself the motor of the National Liberation Movement (L.N.C.). It seized the initiative at the Peza Conference in September 1942, and the L.N.C. became a "front" organisation. Until August 1943 it looked as though a degree of cooperation between the L.N.C. and the Balli Kombëtar (National Union - the nationalist riposte to the L.N.C.) might be possible. However, a conference between the two organisations at Mukjë in that nonth led to a definitive split, mainly because the Yugoslav "godfathers" of the Albanian Communist Party would not permit the latter to enter into an agreement which would have envisaged conservation of the Greater Albania, i.e., definitive loss of Kosovo by Serbia.

In the following month, September, the collapse of Italy and the German take-over of Albania precipitated a new situation. Albania's war was not over, as everyone had hoped. It became clear that the western allies' war plans and resources were not going to stretch to a landing of forces in Albania, as everyone had also hoped. The Albanian people were therefore faced with a choice between resisting the German occupiers or collaborating with them. For their part, the Germans set out to destroy the L.N.C., which constituted a threat to their communications and their grip on the Adriatic coast. The B.K. seconded the German attack. The Germans pulled their punches, being interested only in holding the roads and towns and not in occupying the mountain fastnesses. This enabled the L.N.C. to survive, and the B.K. was discredited. In the six months between the spring and autumn of 1944 the Albanian National Liberation Army (A.N.L.A.) enjoyed a surge of popular support. It parried a final German offensive and pressed on to victory in every part of the country. A provisional government set up at Përmet in May was declared permanent at Berat in October.

Albania's old social structure and undeveloped economy made it ripe for some sort of revolution at the time of the war, but not necessarily for a communist revolution. However, in 1945 a communist revolution was the only one on offer. Enver Hoxha came to power on the wave of the National Liberation Movement and the guns of the National Liberation Army. He immediately launched a programme of social and economic engineering and transformation enforced by a draconian dictatorship. He thereby destroyed the expectations of most of those who had flocked to the L.N.C. and the A.N.L.A. in 1944.

Hoxha's grip on Albania in 1945 and 1946 was firm and comprehensive. Albania's re-emergence as an independent state was therefore tacitly accepted by the allied powers. Albania's pre-war frontiers were not modified. However, Hoxha's policies rapidly alienated the western allies, Britain and the United States. The Soviet Union showed little interest in Albania in the immediate post-war period, being more concerned to penetrate and influence Tito's Yugoslavia. Albania was left to the patronage of Yugoslavia and became the latter's partner in abetting the communist side in the Greek civil war. This made it even more of an outcast state in western estimation. The mining of two British warships in the Corfu Channel completed the breach with the west. Hoxha and his colleagues in the leadership of the Albanian Communist Party were vociferous about Albania's independence, but they had in effect inflicted on themselves and their country the fate of being a satellite of Tito's Yugoslavia. There had, however, been tensions in the relationship from the beginning because of the Kosovo question, and it seemed likely that these would have to be resolved in the end by the elimination of Hoxha. A leadership more amenable to Yugoslav wishes (Koci Xoxe) could then be installed in Tirana, leading eventually to the assimilation of Albania as a republic in the Yugoslav Federation, incorporating Kosovo or sharing Kosovo with the Serbian republic.

Albania's independence and Enver Hoxha's career were saved in 1948 by Stalin's breach with Tito. Hoxha sided with Stalin and purged the comrades who had been preparing to purge him. Albania became a satellite of the Soviet Union, while being saved from the danger of contiguity with the Soviet Bloc by, ironically, the physical barrier of Yugoslavia. From this point onwards, Albania's survival as a state became more assured.

Since the collapse of the communist régime in Albania it has been politically incorrect to attribute any virtue to Enver Hoxha. His methods exacted a heavy toll from the Albanian people. Nevertheless his intransigence and rigour played an important part in enabling Albania to emerge territorially unscathed from the war and to survive Yugoslavia's embrace. Hoxha's Albania was no longer a potentially expendable state.

The reconciliation between Stalin's successors and Tito's towards the end of the 50's and the replacement of "cults of personality" by

"collective leadership" in the Soviet Bloc caused the spectre of expendability to appear once more; but it was only the spectre. Hoxha did not intend to be sacrificed on the altar of renewed Soviet-Yugoslav amity, and so his government allowed its short-lived Soviet connection to be broken. It turned instead to a more distant relationship with communist China. This too faded after a few years when China emerged from its isolation and began to enter into more normal relationships with other great powers. Hoxha's Albania then fell back on defiant isolation; and the Albanian people, in their extreme penury, were made to enact the pathetic charade of a "people's" defence against all comers by constructing the thousands of useless concrete bunkers which litter every corner of the country to this day.

The fact remains that Albania survived and its existence today is unquestioned. It survived the predatory policies of Italy, Germany and Yugoslavia, the non-committal attitudes of the wartime allies, the territorial ambitions of Greece, the dangerous embrace of the Soviet Union and the still more dangerous repudiation by it, the vagaries of reliance on China and the risks of total isolation. It is far from certain that Albania would have survived with its territory intact if the L.N.C. had not started the country on its modern course by mounting the wartime resistance. Only an ivnasion or occupation by western allied forces could have saved it from communism, and from 1943 onwards there was no possibility of such an invasion or occupation occurring. At least the communist party which assumed the government of Albania was an Albanian communist party, and it kept at bay other more powerful communist powers which would willingly have absorbed or otherwise put an end to Albania's existence. When the Soviet Union, the Soviet Bloc and the European communist governments collapsed, Albania was firmly established and, even if in dire straits, free to pursue its independent life. Enver Hoxha and his colleagues are rightly condemned for enslaving Albania: they should be given credit for their part in Albania's endurance and survival.

For Albania, as for the rest of Europe, the upheaval of the second world war did not end until about 1990, although wartime hostilities ended in Albania in 1944. With the collapse of the communist system, Albania is at last able to emerge as an autonomous player on the European scene. The other countries of Europe have been slow to

recognise the significance of this. The effect of Albania's emergence is that Kosovo and Western Macedonia have become important issues of Balkan diplomacy. It is, for example, difficult to conceive of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) surviving without its western regions, where Albanians predominate; and yet those Albanians are not being given either a share in the running of the state proportionate to their numbers or an adequate degree of self-rule. Albania cannot be expected to be indifferent to the fate of these Albanians. A dangerous cause of friction is opening which ought to be of concern to all those external powers which regard the FYROM's peaceful survival as essential if hostilities between FYROM's several neighbours are to be avoided. The rest of Europe cannot afford to ignore the FYROM Albanians' case for an improved régime. The dangers in Kosovo are even greater. There the Albanian population are forced to live like inhabitants of an occupied country, administered as a subject race and offered a choice between Serbianisation or "voluntary" exile. The process of quiet ethnic cleansing which seems to be the underlying Serb aim in Kosovo is building an explosive force which could erupt into fighting and overt ethnic cleansing of the sort experienced in Bosnia. Here, even more than in Macedonia, Albania could not fail to support the Albanian population, with probably disastrous consequences for every state in the southern Balkans. The rest of Europe cannot afford to ignore the existence of the Kosovo problem as it has ignored it in the past. The drive for a Greater Serbia began in Kosovo and will have to be ended there in some way, if there is to be peace in the Balkans. All these complexities arise from Albania's successful survival as a state and emergence as a player on the European scene.

Albania is at present very weak. It would be foolish of others to treat her as negligible for that reason. It is regrettable that Kosovo was left out of the Dayton, Ohio, agreements. The western powers, especially Britain, which give Tirana many times less weight than Belgrade are making a mistake. Albania is there to stay. Greater priority needs to be given to helping and encouraging her to achieve stability over the next decade and to pressing her neighbours to develop better relations with her. As far as Greece is concerned, this requires clear re-affirmation of the permanence of the existing frontier. As far as FYROM is concerned, it means better respect for the human and minority rights of the

Albanian minority (which is a majority in the western regions). As far as Kosovo is concerned, it means that a Dayton-like effort needs to be made by external powers to find the beginnings of compromise between the total Serb refusal of autonomy for Kosovo and the total insistence of the Albanian Kosovars on independence.

In sum, the message to Balkan and western European governments and to the United States and Russia needs to be —give higher priority to the problems posed by Albania's emergence into the community of European states: help Albania to stabilise itself economically and politically: seek a better accommodation for the Albanian nation through the development of sound human and minority rights régimes on both sides of existing borders, however arbitrary these may be thought to be as a result of the vicissitudes of Balkan history. Without greater attention to the imperatives of Albania's existence there can hardly be progress towards peaceful settlements in the Balkans.