

Italian Invasion of South Albania 1914-1920

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Abstract: *During WWI, the region of South Albania, was in a bad condition economically, politically and socially. Moreover in November 1914, this region was invaded by the Italians. This invasion worsened the situation, despite the fact that initially the inhabitants were under the impression that the Italians helped them to get rid of the Greek invaders. But it did not take long before the relations between the inhabitants and the new invaders aggravated. However, faced with this situation the Albanian patriots started to organize and act swiftly. There were strong reactions on their part especially concerning the issue of re-opening Albanian schools. Because of their efforts in 1917, was founded an organisation called "The Spears of Civilisation". This same organisation was re-organized and took the name "The National Defence" on 10 march 1920, under the auspices of Osman Haxhiu. This Committee unanimously decided that the issue of the liberation of the Albanian territories from the Italian invader could be solved only in one way, through the use of weapons.*

Keywords: Labëri, Italian, committee, organisation, lab.

1. Introduction

World War the First found South Albania extremely devastated economically. Meanwhile the Turhan Pasha government, who came into power together with Prince Vid, was completely incapable of managing this country aggravated situation. The Albanian government internal situation was further aggravated within the beginning of this war. The outburst of the war put an end to the protection that the Greatest Powers warranted the Albanian government through the law status approved by the Ambassadors Conference of London. As a result of such policies our country turned into a battle field for the fighting armies. At this point the neighbouring countries were each claiming the greatest part of Albanian territory. Their claims questioned the existence of the Albanians who were in front of two possible alternatives: first, to accept the country being chopped into many pieces or to gather forces in order to face the coming danger. In 29th of November 1914, Italians pretending they were protecting Albanian territories from the Greek invasion, by sending many naval units in the Bay of Vlore and invaded it. Meanwhile the Powers of Atalanta, signed with Italy on 26th of April 1915 the hidden Treaty of London, which provided Italy many territories in the South Albania including Vlore, certain regions of Tepelene, Kurvelesh ending in Himare.

At the very beginning Italians followed a peaceful policy and were targeted as the ones who saved that region from the Greek armies. So doing they were carefully hiding their real intentions which aimed at reviving their territorial invasion. As so Ferrero lieutenant raised in June the 3rd the Albanian flag in Gjirokaster beside the Italian one declaring the independence of Albania under the protectorate of Italian (Memushaj, Rami, vep. e cit. fq. 395) reign. Such a declaration of Albanian territories independence under the Italian reign protectorate (Duka, Valentina, vep. e cit. 2007, fq. 95) was read in front of Albanians. But this declaration of independence was in fact denying the Albanians independence as Albania was under the Italian protectorate. They gradually were beginning to implement certain

colonization strategies in the Bay of Vlore. Furthermore they banned the raise of Albanian flag in Vlore and Gjirokaster and officially announced that the administration of Vlore would be Italian. They, in the occupied lands, set up elementary schools teaching in Italian only. The army and police forces were not ruled by the Albanians. Even the Albanian official offices took Italian names. In a few words, the Albanian administration was roughly eliminated and the number of the Albanians in the administrative offices was drastically decreasing, and those who were still serving were assigned the lowest positions.

Meanwhile the Albanian patriots woke up and they reacted immediately. In 1916-1917, they begun to set up and re-open Albanian elementary schools which were closed during the Greek invasion. As we have stated above the Italians forcefully engaged an Italian teacher which was also the one in charge of the school. He had to carefully control the teaching and educational efforts of the Albanian teachers.

The first to undergo this endangered situation were Vlore's inhabitants. In 1917, Halim Xhelo, who was the secretary of the Mesaplikut (Gaçe, Bardhosh. Sali Hallkondi dhe Historia e Shqipërisë së Re, Tiranë: TOENA, 2004, fq. 229) region, held in Brataj village, a reunion where participated all the Albanian teachers of the Bay of Vlore. In this reunion was taken the decision of setting up the organization named as "Shtizat e Qytetërimit" (Po aty, fq. 232). In fact its real name was "Mbrotjtja Kombëtare" (National Protection), but for camouflage purposes it took the above name. The head of this organization was chosen Halim Xhelo (Memushaj, Rami, vep. e cit. fq. 408). This organization members were not only the teachers but also this region patriots.

What this organization aimed at was spreading the idea of a general uprising, which was considered as the only possibility of nation salvation. This organisation in order to get into contact with the other Labëri villages set up a committee in the region of Mesaplik. In accordance with the decisions taken in Mesaplik both these patriots set up another second committee in the village of Upper Kurvelesh known as Nivice. In this committee took part representatives

and patriots from all the Kurvelesh villages. A. Çiraku related to this committee cited " When both, I and Halil, went to Nivice, we gathered all this region patriots. The first to hold the speech was Halim Xhelua who stated that Vlora is ready to fight Italians, which lately have started to arrest our best patriots. So we have to come together to fight an enemy which in fact is rapidly invading other Albanian territories. Let's come together and let's fight side by side with Vlora's inhabitants. Kurvelesh approved our proposal. In Nivice and Gjirokaster were taken written and signed decisions from all the participants in that committee (AIH: Dosja A-VII-105: *Kujtime nga Abdurrahman Çiraku* fl. 2 dhe 3)

So in February 1919, in Tepelene was held a reunion, in which took part a considerable number of patriots from the diverse regions of Laberi. The ones at the centre of this reunion were: Qazim Koculi, Haxhi e Daut Shehu, Baba Ahmet Turani, Sulo Lekdushi, Myslim Hajno, Riza Runa etc. The decision taken in this reunion was that of setting up a committee in order to manage the armed resistance (*Arkivi i Muzeut Historik Tepelenë*). Furthermore this reunion urged the armed groups of villagers who escaped their villages to frequently attack the Italian armies.

In 1919 Italians started to terrorize the Albanian civilians which deteriorated the situation and further deepened the contradictory gap between the invaders and inhabitants. In February 1919 Italian killed one of the patriots from Nivice who was also this region teacher, Shuko Dalipi. They executed him nearby Salari village (Ceka, Irfan, vep. e cit. fq. 215). The renegades who executed him were paid by Myfit bej Libohova, who was also the Minister of Justice of that time. This murder was in complete collaboration with the Italians and was committed for political reasons. Afterword, with the help of their agents, they went on killing and executing other Albanian patriots who with their political activities were badly discriminating the authority of the Italian invasion. At the same time it burst out the armed revolt headed by the Sihat Nivica (Memushaj, Rami, vep. e cit. fq. 409). In this revolt were killed an Italian marshal and lieutenant. After the revolt the Kurvelesh villages offered shelter for the Albanian patriot Sihat Nivica and his friends.

In 28th of November, in the memory of the Albania Independence the Laberi people, greeted it with powerful anti-Italian manifestations. In that day in Vlora was held an anti-Italian demonstration which ended up in aggressive fighting with Italian forces. Meanwhile the teachers in all this villages organised protests in the memory of the independence day. In these peaceful protests the Albanian people expressed their deep anger toward the invaders.

To face the deteriorated situation the Albanian patriots thought that it was the right time to have another Albanian reunion like that of Albanian Reunion of Prizren. But beforehand they proposed to have a national congress in Lushnja. It was also proposed 21st of January 1920 for this congress to be held. In this congress were going to take part representatives from all the country regions. Italians who set up the Government of Durres were shocked when they become familiar with such an information because this

congress would put an end to this government and instead would set up a new one which will demand the liberty of the invaded areas.

As so they were totally engaged to prevent the organisation of this congress, by killing the real ones in charge of such a congress. In 10th of January they killed in Shkodra the well-known patriot Sali Nivica, who was also a member of the Committee "Mbrotjtja Kombëtare e Kosovës" (Kosovo National Protection) and the head of the newspaper "Populli" (People). Sali Nivica, was the one to propose the Congress of Lushnjë. This murder committed by a paid renegade, aimed at frightening the other members of the committee to put an end to their attempts in organizing the congress. Considering all the precaution taken by the Durres Government and Italian invaders they couldn't prevent this congress. All they reached was a delay in this congress planned opening day which was 28th of January. This congress ended in 31st of January. In this Congress were taken the most important decisions one of which was the set up of a new Albanian government headed by Sulejman Delvina (Çami, Muin, *Kongresi i Lushnjës dhe pushtuesit italianë*. Studime Historike, Tiranë: 1980 nr. 3. fq. 87). Meanwhile this congress decided that in case Durres government would not recognize the authority of the new Albanian government then this second government headquarter would be in Tirana, which would be the capital of Albania as well.

The new government, headed by a high class diplomat and wise politician such as Sulejman Delvina, who rightfully estimated the aggravated situation and determined that the immediate step taken by his government was to free the occupied territories. In order to fulfil such a duty he supported the idea of organizing an anti-Italian armed uprising. The successful organization of this uprising was highly depending in the fighting qualities of the inhabitants of the Laberi region, with which Sulejman Delvina was quite familiar. At the time being Laberi regions were openly challenging the invaders as there were witnessed many incidents with Italians. As so it was strongly believed that if Laberi inhabitants were organised and ready for this uprising the Albanian national issue will end in their favour. (Poaty).

Meanwhile in the city of Vlora was set up in September 1919 "The Committee of Vlora" headed by Hamza Isai. In 10th of March 1920 this committee was re-organized and renamed "National Protection" under the direction of Osman Haxhiu. (Gaçe, Bardhosh, vep. e cit. fq. 234). This committee unanimously decided that there was one and only one way to achieve the freedom of Albanian territories, which was that of armed fighting. For this decision to be executed the committee worked hard in organizing the explosion of a general uprising. Such a duty will have to be realised by setting into motion all this committee members organizing capacities. As so the members of the committee were immediately spread in the villages of Vlora, Tepelena and Kurvelesh. At the same time in both Tepelene and Kurvelesh were operating their regional committees. They were as well engaged in the organization of the general uprising.

As a result of such chilling, patriotic and great efforts spent with the Albanian humble villagers in May 1920 throughout Albania were held a considerable number of popular committees. Their aim was to connect villages with each other, to stimulate the organization of armed groups which would fight till their last drop of blood is shed for the freedom of their invaded territories. They gave their word to throw away their guns only when the last one of Italians will be gone. The organization of these village committees which highly help the practical organization of the armed actions. Each village had its fighting group, each male capable of handling a gun was accepted as a member of this armed group. These committees took all necessary precautions to arm their male fighters by giving up their wealthy possessions. During April-May 1920 in all villages of Laberi were held male committees (Such committees were held in Drashovicë, Progonat, Nivicë, Dhëmbjan, Lepenicë, Vajzë, Tragjas, Dukat, Salari, Turan and everywhere. The existence of these committees were documented in the historical documents of these villages and the memories of the villagers.). These committees rejuvenated the old self-governing traditions and as so they were turned into very important decision-taking governing mechanisms. In all the historical document of Laberi regions one can get a lot of information concerning the way these committees worked and their decisions taken.

One of these committees was that held in the Teqe of Turan village. The members of these committee were from all the villages of Kurvelesh and the region of Lope. These committee decided to immediately take all the necessary precautions for the explosion of the uprising (*Muzeu Historik i rrethit Tepelenë*). In response to this decision in the Village of Progonat, its inhabitants forcefully attacked and expelled the Italian Fighting post. Instead they build up the new Albanian Kurvelesh Prefecture with its centre in Progonat village. Qazim Guga was assigned the duty of the secretary and Rusho Buxha (*Muzeu Historik i rrethit Tepelenë*) was assigned the duty of Chief of Policy. These administrative bodies immediately were under the jurisdiction of Sulejman Pasha government.

For the time being the relations between Italians and Albanians were aggravated to the point that the armed conflict between both parts was difficult to avoid. The aggravated situation was further stimulated when the Albanian government wanted to take control of the new administrative headquarters in the city of Tepelena. For this purpose Italians forbade the Albanian government authorities to enter Tepelena city and in May 17th they started firing guns against Albanian government representatives and volunteering forces trying to get control of Tepelena. Albanian volunteers withdrew toward Kurvelesh and at the same time informed Father Ahmet Turanin, member of the Tepelena committee who had the duty to inform the representatives of Vlora concerning their reunion in Kurvelesh.

Meanwhile the situation has deteriorated even in Vlora. Italians arrested the members of the committee, whereas all the patriots responded to the call of Osman Haxhi, leader of the committee, to escape the city and hide in the villages

along the river. " In 24th of May all the members that were sheltered in the house of Zace Xhelo were informed about a reunion. There was decided the meeting to be held in the Ismail Qemali Ash trees in Mesaplik." (Gaçe, Bardhosh, *Osman Haxhiu*, Tiranë: Naim Frashëri, 2001, fq. 103). In this committee held the speech a considerable number of patriots from Vlora and its regions. The most impressive speeches were that of Arif Mëhilli, Toto Hosi, Sali Vranishti, Halim Xhelua and Qazim Kokoshi. They compiled a notice by means of which they demanded all the inhabitants of Kurvelesh and Mesaplik to immediately organize a popular uprising. At the same time it was decided that in May 29th in Barçalla, Dukat be held an extended reunion where were invited representatives from all the invaded regions.

Some of the members of the committee were given the responsibility to physically get into contact with the heads of this occupied regions and inform them concerning the extended reunion. Such a duty was assigned to H. Xhelua, A. Çiraku, K. Mazja ect. As soon as these delegates entered Nivice, Tepelena they organized a committee in the house of Sinan Muço where were present Father Ahmet Turani, Selam Musai, Gani Alikua and two other representatives from every Kurvelesh Village (Memushaj, Rami, vep e cit. fq. 411). They talked about the precaution to be taken for the uprising organization and at the same time the organization in each village of the armed groups. The same day Italians were exiled from the Nivica village where they waved the Albanian flag. Concerning the representatives that took part in this committee it was judged that it was lower than expected and they proposed to hold another extended committee. The next committee was going to be held in Gusmar as this village was in the middle of Kurvelesh. The exact place where the committee was going to take place will be the Tahire Ashes (Gazeta *Drita*, Gjirokastër: 9 qershor, nr. 10, 1920). The committee took place in May 27th, 1920. In this committee the participation was considerable and there were present nearly all representatives from Kurvelesh and Tepelena villages.

The main committee giving the ultimate hand to the preparations of the uprising was the committee of Barçalla. This committee was gathered in 29th of May 1920 in Barçalla, nearby Dukat village. As it has been stated above the committee meetings calling procedures were carefully taken by the "Komiteti i Mbrojtjes Kombëtare" (Committee of National Protection) of Vlora. There were more than two hundred delegates in this great popular manifestation, which were from all the Laberi villages (Po aty, 412).

The Barçalla committee unanimously approved the proposal of the Vlora committee to begin the uprising. Meanwhile all the representatives solemnly vowed in front of the national flag "that with or without the assistance or support of other Albanian regions, they will fight till they reach the Albanian reunion. In case we do not reach such an ideal we are ready to die with the guns in our hands so that the civilized world will get to know that Albanians are willing to give their life for their freedom and when they decide so there is no army to frighten them." (¹ Halim, Xhelo, *Vlora më 1920*, Gazeta, *Politika*, nr. 25, datë 3 shtator, 1924).

The Barcalla committee decided to set up the "Keshillin Kombetar" (National Council) made up of 30 members which had to run and coordinate all military operations of the Laberi villages armed groups. Whereas within this Council was set up the "Komiteti i ri Kombëtar" (New National Committee), responsible in running and organizing the general uprising. This committee head was chosen Osman Haxhi. This committee chose a number of other organizing boards responsible for the managing of the military operations. In the previous tradition of Laberi such organizing boards were unknown which testifies that at that time Labs traditional rights were evolving aiming at heralding the economical and social changes as well as the evolution in fighting techniques of modern times. The committee took into great consideration certain organizing issues concerning the general uprising. In this framework there were assigned Lieutenant and vice/lieutenant of each village armed groups according to the proposals made by each representative of these villages. It was also decided that all the voluntarily armed forces should be gathered in June the 2nd in Beu village. The Barcalla committee was too important for the Laberi region demonstrating a devoted willingness in not accepting invaders in their territories. On the other hand, judging from how this committee worked, it was once again proved that their customarily rights, better saying the Laberi Customs was rigorously respected. What is most important this region knew how to be self-governed and to take decisions for the best of their country destiny.