SHKODRA AMIDST THE CLASHES BETWEEN THE WARRING STATES OF WORLD WAR I, 1914–1915, ACCORDING TO AUSTRIAN DOCUMENTS

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Abstract

The paper in question aims to address the strategic position of the city of Shkodra, in the confrontation of the warring troops whose interests clashed in Shkodra: Austria, the Ottoman Empire, Italy, Montenegro and Serbia. The city, between military interventions and a diplomacy already fragmented according to the personal interests of the states, is going through economic difficulties and life uncertainty.
The aim of the study is to explain, through Austrian historical documents, the role that Shkodra had for Vienna as a strategic point of its interests, but also a confrontation of Balkan and regional interests beyond. Using consular documents, the Austrian press and Austrian military memoirs and not only, we seek to highlight the importance that Shkodra had during this period. The methodology used is a comparative approach between the facts emerging from the documentation and auxiliary sources.
The findings reflect the role that Shkodra had for Austria as a wedge between the Serbian-Montenegrin expansion in the Balkans, on the other hand Italy saw this city as a springboard for further influence in the region, while for the Montenegrins an old dream that ultimately failed to come true, while for the Serbs it was more like a large inn of unwanted stay, and a momentary hospital of the time. For the Young Turks, Shkodra was a point to project once again the reconnection with the old irreversible times.
The study offers a contribution to Albanian and Balkan history, by offering the impact that these warring forces had in Albania, during the first phase of the First World War.

Keywords: Shkodra, World War I, Young Turks, Montenegro, Serbia.

Young Turk plans involving Kara Said Pasha

The conflict in Albania was not limited to the forces fighting from Europe; the Ottoman Empire—specifically the ruling Young Turk faction, which supported the Central Powers—was also a party to the confrontation. Albanians themselves were viewed as collaborators of the Ottoman Empire, perceived as a predominantly Muslim population—with a segment holding strong religious sentiments—through whom the Pan-Islamic policy previously pursued by Sultan Abdul Hamid could be continued.[1] Consequently, the influence of the Young Turk group was felt in Shkodër as well. The group maintained intermittent contact with the Austrians and had even intervened in Shkodër. One of the reasons for the decline of Esad Pasha's influence in the city at one point was the impact of Young Turk propaganda, which claimed that Esad Pasha was opposed to the *Din* (the faith) and the *Baba* (the religious leader).[2] Talaat Bey, a Young Turk leader in Istanbul, had assured the Austrian ambassador, Pallavicini, that through his influence over the Young Turks in Shkodër, they would not react negatively toward the Italians—even though the latter supported Esad. However, this conversation took place at a time when relations between Vienna and Rome were still strained.
One of the figures viewed as an intermediary between the Albanians and the Young Turks was Fejzi Bey Alizoti;[3] he had been brought to Shkodër because it was rumored that his objective was to establish the influence of Prince Wied's Albanian government in the city.
At the same time, another key figure—seen as opposing Esad while aiming to strengthen Young Turk influence in the country—was Kara Seid Pasha. In mid-March 1915, the Imperial

[1] Ilirjana Kaceli, "Kryengritja e Shqipërisë së Mesme dhe roli i Turqve të Rinj", *Kosova,* nr. 37-38 (November), Prishtinë: 2024, fq. 219.
[2] Korrespondence nga Shkodra – Intrigat e Esad Pashës" *Dielli*, 22.01.1915, fq. 1-2.
[3] Beqir Meta, (red.) "*Historia e Shqiptarëve gjatë shekullit XX Vëll. I*", Tiranë: Botimet Albanologjike, 2017, fq. 351.

Foreign Ministry in Vienna informed Consul Halla in Shkodër that Kara Seid Pasha was expected to arrive in the city; among other tasks, he was to retrieve assets left behind by the Ottomans, including 4,800 crowns left by the Turkish consulate. The Young Turks considered him the most suitable person to send to the city to advance their propaganda. However, the Young Turks did not bring him in secretly from either the Albanians or the Austrians; the interests of these two groups aligned with those of the Young Turks. The Albanians themselves—or more precisely, Prince Wied—had requested his arrival in Durrës via telegram, following the departure of the Dutch mission from the city; the request was made through Ferid Pasha Vlora, a former prime minister from the reign of Sultan Abdul Hamid II.[4] However, the primary objective was to reconcile Esad's faction with the insurgents. For the Austrians, he was the ideal choice—given his Albanian heritage—to establish an 8,000-strong front stretching from Prizren to Dibra to counter the Serbian advance.

The Albanians were fully aware of his impending arrival and even sought to facilitate it. On March 13, the Austrian consul in Shkodra informed Vienna that Aqif Pasha Biçakçiu had stated—citing Luigj Gurakuqi—that not only was his arrival anticipated, but an Albanian passport had also been prepared for him to ensure his unhindered entry into the country. Aqif Pasha was confident in this matter, as he was well-versed in Young Turk politics, having reached an understanding with them in Bari as early as February 1915.[5] About two months later, the Serbs issued a press release acknowledging that Kara Seid Pasha was organizing a military force to confront the Serbian front. Furthermore, at a meeting held at Preng Pasha's home—addressed by Luigj Gurakuqi and Fejzi Alizoti—it was decided that the offensive against Serbia would be launched from either Shkodra or Tirana. Italy realized that the Young Turks had brought this Pasha in to reconcile the Albanians and garner support for their cause, but there was more to the situation. Austria also stood to benefit from the Young Turks' move; by April 1915, relations between Austria and Italy were already strained—particularly following the Secret Treaty of London—as Italy openly opposed any strengthening of Austrian positions in Albania. The Young Turks themselves advised Kara Seid Pasha to leave Italy for Switzerland, as he was no longer safe there; meanwhile, he informed Istanbul that, given the new circumstances—and evidently aware of Italy's diplomatic shift—the plan to transport troops from Shkodra to Durrës should be shelved for the time being.[6] However, he never arrived in Albania according to the plans laid out by the Young Turks—not even after the Austrian occupation of the greater part of the country—because, while en route to Albania, he was captured by Montenegrin forces on October 4, 1916.[7] Taken together, these facts illustrate the role Kara Seid Pasha was slated to play in Shkodër, as well as the significance of Shkodër within Austro-Young Turk objectives.

Italy and its multifaceted interests in Shkodër

Italy was the second Great Power—alongside Austria-Hungary—to hold direct interests in Albania. It, too, was deeply entangled in the web of interests and intrigues characterizing the complex Albanian situation between 1914 and 1915. Amidst the massive conflict—a mix of insurrection and civil war—Italy consistently sided with Esad Pasha Toptani. Its presence in Durrës saw it backing him against the insurgents, who largely aligned with the Young Turks in Istanbul. Consequently, this balance of forces extended to Shkodër. Austrian documents from as early as July 1914 reveal that the Italians were collaborating with Shkodër's Muslim population; the latter had received messages from the Italian consul in the city, Galli, stating

[4] Gazmend Shpuza, "*Kryengritja fshatare e Shqipërisë së Mesme 1914 – 1915*", Tiranë: 8 Nëntori, 1986., fq. 190.
[5] Ilirjana Kaceli-Demirlika, "Shqipëria dhe Turqia 1912 – 1939 Nga ndarja drejt miqësisë", Tiranë: Botimet M&B, 2022, fq. 125.
[6] AMHSH, F. Ark. i Vj., V. 1915, fq. 131-132, Letër e Konusullit Halla për Ministrin e Jashtëm Austriak Fon Burien për komisionit, Shkodër, dt. 27.04.1915.
[7] Ilirjana Kaceli-Demirlika, "Shqipëria dhe Turqia...", fq. 128.

that Esad's arrest was not due to any crime he had committed, but rather stemmed from the religious grounds upon which he was being attacked.[8] Meanwhile, four months later, a November article in the *Tarabosh* newspaper stated that Consul Galli had convinced Colonel Phillips—who commanded the international troops in Shkodër—that Muslims were the dominant force in Shkodër's politics and should therefore be supported.[9] The aim of this strategy in Shkodër—which involved driving a wedge between groups and further exacerbating religious divisions within the city—was to weaken the faction aligned with Austrian influence. Austria, despite its alliance with the Ottoman Empire and generally good relations with the Young Turks, was perceived as potentially sympathetic to the insurgents; at the same time, it could have drawn the Muslims of Shkodër into its orbit. Aligning the latter with Esad Pasha, however, meant alienating a segment of Shkodër's population from the interests and support they might otherwise have extended to Vienna.

Furthermore, the frequent efforts to bring the highlanders closer to Esad were intended to undermine the support Austria enjoyed among the Catholic faction. When the Albanian Club of Shkodër lodged a complaint with the Council of Consuls regarding Esad's threats against Lezhë and Shëngjin, the Italian consul, De Facendis, dismissed the incident as unworthy of attention, arguing that the Council's mandate was strictly limited to the interests of the city of Shkodër itself. Meanwhile, the French consul—who generally championed Montenegrin interests—proposed forwarding the complaint to the International Commission in Durrës.[10]

Another negative consequence concerned the impact on relations between Shkodra and Montenegro. When Montenegro—which was collaborating with Esad Pasha—began making threats, Italy had claimed that if concessions were made to Esad Pasha at Shëngjin, Montenegro would back down from its threats against Shkodra. In reality, this proved not to be the case at all. However, the collaboration between Esad, Italy, and Montenegro had caught Shkodra in a three-way vice, with Italy frequently acting as the voice for the other two jaws of that vice.

This conduct alienated not only Austria—which, at the onset of World War I, viewed Italy as an ally—but also the Albanian people, and above all, the Albanian press in Shkodra. One of the first to openly speak out against Italian policy was Fishta; in an article for *Hylli i Dritës*, he criticized the political and moral conduct of Consul Galli, noting his association with disreputable individuals of questionable character. Yet, it was precisely Consul Halla who, together with Colonel Phillips, persuaded Fishta to apologize to the Italian Consul, Galli.[11] The latter was not well-liked in Shkodër, as he frequently attempted to censor journalists regarding the articles they wrote—especially when he was personally under attack.

In an article dated November 16, 1914, titled "Italian Policy in Albania," the newspaper *Tarabosh*—run by Terenc Toçi—noted the Italians' astonishment that, despite having done so much to secure Albania's independence, the very first people to oppose them were the patriots themselves.[12] Toçi's reply was that it is precisely because we are patriots that we oppose all those who are against Albania—just as we opposed Austria when, on a few rare occasions, it supported Esad.[13] A meeting of the Council of Consuls in Shkodër was held in early February 1915 specifically to address this matter and determine the stance to be taken regarding Terenc Toçi. During the meeting, the French consul proposed calling upon Italy—which was supporting Toçi and thereby swaying him toward its own side—to reconsider its position. This proposal met with strong opposition from the Austrian consul, who maintained that Toçi had not only upheld a patriotic stance but had, in fact, been criticized by the French

[8] AMHSH, F. Ark. i Vj., V. 1914, fq. 10, Falenderimi i myslimanëve të këtushëm drejtuar qeverisë italiane për transporti e Esad pashait në Itali, Shkodër, dt. 17.07.1914.
[9] "Politika italiane në Shqypnië" *Taraboshi*, nr. 172, dt. 16.11.1914, fq. 1.
[10] AMHSH, F. Ark. i Vj., V. 1915, fq. 34, Një protestë kundra aksionit të Esad pashait në Shëngjin dhe në Lesh, Shkodër, dt. 20.03.1915.
[11] AMHSH, F. Ark. i Vj., V. 1914, fq. 393, Telegram i konsullit Halla drejtuar Konsullatës në Durrës, Shkodër, dt. 14.07.1914.
[12] "Politika italiane në Shqypnië" *Taraboshi*, nr. 172, dt. 16.11.1914, fq. 1.
[13] *Ibid.*

and Russian consuls precisely for doing so.[14] It was a meeting marked by cynical attitudes and petty behavior, given that Toçi himself—just ten days after the article appeared—had been summoned to the Italian consulate in Shkodër, informed of his arrest, and subsequently sent to Italy.

Italy's interests did not align with those of Shkodër; consequently, Italy did not fully support the city. A Catholic delegation had asked the Italian consul, De Facendis, to intervene to calm tempers and defuse the tense situation gripping Shkodër—exacerbated by clashes involving religious interests—but the Italians had refused.[15] Aware of the influence Italy held over Esad Pasha, this delegation had sought Italy's intervention—partly because the conflicts in Shkodër were taking place between Catholics and the radical Muslim faction supporting Esad Pasha. However, Italy had no interest in such pacification.

Consequently, Preng Bib Doda subsequently sought assistance from the Austrians—both for himself and on behalf of the Catholics—given his status as the primary representative not only of the Catholic community but also of the most patriotic elements in Shkodër amidst the prevailing circumstances.

Italy's personal interests in the region were frequently highlighted in the Austrian press. Italy had invested in waterways connecting Montenegro and Shkodër and viewed the Montenegrin-Albanian coastline as its own frontier across the Adriatic.[16] Its interests were aligned with the Montenegrins rather than the Albanians. It had even attempted to direct all Serbian soldiers stranded in Albania toward the Shkodra area, while blocking their passage to Vlora—a city it had occupied and coveted for itself.[17]

Montenegro and Shkodra: Two Distinct Phases

In the period spanning the outbreak of World War I and the Austro-Hungarian occupation of Albania in January 1916—an occupation that began with the capture of Shkodra—Montenegro appears in two distinct phases. First, there is the Montenegro that existed prior to its offensive against the city, followed by the period of the Montenegrin occupation of Shkodra itself. During the initial phase, the state revealed two sides of its character. On one hand, there were its own self-serving interests and the multifaceted importance of Shkodra—relevant in both peacetime and wartime. On the other hand, it sought to bare its teeth—albeit through strategic posturing—by playing the victim card regarding alleged "abuses" Shkodra had committed against the state.

Regarding trade, Montenegro engaged in extensive commercial activity with the Shkodra region, utilizing the quay on the Buna River at Pulaj as well as the port of Shëngjin. Some of its goods passed into Montenegro via ships—primarily Italian, but also French. The main issue concerned the transit of these goods; while this status exempted them from numerous taxes, Cetinje was frequently accused of using forged transit documents. With Austria blockading the ports of Bar and Ulcinj, Shkodra became the sole point of contact for external trade. This situation fueled extensive smuggling in the city, opposed only by the highlanders, who viewed the practice as a violation of Albania's neutrality—and, by extension,[18] a threat to the city itself. However, trade also went hand-in-hand with the requirements every country has regarding customs and the transit of goods. Many Austrian documents highlight the issue of customs duties and taxes payable on such goods. The Montenegrins maintained that they should be

[14] AMHSH, F. Ark. i Vj., V. 1915, fq. 67-69, Çështja e Toçit, Shkodër, dt. 02.02.1915.
[15] AMHSH, F. Ark. i Vj., V. 1914, fq. 343-344, Telegram i konsullit Halla drejtuar ministrit të jashtëm në Vjenë, fon Burien, Shkodër, dt. 14.11.1914.
[16] Horstenau, Edmund Glaise. (Drejt.) "*Österreich-Ungarns Letzter Krieg 1914-1918 Das Kriegsjahr 1916 Vierter Band, Erster Teil*", Wien: Militärwissenschaftlichen Mitteilungen, 1933, fq. 146.
[17] Rauchensteiner, Manfried. "Der Erste Weltkrieg und das Ende der Habsburgermonarchie 1914 – 1918", Wien: Böhlau Verlag Ges.m.b.H & Co. KG, 2013, fq. 507.
[18] "Korrespndence nga Shkodra – Intrigat e Esad Pashes", *Dielli*, 22.01.1915, fq. 1-2.

exempt from taxes on navigation along the Buna River and transit across Lake Shkodra[19]—a right they had secured years earlier under the terms of the Congress of Berlin. In late April 1915, the Montenegrin consul in Shkodra threatened the city's Administrative Council, warning that Montenegro would occupy Shkodra if it did not allow the passage of Montenegrin goods through the waters surrounding the city; however, this threat did not actually intimidate the city. Cetinje reported the Administrative Council's refusal to the International Control Commission in Durrës, and—thanks to the intervention of the Italian representative—a decision was reached that Montenegro was not required to pay any additional taxes at the Pulaj customs point.[20]

In early May 1915, an incident occurred in which two Montenegrin boats carrying fuel caught fire due to the carelessness of two Montenegrin boatmen at the Shkodra customs post; although Cetinje accused the Albanians of deliberate sabotage, this claim was not believed by the consuls—not even by the most pro-Montenegrin among them.

Shkodra was a vital point for Montenegro; through this city, Montenegro received information from the outside world—having been isolated by Austria due to the war—while the outside world, in turn, learned about the situation in the country through the information flowing into the city.[21] However, relations were not limited to the diplomatic, economic, and commercial spheres. Montenegro had threatened the highlands of Shkodra from the very onset of World War I. The Kelmend region was particularly vulnerable, given its proximity to Montenegro. For their part, the Montenegrins viewed the people of Kelmend as pro-Austrian, which made them prime targets for attack. Furthermore, upon entering the area in July 1914, Montenegro imposed cultural changes—such as a requirement to wear a Montenegrin-style headscarf known as a *Shushak*; those who refused faced execution or were tied to trees. Indeed, over a two-month period between July and August 1914, the villages of Vukël, Selcë, and Nikç were completely burned down, and 100 people were killed.[22] Faced with these circumstances, the residents of Kelmend themselves sent a letter to Colonel Phillips, asking him to intervene with Montenegro—not only to halt the reprisals but also to secure permission for them to return to their homes.[23] This move occurred even though the highlanders were not pro-British; indeed, they held London directly responsible for leaving vast territories in Hoti and Gruda outside the borders and within Montenegrin territory.

However, Austrian documents frequently reveal the Montenegrins' keen interest and determination to seize the city of Shkodra without delay. Following the departure of the German detachment, the Montenegrin consul sought to claim all the military materiel that had been left behind in Shkodra. In fact, as early as August 1914, it was anticipated that Montenegrin forces would enter the city once Italian troops withdrew, as the Montenegrins maintained that they had handed Shkodra over to international authorities, not to Albania.[24] Although the move was ostensibly a secret plan hatched in Cetinje, it was anticipated and known to everyone. King Nicholas of Montenegro himself believed that capturing the city would require little effort.[25]

The situation was vastly different during the second phase—the Montenegrin occupation. As early as June 1915, Montenegrin forces had launched an offensive and begun a two-week siege of Shkodra; by the 10th, they had reached the Buna Bridge. Despite violating treaties that strictly prohibited any border incursions from Cetinje into Albania, Montenegro justified the

[19] "Drohungen des montenegrinischen Konfuisin Skutari" *Allgemeiner Tiroler Anzeiger*, 11. Mai 1915, fq. 3.
[20] AMHSH, F. Ark. i Vj., V. 1915, fq. 134-137, Letër e Këshillit të Konsujve në Shkodër drejtuar kryetarit të Komisionit Ndërkombëtar të Kontrollit në Durrës, Shkodër, dt. 04.05.1915.
[21] "Montenegro und feine Politik", *Salzburger Chronik für Stadt und Land*, 27. August 1914, Fq. 3-4.
[22] AMHSH, F. Ark. i Vj., V. 1914, fq. 243-244, Agresioni malazez mbi Kelmendin, Shkodër, dt. 16.09.1914.
[23] AMHSH, F. Ark. i Vj., V. 1914, fq. 533-534, Letër e banorëve të Kelmendit drejtuar Kolonelit Filips, Guvernator i Shkodrës, Shkodër, dt. 21.08.1914.
[24] AMHSH, F. Ark. i Vj., V. 1914, fq. 20-21, Situata e përgjithshme. Largimi i detashmentit francez dhe italian, Shkodër, dt. 20.08.1914.
[25] "Montenegro und seine Politik", *Kärntner Zeitung*, 26. August 1914. Fq. 3.

move as a necessity, claiming that Austria was constantly inciting Shkodra to undermine Montenegro's economy. The handover took place on June 27; Preng Bib Doda, the Albanian head of the Local Administration Commission, surrendered the city to the local Montenegrin consul, Martinović. The transfer occurred at noon, with a force of 1,000 troops entering the city, accompanied by the consul and General Vešović—a man rumored to have killed around 1,000 Albanians in the Kosovo and Albania regions prior to that time.[26] The several dozen years of planning that Cetinja had to take Shkodra was also noticed by the positioned fortifications that it had as a state, since most of the best fortifications were in the area in front of the lake of Shkodra, which in the Austrian press stated that this had been the dream destination of King Nicholas. But the biggest incentive to take action had come after June 1915, when the Serbian occupation had started in the Albanian territory, as well as the actions of Italy that had occupied territories in the country, this had made it clear to Cetinja that she too could freely start the occupation.[27] Furthermore, another objective behind the occupation of Shkodra was for Montenegro to sever the link between Kosovo and the Catholic north of Albania,[28] thereby making it easier to launch incursions into both regions.

The justification offered to the Allies was that the offensive had been undertaken at the behest of the Albanian population, seeking liberation from Austrian influence. This claim lacked credibility; however, King Nicholas knew that with all of Europe at war, the Great Powers were powerless to prevent the move and could do little more than issue formal notes of protest against the occupation of Shkodra. Indeed, the Montenegrin offensive aimed to reach as far as the Drin River, but the mountainous terrain, resistance from the highland tribes, and the lack of a sufficiently large army to sustain the campaign halted the advance at Shkodra and its surrounding territories.

No one would have imagined that, upon the creation of the Albanian state, the country would play such a significant role at the very onset of a European war.[29] At the time, four warring nations—the Italians, Serbs, Greeks, and Montenegrins—harbored claims on and launched incursions into Albanian territory; having entered the region, they made Shkodra the most volatile focal point. The people of Shkodra viewed the Montenegrins with suspicion; indeed, the press of the era—reporting just days before the occupation—characterized them as treacherous. Unlike the Serbs, who had revealed their intentions to occupy the area from the very start, the Montenegrins remained silent while posing a threat from across the Buna Bridge. However, following the occupation, on July 10, the Governor of the Shkodra Prefecture, Vojvoda Božo Petrović, issued a public proclamation assuring the people of Shkodra that under their rule, all freedoms—including religious freedom—would be respected, provided they did not infringe upon the rights of others.[30] At the same time, the press called upon the population to surrender their weapons to the authorities for the sake of peace in the city—specifically urging that Albanian officials hand over arms that had been distributed by Austria with malicious intent.

The Montenegrins treated the capture and administration of Shkodra with great seriousness. In late November 1915, Prince Mirko—King Nicholas's son—arrived in Shkodra, where he later met with Prince Alexander of Serbia during his stay; the two were first cousins. The Montenegrin prince even complained to the Serbian prince about the pro-Austrian stance his father had begun to adopt.[31]

[26] Sejfi Vllamasi, "Ballafaqime...", fq. 137.
[27] Kristaq Prifti, & Gazmend Shpuza, "Historia e Popullit Shqiptar Vëll. III Periudha e Pavarësisë 28 nntor 16912 – 7 prill 1939", Tiranë: Toena: 2007, fq. 81.
[28] Gazmend Shpuza, "Kryengritja fshatare...", fq. 242.
[29] "Der Zankapfel Albanien", *Moderne Illustrierte Zeitung*, heft 12, Juli, XV Jhr. 1915, fq. 25.
[30] "Çpallje qeveritare", *Zani i Shkodres*, 31.07.1915, fq. 1.
[31] Trubetskoĭ, Grigoriĭ N. "Notes of a plenipotentiary : Russian diplomacy and war in the Balkans, 1914–1917", DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2015, fq. 86.

During the period of Montenegrin rule, the press of the time occasionally voiced indirect complaints or requests—within the limits imposed by an occupying power like Montenegro—urging the authorities to ensure the provision of bread and heating for the population before the harsh winter set in. This implied that, although conditions in the city had not reached the dire levels seen during the first Montenegrin siege and the ensuing crisis, life in the city was becoming increasingly difficult, even at a subsistence level. However, with the arrival of the Serbs, two distinct types of administration emerged in the city. There was the preceding Montenegrin administration—which had serious intentions and planned to maintain a permanent presence in Shkodër—followed by the Serbian administration after its own arrival in the city. The latter established itself in the old Turkish headquarters. However, the silent rivalry between the two administrations only exacerbated the chaos in the city.

Despite the silent reception Montenegro received upon entry, the city did not welcome this occupation; resistance or opposition to the occupying forces emerged wherever possible. With the exception of a small segment of the city's Orthodox population,[32] the rest of the Shkodër residents did not want Montenegrin rule. Moreover, in the early days—despite the Montenegrin government's propaganda—it arrested all the patriots, including Luigj Gurakuqi, Muço Qulli, Çerçiz Topulli, and many others, starting on July 18th. A week later, Alush Lohja was also arrested, though he was released very quickly, apparently due to intervention by Esad. However, the situation in Shkodra had begun to slip beyond the control of the Montenegrin monarch—especially following the Serbian incursion—as the city, previously thought to be quiet, was turning into a hotbed of lawlessness. Meanwhile, the presence of Serbs in the city hindered the Montenegrins from reaching an agreement to surrender to the Austrians; doing so might have led to accusations of collaboration with the Serbs—who were numerous in the very city the Montenegrins had long coveted.

The Austrian press frequently characterized Preng Bib Doda's surrender of Shkodra as an act of betrayal in the eyes of the people; yet, records from the Austrian consulate in Shkodra reveal that this same individual—acting as head of the City Administration Council—had actually written a letter of complaint to the local Council of Consuls, urging them to halt the Montenegrin advance on Shkodra.[33] On the other hand, there was consensus among all the consuls that Montenegro's position was not supported by any of their respective governments; the letter even cites the Russian and French consuls, who had previously sided with Montenegro almost throughout the entire period.

The strongest opposition from the Albanians came from our highland regions. The Dukagjin area, aided by its favorable mountainous terrain, put up the most effective resistance, with fighting breaking out there as early as the beginning of July 1915.[34] In the fighting that took place on July 7, around 100 Montenegrins were killed, and the defeated army was compelled to return to Montenegro rather than to Shkodër. This had such an impact that the city was virtually empty at the time, as a large portion of the army had been deployed to these contested areas. However, the city—exhausted in every respect and seeing no further support—offered no serious resistance.

The occupation of Shkodër by Montenegro was neither strategic nor driven by the pressure of Austrian provocation; rather, it was motivated by the historical interests Cetinje held regarding the city. Analyses in the Austrian press highlighted Cetinje's interests in Shkodër, stating that the city was the state's primary objective—to the extent that, were it guaranteed permanent possession of Shkodër, Montenegro would immediately abandon the war and its alliance with Serbia.[35] This city possessed greater significance than the current capital of Montenegro—

[32] Friedrich Wallisch „Skanderbegs Adler. Albanische Briefe aus dem Frühjahr 1914“, *Wiener Allgemeine Zeitung*, 27. Juni 1914, fq. 4.
[33] Sejfi Vllamasi, “Ballafaqime...”, fq. 137.
[34] “Die Kämpfe im Albanien”, *Pilsner Tagblatt*, 17. August 1915, fq. 6.
[35] “Montenegro und feine Politik”, *Salzburger Chronik für Stadt und Land*, 27. August 1914, fq. 3-4.

which resembled a mere mountain hamlet compared to the open, culturally diverse, and diplomatically important city that Shkodra was at the time. While the Austrian press's emotionally charged coverage from that era might warrant some skepticism, it accurately reflects the extent to which King Nicholas coveted the city; indeed, he viewed the conquest of Shkodra as his most sacred ambition.

Regarding strategic interests, one can observe an intersection between Montenegrin and Italian objectives. Italy's stance on the relationship between Albania and Montenegro can be viewed from two perspectives. First, prior to the Montenegrin occupation, Italy had actively supported Montenegro's interests in Shkodra. Italy's efforts to undermine the Central Powers in the region, combined with early-established dynastic ties, frequently led to Italian assistance for Montenegro in the Shkodra area. A significant portion of the ammunition Montenegro received via Lake Shkodra was transported by Italian vessels, which enjoyed freedom of movement. There were even instances where Italy shelled Albanian highlanders who sought to prevent Montenegrin ships from passing through Albanian waters, thereby ensuring a clear waterway for those vessels.

It is notable that the Austrian press, following the occupation of Shkodër, viewed the event less in terms of the Montenegrin occupation itself and more in relation to Italy; the latter was treated with derision, with the Italians branded as fools for having unwittingly aided Cetinje—which had betrayed the very Italian interests they had fought so fiercely to defend just two years earlier.[36] However, even though the Italians were perceived as siding with the Montenegrins, the Albanian people actually preferred them; indeed, the Albanians had even asked the Italians to send their own troops if it meant avoiding a Montenegrin occupation.

The occupation of Shkodra not only disappointed Italy regarding Cetinje but also sparked open opposition against it. At a time when—following cooperation between Italy and Serbia—Montenegro was expected to attack Austria, it instead occupied Shkodra, revealing itself to be an opportunistic and cowardly state. Furthermore, this occupation violated the agreement Cetinje itself had reached in Rome regarding respect for this Italian sphere of interest. Consequently, despite the alliance that was supposed to exist between Italy, Serbia, and Montenegro, their actions on Albanian soil—particularly in Shkodra—led to a relationship marked by coldness and mutual envy. Yet, Montenegro had learned this type of behavior from Italy itself, which, just a few years earlier while at war with the Ottoman Empire, had seized Tripolitania before peace negotiations with Istanbul had even properly begun.[37] Italian Foreign Minister Sidney Sonnino had declared that the Albanian territory extending to the Drin River was a "reserved zone" (without specifying for whom), and thus this occupation would not be recognized by Italy. Immediately upon the entry of Montenegrin troops into Shkodër, Italy withdrew all aid to Cetinje and demanded a blockade of the Montenegrin coast. Furthermore, Rome never regarded the Montenegrin or Serbian advances as being driven by strategic necessity.

However, the Great Power most affected by the attack on and occupation of Shkodër was Austria-Hungary itself. The Montenegrin administration in Shkodër sent a letter to the Austrian consul, Halla, stating that since the two states were at war, the Austrian consulate was required to leave the territory of Shkodër by June 17.[38] This initial letter was categorically rejected by the consulate. However, on June 30th, the Austrian consulate in Shkodër sent a final letter to the same government, declaring that they would be leaving the city following a forceful demand from Montenegro—a move made against Vienna's wishes. Furthermore, they

[36] "Skutari",*Arbeiter Zeitung*, 3. Juli 1915, fq. 1.
[37] "Sie raufenttev um Albanien", *Nordböhmisches Volks-Blatt*, 3. Juli 1915, fq. 2.
[38] AMHSH, F. Ark. i Vj., V. 1915, fq. 105-106, Letër e Guvernatorit malazez të Shkodrës Veshoviç drejtuar Konsullit austriak Halla, Shkodër, dt. 16.06.1915.

steadfastly denied having aided the rebels—as Cetinje termed the resisting Albanians.[39] Thus concluded a long chapter in the decades-long history of the Austrian consulate in Shkodër.
Yet, their departure proved to be merely a prolonged hiatus, lasting only until January 1916—a mere six or seven months away. By the winter of 1915, the tide had turned in Vienna's favor; Montenegrin forces were depleted, and their king was beginning to fear for his position. Nevertheless, following the withdrawal from Shkodër, the Austrian press questioned whether Berchtold's enthusiasm for creating an Albanian state had truly been worth it, given such a failure. The territory of Shkodër was now under Montenegrin control—though, in reality, it held more Serbian troops than Montenegrin ones—making it a target for Austrian attack. Bombardments of Serbian and Montenegrin positions in Shkodër began in December 1915. The first bombardment began on December 8, resulting in civilian casualties; a girl was killed and four others were wounded. However, the heaviest assault using Austrian bombs took place on Christmas Day, December 25, when 15 men and two horses were killed following a direct attack on the Montenegrin station's command headquarters.[40] This caused panic not only among the soldiers but, above all, among the population, who did not understand who the target of the attack was. People even began to say that Austria wanted Albania but did not want the Albanians.[41] However, this notion was dispelled in the days following the end of the Montenegrin offensive—not least because no one in Albania wanted the Serbs or Montenegrins there either, with the exception of Esad Pasha, who had collaborated with them.
The Austrian armies were to return via the route from Prizren to Shkodër, but traversing this territory was extremely difficult, owing both to the lack of roads and the harsh winter conditions in the mountainous areas. The Montenegrins never managed to determine when the Austrians would enter Shkodër; they could not even extract any information from the Austrian soldiers who had been taken prisoner. The entire Montenegrin high command anticipated an Austrian offensive as early as the first days of January, yet it never materialized. Nevertheless, this offensive was quietly awaited—particularly by elements of the battered Serbian army, who were more inclined to surrender to the Austrians than to engage in joint military operations with the Montenegrins. Serbia Stranded in the Shkodra Region
One of the major events that drew attention to Albania—and consequently to Shkodra, which played a pivotal role—was the Serbian army becoming stranded on Albanian soil; a significant portion of the force remained in Shkodra for days on end. However, it was not merely the rank-and-file army that stayed in the city; two prominent figures—Prince Alexander of Serbia and Prime Minister Pašić—were also stranded there.[42]
The plight of the Serbs on Albanian territory actually garnered international attention; American newspapers, which had correspondents on the ground, stated that even Napoleon's retreat from Russia was no more harrowing than the Serbian withdrawal across Albanian lands, where the troops went without food for days.

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[39] AMHSH, F. Ark. i Vj., V. 1915, fq. 105, Letër e Konsullit austriak Halla drejtuarGuvernatorit malazez të Shkodrës Veshoviç,Shkodër, dt. 30.06.1915.
[40] Horstenau, Edmund Glaise. (Drejt.) "*Österreich-Ungarns Letzter...", fq. 73.*
[41] Trubetskoĭ, Grigoriĭ N. "Notes of a plenipotentiary...", fq. 88.
[42] "Nicht abgereift", *Kärntner Zeitung*, 30. Dezember 1915, fq. 172.

The plight of the Serbs on Albanian territory actually garnered international attention; American newspapers—which had correspondents on the ground—stated that even Napoleon's retreat from Russia was no more harrowing than the Serbian withdrawal across Albanian lands, where troops went days without food. High-ranking Serbian officials were effectively "guests" of King Nicholas—who controlled Shkodra—and it was said that he provided them with sustenance. Meanwhile, food supplies sent by Serbia's allies, such as France, to the port of Shëngjin were repeatedly bombarded by Austrian warships, destroying the aid. In the eyes of the Austrian press, Serbia no longer had a king, and Peter was known as "John Lackland." It was an irony of fate that both the Montenegrins and the Serbs stranded there found themselves in the very place whose destiny they had so disastrously shaped. The Serbian army had over 80,000 troops stranded, with half of them in Shkodër.[43] Prince Alexander of Serbia arrived in Shkodër on December 1st—accompanied by only one officer and one soldier—after a ten-day journey, finding himself among friends, including the Queen of Montenegro, who was his grandmother. He arrived ahead of Prime Minister Pašić. The Prince himself participated in the first meeting of the Serbian government-in-exile, where new ministers were appointed and those responsible for the tragedy—which the Serbs themselves termed the "Albanian Golgotha"—were identified.[44] From this city, he frequently sent messages to the Allies, urging them to save Serbia from catastrophe—specifically from starvation and the Austrian threat that was drawing closer by the day. Plans were made for him to depart Shkodër for Shëngjin in early 1916, where Allied forces were to pick him up; however, having undergone genital surgery in a building in Shkodër and being unable to move on his own, he had to be transported in a simple horse-drawn carriage. From this city, he frequently sent messages to the Allies, urging them to save Serbia from catastrophe—specifically from starvation and the Austrian threat that was drawing closer by the day. In early 1916, plans were made for him to leave Shkodra for Shëngjin, where Allied forces would pick him up; however, having undergone genital surgery in a building in Shkodra, he was unable to move and had to be transported in a simple horse-drawn cart.[45]

Another prominent Serbian figure in Shkodra was Prime Minister Nikola Pašić. He was no longer satisfied with the proposal—advocated since January 1915 by the Russian Foreign Minister (his greatest ally)—for a border between Greece and Serbia that would cut across Albania. Pašić envisioned a European future in which Serbia played a major role across the continent, not merely within the Balkans; consequently, being stranded in Albanian territory left him deeply frustrated. He pinned his hopes on General Vojvode Putnik, who was by then very elderly and unable to walk; upon arriving in Shkodra, Putnik had to be pulled by his soldiers in a makeshift cart.

All Serbian hopes rested on the assistance Montenegro was providing at the time. However, the latter—a state with a population no larger than that of Belgrade—found it impossible to maintain an army as large as the one that had filled Shkodra. For Austrian newspapers, reality proved more inventive than imagination; they remarked on the sheer improbability of King Peter and Prime Minister Pašić fleeing to the very city that had suffered so grievously at their hands just months earlier. These papers cited accounts by Edith Durham, noting that the massacres perpetrated by the Serbs—following Berchtold's 1913 order to withdraw from the Shkodra-Puka region—defied reporting, representing the absolute nadir of human depravity.[46]

The population remained incensed by Serbian massacres, and one of the few factors keeping Serbian soldiers in Shkodër was the threat of Montenegrin bayonets in the event of a counter-response. However, the Austrians knew that Peter had come to Shkodër because he could no

[43] Ković, Miloš. "The British Adriatic Squadron and the Evacuation of Serbs from the Albanian Coast 1915–1916", at *Balcanika,* Beograd, 2018, (XLIX), fq. 33.
[44] Dragan Bakić, "Regent Alexander Karadjordjević in the First World War" *Balcanika,* Beograd, 2017, (XLVIII), fq. 199-200.
[45] Dragan Bakić, "Regent Alexander ...", fq. 200.
[46] "Die Flucht der serbischen Regierung nach Skutari", *Neue Freie Presse*, 26. November 1915, fq. 1.

longer safely remain in Thessaloniki, given that the Greek government had by then aligned itself with the Central Powers.

Yet, the Serbs' presence and lingering in Albanian territory also made them a source of friction in the eyes of the Montenegrins. King Nicholas was by this time prioritizing the interests of his son-in-law—the King of Italy—over the familial ties he shared with Serbia. In fact, the conflict between the two Slavic nations had begun as early as the start of the occupation of Shkodër in the summer of 1915; the Serbian general serving in the Montenegrin army, Ivanović, had opposed the occupation of Shkodër and was dismissed by King Nicholas of Montenegro as a result.[47] Serbia's aim was to absolve itself of any blame regarding the Montenegrin occupation of Shkodër. For the Austrians, the last-minute withdrawal of the Montenegrins and Serbs from the siege of Shkodra in the spring of 1913 had saved Europe from a new war, while under the new circumstances,[48] the Serbs were viewed as refugees. This was taking place in a city like Shkodra, where the scars of the massacres they had committed were still visible. King Nicholas moved Serbian troops toward Shkodra to prevent the Austrians from viewing them as full collaborators and using that as a pretext to occupy the territory. Another factor was the looting committed by starving Serbian troops on Montenegrin soil; this drove a final wedge between the two sides.[49] Yet, while the Serbian army's stagnation in Albania was a general phenomenon, the situation in Shkodra was defined by the personal predicaments of key Serbian figures.[50] Prime Minister Pašić feared staying in Thessaloniki, viewing himself as a hostage of the Allies, yet he found no welcome in Cetinje either—relations between King Nicholas and King Peter were frozen, complicated by the fraught, mistrustful dynamic between a father-in-law and his son-in-law.

Conclusions

Regarding Shkodra, the nineteen-month period spanning from the outbreak of the Sarajevo incident in June 1914 to the arrival of the Austrian offensive in January 1916 was a tumultuous time—one of many such episodes the city would endure. Shkodra's international status was unique, warranting a dedicated study within the context of wartime diplomacy. The city came to be governed by a group of consular-level diplomats who, finding themselves trapped in this encircled zone, began to take the city's fate into their own hands—often operating outside the confines of their respective nations' interests. Their objectives and policies were driven more by the local context of Shkodra than by the agendas of their home countries; bloc politics faded into the background as these individuals—consciously or otherwise—became personally invested in the city's destiny. Italy was the Great Power playing a complex game in the Shkodra region. Driven by its rivalry with Austria, it was willing to compromise its own interests—and by extension, those of Shkodra—even before the two powers had formally aligned with opposing camps. Italy appears to have miscalculated when it backed Montenegro, ultimately becoming entangled in Cetinje's interests—a situation compounded by existing dynastic ties. For the people of Shkodra, however, the situation was largely viewed as a disappointment—a realization that any expected help would be meager—especially after the country's interests regarding our neighbor across the border came to light.

Meanwhile, Montenegro—a nation in the final throes of its independent political existence—employed every maneuver it knew, or had been taught, to achieve its aims during this brief period. Rarely has a country desired a city—be it Shkodra or any other—as intensely as Montenegro coveted Shkodra; the city seemed to be viewed as the very nucleus of an entire

[47] "Serben in Durres", *Pilsner Tagblatt*, 2. Juli 1915, fq. 6.
[48] "Die Flucht der ...", *Neue Freie Presse*, 26. November 1915, fq. 1.
[49] Horstenau, Edmund Glaise. (Drejt.) "*Österreich-Ungarns Letzter...",* fq. 101.
[50] "Die Flucht der serbischen Regierung nach Skutari", *Neue Freie Presse*, 26. November 1915, fq. 1.

state. Yet, King Nicholas never grasped that this dream and his associated actions had weakened him and made him a figure of ridicule; not only did he fail in every solitary attempt to capture Shkodra, but his own fate as a leader was sealed alongside that "Shkodra dream."
The situation regarding Serbia was quite distinct; it did not appear as an aggressor, but rather like someone forced by necessity to show up at one's doorstep. It was viewed less as a mere enemy and more as the embodiment of a fearsome foe—one that ultimately demonstrated to the Albanians that it, too, could be defeated—while the Serbian government enjoyed a destiny that the Montenegrin government never experienced. Despite the conditions of war and the circumstances of exile, he managed to convene the government cabinet in Shkodër—a location he had never envisioned in the way he had once dreamed of Cetinje.
The city effectively weathered a preliminary surge—a sort of prelude to the unfolding drama of the First World War. Though this wave took its toll, it kept the city standing firm against internal and external pressures, bracing it for the subsequent waves—the historical and political storms—that our country would face in the post-war era.

Conclusions

During World War I, Shkodra became a key center of influence for Young Turk politics and Austro-Hungarian interests, thereby weakening Esad Pasha's position. Kara Seid Pasha—backed by the Young Turks and accepted by certain Albanian groups—was intended to serve as a means to strengthen Ottoman authority and establish a front against Serbian forces. However, due to international factors, he was unable to penetrate Albania and was captured by Montenegrin forces in October 1916.
Between 1914 and 1915, Italy intervened heavily in Albanian affairs—particularly in Shkodra—by supporting Esad Pasha Toptani for strategic reasons and fomenting religious and political discord within the city. The actions of Italian consuls such as Galli and De Facendis frequently sparked tensions with local residents and Catholic representatives, while figures like Father Gjergj Fishta and Terenc Toçi opposed this interference. Furthermore, Italy leveraged its relations with Montenegro and Serbia to expand its regional influence, often in conflict with the interests of the Albanians and Austria-Hungary. From the outbreak of World War I until the Austro-Hungarian occupation in January 1916, Montenegro exerted pressure on and subsequently occupied Shkodra, citing strategic, economic, and historical grounds and justifying the move as a defensive measure against Austrian influence. This occupation provoked resistance from the local population and Albanian highlanders, while also clashing with the interests of Italy and Austria-Hungary in the region. Although Shkodra was temporarily administered by the Montenegrins and later by the Serbs, Austro-Hungarian intervention in late 1915 initiated the process of the city's liberation.
In late 1915, a large part of the Serbian army—along with its leaders, including Prince Alexander and Prime Minister Pašić—was forced to seek refuge in Shkodra following a harrowing retreat across Albanian territories, an ordeal often compared to historical catastrophes such as Napoleon's campaign in Russia. While initially supported by King Nicholas of Montenegro, a lack of resources and strained relations between Serbia and Montenegro escalated the conflict and exacerbated the situation. Shkodra, having already suffered the consequences of the Serbian army's actions, became the setting for a political and humanitarian tragedy, leaving the Serbian leadership isolated and abandoned by their allies.

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