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## The National Defense Committee of Kosovo and the Albanian state towards the displacement of the Albanians of Kosovo in 1918-1924

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**Abstract:** *The political map of the Balkans changed by the end of the First Balkan War 1912-1913. The Vilayet of Kosovo was occupied by Serbia. This War and the following years brought-a tragedy to the vulnerable Albanian civilian population in Kosovo. Many Kosovar Albanians were forced to leave their country or their homes and to go into exile. Most of them sheltered in Albania. Kosovars were welcomed and helped in the Albanian state, they were enabled to have a political organization and representation of their interests and rights. The organization, the National Defense Committee of Kosovo played a key role in preventing migrations and sensitizing international opinion during the years 1918-1924.*

**Key words:** Committee, Albanian Refugees, Occupation of Kosovo, League of Nations, Colonization

### Introduction

The displacement of Kosovo Albanians from their lands over the centuries is one of the most serious events, which has left an indelible mark on the history of the Albanian people. The doctrine of ethnic cleansing<sup>1</sup> begins and is also institutionalized<sup>2</sup> by the official Serbian policy since the drafting of the project known as: “Načertanian” 1844 by Ilija Garasanin, which was a notorious and chauvinist work aimed at creating a greater Serbia. From that time on, the Serbian efforts for homogeneity, ethnic cleansing, colonization, migration, aimed at weakening the ethnic compactness and changing its structure never stopped.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gruda, 2017: 87.

<sup>2</sup> Verli, 1998: 26.

<sup>3</sup> Rajoviq, 1987: 98; Milo, 1992: 26; Gashi, 1996: 168; Uka, 1996: 162; Verli, 2003: 107; Uka, 2004: 72-73; Islami, 2008: 272; 2012a: 99; 2012b: 110; Osmani, 2010a: 94; Soto, 2011: 773; Dugolli, 2011:

After the end of the First World War, at the end of October 1918, Kosovo was re-occupied by the forces of the Serbian army, and with this act, military, police and civil power was established.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, on December 1, 1918, the Kingdom of Serbo-Croatian-Slovenian was established.<sup>5</sup> After that, the action immediately started where it was left before the world war, so the whole process of the Serbian circles towards the Albanian people was a process of denationalization through different forms, so it was a constant terror and genocide.<sup>6</sup> For the treatment of this topic in this Article, we have raised a hypothesis that: The National Defense Committee of Kosovo had the main role for the care of the displaced Albanians and informing and sensitizing the international factor about the tragedy of Kosovo during the years 1918-1924.

### **The National Defense Committee of Kosovo 1918-1924**

Since 1918, the leaders of the Albanian National Movement, following international developments and smelling the results of the First World War.<sup>7</sup> On May 1, 1918, the National Defense Committee of Kosovo (Komiteti “Mbrojtja Kombëtare e Kosovës”, further: KMKK) was established in Shkodër, in a very delicate situation for the Albanians. The KMKK was one of the most important political organizations in Albania, where it was led by prominent activists, where it opposed the Serbian genocide policy for the protection of the rights of Albanian minorities in Yugoslavia and the decisions of the Great Powers.<sup>8</sup>

As well, in the points of the program, it was foreseen as the task of the KMKK to sensitize the international opinion and to protest against the anti-Albanian policy of mass extermination, against the Serbian atrocities in Kosovo,<sup>9</sup> to elect a commission to protect the rights of Kosovo in front of the Great Powers and outside these circles<sup>10</sup> and also the organization of armed resistance in the face of Serbian politics.<sup>11</sup>

Fighting for liberation and national unity, under the leadership of the KMKK state, Albanian fighters fought for their country and against the war against Belgrade, which carried out the military policy of Albanian society.<sup>12</sup> Since the activity of the KMKK was not only on the diplomatic level but also in case it has achieved the success of

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331-334; Schmitt, 2012: 141-142; Asani, 2015: 239; Rushiti, 2016: 43; Kryeziu & Dugolli, 2020: 72; Purellku, 2021: 11.

<sup>4</sup> Koka *et al.*, 2007: 443-444.

<sup>5</sup> Meier, 1999: 44.

<sup>6</sup> Osmani, 2010b: 94.

<sup>7</sup> Mehmeti, 2020: 55.

<sup>8</sup> ASHAK, F. KMKK, D. 1-23, Nr. 1, f.1. Programi themeltar i Komitetit “Mbrojtja Kombëtare e Kosovës”, Shkodër, 1 maj 1918.

<sup>9</sup> Çami, 1996: 140; Culaj, 2004: 51.

<sup>10</sup> Nuro & Bato, 1982: 108.

<sup>11</sup> Kryeziu & Dugolli, 2022: 239.

<sup>12</sup> Verli, 2007: 165.

some diplomats, it also organized the liberation war,<sup>13</sup> all the armed parties do with the national force at the beginning and others in the northeast against the exterminating policies of the districts Serbian.<sup>14</sup>

The fight for the internationalization of the Kosovo issue and the Albanian issue in general was started by the KMKK through diplomatic efforts, by means of protests, memoranda, notes, letters and statistics sent to international organizations, foreign ministers, leaders of the Great Powers and personalities of known during the work of the Peace Conference in Versailles.<sup>15</sup> All these reactions were documented on the expulsion and displacement of Albanians and the colonization of their lands by Serbo-Montenegros, concrete examples of injustice, discrimination, violence and terror against Albanians and requests that international forums take urgent measures to their obstruction and prevention.<sup>16</sup>

So they disagreed with military violence and the Serbian policy of denationalizing the Albanian population in Yugoslavia. Hoxha Kadriu addressed them several times to inform them about what was happening in Albania and the province of Kosovo in particular, where the goal was to make the Albanian issue well known in the world.<sup>17</sup> This organization with its activity became a serious obstacle to the realization of the chauvinistic plans of the leaders of Belgrade.<sup>18</sup>

The KMKK became at the end of 1918 the spokesperson for the aspirations of the Albanian population in Kosovo and in other Albanian countries in Yugoslavia to unite with the homeland, to stop the terror and violence with which the Serbs were re-establishing their rule in these territories.<sup>19</sup>

Even after 1920, the KMKK continued the denunciation with convincing facts of anti-Albanian violence and terror, influencing, a little bit, their limitation. At the same time, the KMKK unmasked the so-called agrarian reform that the Serbian regime was developing in Kosovo, in fact the Slavic colonization of the Albanian lands, made it clear that “the installation of the Slavic race in the lands that are the legal property of the Albanians is intended to forced Albanians to emigrate and colonize Kosovo”, and encouraged opposition to this process.<sup>20</sup> And for these immigrants who left their

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<sup>13</sup> Culaj, 2014: 135.

<sup>14</sup> Skendi, 1992: 42.

<sup>15</sup> Culaj, 2004: 52.

<sup>16</sup> Nushi, 1996: 29.

<sup>17</sup> Prifti, 2017: 33; Skendi, 1992: 58.

<sup>18</sup> Verli, 2003: 385.

<sup>19</sup> See especially ASHAK, F. KMKK, D. 1-23, Nr. 8, f. 211-212. Procesverbale mbledhjeshe e vendime të ndryshme të Komiteti, si dhe njoftime për punën e degëve të Komiteti, për thirrjen në mbledhjen e anëtarëve të tij etj; ASHAK, F. KMKK, D. 23-29, Nr. 28/3, Fl. 780; ASHAK, F. KMKK, D. 1-23, Nr. 7, f. 139; ASHAK, F. KMKK, D. 23-29, Nr. 28/2, f. 643-645; Çami & Lluga, 1975: 61-62, 214-215; 1976: 39-41; Milo, 1992: 97; 2005: 99-101; Skendi, 1992: 64-65; Duka, 1996: 195; Culaj, 1997: 61; Meta, 2003: 191; Culaj, 2005: 302; Hadri, 2012: 100; Prifti, 2017: 24; Verli, 2019: 89; 2021: 19.

<sup>20</sup> Verli, 2003: 386.

homes, thanks to the efforts of Hoxha Kadri and his collaborators there were provided, in the KMKK and outside it, those who were forcibly displaced from their homeland and came to Albania, shelter, food and clothing. Over the years, they managed to integrate in the new settlements, but never and for no reason did they forget the birth-place of their ancestors.<sup>21</sup>

During 1920, the KMKK received various information about the situation in Kosovo from its provinces and their leaders, such as Beqir Vokshi and Hysni Curri, where they told about the dire situation that the people were experiencing, through various arrests and tortures that were carried out by Serbian authorities.<sup>22</sup>

The Serbian government tried to present information to the Great Powers about possible provocations by the Albanians, but they were refuted through reports and petitions that the Albanians sent to the Foreign Office and other offices. At the beginning of January 1921, on behalf of the KMKK, Hasan Prishtina sent a petition to the Foreign Office, where he provided information on Serbian crimes in Albanian territory, and requested the intervention of Great Britain to prevent the crimes, which these crimes aimed at the annihilation of Albanians.<sup>23</sup>

Another aspect of the issues raised in the Albanian parliament are those related to the Albanians of Kosovo and other countries in Yugoslavia, as well as the immigrants who came from these countries to Albania.<sup>24</sup> On March 3, 1921, the President of the Kosovo Committee in Shkodra sends a telegram to Aqif Pasha Elbasani, the President of the Supreme Council of Albania, where he says that the Serbs are exterminating the Albanian race in Kosovo. It also asks this Council to make the Albanian government taking care about this issue and also protest to the League of Nations and the United States of America.<sup>25</sup>

### **The attitude of the Albanian state towards the violence and displacement of the Albanians of Kosovo**

The persecution of Kosovo Albanians, whom the Serbian government intended to exterminate and expel from their lands, did not stop. In support of their brothers, the deputies of the Albanian parliament, which at that time was called the National Council, they stood up, speak out and protested unanimously.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Nika, 2004: 162.

<sup>22</sup> ASHAK, F. KMKK, D. 51-76, Nr. 54, f. 216-222 dhe 317-319.

<sup>23</sup> AQSH, F.1510/1, D.70, fl.1-7. Letër proteste e Komitetit të Mbrojtjes Kombëtare të Kosovës drejtuar Ministrisë së Jashtme angleze si dhe një listë e fshatrave dhe shqiptarëve të Kosovës të masakruar nga xhandarmëria serbe

<sup>24</sup> Arifi-Bakalli, 2020: 79.

<sup>25</sup> AQSH, F.147, D.1-16, f.1. Telegram i kryetarit të Komitetit të Kosovës në Shkodër ku thotë se serbët po shfarosin racën shqiptare në Kosovë.

<sup>26</sup> Naska, 1996: 155.

In the discussions in May 1921, they discussed the treatment of Albanians outside Albania. Deputy Ali Këlcyra put forward the interest that the Albanian state should have, Leonidha Koja was behind him in this opinion, while Deputy Kristo Dako asked the government to try to open Albanian schools. Likewise, in the discussions that continued in June, MP Jusuf Barka, drawing attention to the Serbian atrocities in Kosovo, and asked for petitions to be made in the League of Nations for the rights of Albanians abroad.<sup>27</sup>

The National Council of Albania sent a telegram to the Yugoslav parliament in June 1921, where he asked his own government to mediate to stop the atrocities in Kosovo. But the answer of the president of the Yugoslav parliament Dr. Ivan Ribar was that the Albanian parliament had no right to interfere in their matters that according to him, were the internal affairs of the Yugoslav state.<sup>28</sup> But then the deputies of the Albanian parliament were outraged by the response of the Yugoslav parliament, they emphasized that our telegram was not intended to interfere in the internal affairs of Yugoslavia, but to protect human rights.<sup>29</sup> After that, various Albanian MPs publicly expressed their revolt.<sup>30</sup> After the discussions in the Albanian Parliament, on June 20, 1921, they approved the following telegram:

The National Council having full of hope in the human feelings of the various representatives of the people, take your permission to remove the remark on the cruel massacres and on the enslavement and violence that have been going on for eight years now. They continue with an ever-increasing harshness against the Albanians of Kosovo, and we pray that the necessary steps will be taken by the Government of Belgrade for the cessation of these atrocities that are destroying the civilization of the 20th century.<sup>31</sup>

On June 27, 1921, Fan Noli, as Chairman of the Albanian delegation to the League of Nations in Geneva, sent a Memorandum to Secretary General Eric Drummond. During the months of July-August, Serbian troops had burned 150 Albanian villages and driven away 40,000 Albanians who took refuge in Central Albania, supported by the Albanian government. These refugees are fleeing from the Serbian persecutions and their number who are coming to free Albania is increasing.<sup>32</sup>

It is rather important that in the years 1920-1924, the main institution for determining contemporary politics became the Albanian Parliament, in which the issue of Kosovo was inevitable.<sup>33</sup> Even the Albanian Government of Ilaz Vrioni during

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<sup>27</sup> Verli, 2020: 250-251.

<sup>28</sup> Lalaj, 2000: 127; Milo, 1992: 133.

<sup>29</sup> Naska, 1996: 156.

<sup>30</sup> Meta *et al.*, 2019: 588-589; Verli, 2021: 26. Nuro & Bato, 1982: 112-113.

<sup>31</sup> Culaj, 2005: 192; Hashani, 2023.

<sup>32</sup> AQSH, F.1510/1, D.70, fl.1-7. Memorandum i Fan Nolit para Lidhjes së Kombeve mbi mosmarrëveshjet mes Shqipërisë dhe shteti SKS, Gjenve, 27 Qershor 1921.

<sup>33</sup> Lalaj, 2000: 127.

the months of July-August 1921 protested in the League of Nations against a new wave of persecutions that had erupted in Kosovo by the Serbian authorities,<sup>34</sup> by Mit'hat Frashër, he informed them about the situation of the Albanians in Yugoslavia.<sup>35</sup> Also in the session of July 16, 1921 of the parliament, in addition to the evidence of the Serbian massacres, a part of the deputies came up with the proposal to send a parliamentary commission to protect the Albanians of Kosovo.<sup>36</sup> According to the balance made by the KMKK in 1921 for the genocide carried out by the Yugoslav authorities in the summer in Kosovo, it resulted that 12,371 people were killed and 10,526 others were looted.<sup>37</sup>

The Albanian deputies stated the need to provide documents and arguments that had to be prepared based on a complete and accurate knowledge of the situation in Kosovo.<sup>38</sup>

The KMKK sent them a letter to the Great Powers, on December 2, 1921, as well telling them about the events that were taking place until this time, especially in the border areas, about the burning of houses and villages, the murders and the displacement of Albanians who had settled in Shkodër and in Central Albania.<sup>39</sup> In 1923, the delegation of the KMKK presented to the League of Nations a protest on the treatment of the Albanian population in Yugoslavia, and it was a special place about the anti-Albanian agrarian-colonizing policy. The protest letter brought the signatures of Hasan Pristina, Bedri Pejani and Bajram Curri.<sup>40</sup> Also, the Albanian cultural society "Dëshira" in Sofia, Bulgaria had sent petitions to the President of the League of Nations on September 3, 1923, presenting the difficult situation of the Albanian people who had been displaced from their homes and asking him a safe life and the return of Albanians to their homes. On December 7, 1923 to the Secretary of the League of Nations wrote a letter again asking him to protect the rights of the Albanian minorities because that was the guarantor of these rights and to help the Albanian people who had left Kosovo.<sup>41</sup>

In 1924 there were new memoranda addressed to the League of Nations. On March 22, the Albanian government protested in Geneva through Benedikt Blinsh and informed the Secretary of the League of Nations Mr. Drummond that during the month

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<sup>34</sup> Verli, 2005: 230.

<sup>35</sup> Milo, 2021: 91.

<sup>36</sup> Naska, 1996: 158.

<sup>37</sup> Milo, 1992: 132; Zavalani, 1998: 267.

<sup>38</sup> Lalaj, 2000: 128-129.

<sup>39</sup> ASHAK, F. KMKK, D. 29-35\_1, Nr. 32, f. 180-181. Letër nga Komiteti "MKK" dërguar Fuqive të Mëdha.

<sup>40</sup> Fazliu, 2008: 91.

<sup>41</sup> ASDN, V. 14 Nëntor 1923, D. R1657/41/30696/11379, f. 1-2. Minoritetet shqiptare në shtetin Serbo Kroato Slloven - Shoqëria Kulturore Shqiptare "Dëshira" Sofje - Kërkon mbrojtjen e Lidhjes së Kombeve për shqiptarët në Greqi dhe Jugosllavi; AQSH, F.1510/1, D. 63, fl.1-5. Peticioni i shoqërisë kulturore "Dëshira" në Sofje dërguar Lidhjes së Kombeve për mbrojtjen e të drejtave të shqiptarëve në Jugosllavi.

of February there had been a massacre in the area of Vushtrri in Kosovo, and asked him to warn the Kingdom of Yugoslavia about these massacres and the violence that was causing to the Albanian population.<sup>42</sup>

Several Albanian deputies also reacted to the massacre in the village of Dumnicë and Vushtrri by sending a letter to the Presidency of the Constitutional Assembly, informing them about the massacre of 23 people, 11 women and girls and 12 boys, children and men, and also their property was looted. They also demanded that the government be warned to make the necessary efforts to at least ensure the lives of our compatriots.<sup>43</sup>

The colonization of Kosovo continues where their lands are stolen, as well as their houses, fields and harvested grain, so the Albanian residents have not been given a single inch of land from the divided manors. In addition to Turkey and Albania, Kosovars have also moved to Bulgaria and Romania.<sup>44</sup>

Whereas Mehmet Konica, after informing that the Albanian government had submitted the case to the League of Nations, also asked for British support to stop Serbian violence and crimes.<sup>45</sup>

The government of Noli, not directly, but through the United Committees of irredentist Albanians,<sup>46</sup> on September 26, 1924, with the signatures of Hasan Pristina, Bedri Pejani and Bajram Curri, sent a memorandum to the President of the Council of the League of Nations from Geneva in the name of The United Committees of Unliberated Albanians, where they protested with facts about the violence and continuous persecution that the Serbian government did against the Albanians and demanded that the Albanian people be treated like any other people.<sup>47</sup> It was emphasized in this memorandum that the placement of Slavic colonists came after the attacks on the Albanians. They systematically terrorize Albanian residents so that the latter abandon their homes and lands, while the remaining people live in a miserable state.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> ASDN. V. 22 mars 1924, D. R1657/41/343941/11379, fl.1, Blinishti informon Sekretarin Drummond për masakrat në Kosovë. AMPJ, V. 1924, D.415. Relacion me titull “Monsieur le Secrétaire Général”. Nga konsulli gjeneral i Shqipërisë në Zvicërr dërguar Sir Eric Drummond, Sekretar gjeneral pranë Lidhjes së Kombeve, 22 mars 1924, c.f. Lutfiu, 2021: 156.

<sup>43</sup> AQSH, F.146, D.27, f.1. Korrespondencë ndërmjet Kuvendit Kushtetues, Kryeministrit dhe disa deputetëve lidhur me masakra që po u bëhen kosovarëve dhe çamëve nga jugosllavët.

<sup>44</sup> AMPJ, V. 1924, D.276, fl. 26-27. Korrespondencë e Ministrisë së Punëve të Jashtme, Legatës Shqiptare në Beograd, mbi trajtimin e keq të shqiptarëve nga qeveria jugosllave dhe emigrimin e tyre.

<sup>45</sup> Meta, 2013: 535; see also Culaj, 2005: 206 Verli, 2020: 94.

<sup>46</sup> Meta *et al.*, 2019: 230.

<sup>47</sup> ASDN. V. 25 shtator 1925, D. R1657/41/40731/11379, fl. 1-8, Letra e Bedri Pejani drejtuar Sekretarit të Përgjithshëm të Lidhjes së Kombeve.

<sup>48</sup> Nuro & Bato, 1982: 163.

Mehmet Konica, in a telegram sent to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, announced that the British delegate is not willing to intervene with the Council of the League to look at the petition of the Kosovo delegates.<sup>49</sup>

Among all the actions and protests, there was one which was held in Fier, where students from Vlora and Fier organized a protest march against the Serbian atrocities that were being done to the Kosovar Albanians. They asked the National Government to raise its voice to protest to the Great Powers and the National Society on the basis of minority rights.<sup>50</sup>

Many members of the KMKK, even though they continued their commitment to the Albanian state, also they made their commitment for Kosovo in emigration after it was disbanded [the Committee...B.D] in 1924, it did not stop their activity and in 1925, in Vienna, the “Committee for the Liberation of Kosovo” was created, whose activity continued in the following years.<sup>51</sup>

## Conclusions

The Albanians of Kosovo who had been forcibly displaced from their territories, were welcomed and assisted in the Albanian state. They were given the opportunity to form a political organization and advocate their rights and interests there even at that early stage in the Albanian state.

The KMKK, as an organization represents Kosovars, it was crucial in preventing further migrations and sensitizing international opinion to the tragedy that Albanian civilians have endured in Kosovo during the years 1918-1924, since Serbia's conquest of the region in 1912.

The KMKK also served to raise awareness of the plight of ethnic Albanians who were being subjected to atrocities by Serbian forces and to alert international opinion from the League of Nations to specific states of the dire situation the people were experiencing. of Kosovo under Serbian occupation. For this purpose, the KMKK held meetings and conferences on this topic, it provided reports and documents regularly about the situation in Kosovo and started a public advocacy campaign. The efforts of the KMKK were important in informing the League of Nations about the human rights violations taking place in Kosovo and drawing international attention.

According to the documents of the time and the prospective literature reviewed in this article, the hypothesis was confirmed that the National Defense Committee of

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<sup>49</sup> AMPJ, V. 1924, D.523, fl. 14. Korrespondencë e Legatës Shqiptare në Londër me Ministrisë së Punëve të Jashtme të Shqipërisë, Londër, 03.12.1924.

<sup>50</sup> AMPJ, V. 1924, D.280, fl. 2-3. Telegram, drejtuar Ministrisë së Punëve të Jashtme nga mitingu i studentëve të qytetit të Fierit dhe të Vlorës, ku protestojnë kundër masakrave të pupullit të Kosovës nga qeveria serbe, gjithashtu dhe Lidhjes së Kombeve i dërgohet telegram, Fier, 17.08.1924.

<sup>51</sup> Verli, 2003: 386.



Kosovo with headquarters in Shkodër. It played a crucial part in protecting and helping displaced Kosovars as well as raising awareness of Kosovo in the world community and the misery that the civilian population in Kosovo was going through as a result of the Serbian invaders.



Fig. 1. Committee for the National Defence of Kosovo, 1918. From the book *Komiteti "Mbrotjtja Kombëtare e Kosovës"* published by the Albanian Academy of Sciences (ISBN: 99943-653-0-4, p. 196), taken from the collection, MARUBI, Author: Kel Marubi - Shkodër.

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