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*a cura di Stefano Santoro*

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**Copertina:** Ciano e Stojadinović conversano seduti al tavolino di un vagone ferroviario prima dell'arrivo alla stazione di Stara Pazova, 22 gennaio 1939 (Istituto Luce Cinecittà – Archivio Storico).

## Struggle for supremacy in Adriatic. Italy, SHS Kingdom and the Albanian question

di *Alberto Basciani*

*The challenge for the predominance in Albania and, therefore, in the lower Adriatic was the other (less known) aspect of the Italian-Yugoslavian rivalry that arose after the First World War. The article analyzes the stages that, from the Paris negotiations to the Treaty of Tirana of 2 November 1927, characterized the harsh political and diplomatic confrontation between Rome and Belgrade, resolved by the superior economic means available to Italy's ambitions and by King Zog's desire to have a munificent protector who was, however, geographically at a safe distance.*

**Keywords:** Italian expansionism, Albania, Kingdom SHS, National Bank of Albania

**Parole chiave:** Espansionismo italiano, Albania, Regno SHS, Banca nazionale d'Albania

It is well known how the Albanian question influenced Italian-Serbian relations already in the years before the First World War. Two powers, Italy and Austria-Hungary, that were in theory allies, actually fierce rivals particularly in the Balkan quadrant, managed to find a relatively easy agreement in their desire to block access to the Adriatic Sea to Serbia, a regional power in strong expansion that was about to emerge victorious from the Balkan wars of 1912-1913. This event was meant to favour the birth of the Albanian state<sup>1</sup>. The independence of Albania, effectively proclaimed in Vlore on 28 November 1912 by a handful of notables, remained for a long time more theoretical than real. However, it contributed a long with other strategic and political factors, to frustrate Belgrade's ambitions of maritime expansion<sup>2</sup>. Joining the alliance in the First World War and struggling against the former Austro-Hungarian ally on the Dolomite and Julian fronts weren't enough to shift Italy's focus distant from its Balkan and Albanian interests. Moreover, the London Pact (26 April 1915), by which Italy committed itself to entering the war within a few weeks

<sup>1</sup> See A. Duce, *L'Albania nei rapporti italo-austriaci 1897-1913*, Giuffrè, Milano 1983, especially pp. 288-300; G. Ferraioli, *Politica e diplomazia in Italia tra XIX e XX secolo. Vita di Antonino di San Giuliano (1852-1914)*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli 2007, pp. 556-576; K. Kaser, *The Balkan Wars, 1912-13: an Austrian perspective*, in *Crossroads of European Histories-Multiple Outlooks on Five Key Moments in the History of Europe*, Council of Europe Publishing, Strasbourg 2006, pp. 131-148.

<sup>2</sup> V.G. Pavlović, *De la Serbie vers la Yougoslavie. La France et la naissance de la Yougoslavie 1878-1918*, Institute d'Études Balkaniques, Belgrade 2015, pp. 162-167. As Nathalie Clayer has rightly pointed out, the international dimension, although decisive, was only one of the aspects that led to the proclamation of Albanian independence. In order to fully understand the event, account must also be taken of the national dimension (in Vlore, however, representatives from all the regions of the country, including Kosovo, met) and the individual and regional dimension, exemplified by the rivalry between Ismail Qemal bey and Sireja bey Vlora: see N. Clayer, *Aux origines du nationalisme albanais. La naissance d'une nation majoritairement musulmane en Europe*, Karthala, Paris 2018, pp. 704-705.

alongside the Entente, recognised Rome's almost exclusive influence over a large part of the Shqiptar territory. In fact, in spite of General Cadorna's opposition, the government decided to send an expeditionary army of a considerable size to Albania in 1915 (about 100,000 men grouped in the so-called XVI Army corps) which, after some vicissitudes, was finally entrusted to the command of General Giacinto Ferrero<sup>3</sup>. Consequently, even during the war years, Albania continued to be high on the agenda of the foreign policy of both Rome's and Belgrade's governments (in the latter case, including the difficult years of the forced exile of the government of Nikola Pašić and the entire Serbian establishment – including the Royal family – in Corfu), causing some friction between the two chancelleries, which were, in theory, now allies<sup>4</sup>. Pašić had not in any way given up the chance of occupying Northern Albania and, in particular, the area of Shkoder and, in view of that aspiration, he seemed to have staked his cards on one of the most prominent *beys* (lord) of Albania at the time, Essad Pasha, already Prime Minister from October 1914 to February 1916; he was considered in many Belgrade circles as the right pawn to ensure that after the war Albania gravitated into the Serbian sphere of influence<sup>5</sup>. In turn, Italy had not given up its dreams of Adriatic glory either. On the contrary, once the Macedonian-Albanian front had been sufficiently consolidated, it was the aforementioned General Ferrero himself who, on the 3rd June 1917, issued the so-called proclamation of Gjirokastra. With a certain recklessness, he guaranteed, on behalf of the Kingdom of Italy, the future independence of the Country of the Eagles, evidently in opposition to the wishes of the Greek and Serbian neighbors<sup>6</sup>. The latter, on the other hand, from the day after the end of the war, clearly showed their intentions, which were anything but submissive, towards Albania when they militarily occupied various territories respectively in the South and North of the Country, triggering new tension resulting in some clashes with the Italian troops<sup>7</sup>.

Notwithstanding the contrasts with Belgrade and Athens, some friction with the allies (the American position was particularly critical towards the Italian ambitions<sup>8</sup>) and the general situation of uncertainty and internal disorder in the Shqiptar territory, the end of hostilities seemed to represent a real turning point that would relaunch Italian ambitions in Albania. In fact, one of the immediate consequences of the military victory achieved by the Entente was the rapid and definitive dissolution of Rome's traditional rival in the Adriatic, the Austro-Hungarian Empire. On the one hand, this sudden geopolitical vacuum and, on the other, the onerous commitments

<sup>3</sup> M. Borgogni, *Tra continuità e incertezza. Italia e Albania (1914-1939). La strategia politico-militare dell'Italia in Albania fino all'Operazione "Oltre Mare Tirana"*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2007, pp. 24-35.

<sup>4</sup> M. Bucarelli, *Allies or Rivals? Italy and Serbia during the First World War*, in *The Serbs and the First World War 1914-1918*, ed. D.R. Zivojinović, Serbian Academy of Science and Arts, Belgrade 2015, pp. 247-262.

<sup>5</sup> D. Fundić, *The Albanian Question in Serbian-Italian Relations 1914-1918*, in *Serbia and Italy in the Great War*, ed. V.G. Pavlović, Institute des Études Balkaniques, Belgrade 2019, pp. 194-195.

<sup>6</sup> L. Riccardi, *Il proclama di Argirocastro: Italia e Intesa in Albania nel 1917*, in «Clio», n. 3, 1992, pp. 549-470.

<sup>7</sup> P. Pastorelli, *L'Albania nella politica estera italiana 1914-1920*, Jovene, Napoli 1970, pp. 69-71.

<sup>8</sup> See L. Wolff, *Woodrow Wilson and the Reimagining of Eastern Europe*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2020, p. 158.

that almost simultaneously invested the Greeks in Asia Minor and the Serbs in the complex and, in some ways, traumatic birth of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes Kingdom (SHS Kingdom), seemed to strengthen Rome's prerogatives aimed at making Albania a sort of protectorate, guaranteed also by the massive military presence deployed in Vlore and the small island of Saseno in front of it. Finally, another factor that seemed to play in favor of Italian aspirations was the substantial inability of Greeks and Serbs to agree on a common line of action on the Albanian question and, more generally, on the settlement of the entire Balkan region<sup>9</sup>.

In the context of the new geopolitical climate of the first post-war period which, it is worth reiterating, profoundly transformed the entire order of Adriatic and Danubian-Balkan Europe<sup>10</sup>, the Paris Peace Conference was the first real test of Italian-Serbian (or, perhaps, now Italian-Yugoslavian) relations as far as Albania was concerned.

In the French capital, some circumstances seemed to favour Italian action, at least this was the widespread feeling among observers and experts on the eve of and during the early stages of the complex process of defining the new European borders. After all, Italy was participating as a "major power" alongside France, the United States and Great Britain and, as mentioned above, Italian forces of a certain size were garrisoning significant portions of the territory of Albania. Furthermore, towards the end of December 1918, the Italian efforts, after various failures, contributed to the fact that an Albanian National Assembly met in Durres and was able to reach an agreement among the assembled majorities and set up a provisional government headed by Turham Pasha Përmeti with the Catholic, Prenk Bib Doda, as vice-premier. It was precisely this government, although weak and without a real grip on a large part of the country, that took charge of sending the delegation to Paris to defend the interests of the Shqiptar state. Notwithstanding the fact that there was no lack of Italian diplomats who were aware of the delicacy of the question and of the necessity of not wanting to "overdo it", thereby displeasing both the Albanians and the Serbs, things soon took a difficult turn also on the Shqiptar question<sup>11</sup>. It can be said that during the course of the Parisian negotiations, the evolution of Orlando and Sonnino's policy on Albania reflected the difficulties and anxieties of the more general political and diplomatic line taken by the Italian officials. In other words, it seemed to oscillate between the attempt to impose rigid respect for what had been underwritten with the London Pact and maneuvers aimed at trying to exploit contingent situations by seeking accommodation with the other powers directly interested in the Shqiptar problem. This was the case, for example, of the so-called Tittoni-Venizelos Pact of 29 July 1919 which, among other things, provided for the Italian endorsement of the Greek annexation of important segments of the territory

<sup>9</sup> A. Loupas, *From Paris to Lausanne: Aspects of Greek-Yugoslav Relations during the First Interwar Years (1919-1923)*, in «Balcanica», n. 47, 2016, pp. 263-284.

<sup>10</sup> A. Basciani, *L'illusione della modernità. Il Sud-est dell'Europa tra le due guerre mondiali*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli 2016, pp. 35-45.

<sup>11</sup> V. Sommella, *Un console in trincea. Carlo Galli e la politica estera dell'Italia liberale (1905-1922)*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli 2016, pp. 323-325.

of Southern Albania (Gjirokastra, Coryza, etc.) in exchange for Greek support to the Italian mandate on Albania and the full sovereignty of Rome over Vlore and its surroundings<sup>12</sup>. On the contrary, the positions adopted by the Serbian-Yugoslavian delegation seemed to be marked by a certain amount of moderation based on the respect of what Pašić had perceived to be the majority position within the Supreme Council and that is the restoration of an independent Albania within the borders established back in 1913<sup>13</sup>. As Tajar Zavallani noted, Belgrade's attitude, rather than a real understanding for Albanian national aspirations, showed that it was actually healthy political realism, the SHS Kingdom needed the support of the great powers and in any case it was preferable to have an Albanian state at least formally intact in its land borders – with the Italians outside Vlore – as this would have meant a re-dimensioning of Rome's influence in Albania and, more generally, in the entire region<sup>14</sup>. Nikola Pašić was convinced that as long as the danger of an Italian annexation of Vlore existed, the new state of the South Slavs would have to do everything possible to try to maintain a position of strength in the area of Shkoder. Such was the importance attached by Serbian circles to the Albanian question that, in August 1919, a special Albanian office was set up at the Prime Minister's Office, the so-called 4<sup>th</sup> Section, placed directly under the supervision of the Prime Minister<sup>15</sup>.

The Yugoslavian-Italian confrontation over Albania began already on 18 February 1919 when the Yugoslavian delegation presented its demands to the Supreme Council and the Italians showed firm opposition to the ambitions of the SHS Kingdom. In spite of some doubts by the British and French, the first resolutions of the Council of Four seemed to confirm the general impression that Rome had some sort of political advantage over the Balkan powers at the negotiating table in Paris. In fact, it was decided that matters pertaining to Northern Albania and the future status of the Balkan country, then considered vital to Italian interests, would be addressed exclusively in the Supreme Council<sup>16</sup>.

However, the Italian affirmation was only momentary: as Pietro Pastorelli made quite clear, Sonnino and his successors remained prisoners of their inability to overcome the London Pact schemes on the Albanian issue, although in the Albanian case their reasons were almost opposite to those they had tackled in the Fiume

<sup>12</sup> M.G. Melchionni, *Accordi italo-greci a Parigi (1919-1920)*, in «Rivista di studi politici internazionali», n. 3, 1981, pp. 471-473.

<sup>13</sup> Even, in order to better “protect” those borders, the government of Belgrade, during the course of 1919, formed the so-called Albanian battalions, which were to secure the territories close to Albania from incursions by paramilitary gangs. It was, evidently, a decision which had more of a political value than a practical one. In fact, very soon, strong protests were raised by the populations of those territories, who accused the Albanian battalions of committing abuses and violence against civilians and their property: see D. Maliković, *Formirace albanskij pograničnik batalona 1919 godine*, in «Baština», n. 17, 2004, pp. 125-135.

<sup>14</sup> T. Zavalani, *History of Albania*, Centre for Albanian Studies, London 2015, p. 164.

<sup>15</sup> D. Bakić, *The Italo-Yugoslav Conflict over Albania: a View from Belgrade 1919-1939*, in «Diplomacy & Statecraft», n. 4, 2014, p. 594.

<sup>16</sup> N. Guy, *The Birth of Albania. Ethnic Nationalism, the Great Powers of World War I and the Emergence of Albanian Independence*, Bloomsbury, London-New York 2019, pp. 180-181.

issue<sup>17</sup>. They took for granted the immovability of what had been established in May 1914 in the British capital on the future settlement of the Lower Adriatic; in reality, the entire political-diplomatic framework had undergone great changes in the period between the final phase of the conflict and the very first post-war period. There were many factors which undermined the Italian position: firstly, the leading role played by US President Wilson, who was less and less convinced of the validity of Rome's claims on the Adriatic country, the historical, geographical and ethnographic works produced by the experts called upon to support the allied diplomats, who in many issues – especially on the northern borders of the Land of Eagles – seemed to follow the claims of Serb geographer Jovan Cvijić<sup>18</sup>. In addition, the very birth of the Kingdom of SHS and the prominence shown by the Greek Prime Minister Venizelos during the conference work, would have required a much more prudent and at the same time flexible conduct on the Italian side, who were not capable enough of adapting from time to time to the changing situation and that ended up throwing Rome into increasing difficulties. Luckily for the Italians, their direct competitors had their own problems to deal with as well. In fact, in the case of the SHS Kingdom, it was precisely on the Albanian question that was connected with the more general problems related to the western borders with Italy, that the disagreements between the Croatian expectations – embodied by Ante Trumbić – and the more Serb-centric ones – represented by Nikola Pašić – did not take long to emerge<sup>19</sup>. In any case, in January 1919, at the time of the signing of the peace treaty with Germany, Belgrade managed to arrive with a very precise proposal regarding Albania. For the definitive arrangement of the borders, they would have been satisfied with just a few minor adjustments; however, when the Allies considered Albania's independence unfeasible, the Protić government expressed itself clearly in favour of a substantial division of the Albanian territory between the powers involved<sup>20</sup>. Actually, the Serbs politicians tried to oppose Albania's claim to become what Bosnia had been up to 1914, for Serbia. There was also the possibility that the Italians might stir up unrest in Kosovo and Macedonia and through Albania, joining the Vardar valley, they would unite forces with Bulgarians in a sort of anti-Yugoslavian front. Therefore, in the event that the Italians would firmly remain in the Shqiptar territory, the possession of Shkoder was seen by Pašić as a sort of indispensable security policy for the south-eastern flank of the SHS Kingdom<sup>21</sup>.

With the arrival of Francesco Saverio Nitti at the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, the Albanian question, also with regard to relations with the SHS

<sup>17</sup> P. Pastorelli, *L'Albania nella politica estera italiana*, cit., pp. 189-231.

<sup>18</sup> J.W. Crampton, *The Cartographic Calculation of Space: Race Mapping and the Balkans at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919*, in «Social and Cultural Geography», n. 5, 2006, pp. 744-745.

<sup>19</sup> I.J. Lederer, *La Jugoslavia dalla conferenza della pace al Trattato di Rapallo 1919-1920*, Il Saggiatore, Milano 1966, pp. 189-193.

<sup>20</sup> Ivi, p. 307.

<sup>21</sup> D. Bakić, *Nikola Pašić and the Foreign Policy of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, 1919-1926*, in «Balcanica», n. 47, 2016, pp. 297-298.

Kingdom, entered a new phase. This was possible because the head of the Italian government did not show any significant interest in Albania, as he openly told the Yugoslav delegation during direct talks at the end of February 1920 in London<sup>22</sup>. Had it not been for the pressure from the military, Nitti would probably have abandoned Vlore without too much thought. Amidst internal turbulence and exhausting negotiations, the Albanian question, by now closely tied to that of Fiume, dragged on for long weeks without reaching any tangible solution, because of Trumbić's less and less conciliatory attitude and also due to of the fall of the Nitti executive in May 1920.

After the substantial failure of the Paris talks and the progressive decline of the influence of the American president Wilson, Italy and the SHS Kingdom were able to reknit, amidst a thousand difficulties, direct diplomatic negotiations that would lead to the Rapallo compromise of November 1920<sup>23</sup>. The turning point in the Albanian situation was determined by the internal events of the Adriatic country, where both the attitude held by Italy in Paris on the future destiny of Albania and the revelation of the previous agreement with the Greeks caused an increased general feeling of hostility towards the Italian presence. These growing anti-Italian impulses found an extraordinary catalyst in the so-called Congress of Lushnje, where, between 28 and 31 January 1920, 56 delegates met and decided to overthrow the provisional government now supported only by the Italians, therefore laying the groundwork for the expulsion of the latter from the country in the following month of June, with the entrenched camp of Vlore now besieged by Albanian militias. Perhaps because of the increasingly difficult internal situation, it was Giovanni Giolitti's executive (at his last experience as Prime Minister) that decided to withdraw the entire expeditionary force, with the exception of a garrison that remained to guard the islet of Saseno. The Tirana Protocol of 2 August 1920, by which the government of Rome committed itself to recognize Albanian independence and the borders marked in 1913, sanctioned the end of this long phase of Albanian politics and confrontation with the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes<sup>24</sup>. Despite Belgrade's political circles obvious satisfaction in seeing Italian retreat from Vlore, they could not claim a clear political victory. It could certainly be considered a success to have managed to avert the danger of finding the Italians on their southern border, but at the same time, this meant giving up Shkoder and the surrounding territory, which had always represented a territorial ambition nurtured by Montenegro<sup>25</sup>. A choice which added further reasons for discontent among many Montenegrin political circles where, beyond the rhetoric of brotherhood of arms and blood with Serbia, the end of the in-

<sup>22</sup> Ivi, p. 328.

<sup>23</sup> M. Bucarelli, B. Zaccaria, *Encroaching Visions: Italy, Yugoslavia and the Adriatic Question, 1918-1920*, in *Italy in the New International Order 1917-1922*, eds. A. Varsori, B. Zaccaria, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2020, pp. 252-253.

<sup>24</sup> G. Caccamo, *Esserci a qualsiasi costo: Albania, Mediterraneo orientale e spedizioni minori*, in *La vittoria senza pace. Le occupazioni militari italiane alla fine della Grande Guerra*, a c. di R. Pupo, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2014, pp. 161-194.

<sup>25</sup> I.J. Lederer, *La Jugoslavia dalla conferenza della pace al Trattato di Rapallo*, cit., p. 339.

dependence of the small mountain kingdom was causing much discontent and open criticism in various sectors of public opinion in Cetinje. In that difficult context, dissatisfaction in many cases led to harsh acts of violence<sup>26</sup>. One of the pro-Union Montenegrin leaders, Andrija Radović, in an extensive memorandum sent to the Albanian government in October 1920, highlighted how «[...] it was in the interest of our state to exercise the maximum possible influence in Albania and to exclude, or at least reduce, the Italian influence as much as possible». In short, albeit for very different reasons, both in Rome and in Belgrade, many political and strategic reasons meant that the Albanian chapter could not be considered closed.

In the meantime, on 17 December 1920, Albania was admitted to the League of Nations, receiving with this act a further guarantee of its still fragile independence and the preservation of the borders established in 1912; in fact, in September 1921, the Conference of Ambassadors reaffirmed the need to keep territorial integrity and political independence of the Balkan country, entrusting a sort of political-diplomatic protection to Italy. Finally, a few months later, in the late autumn of 1921, also in virtue of the strong urging received from the Western powers, the government of the Kingdom of SHS withdrew its troops and irregular forces from Albanian territory. As Miranda Vickers noted, the Yugoslavs did not pay enough attention to the persuasive power exerted on British politicians by well-known personalities such as Edith Durham or Aubrey Herbert, who were resolutely in favor of the full restoration of Albanian independence with the borders of 1912-13, and how keeping peace and stability in South-eastern Europe was now anchored to the birth of a stable independent Albania<sup>27</sup>. It was also thanks to these circumstances that a country devastated by an almost uninterrupted state of war that had begun in 1910, and by continuous foreign military occupation, was preparing to embark on the difficult path of building an independent and sovereign state. As far as Italy was concerned, Giolitti's move to disengage militarily from Vlore, if from the eminently military perspective it did not exactly mark a brilliant page, from the diplomatic point of view it represented a remarkable tactical success and ultimately put Italy in a position of advantage over its two Balkan competitors and in particular the SHS Kingdom. However, just like in Italy, the new political and territorial order did not put an end to Yugoslavia's plans for Albania. From 1921 onwards, the Yugoslav government's contacts with an ambitious and shrewd bey from the Mati region, Ahmed Zogolli (who had participated in the First World War as an officer in the Austro-Hungarian army) steadily intensified. Pašić sent one of his trusted agents to Shkoder, a certain Nastas Ilić, who assured the great maneuverer of Belgrade politics that the establishment of a nationalist government in Tirana was the best guarantee for the SHS Kingdom to counter Italian ambitions and lay the foundations for

<sup>26</sup> S. Pavlović, *Balkan Anschluss: the Annexation of Montenegro and the Creation of Common South Slave State*, Purdue University Press, West Lafayette 2008. Nor were there any historians who openly spoke of a civil war at the end of Montenegrin independence: see Z. Adrijašević, *Storia del Montenegro*, Besa Muci, Nardò 2019, pp. 160-162.

<sup>27</sup> M. Vickers, *The Albanians. A Modern History*, I.B. Tauris, London-New York 1997, p. 100.

renewed political and diplomatic action. From that moment, Zogolli became, in the eyes of Pašić, the personality to focus on and, obviously, for the eager Ahmed, there were tangible signs of the attention shown by Belgrade towards him<sup>28</sup>. In the Yugoslavian capital, it was well known that there was no point in concentrating on Tirana without keeping a close eye on what was happening across the Adriatic. In fact, in October 1922, the Fascists' seizure of power was a major wake-up call. As early as 2 November 1922, a telegram sent by the Italian Legation in Belgrade warned the interim Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Mussolini, that «recent events in Italy and the new government have alarmed these political circles who feared and still fear [...] especially the anti-Serbian revival in Hungary, Albania and Montenegro with Italian help [...] the press, especially the Croatian one, is aggressive»<sup>29</sup>. Concerns that, at least in those first months, were gradually alleviated thanks to Mussolini's rather moderate attitude, evidently focused on internal issues and still under the discreet but firm tutelage of Salvatore Contarini, the General secretary of minister of Foreign Affairs. A further demonstration of this moderate attitude was the Italian ratification of the Santa Margherita Ligure Agreements in February 1923 with SHS Kingdom<sup>30</sup>.

In fact, in the following years, notwithstanding the start of a process of normalization of the Italian-Yugoslavian relations, thanks to the gradual resolution of the controversy over Fiume (on 27 January 1924 the Pact of Rome was signed between the two governments, perhaps too rashly called the “pact of friendship”), the Albanian question continued to represent a factor of divergence between Rome and Belgrade. A problem which, actually, seemed to be overcome for a brief period of time when Mussolini urged the Italian Minister in Belgrade, Alessandro Bodrero (who had excellent personal relations with King Alexander) to seek an understanding with the Yugoslavian government on the Albanian issue, almost as a reaffirmation of the now good relations established between the two countries. This was the genesis of the joint Italian-Yugoslavian declaration on Albania of 9 June 1924, which reaffirmed the commitment of the two governments to uphold and strengthen Albanian independence and to consider the internal struggles in the Adriatic country an internal affair<sup>31</sup>. Until 1937 this declaration remained the only step agreed upon between Italy and Yugoslavia on the Albanian issue, soon destined to remain a dead letter.

As Massimo Bucarelli pointed out a few years ago, Italy, through a project devised by Salvatore Contarini, set in motion an ambitious plan to «[...] recover in

<sup>28</sup> D. Bakić, *The Italo-Yugoslav Conflict over Albania*, cit., pp. 596-598.

<sup>29</sup> *I documenti diplomatici italiani* (Ddi), Settima serie, v. 1, 31 ottobre 1922-26 aprile 1923, La libreria dello Stato-Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, Roma 1953, doc. 36, L'incaricato d'affari a Belgrado, Summonte, al presidente del Consiglio e ministro degli Esteri, Mussolini, 2-11-1922.

<sup>30</sup> M. Bucarelli, *Mussolini e la Jugoslavia (1922-1939)*, B.A. Graphis, Bari 2006, p. 27. The Italian-Yugoslavian conference in Santa Margherita Ligure made the agreements reached between the two countries in Rapallo in November 1920 enforceable.

<sup>31</sup> P. Pastorelli, *Italia e Albania 1924-1927. Origini diplomatiche del Trattato di Tirana del 22 novembre 1927*, Poligrafico toscano, Firenze 1967, pp. 28-30.

economic terms what it had lost in political terms»<sup>32</sup>. It is clear that the economic offensive, which should have been accompanied by a more consistent action of cultural expansion, was primarily aimed at creating strong ties with the Albanian government, which had already realized with bitterness in the previous months how difficult it was to rake in the international markets the funds it desperately needed to start a first serious attempt to build a modern organisation of the state. It was completely unrealistic for the League of Nations itself to demand that concrete political and social reforms be undertaken as a binding condition for the granting of a loan<sup>33</sup>. On the other hand, not even the Yugoslavs had stopped working to create allies and/or clients among the Albanian strongmen, to be used at the right moment.

In this sense, the vicissitude of Lale and Nikola Zuber, two businessmen and brothers who had many important ties in the influent circles of the Montenegrin capital, and above all, quite active in Belgrade, where they were known to be very well inserted in the so-called Belgrade *čaršija*, that inextricable lump of political, economic and social power which controlled the vital ganglia, and the economic and the social power of the Yugoslav capital with ramifications also in many other cities and provinces of the Kingdom of the South Slavs<sup>34</sup>, is emblematic: they founded the Serbian-Albanian Bank in Cetinije, Montenegro, in the early 1920s. The bank was founded in March 1922 with the majority of the capital held by the Zuber family. In December 1924, with the rise to power of Ahmed Zogolli, successful thanks to the Yugoslavian decisive support which included men, arms and money and also quite a few white Russians mercenaries, the Montenegrin investors thought that the time had come to open branches of the bank in Albania, starting from Shkoder, in order to operate directly in the territory of the Adriatic state. Their decision came about because of their good contacts in Belgrade and also trying to exploit the good relations established between Belgrade and Tirana at that time<sup>35</sup>. Of course, the real issue at stake behind that decision was the ambition to build a decisive financial institution in the management of the Albanian economy through the creation of the National Bank of Albania, which meant that the Zuber brothers were supported in every way by the Yugoslav executive, nor did they fail to give their support to Pašić's Serbian Radical Party in view of the political and diplomatic effort necessary to set the bank's financial activities in Albania in motion by the first months of 1925<sup>36</sup>. Indeed, the wind seemed to have turned and the peaceful handover by Albania to the Kingdom of SHS in June 1925 of the monastery of St. Naum and the surrounding territory (some 30 kilometers from Ohrid) seemed to demonstrate the

<sup>32</sup> M. Bucarelli, *Mussolini e la Jugoslavia*, cit., p. 29.

<sup>33</sup> M. Vickers, *The Albanians*, cit., pp. 106-107.

<sup>34</sup> S. Mišić, *Serbo-Albanian Bank 1925-1927*, in «Balcanica», n. 37, 2006, pp. 249-250.

<sup>35</sup> The *coup d'état* put an end to the regime of Fan Noli, the so-called red bishop, who, amidst not a few contradictions and errors (among which, perhaps, a too rash diplomatic recognition of the USSR) had tried to stabilise the Albanian internal and international situation. See M. Vickers, *The Albanians*, cit., pp. 110-117.

<sup>36</sup> S. Mišić, *Serbo-Albanian Bank 1925-1927*, cit., pp. 251-253.

enormous increase in Serbian influence in Tirana<sup>37</sup>. The actions of the Montenegrin bankers seemed to flank the policy implemented at the same time by Pašić, aimed at ensuring that the north of Albania remained under Yugoslav influence. Moreover, it was the radical Serbian leader himself who recommended to the diplomats sent on a mission to the neighboring country that the objective was still an independent but weak and unstable Albania<sup>38</sup>.

Although eager for the enterprise to succeed, Momčilo Ninčić, the Foreign Minister of the SHS Kingdom, realised that such an operation could not take place without Italian consent; also because in January, thanks to the mediation of some businessmen operating in Albania, Mussolini decided to re-establish relations with Zogolli. In February 1925, Zogolli opened ad hoc negotiations with representatives of the British Midland Bank and with Mario Alberti, director of Credito Italiano, and in March 1925, despite the lukewarm support of Salvatore Contarini, Minister Vincenzo Lojacono, a fervent supporter of the need to make Albania an Italian protectorate, was appointed head of the Albania Office at the Minister of Foreign Affairs (MAE)<sup>39</sup>. In short, there were all the conditions that indicated to the leaders in Belgrade that the Albanian dossier was once again in the forefront in Rome and, therefore, it was time to move with caution, and, in fact, already in the previous month of February of that same 1925, Ninčić proposed to Rome that they set up together, with mixed Italian-Yugoslavian capital, the new banking institution, effectively taking over the management of the Shqiptar economy. As mentioned earlier, in the intentions of Zuber brothers and the Yugoslav leaders, the Albanian National Bank was to become the beating heart of the Albanian economy and, above all, the control and management centre of the future financial system of the Country of the Eagles. In mid-March, Ninčić, in a conversation with the Italian Minister in Belgrade, Alessandro Bodrero, spoke openly of the Yugoslav cabinet's firm intention to achieve full collaboration with Italy in Albania, also in terms of economic action. In particular, Ninčić expressed the idea that the creation of a bank empowered to issue banknotes under the aegis of Rome and Belgrade could constitute the «[...] first act of a common effort for a stable situation in Albania [...] no misunderstanding must arise between Italy and Yugoslavia in this regard»<sup>40</sup>. According to the head of Yugoslavian diplomacy, an agreement between the two countries would also have the effect of pushing back other powers interested in developing their influence in the neighboring country<sup>41</sup>. Thus, while Mussolini himself was exerting strong pressure in Rome, so that Credito Italiano could elaborate a strategy for the penetration of

<sup>37</sup> B. Lory, P. Nathalaili, *Le monastère de Saint Naum (Sveti Naum/Shën Naum)*, in «Balkanologie», n. 1-2, 2002, pp. 39-40.

<sup>38</sup> D. Bakić, *The Italo-Yugoslav Conflict over Albania*, cit., p. 588.

<sup>39</sup> G. Carocci, *La politica estera dell'Italia fascista 1925-1928*, Laterza, Bari 1969, pp. 34-35.

<sup>40</sup> Ddi, Settima serie, v. 3, *23 febbraio 1924-14 maggio 1925*, La libreria dello Stato-Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, Roma 1959, doc. 764, Il ministro a Belgrado, Bodrero, al presidente del Consiglio e ministro degli Esteri, Mussolini, 16-3-1925.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

Albania<sup>42</sup>, in April, Ninčić, in a new conversation with Bodrero, raised the possibility of obtaining a far-reaching political agreement with Rome<sup>43</sup>.

The proposal put forward by the Yugoslav Foreign Minister seemed, however, to be almost an attempt to save in extremis a situation compromised by the decisive step forward taken by Italy, the extent of which became clear when, on 19 March, news was spread of the signing of the convention establishing the birth of the National Bank of Albania through an agreement between the Albanian state and an Italian financial group headed by the banker Mario Alberti of Credito Italiano. The reaction in Belgrade was anger. While the capital's press was bluntly accusing Italy of plotting again in Albania, the Italian Minister in Albania, Carlo Durazzo informed Mussolini that «[...] new minister Lazarevich has on several occasions on this subject entertained both Mufid bey [foreign minister, ed.] and Ahmed bey Zogolli, told the latter that he could no longer count on his personal friendship. Lazarevich also remarked that in any case the Albanian government should have demanded a certain share in Yugoslav capital, also in order "not to let the Italians act without control"»<sup>44</sup>.

In fact, Italy, acting behind the backs of the SHS Kingdom, had succeeded in setting up the National Bank of Albania (BNA) with a majority of Italian capital and, above all, completely excluding their Adriatic neighbors from the financial operation.

Alessandro Roselli has well illustrated the peculiarities of this political and financial action. The way in which the share capital of 12.5 million gold francs was distributed undermined the very principle of the bank's independence: the participation of the Albanian government in the capital was not allowed, while the participation of Albanian citizens was statutorily limited to a maximum of 49%. For reasons of political expediency, the constitution of the bank was also open to Yugoslavian capital (on 18 March, the Yugoslavian Legation in Rome sent an aide-mémoire to the Italian government in this regard), as well as Swiss and Belgian capital, for a total of 25% of the capital, but the remaining 75% was owned directly or indirectly by Italian funds, creating a certain scandal in Albania, to the extent that the Albanian negotiator, Mufid bey Libhova, was forced to resign<sup>45</sup>. However, the fact that upset the Yugoslavian cards even more and, above all, cast a completely different light on the financial operation that had just been concluded, arose from the observation that the participation of private banking institutions and Albanian citizens was only nominal and that the entire investment channeled into the enterprise, amounting to almost 14 million lire, was given by the Italian state, which acted through the National Institute for Foreign Exchange (INCE). The bank's headquarters were es-

<sup>42</sup> G. Carocci, *La politica estera dell'Italia fascista*, cit., pp. 36-37.

<sup>43</sup> Ddi, Settima serie, v. 3, cit., doc. 795, Il ministro a Belgrado, Bodrero, al presidente del Consiglio e ministro degli Esteri, Mussolini, 11-4-1925.

<sup>44</sup> Ivi, doc. 770, Il ministro a Durazzo, Durazzo, al presidente del Consiglio e ministro degli Esteri, Mussolini, 22-3-1925.

<sup>45</sup> A. Roselli, *Italia e Albania: relazioni finanziarie nel ventennio fascista*, il Mulino, Bologna 1986, pp. 54-66.

tablished in Italy and the management would be composed of four executives, two Italians and two Albanians, but the presidency would always be attributed to an Italian citizen<sup>46</sup>.

There is no doubt that in the competition for control of Albania, the foundation of the BNA marked a clear Italian advantage over the Yugoslavs, also because from this moment on, relations between Rome and Zogu could only intensify and the increasingly abundant flow of Italian money to the Albanian president made the real difference. In reality, as Bernd Fischer has correctly pointed out, Zogu's choice to favour relations with Italy was also economically the most logical one. Italy needed Albanian natural and agricultural resources; on the contrary, the SHS Kingdom (and also Greece) exported, although in very different quantities, the same Albanian agricultural products and their respective industries did not need – at least, not as much as the Italian did – Albanian raw materials, which, however, were available only on paper and, therefore, only if the interested ones were willing to make conspicuous investments for geological prospecting, infrastructures, etc.<sup>47</sup> In any case, in Rome, they understood how necessary it was to stabilize a direct relationship with Zogu, both politically and financially. On 27 April, Mussolini sent a telegram to the Italian Minister in Albania, Carlo Durazzo, asking him to reassure Zogu that Albanian safety from Yugoslav and Greek aims was now a matter «[...] of the utmost importance for our country. You can assure the Albanian Government that I am very sensitive to the appeal of friendship addressed to me»<sup>48</sup>. On the other hand, the economic and financial side, a message sent on 15 July 1925 by Mussolini to the Italian Minister in Albania made it clear to the diplomat that an advance of 2 million lire would soon be sent. However, it was the express wish of the head of government «[...] to deal with this personally and exclusively with Ahmed Zogu and, in announcing the arrival of the first contingent, to recommend and assure him at the same time that we do not intend to involve any other Albanian personality in this affair, wishing to demonstrate that we place the utmost consideration and trust in him»<sup>49</sup>.

In short, the Fascist government had found the key to establishing a direct relationship with the strong man of Tirana who in turn obtained a protector who was at a safe distance and sufficiently munificent to offer him the simplest solution to replenish his personal coffers and to meet the growing needs of allied beys, families and clients, which at that time were more necessary than ever to shore up his still uncertain power. On 29 August 1925, Mussolini again telegraphed, this time to the minister in Belgrade, Bodrero, so that he would take the appropriate steps to expel the Yugoslav armed gangs operating on the Albanian borders and, above all, to in-

<sup>46</sup> Ivi, pp. 67-68.

<sup>47</sup> B.J. Fischer, *King Zog and the Struggle for Stability in Albania*, Albanian Institute for International Studies, Tirana 2012, pp. 82-83.

<sup>48</sup> Ddi, Settima serie, v. 3, cit., doc. 821, Il presidente del Consiglio e ministro degli Esteri, Mussolini, al ministro a Durazzo, Durazzo, 27-4-1925.

<sup>49</sup> Ddi, Settima serie, v. 4, 15 maggio 1925-6 febbraio 1927, La libreria dello Stato-Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, Roma 1962, doc. 63, Il presidente del Consiglio e ministro degli Esteri, Mussolini, al ministro a Durazzo, Durazzo, 15-7-1925.

form the royal government of Italy's utmost interest in maintaining the full territorial integrity of Albania<sup>50</sup>. The foundation of the SVEA (Society for the Economic Development of Albania), which took place shortly before the birth of the BNA itself, completed the architecture of the penetration and progressive domination of the Albanian economy by Italy.

Considering the turn of events, the SHS Kingdom seemed to be cut off from Albanian affairs; furthermore, for Belgrade, the question was further complicated by the clashes within Albanian diplomacy and politics over the attitude towards Albania. Already, in June 1923, a dossier elaborated by the Ministry of War highlighted how, in Belgrade, there was no univocal Albanian policy, but forces were dispersed by three different visions on the conduct to be followed: one dictated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, another by the Ministry of the Interior and, finally, a third dictated by the Armed forces. At the same time, the neighboring country continued to remain unstable and to absorb a lot of energy and funds without any certainty of a return in political terms. On the contrary, many people feared that the weapons acquired with Yugoslav help might one day be used against the Yugoslavs themselves. Despite the cold shower he had received only a short time earlier on the occasion of the founding of the BNA, Ninčić still believed that only through a stable agreement with Italy could the SHS Kingdom play a significant role in Albanian affairs. In the course of 1925, the Yugoslavs tried to involve Italy and France in a sort of trilateral agreement aimed at stabilizing the Balkans, although receiving a rather cold reception from Mussolini, who instead insisted on considering the region a sort of exclusive Italian hunting ground<sup>51</sup>.

The following months were characterized by great diplomatic ferment, made more feverish by the uncertain internal Albanian situation. At the beginning of October, for example, Mussolini sent a telegram to the Italian Minister to the Albanian government, Durazzo, asking him to warn Zogolli of possible future disturbances which could affect the country due to destabilizing initiatives prepared by the Yugoslavs, particularly in the northern provinces<sup>52</sup>. In November, the city of Shkoder was the scene of yet another violent anti-Zogist uprising in which, according to Italian diplomatic sources, formations traceable to Yugoslavia, if not directly Yugoslav, were also involved. Probably, even events of this kind contributed in Rome to shift the needle of the scales decisively towards those sectors of the political and diplomatic worlds which hoped for the pure and simple marginalization of the SHS Kingdom from Albanian affairs and the progressive reduction of Albania into a real Italian protectorate to the detriment of those currents, personified by Salvatore Conatarini, who, instead, would have preferred a sort of Italo-Slavic condominium over

<sup>50</sup> Ivi, doc. 113, Il presidente del Consiglio e ministro degli Esteri, Mussolini, al ministro a Belgrado, Bodrero, e al reggente la legazione ad Atene, De Facendis, 29-8-1925.

<sup>51</sup> Cfr. D. Bakić, *The Italo-Yugoslav Conflict over Albania*, cit., pp. 589-590.

<sup>52</sup> Ddi, Settima serie, v. 4, cit., doc. 138, Il presidente del Consiglio e ministro degli Esteri, Mussolini, al ministro a Durazzo, Durazzo, 4-10-1925.

the Country of the Eagles<sup>53</sup>. Mussolini's irritation was reiterated in a telegram sent to Bodrero at the beginning of February 1926, in which the head of the Italian government accused the Yugoslavs of violating the pact made with Italy by their continuous attempts to interfere in the internal Albanian affairs<sup>54</sup>. Thus, while Belgrade did not hide its worries about the evolution of the Albanian situation, the Fascist government was willing to grant economic aid and political protection to Zogu only in exchange for the stipulation of an agreement that would clearly (and even more firmly) bind Tirana to Rome. A dispatch sent by Mussolini, on 5 December 1926, to the main Italian diplomatic offices in Europe and to the Italian embassy in Washington, denounced in no uncertain terms the Yugoslav propaganda, guilty, according to the Duce, of acting in the shadows to insinuate doubts and falsehoods about the nature of the treaty that Italy in those same months was laboriously pursuing with Zogu<sup>55</sup>. For Mussolini, moreover, it was important that the British should not create any difficulties and, above all, that they should refrain from encouraging the cabinets executives of Belgrade and Athens to pursue a similar agreement with Albania.

In short, in spite of the contrasts and uncertainties in Belgrade they understood the political importance of the agreement being negotiated between Italy and Albania and so, while the Yugoslav representative in Geneva tried to obtain assurances that the possible signing of the Italo-Albanian treaty would not remove Albania from the control of the League of Nations, Mussolini was concerned to ensure that the day after the signing of the agreement the SHS Kingdom would be put in a position not to act in the neighboring country in a way contrary to Italian interests, practically Zogu would remain firmly in place. These were not unjustified fears. The Yugoslavian-Albanian border was marked by rather serious episodes of violence which contributed to making the general situation even more tense, but which could have represented a good pretext for Belgrade to interfere more heavily in Albanian internal affairs. According to the reports sent to Rome by Minister Bodrero, the situation in the Yugoslavian capital was tense, the conciliatory attitude towards Italy expressed in words by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not correspond at all to the anti-Italian climate prevailing in Belgrade's political and journalistic circles, moreover, numerous Albanian exiles were circulating in the city, ready to be used for anti-Zogist and anti-Italian purposes. It cannot be said that Mussolini and his diplomats did much to try to ease the tension. From the point of view of the Italian head of government, the worsening of relations between Albania and the SHS Kingdom played into Rome's interests and also helped to avert the possibility of British (not to mention French) interference in order to get the Yugoslav government somehow involved in the by now ever-closer agreement between Rome and Tirana. The Yugoslavs had to be removed at all costs and Zog's position strength-

<sup>53</sup> Cfr. M. Bucarelli, *Mussolini e la Jugoslavia*, cit., pp. 40-42.

<sup>54</sup> Ddi, Settima serie, v. 4, cit., doc. 240, Il capo del Governo e ministro degli Esteri, Mussolini, al ministro a Belgrado, Bodrero, 8-2-1926.

<sup>55</sup> Ivi, doc. 520, Il capo del Governo e ministro degli Esteri, Mussolini, alle ambasciate in Europa, all'ambasciatore a Washington, De Martino, e al ministro ad Atene, Arlotta, 5-12-1926.

ened, and with this in mind Rome began to raise in the Albanian president's mind the possibility of transforming Albania into a kingdom. At the beginning of February, a new anti-Zogist armed insurrection took place in the Dukadjin region. The events took Belgrade by surprise while they were used by the Italians to finally push Zogu to further tighten the bonds of alliance with the Fascist government<sup>56</sup>. In fact, on the following 27 November 1926, Italy and Albania signed the Pact of Tirana with which Italy guaranteed both the inviolability of the Albanian borders and the stability of the Zogu regime, which sanctioned Mussolini's definitive decision to proceed unilaterally with regard to Albania without taking Yugoslavian expectations into account<sup>57</sup>. The dismayed Yugoslav reaction expressed by Foreign Minister Nincić to Bodrero: «[...] I consider such a pact to be in no way in conformity with the relations of friendship existing between the two countries [...] I cannot conceal from you that this fact will have a great impact on Yugoslav public opinion. And I regret this all the more because I consider that it was not worthwhile to change so suddenly a policy that had been created with so much love and effort»<sup>58</sup>.

A further very important development was marked, about a year later, on 27 November 1927, by the signing of the so-called Treaty of Tirana, the result of just two months of negotiations between the Italian minister in Tirana, Ugo Sola, and President Zogu. From a geopolitical point of view, that agreement was undoubtedly a success for Italy, as it ensured it almost total control of the Otranto Canal, albeit at the cost of negative repercussions in the main western and Balkan capitals (an aspect that should not be underestimated in view of the fascist ambitions for expansion on the Danube and, more generally, in South-eastern Europe) and even furious ones in Belgrade. From a political point of view, for Italy that treaty represented the necessary basis for a difficult and costly and, on the whole, very unreciprocal power policy aimed at establishing a sort of protectorate over the Adriatic country<sup>59</sup>. For the SHS Kingdom, it was a political defeat, not only and not so much with respect to Rome, but rather, for the fact that the decisive strengthening of Zogu represented the definitive expulsion of Yugoslavia from any possibility of active participation in Albanian affairs. The political strengthening of Zogu, on the verge of assuming the new role of King of the Albanians, would, in the future, become a difficult obstacle to overcome for the regional ambitions of the Kingdom of the South Slavs, not to mention that the Albanian strongman, in the years to come, would not hesitate to try to exploit, to his own advantage, the still dramatically open question of the Kosovo Albanians by fanning the flames of irredentism.

<sup>56</sup> Cfr. D. Bakić, *The Italo-Yugoslav Conflict*, cit., p. 600.

<sup>57</sup> Cfr. M. Bucarelli, *Mussolini e la Jugoslavia*, cit., p. 45.

<sup>58</sup> Ddi, Settima serie, v. 4, cit., doc 512, Il ministro a Belgrado, Bodrero, al capo del Governo e ministro degli Esteri, Mussolini, 2-12-1926.

<sup>59</sup> P. Pastorelli, *Italia e Albania 1924-1927*, cit., pp. 483-502.