

## The Italian-Bulgarian Clashes During World War II and the Minority Issue



### History

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### Abstract

The territorial reconfiguration of the Balkans in Vienna (April 1941) did not fully satisfy any of the Great Powers' interests. Italy had promised the Greater Albania but it was not able to include all the Albanian ethnic territories within the new and larger Albanian state. Bulgaria had significantly expanded its borders, but inspired by the medieval dreams about a Great Bulgaria, it kept on asking for more. The revisionist tendencies of Bulgaria created tension between the two Axis' Allies, which risked causing a conflict between them in more than one occasion. Despite the Italy's and Germany's concession for a rectification of the demarcation line in the southeast of Shar Mountains (Šar Planina), the Italian-Bulgarian dispute continued with their ups and downs, and until the capitulation of Italy, there was not a real agreement for a demarcation line yet. There was only a military demarcation line established in the spring of 1943, signed up after a series of negotiations between the Italian general Dalmazzo and the Bulgarian general Bodjev. Bulgarian-Italian disputes were essentially territorial conflicts. When territories are under discussion, their population, especially the minorities turn into the "hot potato" of the situation. Both Italy and Bulgaria try to use the minorities for their political goals. Accusation and counter-accusation regarding the treatment of minorities were frequent.

On April 21, 1941, the German and Italian Foreign Ministers, Joachim von Ribbentrop and Count Galeazzo Ciano met in Vienna to divide the Balkans. Count Ciano had brought an ethnographic map on which there were set almost all the boundaries from the very first day. Ribbentrop initially agreed with the ethnic criteria set by the Italians. But when German economists convinced him that these criteria favored Italy and had placed the material sources (copper mines, asbestos, chromium) within the Italian sphere of influence, he demanded a revision of the map on the second day of the conference. A compromise was reached: the Balkan redistribution would take into consideration the ethnic boundaries as well as the economic and strategic ones<sup>73</sup>.

The ethnological considerations favored Albania and hence Italy, while the economic considerations favored Bulgaria, which promised to produce for Germany.

### The Italian-Bulgarian clashes for the demarcation line

Despite this, the Balkan reformation in Vienna did not fully satisfy any of the Great Powers. Italy had promised the Greater Albania but it was not able to include all the Albanian ethnic territories within the new Albanian state. Bulgaria had significantly expanded its borders, but inspired by the medieval dreams about a Great Bulgaria, it kept on asking for more. Bulgaria's dissatisfaction sometimes created tension between the two allies of the Axis. This tension risked to cause a conflict between them in more than one occasion.

In May 1941, a mixed Bulgarian-Italian commission decided on a demarcation line between the territories controlled by the Italians and those controlled by the Bulgarians. The Albanian eastern regions of Tetova, Dibra, Struga and Kërçova, which nowadays are part of Republic of Macedonia<sup>74</sup>, were joined under the Italian Albania. The expansion of the Albanian state almost within its ethnic borders led to a change in the number of the ethnic minorities who lived there. The number of the Greek minority did not change.

<sup>73</sup> The National Archives (United Kingdom), Foreign Office (further: FO) 371/48217, War Office's notes for the Foreign Office, 17 October 1945.

<sup>74</sup> Thus, Hitler as a real architect of the Balkans map allocated most of the Albanian territories to Italy and the latter united them with Tirana's administration. On June 29, 1941, Mussolini created with a special decree the High Civil Commissariat for Kosova, Debar and Struga, and Fejzi Alizoti was assigned its direction. On August 12, 1941, by a royal decree, these territories joined the Albanian State established in London in 1913.

The Slavic minorities had increased in number, as the Montenegrin and Bulgarian/Macedonian minorities were added to the Serbian minority living in the territories of Kosovo and the Macedonian one living in the eastern Albanian provinces.

Similarly, it changed even the political map of Albania's neighboring states. Albania, though occupied, was bordered by new legal-constitutional formations occupied by the Germans in the north and south and by the Bulgarians in the east. The border with Bulgaria, a Balkan state supporting the Axis in the East, not only reopened the Macedonian question<sup>75</sup> but it resulted in the discussion of the issue of ethnicity and the national identity of the Slavic-Macedonian minority living in the villages of Prespa and of the Slavic speaking population in the Golloborda region.

The Vienna line was not final in the determination of the demarcation line between the Albanian territories occupied by Italy and the territories controlled by Bulgaria. A mixed commission had been established to take detailed decisions about this issue. The Bulgarians were very active in asking for as many territories as possible. Apparently, they were convinced that if the Axis managed to win, the boundaries set by the Vienna agreement and the mixed commissions could be made final. This was the reason why they were so avid. On July 21, 1941, during a visit to Rome, two Bulgarian ministers raised the issue of the Italian-Bulgarian demarcation line and demanded an agreement for the rectification of the boundary line in lakes Ohrid and Prespa. Count Ciano thought that the ministers wanted this rectification in order to "strengthen [the ministers'] their situation in the internal plan"<sup>76</sup>. "I refused; - Ciano wrote in his diary, - more in principle rather than by conviction - and added: Some small concessions may be made in the mixed commission"<sup>77</sup>.

Ciano's refusal did not discourage the Bulgarian government. It proceeded with its efforts in two directions: diplomatically, by seeking the help of the other ally of the Axis, Hitler's Germany and on the ground by causing border incidents. The Italian border controls often complained that the Bulgarian military officers would violate the demarcation line to trigger unrest in the Albanian regions controlled by Italians.

Thus, on September 20, 1941, a telegram of the Albanian Cabinet for the Albanian embassy in Sofia, reported that some time ago, a military group of Bulgarian-Serbians had violated the demarcation line and entered into an Albanian village near Kaçanik and killed two Albanians for unknown reasons<sup>78</sup>.

It is obvious that these contradictions risked turning into conflicts, which as a whole could create problems for the Axis policy in the Balkans. This prospect alarmed the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which during the winter of 1941-1942 was involved in a research group for setting the boundaries. But on January 12, 1942, the German ambassador in Rome, Mekensen (Hans Georg von Mackensen) telegraphically informed the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs that the field work for determining the Albanian-Bulgarian demarcation line was not possible due to the difficult terrain during the winter<sup>79</sup>. He also conveyed the concerns of the Italian Foreign Minister, Count Ciano, who was skeptical about the German involvement in this matter.

<sup>75</sup> In April 1941, the Macedonian territories, part of Serbia and Greece, were invaded by the Bulgarian army and came under Bulgarian occupation administration. They were declared Bulgarian territories, inhabited by ethnic Bulgarian population. In accordance with their conviction that there was no Macedonian nation, the official Sofia began a violent process of "Bulgarianisation" on the population of the occupied territories. For more information on the Bulgarian administration of Macedonian and Greek territories see: M. Glenny, *Histori e Ballkanit (1804-1999): nacionalizmi, luftërat dhe Fuqitë e Mëdha, Tiranë: Instituti i Dialogut dhe Komunikimit dhe Toena*, 2007, p. 509-511.

<sup>76</sup> Galeazzo Ciano, *Journal politique 1939-1943*, Paris: 1947, p. 55.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> *Archivio Storico and Diplomatico dei Ministerio degli Esteri* (further: ASDME), Serie: Sottosegretariato per gli Affari Albanesi, Gabinetto Albania (1938-1945), busta 107.

<sup>79</sup> *Dokumente të institucioneve gjermane për historinë shqiptare 1941-1944 (Documentary records of German institutions on Albanian History)*, edited by Hakif Bajrami, Prishtinë: "Vatra", 1998, p. 27.

The ambassador advised his superiors not to undertake a new research, because it would arouse the Italians distrust towards the German intentions towards Albania and “because of the latent Italian-Bulgarian tensions about the border, especially if the research was to be done in the Albanian territory”<sup>80</sup>.

On 28 March 1942, realizing that diplomatically it could not be achieved what Bulgarian government wanted, in agreement with the German Supreme Command, they militarily occupied a part of Kosova's south-western territories (referred as Eastern Serbia in the document). This meant that the whole Albanian regions of Kaçanik would become part of the territories controlled by the Bulgarians. Germany supported a small rectification of the demarcation line in the southeast of Shar Mountains (Šar Planina). At the time, many politicians argued that the strategic considerations were crucial in determining the southeast of Shar Mountains as the Bulgarian-Albanian border. Instead, I consider the rectification of the boundaries was rather the result of a compromise between the German economic needs and the Bulgarian political and strategic [i. e. nationalist] goals.

The news about the occupation of these territories was spread with great concern in all Albanian territories. Even Italians reacted immediately to the new boundary changes. They were making efforts to maintain their strong positions in Albania and to keep on flattering the Albanian nationalism (remember the appointment of Mustafa Kruja as the head of the Albanian government, the negotiations for removing the Lictor's Emblems from the national flag etc.). Count Ciano raised the concern that the Bulgarian Army's action was increasingly causing preoccupations in the "old Albania", as well as in Kosova. He cautioned the German Foreign Ministry that if it was accepted the concession of further Albanian territories to the Bulgarians, "they had to consider that there would be active resistance from the local population."<sup>81</sup>

According to Ciano, this would lead to a small but strong war between Albanians and Bulgarians, which would have immediate effect in promoting insurgent aspirations [against the Axis] in other Balkan nations such as the Serbs, who up until then had been friendly with the Axis.<sup>82</sup>

Italy did not limit itself to requesting help from its ally, Germany, for resolving its disputes with Bulgaria. It also exerted propaganda pressure on Bulgaria by itself. Italian authorities urged the Albanian nationalist rhetoric, as a counterweight to the Bulgarian territorial claims.<sup>83</sup>

During March 1942, the periodical "Kosova", had published several articles in support of the Albanian irredentism for the eastern territories. This propaganda campaign had caused a lot of preoccupations to the Bulgarian government.

In fact, the Italian Ambassador in Sofia, Magistrati (Massimo Magistrati) had been summoned to the Bulgarian Foreign Ministry, where he was asked to intervene at his government for ceasing this propaganda. Magistrati proposed that, "considering the cautious content of the Bulgarian press [the lack of nationalistic writings], in the next numbers, "Kosova" had better not publish articles with irredentist character regarding the regions occupied by Bulgaria".<sup>84</sup>

On March 13, 1942, the Cabinet for Albania, after announcing the Bulgarian request to the General Vicegerent in Tirana, Francesco Jacomoni, asked him to take a stand on the issue. Jacomoni acknowledged the

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *Dokumente të institucioneve gjermane ...*, p. 28.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *ASDME*, F. Sottosegretariato per gli Affari Albanesi, Gabinetto Albania (1938-1945), busta 123.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

possibility of mitigating the irredentist propaganda in the Albanian press, but added that "this position should be conditioned by the content of the press in question [i.e., Bulgarian press]"<sup>85</sup>. He warned that "any sign that could be evidenced in newspapers in the future about Bulgarian rights in Tetovo, Struga, Debar and Lake Prespa, would have its journalistic reprisal in "Kosova".<sup>86</sup>

The Italian-Bulgarian clashes about the demarcation line continued with their ups and downs, and until the capitulation of Italy, there was not a real agreement for a demarcation line yet. There was only a military demarcation line established in the spring of 1943, signed up after a series of negotiations between the Italian general Dalmazzo and the Bulgarian general Bodjev<sup>87</sup>. Bulgarian claims for rectifying the Vienna line especially towards lakes Ohrid and Prespa, were also shown to Germany by the Bulgarian government in August 1943, but now the situation in the Balkans was not conducive to the Axis and Germany did not want to alienate Albanians because of unreasonable Bulgarian claims.

### **The Italian-Bulgarian clashes and the minority issue**

Bulgarian-Italian disputes were essentially territorial conflicts. And, when territories are under discussion, their population, especially the minorities turn into the "hot potato" of the situation. This is the reason why minorities have held a particularly important place in the Bulgarian politics during World War II. Within the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there was established a special directorate for dealing with the foreign minorities who had joined the Bulgarian state and the Bulgarian minority in other countries.<sup>88</sup>

Bulgaria handled the minority issue by using traditional Balkan methods: from ignoring their rights to genocide and ethnic cleansing. The reasons were evident: Bulgaria was implementing a long-term policy, favored by the racist policy of the Axis, in order to ethnically alter the region inhabited by Albanians.

The Bulgarian management of the minorities had two directions: on the one hand it manifested brutal behavior towards minorities in the territories that had recently become part of the Bulgarian state, including the Albanians; on the other hand, it raised allegations of persecution towards the Bulgarian minority [including the Macedonian minority in Albania] by Albanian and Italian authorities. These claims, from time to time, gave rise to no small contradiction between the Italian and Bulgarian administrations.

The Italian authorities observed with great concern the Bulgarian government's brutal acts against the Albanian population in its area of occupation. In a secret report from Gabinetto Albania (Albania Cabinet), there were presented the details of the abuses that Bulgarians had committed against Albanians from May 1941 to August 1942. The report shows a very large number of ill-treatments. For the senior Italian officials, these events could not be considered as a fatal segment of war events. "Their nature, their number, their continuity - Italian authorities said - show that in this Balkan sector, there occurred an endemic badness, which the Bulgarian government should cure with the tools it considered possible".<sup>89</sup> Rome argued that this situation could have serious consequences for the Axis Powers, "at a moment when they have focused all their energy to the war needs." Italian diplomats pointed out that there was another political reason why it was mandatory to avoid clashes of ethnic character. "Because of the general political effects - Italian Foreign Ministry said - It is appropriate to avoid that the New Balkan Arrangement with the East-West boundaries, Albania-Bulgaria,

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>87</sup> *Dokumente të institucioneve gjermane ...*, p. 62.

<sup>88</sup> ASDME, F. Sottosegretariato per gli Affari Albanesi, Gabinetto Albania (1938-1945), busta 123.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*

installed instead of the North-South territorial boundary, Yugoslavia-Greece, is responsible for more serious preoccupations than those that existed in the past."<sup>90</sup>

Italy warned that ethnic-related clashes increased the risk of spreading the communist propaganda, which "finds the best ground to take root and eventually expands to territories that are now immune to it. This happens exactly in places where there are people such as the Albanian minority in Bulgaria, who are in a general state of concern, nervousness and alarm".<sup>91</sup>

During 1943, there is evidence of another trend in the Bulgarian attitude towards minorities. The Sofia rhetoric begins to focus on the persecution of the Bulgarian minority [understand: Macedonian] by the Italian and Albanian authorities, and to undertake a more powerful action in defense of this minority. It should be noted that while the Bulgarian government continued to refer as Bulgarian to the Slavic speaking population of the eastern Albanian provinces, Italians responded by referring to them as a Macedonian population, which demonstrates the reopening of the "Macedonian issue" even during World War II. This emphasis on the mistreatment of the Bulgarian minority by the Albanian authorities is linked to the problematic situation in Albania resulting from the resistance against the Italian occupiers and the weakening of the latter. The unstable Italian position increased the hope for fulfilling the Bulgarian dream of territorial change.

On 16 January 1943 the Bulgarian Foreign Ministry sent a Note Verbale to the Italian embassy in Sofia. It stated that "the problem about the Bulgarians' situation in Albania, which unfortunately has been raised in order to find a satisfactory solution since 1941, has taken a turn for the worse." Bulgaria, according to the Note Verbale, has been inspired in its policy towards minorities by a spirit of reconciliation, patience and a high understanding towards the needs of the moment.

This is exactly the reason why "it has often stepped back from demarches, which would have normally been fully justified, wanting to demonstrate not only its good will, but also its determination to preserve the traditional friendship that links the three countries concerned ". But the Bulgarian government had noticed since the second half of 1942, the situation had worsened and the Bulgarian population in Albania suffered from an absolute lack of personal safety and property rights security; a hostile atmosphere created by the Albanian population; an unfriendly attitude maintained by local authorities etc.. These general concerns were materialized in a note of more specific complaints such as: the removal of officials of ethnic Bulgarian origin from the local administration, discrimination on supplies at the expense of Bulgarian population, prevention of Bulgarian parents from sending their children to study in the Bulgarian territories, the arbitrary acts of the administrative bodies while looking for arms, the existence of gangs engaged in theft, robbery, murder etc.

This situation, always according to the Bulgarian government, caused a large influx of refugees, [i.e., in early 1943] which has already taken alarming proportions. In the document, it is presented even a table of families of Macedonian origin who left their provinces during the second half of 1942. This table shows that 1750 family out of the total population of 7555 people moved away. The Bulgarian government complains that the influx of refugees has caused a lot of preoccupations and difficulties to the Bulgarian government; hence it requires from the Italian and Albanian governments that they ensure the necessary conditions for the return of these refugees. The Italian and Bulgarian memorandums continued their back and forth until the capitulation of Italy in early fall 1943. On one hand, they witnessed the harsh behaviors of Bulgarian authorities towards Albanians and, on the other they demonstrate the misuse of Albanian national question by the Italian invaders.

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<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*