

British Diplomacy on Albania during the First World War

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Abstract:

Great Britain, which at the Conference of Ambassadors in London had played a crucial role in achieving the compromise between Great Powers on the issue of Albania and being as one of the guarantee Powers of its independence, on the eve and during the First World War was very much interested in the situation in Albania. However, during the reign of Prince Wied, Great Britain, as a Power which did not have direct interest in Albania, had chosen not to intervene in the internal issue of Albania, whereas during the First World War it had a completely different policy in relation to Albania, coming to the position of making compromises at the expense of Albanian territories because of the war developments. In this context, it made concessions to Italy, Greece, Serbia and to a certain degree to Montenegro, despite the fact that since the beginning of the First World War it had voiced the support for the principle of nationality. In this paper, based mainly on British unpublished and published sources and on a relevant bibliography, all these compromises, the consideration of the possibility by the British Government to provide support from Albanians and the geo-strategic importance of Albania for Entente Powers at the end of the First World War from the British diplomacy viewpoint shall be discussed.

Key words: Great Britain, Albania, World War I, British Adriatic Mission, Secret Pact of London.

During the First World War, British statesmen expressed the support for the principle of nationality and the obligation of the United Kingdom for the protection of the nations of Europe, and very often special emphasis in their speeches was dedicated to small nations, and their protection was presented as one of the main objectives of the war of British Government. Thus, on 4 September 1914, British Prime Minister H. H. Asquith and Bonar Law spoke of Germany's attack on the nations of Europe and the obligation of Great Britain to defend them (Hanak 1962, 57). Asquith also in November of the year 1917, when he announced the British war aims, emphasized the great importance of the issue of the rights of smaller nationalities of Europe. Lloyd George also very often expressed that Great Britain was fighting on behalf of the small nations (Ibid., 58). At the beginning of the year 1918 he pointed out as follows: “[...] We must know what is meant for equality of right among nations, small as well as great, is one of the fundamental issues this country and her Allies are fighting to establish in this war [...]”.(British War Aims: Statement by the Right Honourable David Lloyd George, 6)

However, during the First World War Great Britain could not abide by such principles when it came to Albania and Albanians. So, Albania would become part of different compromises in the diplomatic circuits of Entente. In this view, it should be noted the project of Entente Powers to re-establish the Balkan League of 1912, according to which Albania was to be divided between Serbia and Greece, as a compensation, so that the two Balkan states make concessions to Bulgaria (Abbott 1922, 19).

Compromises of Great Powers to the detriment of Albanians began by allowing the "provisional" invasion of Southern Albania by Greece. Given the situation created in Albania after the beginning of the First World War, Greece had taken the advantage to meet its ambition in Southern Albania stating that its only objective in Albania was to save the

population there. In this context, the Secretary General of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Greece, Monsieur Politis, told to the British Minister in Athens, Sir F. Elliot, that in Northern Epirus, as he was referring to Southern Albania, there was a chaos and anarchy, and under such circumstances a couple of Greek regiments would restore order there. According to Politis, it was the Italian Government that rejected this plan, and as a consequence during the winter not only the misery of all those who were expelled from their homes, but also the hatred between Mussulman and Christian population, who should live in peace with each other would prevail (The National Archives of the UK (TNA): FO 371/1889, pp 213-214; Gurakuqi 2011, 224). In this matter, Sir Edward Grey had given instructions to Sir R. Rodd, to enquire regarding the attitude of Italian Government about an eventual understanding with Athens (TNA: FO 371/1889, p 218). Italian Government replied that they had no opposition to Greece taking the proper measures to maintain order in Argyrocastro (Gjirokastër), as long as the London Conference decisions would not be violated (TNA: FO 421/294, p 51). Immediately, on 18 October 1914, Sir Edward Grey had given instruction to Sir F. Elliot to inform Greek Government on Italian stance, indicating that it would then be able to restore order in Northern Epirus, as he was referring to Southern Albania (TNA: FO 421/294, p 51*). On 24 October, through a circular telegram, the Greek Government informed the Great Powers that they were sending provisionally the Greek forces in Epirus (Southern Albania) “[...] to restore order and to allow refugees to return home [...]” (TNA: FO 421/294, p 53). On 29 October 1914 Greece was granted the permission by the Entente Powers for the provisional occupation of Southern Albania, but it would withdraw when the Entente Powers decided for this. This occupation was also accepted by Germany and Austro-Hungary, provided that it would not be against the decisions of the Conference of Ambassadors in London. Only two days later, Greek army occupied cities of Tepelenë,

Sarandë, Korçë, Përmet and Gjirokastër (Pearson 2004, 83; Gurakuqi 2011, 225-226).

As it appears, Great Britain in the course of its efforts to gain the support of Greece in the war, not only allowed this occupation but had also mediated to Italy so that the latter would come to an understanding with Greece.

The Great Powers accepted the temporary occupation of Southern Albania under the condition that this would not fall in contradiction with the decisions of the Conference of Ambassadors in London, but despite this, the Entente Powers continued to exploit the Southern Albania to encourage Greece and Italy as well, to enter in the war on their side. In November 1914, England, France, and Russia had offered Greece the Southern Albania with the exception of Valona, if it joined them in the war (Cocks 1918, 38; Stickney 1998, 100; Swire 2005, 202-203; Pearson 2004, 83-84). On 5 December also, these Powers offered to Greece, in exchange of its support, Southern Albania with the exception of Valona, an offer that was rejected by Venizelos (Guy 2012, 135).

Immediately after the Greek occupation of Southern Albania, Saseno (Sazan) and Valona (Vlorë) were occupied by Italy, a Power which continued to be neutral. The extremely favourable geo-strategic position of these places had influenced that Italy, prior to the occupation, require both warring parties to approve it (Marjanović 1962, 61-62). The Central Powers accepted the Italian project, although Austria had expressed strong reservations against it. On the other hand, Entente was ready to approve occupation of Valona by Italy, but it opposed this to be approved also by the Central Powers. Particularly the Russian Minister Sazonov was categorical stating that Russia and its two Allies would allow Valona to be taken by Italy provided that the latter acted against Austria. Italian Prime Minister Salandra had opposed Sazonov's stance, estimating that Great Britain would not oppose strengthening of Italy in the Balkans since this would serve as a counterpoise to

Slavdom there. Thus, Salandra, on 2 October, had instructed the Italian Ambassador in London, Imperiali, to notify Sir Grey with Italian request hoping on its approval (Gottlieb 1957, 235-236). Imperiali, in his discussion with Sir Edward Grey, had justified the willingness of Italy to take the port, as a "temporary" measure". According to him Valona was threatened by Albanian and Epirote bands. Besides the approval for the acquisition of Valona, it was also asked from Great Britain to mediate to Russia and France for the issue in question. Grey had immediately sent a telegraph to the British Ambassador in Russia, Buchanan, declaring that opposition to Italy on this issue would reduce the chances of its entry in the war on the Allies' side, therefore he hoped that Sazonov would respond positively to Italy (Gottlieb 1957, 236; Marjanović 1962, 62). It was highly probable that, Sir Edward Grey had expressed to Imperiali the opinion that Italy should not negotiate with the Central Powers on the issue of Valona, considering that Imperiali since the first meeting with Sir Edward Grey had drawn the attention of Salandra not to discuss the matter in question with the Austro-Hungarian or German Government. Italian Government had waived from discussion with the Central Powers while Sazonov and Delcassé, after the insistence of Sir Edward Grey, as Imperiali had also noted, had approved the request of Italy (Gottlieb 1957, 236-237).

On 6 October Sir Edward Grey, on behalf of Entente, had communicated Imperiali in London the approval for the action in Valona (Marjanović 1962, 62).

On 29 October "Italian Sanitary Mission" was sent to Valona (Gottlieb 1957, 237; Marjanović 1962, 62; Pearson 2004, 83), while the following day Italian army occupied Saseno Island (Swire 2005, 203; Gottlieb 1957, 237; Marjanović 1962, 203; Pearson 2004, 83) and on 26 December Italy invaded Valona (Swire 2005, 204; Pearson 2004, 84).

The war course influenced the Entente Powers to continue with the concessions to the detriment of Albanians.

Further negotiations with Italy were finalised with signing of the Secret Pact of London, which in fact ignored the existence of the Albanian independent state. According to the Secret Pact of London, Italy would receive “[...] full sovereignty over Valona, the island of Saseno and surrounding territory of sufficient extent to assure defence of these points (from the Voïussa to the north and east, approximately to the northern boundary of the district of Chimara on the south) [...]” (Miscellaneous No. 7, 4-5) then in the Central Albania a "small autonomous neutralised State" would be established, which would be represented in international relations by Italy, while the latter would not oppose Great Britain, France and Russia to dividing Northern and Southern Albania between neighbours of Albania, respectively between Montenegro, Serbia and Greece (Ibid., 5).

British Government in general played a key role during negotiations of Powers of Entente with Italy, in reaching the agreement. Sir Edward Grey, had been trying hard to achieve a compromise, especially between Italy and the ally of the Great Britain, Russia, as it considered the entry of Italy in war as a very important step. He had information that if Italy joined Entente Powers, Romania would join them as well, and so considered that the decision of Italy to join them may have impact at some other neutral countries too (Calder 2008, 34-35). On the other hand the British Admiralty showed also the willingness to make concessions to Italy in Adriatic. (Fest 1978, 28)

The British Government had been aware of the violations that were made under the Secret Pact of London. This was confirmed by Grey as well: “The Allies have, in order to meet Italy, allowed serious inroad upon the principle of nationalities, for which they hope this war will secure general recognition.” (Calder 2008, 35) That the terms of the Secret Pact of London had been in full contradiction with the principles by which Great Britain had entered the war, Lloyd George stated later (Gottlieb 1957, 358).

It should be noted that since the entry of Italy in the war alongside Entente Powers, the Foreign Office had decided to review terms of Secret Pact of London, for several reasons: the Italian "lateral war" in Albania; delayed declaration of war against Germany and Turkey by the Italians; and indifference that they showed to other military developments of Allies. The refusal of Italy to renounce Fiume, which was in contradiction to the terms of the Secret Pact in London, had an impact to Great Britain in terms that it would not feel obliged to comply with the terms of the Pact. So, since the eve of the Peace Conference, Great Britain had attempted to make relative the Italian claims which were based on the Secret Pact of London (Burgwyn 1997, 7).

Decisions of the Secret Pact of London had been learnt by the Government of Serbia through its diplomatic representatives in Europe. Therefore, it had started preparations immediately for occupations in Albania (Janković 1973, 171-172; Prifti and Shpuza 2007, 80).

Serbian Government had begun to find excuses for intervention in Albania. Sir Edward Grey received a telegram from Royal Legation of Serbia which stated that a large number of Austrian, Turkish and Bulgarian emissaries were raising and training an Albanian army and were planning an attack on Serbian territory. On the other hand, Esat Pasha, according to the telegram in question, had requested from the Serbian Government to help him against insurgents, and if aid had not been sent until 8th May, then he would have to leave Durazzo to insurgents. Alternatives that Serbian Government had in mind were action with a force of 10,000 soldiers to the Albanian frontier to guard against an Albanian attack or later use of a force of 50,000 soldiers against an Austro-Turkish army. The Serbian Government requested from Triple Entente to send later on 60.000-80.000 soldiers to defend them from an attack from Albania, in case they would not allow Serbia to take necessary measures immediately (TNA: FO 371/2258, ff 11- 12).

Russian Minister for Foreign Affairs had considered that this Serbian representation had been exaggerated and warned Serbia and Montenegro not to begin any expedition in Albania (TNA: FO 371/2258, p 21). France, like its ally Russia, considered that the situation of Esat Pasha had been exaggerated in the Serbian representation and thus Delcassé advised Serbian Government not to take action in Albania (TNA: FO 371/2258, p 26). The British minister in Serbia (Nish) Sir Charles des Graz as well had been given instructions from the Foreign Office to advise Serbian Government that it would be wiser for the not to take any action in Albania (TNA: FO 371/2258, p 23). With learning by Italian ambassador about the advancement of a considerable number of Serbian forces toward Albanian frontier, the Foreign Office had instructed Sir Des Graz to persuade Serbian Government to avoid any movement against Albania (TNA: FO 371/2258, p 36). While Lord Kitchener from War Office, on the preparations that the Serbian Government was making for the advance towards Durazzo, had instructed Colonel Harrison in Kraguyevac, to inform the General Staff that such movements were objectionable for political and strategic reasons. He stressed that "[...] Military situation demands that Serbs should keep all available forces for employment against Austrians with a view to securing Bosnia, Herzegovina and access to the Adriatic by co-operating with Russians and Italians. [...]" (TNA: FO 371/2258, p 37).

Despite these warnings, Serbia began occupations in Albania. On 2 June 1915, Mr. Greig reported from Monastir that Serbian forces had already occupied Pogradets (Pogradec) and were ready to attack Elbassan (TNA: FO 371/2258, p 57). Whereas three days later he reported that a force of 20,000 troops were advancing in Albania in two columns which were based in Dibra and Ochrida. The northern column had already occupied the plain of Dibra, whereas the southern one

Pogradetz, Kyuks (Kukës) and Elbasan (TNA: FO 371/2258, p 61).

Tirana, according to the information that Mr. Greig received, was occupied by Serbian forces on 8 June 1915. Serbian losses during this expedition had reached 80 killed and about 150 wounded (TNA: FO 371/2258, p 116). British Government had reacted immediately to these occupations. It advised the Serbian Government that "[...] such a diversion of Serbian forces will naturally weaken the force which Serbia would be able to employ against Austria-Hungary, which should always remain her main objective [...]" (TNA: FO 371/2258, p 82). On 14 June 1915 Sir Edward Grey proposed that the Allied Powers make serious representations at Nish (TNA: FO 371/2258, p 89). After information came from St. Petersburg, respectively from Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, for a possible attack of Serbia against Austria and following his suggestion to postpone the contemplated action (TNA: FO 371/2258, p 106), Sir Edward Grey agreed and for that position he informed the Allies (TNA: FO 371/2258, p 108). Montenegro started its occupations in Albania as well. On 11th of June, Montenegrin forces had crossed the border, one column of which had occupied the mountain of Tarabosh and had taken the strategic points over Buna, while another column after the great resistance from Albanians had managed to take positions that it had held during the siege of Shkodër during 1912-1913 (Swire 2005, 206; Pearson 2004, 90).

Entry of Montenegrin forces in Albania had caused reaction of Allied Powers who demanded from the Montenegrin Government to cease the further presence of the Montenegrin army and this army not to enter in Shkodra. The Montenegrin Foreign Minister, Petar Plamenac, had promised to diplomats of Allied Powers in Cetinje, that Montenegrin army would not progress further (Rakočević 1986, 261). However, on 27 June 1915, Montenegrin forces occupied Shkodër (Swire 2005, 206;

Rakočević 1986, 261; Pearson 2004, 91; Prifti and Shpuza 2007, 81).

Allied Powers, Great Britain, Russia and Italy, on 28 June 1915, presented a protest to Montenegrin Government against occupations in Albania (Swire 2005, 206). While on the next day, they also sent a note to Montenegrin Government expressing that they do not recognise the occupation of Shkodra. They accepted the existing situation but they made it clear to Montenegro that the issue of Shkodra would be resolved after the end of the war (Rakočević 1986, 262).

The developments of the war had impacted on the changing of the attitude of Great Britain to Albania, even its need to seek the support of Albanians. The advance of Central Powers' forces into Balkans resulted in the beginning of withdrawal of the Serbian army through Kosovo, Montenegro and Albania toward Adriatic, to continue afterwards in Corfu. In such a situation, Allied Powers had decided to send supplies for Serbia through Adriatic. For this purpose the Great Britain had created a "British Mission of Adriatic" with the objective of sending food supplies from Italy, across the Adriatic, to the Albanian ports. Then from these ports transportation of supplies would be organized to soldiers in retreat (Fryer 1997, 95).

On 9 November 1915, Foreign Office through Sir R. Rodd disclosed to Italian Government the British scheme for the supplies to Serbian army. Among others, the scheme had foreseen the supplies to be provided by British Government in cooperation with the French one, if the latter would agree, and such supplies would be sent to Brindisi. Italian Government would provide storage accommodation and would assist in ensuring crafts to transport the supplies across the Adriatic. Sir John Jackson Limited would take care of the improvements of roads. It was scheduled to be completed first the Mitrovitza–Ipek (Mitrovicë-Pejë) and Kolasin-Plevlje roads, and a light rail or tramway from San Giovanni (Shëngjin) to Podgorica.

Supplies would be disembarked in San Giovanni by staff provided by the British Government. If the need would raise to disembark stores in Durazzo or any other port, naval officers would be sent there, too (TNA: FO 371/2275, pp 93-94). The scheme of the British Government for the supply of the Serbian Army had been approved in general by the Italian Minister for Foreign Affairs, although some details were left to be discussed with the Ministry of Marine (TNA: FO 371/2275, p 126). The Minister for Foreign Affairs of France agreed as well with the British proposals (TNA: FO 371/2275, p 166).

Besides these organizations, the importance of the cooperation with Albanians was also discussed in British diplomatic circuits. In this context, Aubrey Herbert, a British diplomat and a great supporter of Albanians, had made it clear to George R. Clerk, Head of the War Department, Foreign Office, to Sir Arthur Nicolson and Admiralty that, in order to seek support of Albanians, in exchange two things were required to offer to them: current assistance and future safety (Destani and Tomes 2011, 96).

Herbert's suggestions appear to have affected the decisions of the British Government in relation to Albanians. Foreign Office would soon express their readiness, if its Allies agreed to offer a solution to Albanians in exchange for their friendly attitude toward the Allies. The solution which would be offered to Albanians was that Allied Powers would do everything possible to further the establishment of an independent Albanian state which would be organised on cantonal basis, under Italian protectorate, and that would be bounded on the north by the Montenegrin frontier, while in the south by the line that went from the mouth of the River Voiussa (Vjosa) to the southern extremity of Lake Ohrid (TNA: FO 371/2275, pp 64-65).

For its Mission in Scutari (Shkodër), for the supply of Serbian Army through Albania and Montenegro, the British Government had appointed Mr. Lamb as Head of the Mission.

Foreign Office had given him some instructions before departure. Upon arrival in Scutari, he had to start friendly relations with the country's authorities, to organise the work for supply. Lamb was also encouraged to secure the co-operation of persons in Albania who were in a position to help, “[...] so far as such friendship and co-operation can be secured without committing His Majesty’s Government or their Allies to any policy with regard to the future of Albania [...]”. Regarding the political goals of this Mission, Lamb did not yet have instructions, since the issue in question was being discussed with Allied Governments (TNA: FO 371/2275, pp 188-189).

Unfortunately, the policy that was planned by the British Government for Albania, respectively guaranteeing for independence of Albania, was rejected by France and Russia (Guy 2015, 148-149).

On 22 November, Lamb informed from Brindisi, that at that night the Mission, composed of 17 persons would pass to Medua (Shëngjin) (TNA: FO 371/2275, p 383). Lamb, and the major part of the Mission had later reached Scutari. From Scutari, he had informed that due to enemy submarine attacks on the port of Medua, it was impractical for this port to be used as a base (TNA: FO 371/2276, pp 73). What was the situation that prevailed in San Giovanni di Medua, was described by Rear-Admiral Troubridge, who arrived there on 19 december 1915. He wrote on his diary that San Giovanni di Medua was impossible to be defended, since it was constantly bombarded from aeroplanes. The port was crowded by the civil population of Serbia who came there and were trying to leave the place (Fryer 1997, 206-107). The circumstances created by war operations had forced British officers who were sent in the framework of Adriatic British Mission to leave Albania, during January of the year 1916 (Destani and Tomes 2011, 205).

Although Great Britain had followed with close attention the developments in Albanian territories, which were occupied not only by forces of Central Powers, but parts of them

by Italy and France, approaching the end of the war, it still did not have any clear policy of action for Albania. Despite the insistence of Admiral Troubridge that British Government abandons the semi-isolation policy in relation to the Balkans and prepare a defined policy towards situation in Albania (TNA: FO 371/3148, pp 309-311), Foreign Office responded that the conditions were not yet ripe to take any action in Albania. However it had highlighted that British Government must concentrate on preventing the complete domination of Albania by the enemy after the war and that the peace settlement must be based on the principle of self-determination (TNA: FO 371/3148, p 313).

But in the British diplomatic circuits it was several times highlighted the geo-strategic importance that Albania, particularly Valona had for military operations of the Allied forces. On 12 July 1918, at the meeting of Imperial War Cabinet, the Director of Military Operations reported that Italian forces had taken city of Berat. This success was considered to be very important since it afforded protection to Valona and would enable French to operate to the north of Lake Ochrida (TNA: CAB 23/41/10, pp 1-3). On 17 July 1918, in War Cabinet, General Wilson emphasized the importance that would have the advance of Allied forces as far as the River Skumbi (Shkumbin) and their occupation of the heights beyond. In this way they would secure the road to Lake Ochrida (TNA: CAB 23/17/22, pp 89-91). Geo-strategic importance of Valona was also emphasized at the meeting of War Cabinet, held on September 3, 1918, where the War Cabinet requested: "The Chief of the Imperial General Staff to communicate with our Military Representative at Versailles, in the sense that the War Cabinet attach great importance to the retention of the command of Valona by the Italians" (TNA: CAB 23/7/31, pp 1,4).

A very important event that had its impact in the end of the First World War, was the military operation of the Allies in

Durazzo. The bombardment of Durazzo, which occurred on 2 October 1918, was undertaken by three Italian armoured cruisers and three British light cruisers. In addition, Durazzo was bombed by British and Italian aircraft. In the operation participated also an Italian dreadnought, British, Italian and Australian warships and American sup chasers, all of which acted as shield against any possible intervention by Austrian warships. This operation caused the escape of Austrian warships from Durazzo (Halpern 2004, 144). The Allies' success in Durazzo had a crucial importance, since Durazzo had been an important base of Austro-German submarines. It was considered that its destruction would also influence the Allies' success in the Austro-German main naval base at Pola. In addition, it was emphasized that after this success, the Allies' transport through the Maediterranean would be safer ("The Naval Battle of Durazzo" 1918, 49).

As it is apparent, the geo-strategic position of Albania played an important role at the ending of the First World War, a war which left open many issues related to ethnic Albanian territories, which would become an important topic in the Peace Conference in Versailles.

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