

The Background  
of  
The Italian-Greek Conflict

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By

FAIK KONITZA

*Former Envoy of Albania to the United States*

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Washington, 1940

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## PREFATORY REMARKS

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I am publishing in pamphlet form a statement which I issued in the latter part of August, when it seemed as if an armed conflict between Italy and Greece were imminent. Two journalists, independently of each other, told me that my statement was "newsworthy"; and the news agencies, often more intelligent and always more independent than the newspapers, were kind enough to send an abstract of it over the wires. It was a surprise to me, therefore, that no newspaper thought fit even to mention it. I have no bad feelings about this curious silence. After all, the newspapers are masters in their own house and free to extend or deny at pleasure the hospitality of their columns. Nor am I one of those simpletons who, under the spell of what has been aptly called "the hypnotism of repetition," believe, from having heard it so often, that there actually is such a thing as a free press. But my curiosity was tickled, and I kept wondering what could well be the motives for ignoring my statement, which, for one thing, as every reader will see by himself, was moderate in form, assuming at times almost the colorless detachment of an inventory. I reduced the motives of this apparent hostility to a few possibilities.

First, of course, is the question of facts. Perhaps the facts submitted by me were not "facts" as understood by the press. As chance would have it, the very day that I started writing down my statement, a newspaper came out with the information that "Turin is an Italian naval base." Next day, a noted journalist, turned radio commentator, referred to the Imam of Yemen as a "Sultan." Then I was reminded of a collection of newspaper curiosities that I had compiled in my spare moments for my own amusement. I looked it up and read that "Tacitus was a Roman historian who lived in the third century before Christ," and that "King Alfonso XIII is the last of the Habsburgs," and so on. While writing these remarks, I heard over the radio another



noted journalist volunteer the information that a gentleman, whom until then I had considered a devout member of the Church of England although belonging to the "High Church" part of it, I mean Lord Halifax, is "a Roman Catholic." These bits of news are interesting in a way; but they are tantamount to saying that—Denver, Colorado, is a United States naval base; the ruler of Monaco is an Emperor; Shakespeare was a contemporary of Richard Coeur-de-Lion; King Victor Emmanuel is the last of the Hohenzollerns; and the present Archbishop of Canterbury is a Cardinal. Obviously, a certain press either does not recognize facts when it sees them, or attaches to the word "fact" a special meaning unknown to the dictionary.

Then there is, of course, the question of space. My statement had to be long in order to cover the subject; in fact, it was long enough to supply the text of a little pamphlet. But those acquainted with the making of a modern newspaper are aware of the fact that one of the standing problems of this particular work is to have material enough to fill up every day countless columns. In Europe this problem has been solved by the device of keeping always in hand a number of articles of different length on various subjects of permanent value, already set up in type and waiting on the galley for immediate use in case of need. In the United States the problem is disposed of by a clever method of padding, which consists in repeating a story, generally three times, each time in a new wording. This is a most curious adaptation of an obsolete musical form, known as *theme with variations*. First, there is a copious headline, which constitutes the theme. Then the story is briefly told; this is the first variation. A second variation follows, in which the story is told anew with more details. Finally, the story is taken up again from the beginning in a more elaborate form and the writer winds up with speculations about future developments: this corresponds to the musicians' *da capo, e poi la coda*. The finished product is often a creditable piece of verbal composition,—and, in skilled hands, can be even a work of original artistic merit. It has also its practical usefulness for the reader; for instance, in a family of three, the article can be cut in three parts and every member of

the family is able to get the whole story without having to wait for the two other parts. But it is obvious that newspapers, which have to resort to such stratagems in order to fill up their columns, could well afford now and then to get rid of a small portion of their bulky padding and make room for bits of informative writing of a more serious character. Their overworked staffs have not the leisure and may not have the equipment necessary for this type of writing. Moreover, editors have always assumed the right to curtail and condense,—a right they do not always exercise in a fair or even intelligent manner; but this right has now acquired general recognition, and is an additional reason for considering with some suspicion any denial of publication because of alleged lack of space.

Of a more serious character is the suspicion of newspapers that they may be made the unconscious tools of some dark, mysterious propaganda. Their reticence is worthy of praise,—if the reticence is sincere and not a propaganda in reverse. Although the word "propaganda" is new, the thing it has come to mean is old, and its ways may be studied in the pages of history with all the advantages of distance. There are four periods of particular interest in such a study: The struggle of the Papacy with the Hohenstaufens and especially with Emperor Frederick II; the wars and controversies of the Reformation; the contests between the followers of the Stuarts and the "Usurpers"; and the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. The first World War in our own time is too recent, and lacks the perspective necessary to an impartial study. One clear lesson that emerges from the history of these four periods of propaganda, is this: *If your propaganda is to succeed, you must by all means prevent the other side's case from reaching the public, except in the shape of fraudulent misquotations.* The question whether the region southeast of Albania, now in Greece, has always been a part of Albania in the past, is a point of history that has nothing to do with any present war or side, and that is the only thing I have discussed in my statement. But because in the present state of world affairs certain aspects of Albano-Greek history may strengthen Italian designs, the press virtuously declined to publish my statement.



It could have published it and in the same issue contradicted it in an editorial note; in ignoring it altogether, the press took part in a definite bit of propaganda. The shoe, I am afraid, is on the other foot.

Needless to say, I do not blame any journalists for all this. The average American journalist is intelligent, alert, resourceful, and fair-minded. He often can compare favorably with his European colleague. If sometimes he is sadly uninformed on certain questions, it is not his fault; it is rather the fault of the publisher, who does not encourage or reward specialization, and who prefers his reporters to be Jacks-of-all-trades and ready to write offhand about everything—because it is cheaper this way. Nor has the journalist anything to do with the policy of his paper. And if one day, prompted by his conscience, he were bold enough to express an opinion clashing with the established dogmas of his paper, what would happen is this: The publisher, forgetting both his pontifical dignity and his cant about the freedom of thought, would suddenly turn bouncer and chuck out the rash sinner into the cold street. Publishers are honest merchants who have their own interests and ambitions to take care of; and being humans, they also have their prejudices and their whims. The European publisher is as callous as his American counterpart, and sometimes he is even more so. But there is one fundamental difference between the two. The European publisher shrinks from such highfalutin pretenses as working for the cause of humanity, justice, freedom, and so forth. If he were to assume this pose, he would be afraid of provoking laughter or, what is worse, smiles. He quietly admits that he has an axe to grind; and that he is in the market to sell his merchandise, not to peddle somebody else's wares. Such candor disarms criticism.

*Faik Konitza*

October 10, 1940  
1530 Sixteenth Street,  
Washington, D. C.

P.S.—The text of my statement is published here without any change, exactly as it was sent out to the press on August 22.

## THE BACKGROUND OF THE ITALIAN-GREEK CONFLICT

Preliminary verbal skirmishes, preceding a probable armed conflict, have been going on for some time between Italy and Greece over Albania. Italy contends that Greece is holding a good deal of territory rightfully belonging to Albania, while Greece loudly denies the claim. It has seemed odd to many Americans that, while Italians and Greeks were being heard, there was no independent Albanian voice audible. But did not an English writer once give as one of the characteristics of the Albanians that they are "inarticulate"? To repeated inquiries, I have answered that I had nothing to say; and to those American friends whose affection gave them the right to ask me why, I declared that I was weary of everything and had decided henceforward to remain a mere spectator of the world's tragedies and farces. But now I am being urged by a group of Albanian nationalists to make a statement. These Albanian friends know about me a few things that my American friends do not know. They know that I was born in the Albanian-Greek borderland, which is precisely part of the disputed region, and thus the grounds where I played as a boy are prospective battlefields; they think that nobody is better acquainted than I with the history of the region; and they keep reminding me that as a youthful leader I once was a strenuous defender of the territorial integrity of Albania. I therefore have



decided, though reluctantly, to break my silence and submit to the American public some ascertainable facts concerning the background of the impending conflict.

## I

In ancient times, as everybody knows, the Albanians were called Illyrians. The disputed region was known of old as Southern Illyria, and later on as Southern Albania; while the Greeks have chosen to call it Epirus, a name meaning "mainland" and originally applied to the region by the inhabitants of the small isles off the coast of Albania,—in the same way as fishermen in the Bahamas would call Florida "the mainland," a name prejudging nothing as to the nationality of the people living on the mainland in question. The region, during the nearly five centuries of Turkish rule, formed the Vilayet or Province of Yanina, with the city of Yanina as its capital.

Not only has this region always been Albanian in language and nationality, but the limits of the Illyrian stock went far beyond it. Even the Ionian Islands were mainly Illyrian. In a famous handbook, well known to students, Luebker's "Lexicon of Classical Antiquities," under the name Kerkyra (Corfou) it is observed that the island "was originally inhabited by Illyrians." And those who will take the trouble to read the work of the noted Swedish scholar, Martin P. Nilsson, published in 1909 in Lund under the title "Studies in the history of ancient Epirus," will be cured of any inclination to think that Epirus has ever been Greek. The region

kept its Illyrian character unchanged. Even as late as the tenth century of our era, Leon the Wise, Emperor of Byzance, in one of his writings mentions the fact that "the inhabitants of Epirus are Albanian." Slowly, Greek infiltrations began to be felt in some parts of the region. How these infiltrations became possible we know from some first-rate authorities.

## II

In the latter part of the fourteenth century, Yanina was ruled by a Byzantine prince (or "despot" as his official title was) called Thomas. This Thomas conceived the fine idea of killing all the Albanians. You may wonder whether this is drawn from some distorted Albanian tradition, or some fanciful Italian propaganda sheet. Not a bit of it. The authority for this atrocity is an honest and God-fearing Greek, Michael Dukas, a member of the imperial Byzantine house of the same name, whose chronicle is included in the great Bonn collection of the Byzantine historians and is accessible to every student. Dukas, with disgust and disapproval, relates all the cruelties and murders of Thomas against the Albanian population of Yanina. One of his favorite games, says Dukas, was to cut the noses or other parts of the body of Albanians and let them die in agony. Some Albanian feudal chieftains threatened Thomas with a punitive expedition if he did not stop his crimes against the Albanians. Thomas relented for a time and gave his daughter in marriage to the most powerful Albanian prince of his age, Jon Shpata. After a while



Thomas again started his persecutions, even more ruthlessly than before. Whereupon Jon Shpata gathered an army and besieged Yanina, his father-in-law's capital. Thomas, writes Michael Dukas, under the flag of truce, used to send to Shpata every day a basketful of eyes plucked from the heads of unfortunate Albanians, and this gruesome gift continued until the siege was raised. Thomas' ambition, says the Greek historian, was to earn the surname of "Albanitoktonos," that is to say—"the killer of Albanians." The despot, adds Dukas, was very fond of foreigners and outsiders, and had brought many of them to the city. Finally, we are tersely told, Thomas succeeded in "emptying" Yanina of its original inhabitants. Of course, one can hardly conceive of a more effective method for changing the ethnic complexion of a place; but "rights" created in this way are, to say the least, of a dubious quality.

The crimes described by Michael Dukas occurred in 1380 and the few preceding years. Fifty years later, to be precise in 1431, a mighty Ottoman army came thundering to the gates of Yanina, which in the meantime had been repopulated with outsiders, and took the city by storm. It is remarkable that, after a survey of the province, the Turks classified it as part of Albania. But there is something more significant and quite irrefutable. The Turks took a careful census of the towns and villages, and the names of these places appeared thereafter in the official calendars under their Albanian and not under their Greek form. For instance, to pick up two names at random, the towns called by the Albanians "Delvina" and "Grebene," but by the Greeks respectively "Dhelvinon" and "Gre-

vena," were registered by the Turkish authorities as "Delvina" and "Grebene." The early Turks were meticulously precise about the spelling of place-names, always preferring the genuine folk forms. For example, after the first siege of Vienna, the Turks started to write "Wian" with a long A, which is the true folk form; and as long as the Ottoman Empire lasted, they stuck to that form, rejecting the artificial form "Wien." In the treaty of Eisenburg, signed in 1664 between Turkey and the Holy Roman Empire and drawn up in Turkish and Latin, when enumerating the titles of the Habsburg Emperor the Latin text refers to him as King of "Bohemia" but in the Turkish text the Turks insisted in having King of the "Czech."

### III

The Turkish conquest brought one important change in the life of Albania. For reasons too long to explain here, a great many Albanians left Christianity for Islam, and the movement continued for two centuries until at last 65 per cent of the population became Moslem, the rest remaining Christian, in the North as members of the Church of Rome and in the South as members of the Eastern Church, often miscalled the Greek Church. In the latter church the service being in Greek and the clergy mostly of Greek nationality, here was a chance for the Greeks to denationalize the Albanians by using the church as a weapon of propaganda. Another factor was the stealthy immigration of Greek-speaking people, often foolishly favored by Albanian



landowners who needed farm laborers to replace Albanians gone to the endless wars of the Ottoman Empire. The raising of Greece to an independent State added a powerful impulse to the Greek propaganda. The Greeks now boldly began to assert that every member of the Eastern Church, irrespective of language and nationality, was a Greek.

One of the strangest tricks of the Greeks was to bribe high officials in Constantinople to issue a decree forbidding the circulation or possession of Albanian books. It became a penal offense to carry even such harmless books as a grammar or an arithmetic, if they were written in Albanian. The Greeks descended even lower; they did not shrink from denouncing harmless Albanian patriots as revolutionaries and had them shipped to distant penitentiaries.

#### IV

After the Balkan wars, European Turkey was dismembered and the Powers could not well ignore the existence of the oldest nationality in the Peninsula. Albania was made a State, but reduced to one-fourth of her natural size.

One would think that, after this, the Greeks were satisfied and would keep quiet; that they would seek to cultivate, if possible, good neighborly relations with the remnant of Albania. Far from that; taking advantage of the fact that Turkey the previous year had completely disarmed the Albanians, an organized Greek

army, disguised as civilians, rushed all over Albania and began a systematic series of wholesale arson and murder. There were at the time in Albania, at the center of these organized crimes, two foreign eye-witnesses: the well-known English writer Mary Edith Durham and a German correspondent. They were both horrified and they made an agreement to let the world at large know everything about what they considered as one of the greatest organized crimes of all times. Unfortunately the World War broke out and drew everybody's attention. But Miss Durham published in 1920, under the title "Twenty Years of Balkan Tangle," a book where a whole chapter is devoted to an account of the massacres. Nobody who wishes to understand the present conflict can afford to overlook that book.

After the World War, Greece forbade Albanians to have their own schools in Greece, and continued the work of eliminating, by all and any means, the Albanian element. A rare occasion was offered to the Greeks by the Treaty of Lausanne, which stipulated the interchange of Turkish and Greek families. As I stated above, a majority of the Albanians, some centuries ago, left Christianity for Islam; but they kept their national language and traditions, and never learned to speak Turkish. The Greek fraud consisted in passing a good many Albanian Moslems for Turks, and having them shipped, as subject to exchange, to the depths of Asia Minor. This is like deporting Irishmen to Poland on the ground that both the Irish and the Poles are Catholic and therefore of the same nationality. The International Commission for carrying out the exchange of



populations detected the fraud in a few instances and stopped it, but more often was cleverly hoodwinked.

When one looks up old witnesses on the national status of various places in the contested region, one is amazed at the changes brought about by organized cunning and fraud. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, a member of the Church of England, called Smart Hughes, made a tour of Albania and left a record of his observations. Hughes visited also my home-town, Konitza, an ancient place believed by some scholars like Pouqueville to have been in the early Middle Ages "the capital of Southern Illyria." (The name of the place sounds strangely Prussian; but this is due to the fact that the same Slavonic influences on the toponymy have been at work both in Prussia and in Albania.) Hughes noted that Konitza had 800 houses, of which 600 were Albanian and 200 Greek. Where are those 75 per cent Albanians now?

There is, however, in the disputed region, a large district whose dauntless resistance has outlived all organized murder, fraud and spoliation. Its name has often appeared of late in the American press. It is Chameria, distorted by the Greeks into Tzamouria. (I do not blame the Greeks for this distortion; it is due to the incapacity of the Greek alphabet to reproduce all the sounds of the Albanian language, and of many other languages for that matter. The late Senator Cabot Lodge was always referred to in the Greek press as "Kampot Lontz.") The population of Chameria as recently as 1913 was 96 per cent Albanian. This proportion has now been reduced by acts of violence, and I could produce many workers toiling in American

factories whose fathers were prosperous landowners in Chameria less than a generation ago. Yet, in spite of all the persecutions, the Albanians still form 80 per cent of the population of Chameria.

## V

And now Italy is about to step in with the announced intention to right the accumulated wrongs done to the Albanian nation and to restore the natural and historic limits of Albania. Is it reasonable to expect that any true Albanian will be dissatisfied with this move? But, one may object, however reprehensible the methods employed by the Greeks, they have succeeded in reversing the national status in many parts of the disputed region; and correcting an old wrong with a new wrong does not sound well. To this I answer that there could be no statute of limitation for organized and persistent crimes. But there is more. Far beyond historic Albania, in inner Greece, there are almost one million Albanians, nearly half of whom still speak their ancestral language. These people have an idealistic longing for Albania, and in the past have given martyrs to the Albanian cause. They could be exchanged with the Greeks of the disputed region, and everybody in the end would be satisfied. But, the Greeks assert, Italy seeks to further her own interests in extending the frontiers of Albania. With this I readily agree; but I am entitled to add that the assertion is irrelevant and merely an attempt to elude the question. The question is whether the former Turkish province of Yanina was and always has been an integral part of Albania. If it



is truly so, does this truth automatically cease to be a truth just because the Italians affirm it? The plain fact is that Italy has here a good and strong case, because her interest happens to be identical with a long-overdue act of justice towards Albania. For once, the avenging gods are on the side of Caesar's legions.

Washington, D. C.

Thursday, August 22, 1940



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