

SECRET COMMITTEE "DEATH OR LIBERTY" THE MAIN PROponents OF THE INDEPENDENCE OF ALBANIA

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Abstract

The injustices towards the Albanian people began from the decisions of the Congress of Berlin in 1878 and the bloody suppression of the uprising of the Albanian League of Prizren in 1881, where many Balkan states gained independence from the Ottoman Empire, while Albanians remained an integral part of it.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Albanians were very unprepared both politically and organizationally. Thanks to some Albanian activists and patriots, in November 1905 the Secret Committee for the Freedom of Albania "Death or Freedom" was formed, which will organize the armed struggle against the Ottoman rule and the neighboring chauvinist circles that attempted to dismember the Albanian lands.

This organization was formed in the city of Bitola under the leadership of Bajo Topulli, Fehmi Zavalani, Halit Bërzeshëtës, Gjergj Qeriazit, Çerçiz Topullit, Mikhail Gramenos, Nuçi Naçit and many other patriots. The purpose of this organization was to raise awareness, brotherhood, love and unity in a joint fight against every ruler for the Freedom of Albania.

This organization played the role of the central committee by sending patriots and activists to every province of the country where it formed its branches in the most important centers of the Albanian vilayets. It has also expanded its activity with patriotic societies abroad.

In 1906 the Secret Committee for "Freedom of Albania" in the area of Korça formed the first armed units that operated until 1908 when the Congress of Bitola will be held.

The bravery and courage of the armed groups together with the Congress of Bitola contributed so that the act of Albania's independence was to be written with these letters. 1912.

Keywords: Committee, congress, vilayets and guerilla groups.

Introduction

The most important patriotic activity of the Albanian nation was the National Renaissance, which began in the 1830s and played a key role in raising the awareness of the Albanian nation. During the efforts to implement reforms in Macedonia and Kosovo, the Albanian National Movement conducted significant activity both within the homeland and in Albanian colonies operating in Sofia, Bucharest, and elsewhere. This activity manifested itself in the continuous raising of national consciousness, in the unification of progressive democratic Albanian forces, and in their preparation for the struggle against the Ottoman Empire on the one hand, and on the other, against external aggressive and predatory ambitions.

At the same time, the Albanian National Movement also faced the subversive and armed activities of the squads of neighboring occupying monarchies, who raided and destroyed entire villages in the vilayets of Thessaloniki, Bitola, and parts of Kosovo. The Secret Committee for Albania's Freedom – "Freedom or Death," was a political-patriotic organization that led the armed struggle against the Ottoman rulers and neighboring chauvinist circles.

The organization was formed in Bitola at the initiative and under the leadership of Bajo Topulli in November 1905, with participants including Gjergj Qirjazi, Fehmi Zavalani, Çerçiz Topulli, Mihail Grameno, Nuçi Naçi, and others. As is known, at the Congress of Bitola in 1908, along

with the unification of the Albanian language alphabet, topics related to the official recognition of the Albanian language and nation were discussed, along with other developments closely tied to the declaration of the independence of the Albanian state in November 1912.

The most important events of the Albanian National Renaissance from 1830-1900

The most important period of the Albanian people was that of the National Renaissance that began in the 30s of the 19th century. The Albanian National Renaissance is divided into four stages and ends with the act of declaring the independence of the Albanian state on November 28, 1912 in Vlora, which was the crowning of the efforts of all the leaders and activists of the Albanian National Renaissance.⁶⁵

During the years 1832 to 1878, many uprisings took place against Ottoman rule in both the southern and northern parts but with particular emphasis on the territory of today's Macedonia, where the uprising of Dervish Cara took place during 1843-1844,⁶⁶ starting from Gostivar and Tetovo and ending in the northern areas of Kosovo. Meanwhile, in the spring of 1844 the uprising had covered all Albanian territories from Manastir and Ohrid in the south to the northern and northeastern edges of Kosovo.⁶⁷

In 1864 several reforms were made where the place of the elayets was taken by the vilayets headed by the vali (governor). The Albanian lands came into the composition of four vilayets, and that: The Vilayet of Manastir, the Vilayet of Shkodra, the Vilayet of Kosovo and the Vilayet of Ioannina.⁶⁸

The Albanian question and its territory were always put at the greatest risk by seeing the notorious interests and programs of the Balkan states or monarchies against the Albanian lands, which were under Ottoman administration and rule. The ideologists of the National Renaissance found it reasonable to form a joint committee with the name of the Central Committee for the Protection of the Rights of Albanian Nationality or otherwise the Istanbul Committee created on December 18, 1877 where the chairman was elected Abdyl Frashëri while members of this committee were Pashko Vasa, Ymer Prizreni, Sami Frashëri, Zija Prishtina, Mehmed Ali Vrijoni, Ahmed Koronica, Jani Vreto etc. The members of this committee demanded the armed uprising against the Ottomans and the creation of the Albanian National State.⁶⁹

The Albanian League of Prizren is one of the most important events in the history of the Albanian National Renaissance, of the struggle of the Albanian people for the protection of the territorial integrity of the country and for national liberation.⁷⁰

The Albanian League of Prizren was created by the most prominent ideologues and activists of the National Renaissance, who understood the diplomatic games of the great powers, which for their own interests maintained a balance between themselves. They came as a result of the 1970s with a goal of colonial domination in the world, violating and injuring the territorial integrity of the Albanian people, which was an integral part of the Ottoman Empire when it was in a difficult economic, political, financial and military situation. This will come as a result of the revision of the peace of St. Stephen and the discontent created by the European powers convening the Congress of Berlin. Although for a very short period of time, March 3, 1878 and June 13, 1878, the trunk of the Albanian intelligence brought awareness to the Albanian people so that within 3 months they motivated all provinces and three days before the Congress of Berlin on June 10, 1878 they called the Assembly of the Albanian League of Prizren.

⁶⁵ *Historia e Popullit Shqiptar*, v.II, (Rilindja Kombëtare - vitet 30 të shek XIX – 1912), 2002, Tirana, 2002, p. 510

⁶⁶ Aleksandar Matkovski, "Uprising of Dervish Cara, Skopje", 1986, p. 33.

⁶⁷ *Historia e Popullit Shqiptar*, cited work, p. 92-93.

⁶⁸ Nebi Dervishi, "MANASTIRI Vatër e Rilindjes Kombëtare Shqiptare (shek.XIX- deri në vitin 1912)", Skopje, 2018, p. 20.

⁶⁹ *Historia e Popullit Shqiptar*, cited work., p. 142-144.; Edwin Jacques, "SHQIPTARËT Historia e popullit shqiptar nga lashtësia deri në ditët e sotme", Tirana, 1995, p. 285-288.

⁷⁰ Instituti i Historisë, *Lidhja Shqipëtare e Prizrenit në dokumentet Osmane 1878-1881*, Tirana 1978 p.3.

By this act the Albanian people proved not only that they no longer existed as a formed and united nation but also showed their ardent and capable desire, both in diplomatic and combat terms, to protect the inviolability of their lands and to establish their own national state.⁷¹

Although the Albanian League of Prizren was extinguished with blood, it will have its echoes until the act of declaring independence on November 28, 1912. Ideologues and activists such as: Pandeli Sotiri, Thimi Mitko, Petro Nini Luarasi, Gjerasim and Sevasti Qeriazi, Papa Negovani, found it reasonable for Albanians to open the school in the Albanian language, which began teaching on March 7, 1887 in Korça. Activists and ideologues of the National Renaissance have always called for a joint gathering and organization to solve a single alphabet of the Albanian language for all Albanians.⁷²

In our Albanian historiography during 1899 the League of Peja led by Haxhi Zeka with the ideology "*Besa Besa*" takes a special place. It will spread to all Albanian cities and provinces in the struggle for the autonomy of Albanians.⁷³ On the League of Peja Sami Frashëri was excited that with this act begins the origin of the unification of national forces and this should not be a temporary thing, but to stay until the wishes and demands of the national movement are realized, i.e. to save the country from external and internal danger.⁷⁴

Formation of the Committees of the Armed Forces for the Freedom of Albania "Death or Liberty" 1905-1907

A people that does not remember the past and does not respect the constellation of patriots who sacrificed for the nation in the most difficult times, forgiving the most depraved things - blood, sweat and toil, does not know how to build the present and cannot even program the future.⁷⁵

It is worth noting that in February 1905, a case of Greek partisans killed in the village of Negovan the patriotic writer Papa Kristo Negovani along with some of his fellow villagers. This massacre echoed greatly in Albania and in the colonies of migration.⁷⁶

A major role continued to be played by the colonies of Romania and Bulgaria, whose Albanian population had grown with new emigrants and fugitives from Albania. Although they carried on a wide activity, the patriotic societies of the exile colonies lacked at the beginning of the twentieth century a single leadership that would coordinate their activity.⁷⁷

On April 23, 1905, in Bucharest, Romania, an assembly of Albanians was convened, which was attended by representatives of Albanian exile colonies and from Albania. At the meeting of the national assembly, the committee "Kombi" will be formed under the leadership of Albert Gjika and the 15 members of the presidency where they had the duty to think about the formation of Albania's secret committees.⁷⁸

The Congress also decided to prepare an armed uprising and appointed a special governing body for it. After the congress in Rome, a press body of the committee titled "The Messenger of Albania" ("L'Araldo d'Albania") began to appear.⁷⁹

The patriotic Albanian circles were set in motion again. Their influence in Albanian political life had increased and at all costs the territorial integrity of Albania had to be protected.

In November 1905, at the initiative of the professor of the Turkish gymnasium in Bitola, Bajo Topulli, an Albanian secret committee was formed in this city under the name "Committee for

⁷¹ Kristo Frashëri, "*Lidhja Shqiptare e Prizrenit 1878-1881*", Tiranë, 1989 vëll.II, f.109-110; *Historia e Popullit Shqiptar, cited work*, p. 154.

⁷² *Historia e Popullit Shqiptar, cited work.*, p. 381.

⁷³ Shukri Rahimi, "Lufta e Shqiptarëve për Autonomi 1897-1912", Pristina, 1978, p. 87.; Kristo Frashëri, "*Historia e Qytetërimit Shqiptar (Nga kohët e lashta deri në fund të Luftës së Dytë Botërore)*", Tirana, 2008, p. 213-2014.

⁷⁴ Shukri Rahimi, *cited work.*, p. 90.

⁷⁵ Nebi Dervishi, *cited work.*, p. 32.

⁷⁶ Kristo Frashëri, *cited work*, p. 220.

⁷⁷ *Historia e Popullit Shqiptar, cited work.*, p. 331.

⁷⁸ Shukri Rahimi, *cited work.*, p. 124-125.; *Historia e Popullit Shqiptar, cited work.*, p. 331.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* p. 331.

the Freedom of Albania", which marks the beginning of a general national organization. The founders of this organization are: Halit Bërzeshta, Gjergj Qeriazi, Fehmi Zavalani, Sejfi Vllamasi (Novasella), Çerçiz Topulli, Jashar Bitnicka, Mihail Grameno, Nuçi Naço.⁸⁰

The Committee came up with its own political program which responded to the demands of the Albanian national movement in that period. According to the statute (canonism) of the committee, published in Sofia, the purpose of the organization was "to revive Albania by sowing fraternity, love, unity, spreading the path of civilization by means of books to be printed. The purpose of this committee was to "protect the Albanian homeland from the external danger it was facing", the only means was the creation of armed detachments and the fight for freedom. In January 1906, Bajo Topulli himself formed the first committee in the province of Korça. A few months later, many guerilla groups were formed in the southern part of Albania and in Kosovo. In the same year in Kurbin will join the armed units for the freedom of the homeland. The Albanian armed units also fought against the Greek bands, who persecuted the Albanian patriots and prepared the ground for the Hellenization and annexation of southern Albania. Against these actions and especially to avenge the massacre of the patriot Papa Kristo Negovani and his fellow villagers, Çerçiz Topulli's armed unit in September 1906 killed the Greek metropolitan of Korça, Fotin, as one of the instigators of the violent acts of Greek bands in the sanjak of Korça. Even in the sanjaks and cases of the vilayets of Kosovo and Bitola, such as that of Kumanovo, in the villages around Skopje, in the districts of Ohrid, Bitola, Debar, etc., during the years 1905-1906 there were Albanian armed units, which, although not all organized by the committees "For the freedom of Albania," pursued the same patriotic goals, protecting their compatriots from the violence of Serbian and Bulgarian gangs, operating in these areas.⁸¹ In the spring of 1907, patriotic armed units increased their activity. At the head of the most important armed unit of the committee was now Çerçiz Topulli together with the democratic writer Mihal Gramenon. With the flag of Skanderbeg in their hand and the revolutionary slogan "Death or freedom!" the armed units conducted during the years 1907-1908 a great patriotic activity in the provinces of southern Albania. In response to the arrest of a majority of Albanian patriots made by the Ottoman authorities, members of Çerçiz's armed unit, assassinated in early March 1908 the Gjirokastra bimbash (gendarmerie commander) inside the city. A few days later, on March 18, 1908, Turkish forces surrounded the armed unit at the at Rrapi i Mashullores, in the vicinity of Gjirokastra. The armed unit was valiantly guarded. After many hours of fierce fighting against numerous Turkish forces, it broke through the siege. During the attempt, Hajred Tremishti, the brave warrior of the regiment, was heroically killed. The war of Mashkullore echoed in Albania as a call for a new liberation uprising. But the further development of events was temporarily interrupted by the victory of the Turkish bourgeois revolution.⁸²

The city of Manastir was the main center of creation of armed units also in 1908 will gather all Albanians for the holding of the Congress of Alphabet. This Congress invited them to join, "*That without your help and all Albanian brothers, we will not be able to do as many deeds as we want*". The Congress of Manastir started on November 14-22, 1908.⁸³

In the Congress there were 32 delegates with the right to vote representing 26 different Albanian cities and societies inside and outside the homeland, as well as 18 other delegates as non-voting participants. Manastir on November 14 was the center of the meeting of the most prominent figures and personalities of the Albanian people, who arrived from all sides of Albania, Turkey, America, Italy, Egypt, Greece, Romania, etc. This was the day when Mit'hat Frashëri, Luigi

⁸⁰ Shukri Rahimi, *cited work.*, p. 126-127.; Kristo Frashëri, *cited work.*, p. 220.; Nebi Dervishi, *cited work.*, p. 32.; *History of the Albanian People*, *cited work* p. 317.

⁸¹ Nebi Dervishi, *cited work.*, p. 36.

⁸² Kristo Frashëri, *cited work.*, p. 221.

⁸³ *Historia e Popullit Shqiptar*, *cited work.*, p. 391.

Gurakuqi, Ndre Mjeda, Gjergj Fishta, Sotir Peci, and many others met to lay the foundations of the common alphabet of the Albanian language⁸⁴.

The President of the Commission was elected Gjergj Fishta, three alphabets were proposed, later the commission to not make a rift, agreed as a solution to be two alphabets, accepting the Istanbul alphabet and the Latin alphabet. This group of armed units are the main proponents to the independence of Albania and it is with these letters of the alphabet that both the act of independence of Albania in 1912 and the independence of the Republic of Kosovo in 2008 will be marked.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that Bitola, the city of consuls, since 1873, had been the center of the Vilayet of Bitola as well as a powerful hub of the Albanian National Movement in the last quarter of the 19th century and the early years of the 20th century. In November 1905, the "Secret Committee for Albania's Freedom – Freedom or Death" was formed. After the triumph of the Young Turk revolution "Hürriyet (Freedom)" in July 1908, the national club "Bashkimi" was established in Bitola, which, as the Central Club, became the initiator of calling and holding the Congress of the Alphabet (November 14-22, 1908).

After the proclamation of the "Hürriyet" (Constitution) on July 23, 1908, the activities of Albanian patriots, in addition to other endeavors, also focused on the establishment of national clubs. These were important institutions of this period, aimed at fulfilling the programmatic demands of the Albanian National Movement through political means, as well as through armed struggle. They had a comprehensive national platform with the goal of uniting the Albanian people by raising their educational and cultural level.

These clubs prepared the ground for the realization of the Albanian uprisings of 1911-1912, as the policy of the Young Turks had proved unworthy in meeting the legitimate demands of Albanians in these lands. For these reasons, the Albanian National Movement saw significant development in the Vilayet of Kosovo and the Vilayet of Bitola, where the bloodiest events occurred on the eve of the declaration of Albania's Independence on November 28, 1912.

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⁸⁴ *Shqiptarët e Maqedonisë*, Dhimitër. Dishnica, *Veprimtaria dhe kontributi i familjes Qiriazhi në Manastir...*, në: p. 311.