

Skenderbeg and Albanian National Consciousness

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This year, the 500th anniversary of the death of *Skenderbeg*, the Albanian national hero who for twenty-four years put up a strenuous resistance to the Ottomans, will be commemorated inside and outside Albania, by Albanians as well as by foreigners.

Skenderbeg's reputation, which was already great in his lifetime, became even greater after his death. Numerous are the writers who have written about him. But the one who has contributed most to his fame is an Albanian Catholic clergyman from Shkodër, *Marinus Barletius*, with his "Historia de Vita et Gestis Scanderbegi" (Rome, 1506—1510). His work had several editions and was translated in many European languages. The veracity of his statements, however, has often been contested by critical historians, yet his work has survived, because of its literary merits. Since the time of *Barletius*, hundreds of works, mostly based on him, have appeared on *Skenderbeg*, both in the West and in the Slavic world.

The renown of *Skenderbeg* in the West was due in part to his capacities as a leader, because he was able to defend his country against unusual odds, and in part because his war against the Ottoman Sultans bore the stamp of the Cross against the Crescent. He was helped by the Christian West, especially by *Alphonse V*, King of Naples, who continued to represent Western ambitions in the Balkans, and by the popes. Before his death, *Pope Nicholas V* called him "Champion of Christendom", a title which was confirmed by three of his successors.¹⁾

The memory of the Albanian national hero was maintained vividly among the Albanians of Italy, those who emigrated to Calabria and Sicily, following his death. Among them, "during the wedding dinner", wrote A. Smilari toward the end of the last century, "guns are fired on every side, and songs are chanted, which recall the dinners of *Skenderbeg*". And in the afternoon of Easter day, "The men and women dance separately, singing poems which bring to

¹⁾ F. S. Noli, *George Castrioti Scanderbeg*. New York, 1947, p. 73.

memory Skenderbeg and the fall of Albania under Turkish rule."²⁾ Living compactly in Christian territory, though in separate communities, the Italo-Albanians have preserved the songs about *Skenderbeg* and his exploits which their ancestors had brought from the mother country. Today one may even speak of the existence of a *Skenderbeg* cycle among them, if one takes into account also the songs on other Albanian heroes who surrounded him.

Different, however, was the situation in Albania proper. After *Skenderbeg's* death, Islam gradually gained so many converts among the inhabitants that by the 19th century the majority of them had become Moslems. The memory of the national hero had begun to fade and songs which once celebrated him and his companions had disappeared. It would be regarded as *lèse majesté* to recollect the deeds and sing heroic songs about a commander who had opposed two powerful Sultans, *Murad II* and *Mehmed II*, in the name of Christianity.

Thus, it was not in Albania proper that the personality of *Skenderbeg* first reemerged. It was among the Italo-Albanians, who enjoyed freedom in Italy and were far from Ottoman danger, that *Skenderbeg* became, at the time of the struggles for the liberation of Italy, the inspiration of nationalism and an incentive for the liberation of their brothers across the Adriatic. He served also as an essential link between the two shores. One of the Italo-Albanian poets, *Girolamo De Rada* from Calabria, published the "Rhapsodies of an Albanian Poem"³⁾, founded on the folk songs of his people, in which he told of the freedom of the Albanians before the Ottoman conquest, their wars against the Ottoman invaders, and their exile to Italy. In a later poem, "*Skenderbeg*"⁴⁾, *De Rada* sang nostalgically of the heroic past of the Albanian forefathers, with *Skenderbeg* as the great hero in their midst, raising hopes for Albanian revival. A younger Albanian poet, *Giuseppe Schirò* from Sicily, turned also to the glories of the past to assert the rights of Albania to independence. In his "Albanian Rhapsodies"⁵⁾, the first part deals with the

²⁾ A. S m i l a r i, *Gli Albanesi d'Italia, loro costumi e poesie popolari*. Naples, 1891, pp. 51—52, 31.

³⁾ G. D e R a d a, *Rapsodie d'un poema albanese raccolte nelle Colonie del Napoletano*. Firenze, 1866.

⁴⁾ G. D e R a d a, *Poesie albanesi*. Vol. 2. Corigliano Calabro, 1872.

⁵⁾ G. S c h i r o, *Rapsodie albanesi*. Testo, traduzione, note. Palermo, 1887.

siege of Krujë (Croya), *Skenderbeg's* capital, by the Sultan *Mehmed II* in 1446.

After the League of Prizren (1878—1881), which was primarily created in order to oppose the decisions of the Congress of Berlin detrimental to Albanian territory, the Albanians of the mother country followed the example of their brothers in Italy. *Skenderbeg* began to hold a prominent place in the works and speeches of the national awakeners. It has been remarked that in periods of national renaissance people evoke their glorious past — it can serve as a stimulus — and write histories. They are not interested in historical accuracy which satisfies the intellect; their interest lies in a mixture of history and legend which can best move them. Father *Paisij's* "Slavenobulgarian History" (1762), which became a strong incentive in the Bulgarian national movement, was such a blend. *Jovan Rajić's* "History of the Slavic Peoples, Particularly of the Bulgarians, Croats and Serbs" (1794/95) is another instance among the neighboring Serbs. The Albanians reverted to *Skenderbeg* who, by unifying the small Albanian feudal lords and winning the confidence of the people opposed the Ottomans and created, under his leadership, a loose independent Albania.

The first among the Albanians of Albania proper to write in Albanian — at a time when even publishing in the Albanian language had been banned by the Porte — a legendary history of *Skenderbeg* was *Naim Frashëri*, the apostle poet of Albanian nationalism. His history is a long poem, bearing the title "The History of *Skenderbeg*".⁶⁾ In it *Naim* extols the feats of the Albanian hero and describes the battles of his countrymen, under his supreme command. *Faik Konitza*, the learned editor of the review "Albania" (Brussels and London, 1897—1909), popularized the figure of *Skenderbeg* and his flag — the black double-headed eagle on a red background — which he discovered in his library researches in Europe. He also published in his journal an Albanian translation of several of the poems on *Skenderbeg* comprised in the "Agreeable Discourse of Slavic People" (1756, 1759)⁷⁾ by the Dalmatian poet *Andrija Kačić Miošić*. And the national poet *Gjergj Fishta* evoked the period of *Skender-*

⁶⁾ N. Frashëri, *Historia e Skënderbeut*. Bucharest, 1899.

⁷⁾ A. Kačić Miošić, *Razgovor ugodni naroda slovinskoga*, in *Djela Andrije Kačića Miošića*, Knj. I (Iz. Jugoslavenska Akademija znanosti i umjetnosti). Zagreb 1942.

beg in *Mois Golemi*, an Albanian feudal lord who first betrayed his leader and later rejoined him to remain faithful until the end.

The elevation of *Skenderbeg* to the rank of the national hero was in large measure the work of the writers of the revival period. His acceptance as such, however, by a people religiously divided into small Christian minorities and a predominant Moslem majority is worthy of note.

As far as the Italo-Albanians and the Catholics of northern Albania are concerned, it is easy to understand why they held *Skenderbeg* as the Albanian national hero — they both were Vatican-oriented. As for the Orthodox of the south, a short explanation may clarify their position. Until the outbreak of the Second World War, there were Orthodox Albanians who believed that *Skenderbeg* had been Orthodox. The religious affiliations of members of his family confused them. *Skenderbeg's* father, *Gjon Kastrioti*, had changed religion several times. He was a Catholic as an ally of Venice and turned into an Orthodox as an ally of *Stefan Lazarević* of Serbia. One of *Skenderbeg's* brothers, *Reposhi*, had been a monk in Sinai and died as a monk in the Serbian Orthodox monastery of Hilandar, in Mount Athos. But a more weighty reason for them must have been that *Skenderbeg* fought against the Ottomans, who were their foes. How could one account however, for the fact that *Skenderbeg*, this "Champion of Christendom", became the national hero of the Moslem Albanians as well?

Let it be said from the outset that the Albanians, owing to historical conditions, have never been religious people. During the Late Middle Ages, their country had become the battlefield between the Catholic West and the Orthodox East. Whenever the West was advancing, the Albanian feudal lords — often followed by their populations — espoused Catholicism; whenever Byzantium was the victor and the West retreated, they embraced Orthodoxy. They lived, one might say, a religiously amphibious life.

With such a tradition behind them, when the Ottomans conquered Albania, it was not hard for the Albanian feudal lords, who remained in the country, to be converted into Islam in order to preserve their privileges. Moreover, the Ottoman empire being primarily a military empire, offered great opportunities to the warlike Albanians as a whole. As the conversions were rather the result of expediency, religious fanaticism had slight possibility of development.

It was not religion that was of consequence to the Albanians, but blood kinship. In a tribal society, as a great part of Albania had been in the past, blood is at its basis. If among the highlanders of the north, Christian and Moslem, the songs about *Skenderbeg* had been forgotten, legends about him and incidents of his life were still remembered. The story goes, for instance, that a discussion about the vendetta took place between the Albanian national hero and *Lek Dukagjini*, another Albanian feudal lord, to whom the customary law of northern Albania is attributed.⁸⁾ Until the liberation of Albania from the Ottomans (1912), there were brothers in the south, some Christian and others Moslem, to whom religion did not matter, for they celebrated together the great holidays of their respective religions (Easter and Bayram). In a mountainous belt between the northern highlands and the south, comprising the regions of Mat, Krujë and Dibër, where the inhabitants are preponderantly Moslems, a slightly different and less consistent customary law was in force, which bore the name of "Code of Skenderbeg".⁹⁾ By all these Moslems of Albania *Skenderbeg* was not thought of in terms of religion, but of blood — an Albanian.

At the same time the name *Skenderbeg* helped to obliterate his religion, since he was not known by his Christian name, which was *Gjergj* (George), but by that of *Skenderbeg*, a good Moslem name.

Connected with the importance of blood relationship, could there have been perhaps among the Moslem national awakeners a certain feeling of identification with *Skenderbeg*? He had been sent by his father as a hostage to the Sultan's palace, where he had been converted into Islam. He had served his master in several wars and at the battle near Niš (1443), when the Ottoman armies retreated, he deserted and returned to Krujë to hoist the banner of revolt and defend Albania. The Moslem national awakeners were descendants of islamized Christian Albanians, most of whom had entered the service of the Sultan. On the eve of the collapse of the Ottoman empire they became aware that the moment was approaching when they would have to declare themselves independent and oppose the empire.

⁸⁾ A. Shtjefen Konst. G j e ç o v [collector and codifier], *Kanun i Lekë Dukagjinit* [The Code of Lekë Dukagjini]. Shokdër 1933, p. 121.

⁹⁾ Cf. M. H a s l u c k, *The Unwritten Law in Albania*. Cambridge 1954, chapters XIV, XV.

Thus *Skenderbeg* possessed the attributes which satisfied the religiously divided people of Albania. He represented a glorious past, when all the Albanians were rather united. He became their national hero and the symbol of unification. The writers of the revival, whose great concern was union, called all the Albanians, irrespective of religion, "sons of Skenderbeg".¹⁰⁾

The pride of the Albanians in *Skenderbeg* was reinforced when they saw that his personality had impressed so many cultured foreigners. *Andrija Kačić Miošić* devoted more songs to him than to the Serbian kings. *Voltaire* wrote of him: "Si les empereurs grecs avaient été des Scanderbeg, l'empire d'orient se serait conservé."¹¹⁾ Even *H. W. Longfellow*, in distant America, composed a poem on him, "Scanderbeg", included in the "Tales of a Wayside Inn".

In the ensuing months, *Skenderbeg's* memory will be honored, on the occasion of the 5th centenary of his death. In Albania proper, in Italy, where even the Pope is expected to participate, and among the Albanian communities abroad, various aspects of his historical role will be emphasized, depending on political outlook. However, irrespective of differences in political outlook, one constant will run through all the commemorations: *Skenderbeg* as the Albanian national hero, who succeeded in uniting his people and defended his country against the expanding Ottoman power, thus becoming the embodiment of Albanian national consciousness.

¹⁰⁾ Cf. Gj. F i s h t a, *Lahuta e Malcis* [The Lute of the Mountains]. Second edition, Rome 1458, Canto XIX:

Stand up, you sons of Skenderbeg (448)

Christians and Moslems, let not religion divide you! (449).

¹¹⁾ *Essais sur les moeurs* (in *Oeuvres Complètes*). Paris 1928, vol. 3, chap. XVI, p. 122.