

**ITALY, YUGOSLAVIA AND LILLIPUTIA
THE BRITISH ENTANGLEMENT IN
ALBANIA, 1925-1931**



History

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Abstract

The European political developments of the interwar years have been in the focus of many historical studies. That is understandable, because these events had a major impact not only on European nations but on the whole world. However, most of the scholarly work deals with the relations among Western Powers and to a certain extent neglects the role of small nations in the interwar years. In this paper I make an attempt to highlight some aspects of the relations between a Great Power – Great Britain, and one of the smallest states in Europe – Albania. I argue that in the interwar years, the conflicting interests of European powers produced a complex and delicate situation that eventually led to war. The case of Albania and the attitude of Great Powers and neighboring countries towards her are a representative example of this atmosphere.

Considering that in the interwar years Albania was a newly established small state, politically and economically unstable, one can not fail to notice the interest several Great Powers and other Balkan states show in its internal affairs, to the extent that, they often become a reason for diplomatic friction among them. What is that makes Albania attract the attention of European diplomacy at this time? We can exclude from the start that it is the central role Albania played in Balkan politics or even less so in the wider European stage. In fact, its reputation in international arena was evaluated according the state’s area, economic income and political stability. Albania was the smallest state in the Balkans, increasingly underdeveloped and backward, and the political and social unrest were common in the country.¹ Obviously these were not valid characteristics to increase the importance of a state. Contradictory as it may seem, these were the very same features which attracted continuously the attention of Great Britain and neighboring states in the internal developments of Albania.

Even though, the geostrategic position is often considered as the main reason that made the neighboring countries want to get control over Albania,² this argument is not valid in case of Great Britain which was positioned as a disinterested power in the Balkan affairs. The three above mentioned drawbacks of the newly established Albanian state, from the British point of view, were a permanent threat to the preservation of peace and *status quo* in the Balkans and Europe. This would be the core of the British interest in Albania in the interwar period.

In this article I deal with the reasons and the extent of Great Britain’s interests in the political developments of the Balkans, from 1925 to 1931, focusing in Albania as a case study. This period was marked by a rivalry among several states for predominance in this country, risking to precipitate in a military clash with serious implications.

¹ Stevan K. Pavlowitch. A history of the Balkans 1804-1945. Longman, London 1999. p. 234, Miranda Vickers, The Albanians, a modern history. MPG Books, London 1999. p. 98-100.

² Charles Woods, Albania and the Albanians. The Geographical Review, vol. 5, no. 4. Prill 1918. p. 257.

I argue that the engagement of Great Britain and its concern in preserving Albania's independence and integrity resulted from the extremely delicate balance created in Europe with the Peace Treaty of Versailles. The relations among European states were dominated by prejudice and diplomatic intrigue which threatened the peace settlement and could lead to a new war. Britain positioned itself as an intermediary to appease the irredentist aims of European states. Although maintaining the *status quo* and thus preserving European peace was the main objective of British foreign policy, at times, such as the case of Albania, exceptions were made in the former to succeed in the latter. In the name of peace Britain would tolerate the Italian gradual penetration in Albania and would even provide justification for it. This was an example of the 'end justifies the means' philosophy.

In June 1925, after having successfully taken control of Albania's economy, through a number of concessions, the most important being the creation of the National Bank of Albania, which in practice was an Italian bank with its branch in Albania,³ the Italian government continued its expansionist policy in order to achieve a dominant position in political affairs as well. As a legal justification for this advancement would be used the resolution of the Conference of Ambassadors of 9 November 1921, which was signed by the Great Powers and recognized special privileges to Italy in Albania. However, the resolution could be made applicable only through the approval of the Council of the League of Nations. For Italian interests this was an undesirable complication. "Like the roaring lion in the first epistle of St. Peter, Mussolini walked about seeking whom he might devour. The only country in which he could hope to make headway was Albania."⁴

Mussolini took advantage of Zogu's request for a loan of two million gold francs, the latter badly needed to face the financial problems of the Albanian state, and came forward with a proposition for a political alliance which in practice would allow Italy to have the complete political control in Albania. Zogu was being offered protection from possible attacks of neighboring countries by letting Albania become an Italian protectorate. Firstly, in order to give a legal support to their proposal the Italians requested Albania recognize the provisions of the Conference of Ambassadors of 1921. Secondly, Zogu was offered an open convention which involved issuing more concessions and restricting his right to conclude political agreements with third parties without being consulted beforehand with Rome. Thirdly, they suggested signing a secret military alliance.⁵

After secret negotiations between an Italian MP, Alessandro Lessona and Ahmet Zogu, at the end of August 1925, the latter accepted only the third proposal.⁶ Mussolini and Zogu exchanged letters by which Italy engaged to intervene with its army in case Albania was attacked by a third party, and in case Italy would enter a fight with a Balkan country, Albania would be asked to declare war against it. However, these letters were not legally binding.

³ Alessandro Roselli, *Italy and Albania, Financial relations in the fascist period*, I.B.Tauris. London 2006. p. 33-39.

⁴ Gaetano Salvemini, *Prelude to World War II*, New York, Doubleday&Co.INC, 1954. p.102

⁵ Pranvera Dibra, *Shqipëria dhe diplomacia angleze, 1919-1927 (Albania and the English diplomacy 1919-1927)*. Neraida, Tiranë 2005. p. 337.

⁶ Alan Cassels, *Mussolini's Early Diplomacy*, New Jersey 1970, p. 315

In addition, it was agreed they were to remain secret. For Mussolini they were proof of the fact that Albania was not a client state of Yugoslavia, while Zog could make them public to the Italian embarrassment and force Italy to intervene in case the Albanian independence was threatened. Moreover, through these negotiations Zogu had managed to receive 6 million Italian lire which he needed to avoid internal discontent and unrest.⁷

The negotiations and their conclusion had been kept hidden from the public opinion and the diplomatic representatives. Although, the British *charge d'affaires* in Albania, Robert Parr had informed the FO that such meetings had been taking place, nothing was known about the purpose of the talks.⁸ However, the British were informed on the aims of the Lesona's visits in December of the same year by Zogu himself. That was strange considering he had been the one to keep the British guessing for so long. In a meeting with the British minister in Albania, Harry Eyres, Zogu explained that the Italian government had been trying to convince him to accept the resolution of the Conference of Ambassadors but, "he had no intention whatever of acceding to this request (nor indeed of allowing Italy to obtain any preponderating political influence in Albania)."⁹ Anyway, he had been careful not to mention the signing of the secret treaty with Italy. The fact that Zogu had decided to make public a part of the negotiations with the Italians, after 3 months they had ended, and had approached the British to disclose his secret, clearly showed for a recently increased pressure to bear on him which he could not handle alone anymore. It was time to receive foreign support, and who better than the British could do that. Certainly the Italians' requests raised the suspicions of the British and Yugoslavs alike. The Foreign Office understood that the Italian government had been up to something. O. C. Harvey, of the FO, only stated the obvious: "Why such questions are not to be dealt with, by the Italian Legation remains a mystery."¹⁰

Once the news was made public the Albanian press reacted with discontent. The newspaper *Demokratija* in its article of 5 January 1926, pointed out that: "Italian interest demanded an independent Albania and she should accordingly give this every support. She could profit far more in that way than by aggression..... Albania is ready for a complete understanding but her independence must be respected."¹¹ Although, this was representative of the way public opinion felt about the situation, it weighted little to nothing in the decision making. As Joseph Roucek puts it: "Albania was a one man country - and Zog was the man."¹²

Mussolini did not give up its goal of signing a dual pact with Albania. He was simply waiting a more appropriate moment to succeed. In June 1926 he started again the attempts to reach a political agreement based on Albania's recognition of the Conference of Ambassadors' resolution. This time Mussolini was more determined and his request came as an ultimatum presented to Ahmet Zogu by the Italian minister in Albania, Aloisi. The latter was said to be 'a

⁷ Jason Tones, *King Zog, self-made monarch of Albania*. Sutton Publishing Limited, London 2003. p. 82.

⁸ PRO FO 371 11205 C 11517/2756/90 Parr to FO, 29 August 1925.

⁹ PRO FO 371 11205 C 391/391/90 Eyres to Chamberlain - Confidential, 31 December 1925.

¹⁰ PRO FO 371 11205 C 391/391/90 Harvey's Minutes, 13 January 1926.

¹¹ PRO FO 371 11205 C 1602/391/90 Parr to FO, 28 January 1926.

¹² Joseph Roucek, *The Politics of the Balkans*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1939. p. 93

very capable and unscrupulous man'¹³, qualities that affected the way negotiations were to be conducted. Zogu had been given two options, recognize immediately the resolution of 1921 and the Italian government would provide him with money, arms and every other possible assistance, otherwise, Aloisi would interrupt immediately the relations with Albania and leave for Rome.¹⁴ Aloisi had read for Zogu this text as a personal message from Mussolini and had not accepted to leave anything in written. Zogu's reply was that he personally was against it but he needed 'to consult his cabinet before giving an official answer'¹⁵. That was done to gain time and feeling threatened Zogu hurried to get support from abroad. He forwarded the news to all the foreign legations in the country which were alarmed.

When hearing the news Chamberlain stated: "I am genuinely appalled at the prospective result of an Albanian crisis."¹⁶ It was certain that this question would involve Yugoslavia and at the same time increase the suspicions of France. For the British it seemed an irrational plan and Chamberlain instructed his minister in Rome to talk to Mussolini: "...you should point out to him from me, speaking in all earnestness as a friend of Italy and as a personal friend and admirer of his – that the results of his action may well have most serious results."¹⁷

At the same time, the British government is careful to check upon the reaction of Yugoslavia, knowing the Italian move would cause resentment there. The Yugoslav Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nincic, had been perturbed when informed of the news and declared that: "If signor Mussolini were the instigator, Italy had broken verbal agreement which she made with Yugoslavia to respect integrity of Albania."¹⁸ France, Greece and Turkey had shown their concern on the matter as well.¹⁹

In the meeting Graham, the British minister in Rome, had with Mussolini, the latter categorically denied such an event and called it 'an absurd exaggeration'. He later stated: "The last thing I want to do is to raise the Albanian question"²⁰. He admitted that Zogu had been suggested to sign a pact of friendship based on the resolution of 1921, but if he was to refuse, the relations between the two countries would have continued as before. This was reassuring to a certain extent. After that, there were talks about misinterpretations and misunderstandings. Aloisi denied to have used threatening language, he blamed Ahmet Zogu for that, while the latter declared that the British minister O'Reilly, must have misunderstood his message. He had never mentioned the word ultimatum.²¹ Obviously the situation was so delicate that no one dared to take responsibility.

Although the Mussolini's explanation or better his excuse, was not that convincing, Chamberlain felt relieved. The only British concern remaining was Yugoslavia. Chamberlain stated: "I hope the

¹³ Bernd Fischer, Mbreti Zog dhe përpjekja për stabilitet në Shqipëri, (King Zog and the struggle for stability in Albania) Çabej 2004. p. 107.

¹⁴ PRO FO 371 11205 C 7200/391/90 O'Reilly to Chamberlain, 25 June 1926.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ PRO FO 371 11205 C 7200/391/90 Chamberlain to Graham, 28 June 1926.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ PRO FO 371 11205 C 7382/391/90 Forbes to Chamberlain, 29 June 1926.

¹⁹ PRO FO 371 11205 C 8011/391/90 Conversation between Chamberlain and French ambassador De Fleurian, 15 July 1926 and PRO FO 371 11205 C 8011/391/90 Conversation between De Fleurian and Tyrell, 1 July 1926

²⁰ PRO FO 371 11205 C 7400/391/90 Graham to Chamberlain, 30 June 1926.

²¹ PRO FO 371 11205 C 7461/391/90 Graham to Chamberlain, 3 July 1926.

reassurances of the Italian minister at Belgrade will have sufficed to place matters in their proper aspect.”²² Mussolini’s message had been enough to cool the Yugoslavs down. Nincic declared that: “we are satisfied that Italy: respected independence and integrity of Albania.”²³

However, the real tension between the British and Italian governments was yet to come. The British involvement and attempts to act as a negotiator in this possible crisis had caused the resentment of the Italian government. Adding to this, the tension between Britain and Italy about the oil concessions in Albania in February 1925, Italy had come to the conclusion that these were ‘obstacles for the Italian interests in that end of the Adriatic’²⁴. Moreover, according to Mussolini everything had happened with the active participation of the British representatives in Albania. Mussolini had turned the situation to his advantage. From being the instigator of a serious Balkan crisis, he now claimed to be the victim of a British forward policy in Albania. This needed to be dealt with caution by HMG.

After a thorough and careful examination of the situation in the FO, Chamberlain replied in a detailed explanatory letter to the Italian allegations. Refusing to accept these charges Chamberlain stated that: ‘HMG have neither sought for themselves an exclusive position nor have they sought to deny to Italy the position to which her greatness and her proximity entitle her. If, however, British policy towards Albania herself is thus in the main negative and disinterested, I cannot deny my anxiety lest events in connection with that country share towards a crisis fraught with grave danger to the peaceful relations of her neighbors. As such, Albania is and must be a matter of concern to every member of the League.’²⁵ This put in a nutshell the British interests in Albania. The real issue at stake was the delicate European and Balkan reality. Fear and prejudice about each others’ actions and plans could always lead to discontent and tension. What Britain wanted was to avoid all this ending up in a military clash but the continuous rivalry between Italy and Yugoslavia for predominance in Albania could at times force her leave the neutral position and mingle in Balkan squabble. In order to avoid complications Chamberlain had advised earlier O’Reilly that he should not interfere in such disagreements. “...if Ahmet bey refers again to the matter or makes similar confidences to you in the future, you should make it clear to him that His Majesty’s Government have no intention of interfering in his disputes with Italy, or of giving him any advice beyond the general recommendation that he should settle his differences directly with M. Mussolini and that if he fails he should then appeal to the League of Nations.”²⁶

However, this was not enough for Mussolini. It was true that Britain recognized Italy’s special rights in Albania but Mussolini desired to achieve more. At the end of September 1926, Mussolini gets the chance to discuss things in person with the Secretary of State. Chamberlain was cruising the Mediterranean in his yacht with his family when at Leghorn he was received by the Duce who used every opportunity to show his close relations with Britain. Considering that the diplomatic crisis over Albania between the two countries had taken place one month before, it was

²² PRO FO 371 11205 C 7400/391/90 Chamberlain to Graham, 4 July 1926.

²³ PRO FO 371 11205 C 7409/391/90 Forbes to Chamberlain, 1 July 1926.

²⁴ PRO FO 371 11205 C 8500/391/90 Mussolini telegram to Chamberlain, 29 July 1926.

²⁵ PRO FO 371 11205 C 8909/391/90 Chamberlain to della Torretta, 18 August 1926.

²⁶ PRO FO 371 11205 C 7461/391/90 FO to O’Reilly, 9 July 1926.

one of the main topics of the two leaders' talk. Mussolini repeated what he had stated in July, that the Italian interests in Albania were economic and he wanted to preserve the independence of the country adding that "on this basis I am prepared to sign a pact that embodies this formula."²⁷ Although it is not clear whether Chamberlain gave an approval to Mussolini's idea for a pact, the truth is that there was nothing to disagree about. Mussolini appeared not in a spirit of aggression but one of contrition and conciliation.²⁸

However, the press claimed that Chamberlain had encouraged Mussolini at Leghorn to think that Britain would support an Italian forward policy in Albania. The idea was reinforced once Italy signed with Albania the Pact of Tirana, which put Albania under the Italian protectorate. Italy had essentially replaced the four-power guarantee which Albania had been given in 1921 by the Conference of Ambassadors.²⁹ It seemed that Mussolini had managed to avoid the need for League's permission to intervene in Albania's affairs.

Yugoslavia was alarmed by the signing of this pact as it was considered a blow to the Yugoslav goals and policy in Albania. The Yugoslav Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nincic, stated that they had been presented with '*a fait accompli*' and the pact constituted a violation of the verbal agreement between the two nations that neither would seek to gain privileged position in Albania. While in a meeting with the British representative in Belgrade, Nincic was even harsher in his reaction. "...the landing of a single Italian soldier in Albania which could be justified by some artificially created unrest would lead to war.it would be a question of life and death to Yugoslavia to prevent it."³⁰

The British knew how easy it was for such threats to turn into armed conflicts in the Balkans. They were unprepared for this new development as they had never been informed of the negotiations for the Pact. Their minister in Albania, Seeds after having received the text of the Pact by Zogu informed the FO: 'the pact exceeds Italy's legitimate aspirations, grants her special rights of intervention in Albania in normal times and will make all future Albanian governments dependent on her protection against internal enemies....I frankly did not foresee a political mandate.'³¹ Although the British did not like this conclusion, they did not fail to take their usual position of intermediary and peace keeping negotiator. In order to cool down the situation and to remove dangerous prejudice, Kennard, the British minister in Belgrade, was instructed, to consider the Pact, in talks with the Yugoslavs, a normal development. The articles of the pact were not to be misinterpreted and the British saw no reason why Italians should abuse the pact. The assistant under-secretary of State, Tyrell, was of the opinion that the Pact would serve at "the preservation and consolidation of the *status quo* in Albania"³² With the British acting as intermediaries the clash was avoided.

²⁷ Peter Edwards, The Austen Chamberlain-Mussolini Meetings, *The Historical Journal*, vol. 14. no. March 1971. p. 160.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p.160.

²⁹ Bernd Fischer, Mbreti Zog dhe përpjekja për stabilitet në Shqipëri, (King Zog and the struggle for stability in Albania) Çabej 2004. p. 105.

³⁰ PRO FO 371 11206 C 12719/391/90 Kennard to FO, 3 December 1926.

³¹ Documents on British Foreign Policy, First series, vol. II, no. 315, Seeds to Chamberlain, 3 December 1926.

³² PRO FO 371 11206 C 12838/391/90 Tyrell to Graham, 7 December 1926.

The Yugoslav protest had culminated with the resigning of the Minister of Foreign Affairs³³ but that had been all. Although this diplomatic incident could be considered over, it would not be the last.

One year later, the Italo-Yugoslav rivalry would produce another crisis in which the British needed to intervene. This time, it was the signing of the French and Yugoslav Pact of Alliance of November 1927 that would start the crisis. Only eleven days later Italy and Albania signed the second Pact of Tirana, or as it was otherwise known, the Pact of Defensive Alliance, which was essentially a more detailed reconfirmation of the 1926 Pact.³⁴

Chamberlain did not agree to such pacts for several reasons. He thought that the Franko-Yugoslav Pact unnecessarily involved France in the Balkan affairs and raised the suspicions of Italy. While about the second Pact of Tirana he was even more categorical: “the new Treaty of Defensive Alliance is entirely inconsistent with the spirit of the Covenant....there is no reference from beginning to end to the League of Nations or the Covenant....or to the obligations of the parties as members of the League.”³⁵ Anyway, none of the British suggestions had been taken into account and the respective Pacts had been signed as a mutual challenge. As Tomes puts it: ‘Great Power rivalry in the Balkans echoed the years before 1914, yet Mussolini protested that Italian policy was in no way sinister.’³⁶

In fact, the signing of the First and Second Pacts of Tirana, had a positive result in the stability of Albania. For more than four years there were no serious incidents at the borders of the country, which before were common place. As the British minister in Albania, Hodgson, puts it in his 1930 annual report: “Tranquility prevailed throughout Albania during the year”.³⁷ At the same time the Italian government declared that the Italian policy in Albania “is directed to one object, namely, to developing the country’s resources, thus rendering it capable of defending itself.”³⁸ On the other hand, the Yugoslavs had been a factor to this stability because ‘their behavior, indeed, so far as Albania is concerned, has of late been exemplary’³⁹.

However, the delicate stability created in Albania was not reassuring for long. Henderson, the British minister in Belgrade, in his personal letter to, the Head of the Central Department, Orme Sargent, discusses the possibility that Zogu, now King of Albanians, might be assassinated. This would surely bring an end to the relative stability created in the country. Indeed for a long time there had been rumors that the King was suffering from a fatal disease and often because of his health problems he was forced to withdraw from active political activities, increasing the gossips that he was not to live long. On the other hand, although he was practically a prisoner in his own palace⁴⁰, there had been several attempts to his life, which he had managed to survive.

³³ William Miller, Albania and her Protectress, Foreign Affairs, vol.5, no. 3. April 1927, p. 438.

³⁴ Historia e popullit shqiptar (History of Albanian People), vol. III, Albanian Academy of Sciences, Toena, Tirana, 2007. p. 269.

³⁵ PRO FO 371 12066 C 9811/25/90, Chamberlain to Graham, 5 December 1927.

³⁶ Jason Tomes, King Zog, self-made monarch of Albania. Sutton Publishing Limited, London 2003. p. 93.

³⁷ PRO FO 371 15148 C 1412/1412/90 Annual Report of 1930, 24 February 1931.

³⁸ PRO FO 371 15146 C 777/475/90 Hodgson to A. Henderson, 23 January 1931.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ PRO FO 371 11206 C 8933/391/90 Austen Chamberlain to Seeds, 20 August 1926.

But nobody could foresee how much longer the fortune would assist him. For the British it was obvious that: “Once the strong hand of the King is removed chaos is no doubt likely to ensue and the Italians could then seize the opportunity to claim under Articles 1 and 2 of the Tirana Treaty of 1926 that they are entitled to land troops in Albania and restore internal order.”⁴¹ The weakness of Albania could turn the slightest change in the *status quo* fatal for her future. The only acceptable solution was that in case of turmoil, Albania should appeal to the League of Nations for assistance. Even in that case, the Conference of Ambassadors resolution made Italy’s interference inevitable. In the FO they agreed the resolution of 1921 had been a mistake: “I cannot help feeling that the time is approaching when we really ought to face the question of getting rid of this disastrous resolution on the ground that the circumstances which justified it in 1921 have completely changed.”⁴²

But could that change be effected under the present circumstances? The British were reluctant to take that step. It might bring more trouble and complications with the Italians for them. That is why they chose a safer solution. “The fact is that from the practical as distinct from the ethical point of view the Italian protectorate over mediaeval Albania is in present circumstances perhaps the best guarantee of peace which we can hope to obtain.... the fact remains that so long as Albania continues in her present ambiguous position, nominally an up-to-date and independent member of the League of Nations, but in reality a mediaeval state living under the protection of Italy, so long will not merely Italy and Yugoslavia but the whole of Europe be dancing on an Adriatic volcano...”⁴³

The issue and the solution was one, namely, Albania’s backwardness. With the blessing of the British, she could not escape from the Italian firm grip anymore. But to British general interests that was only a minor concession. As the editor of Foreign Affairs, Hamilton Armstrong, very shrewdly had put it in his article *Italy, Yugoslavia and Lilliputia*: “If Rome has been seeking prestige she has won it – the prestige of fear. The main rope in the Balkan tug-of-war stretches across the Adriatic from Rome to Tirana, and thence to Belgrade. Albania is the unfortunate middle marker, first hauled in this direction and then that, and always feeling herself threatened with extinction.”⁴⁴ But he was not the only one to have realized the position of Albania. King Zog had arrived at the same conclusion; he only put it less metaphorically: “The fact was that, there was complete incompatibility of temper between Italy and Yugoslavia and that Albania was the predestined victim.”⁴⁵

⁴¹ PRO FO 371 15146 C 2641/475/90 Sargent’s Minutes, 25 April 1931.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ PRO FO 371 15146 C 5007/475/90 Sargent’s Minutes, 29 June 1931.

⁴⁴ Hamilton Fish Armstrong, *Italy, Yugoslavia and Lilliputia*, Foreign Affairs, vol. 6, no. 2, January 1928, p. 191-2.

⁴⁵ PRO FO 371 12069 C 9594/946/90 Seeds to Chamberlain, 16 November 1927.