

British Plans to Organize a Revolt in Northern Albania in Years 1940-1941



History

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Abstract

British policy towards Albanians, at this time, was inspired by the writings of Miss Edith Durham, Margaret Hasluck and other figures who had lived in Albania during the regime of Ahmet Zogu. These were fueled sympathy for albanians, concluded that albania’s political fate was determined more by North highlanders, who with their organization had more opportunities to act organized at war. Thus the key to organizing a resistance against Italy in Albania, by british policy, thought to be found in the north, planning activities driven here from Yugoslavia. This policy proved unsuccessful, because not valued the role of Kosovo and Albanian nationalism, as a crucial weight factor in promoting war against the italians and in establishing fair relations between Albania and Yugoslavia, to correct the injustices of the past. Trying to issue as worthless the mountainous terrain factor in the development of guerrilla warfare in Albania, linked this with “more backward political development of the albanians”, was unfounded, prejudicial and an unrealistic look. As a consequence of introducing the game of interests greek-yugoslav and prejudices of the most senior officials of the Foreign Office, efforts to promote fighting irregular as through agents M.I (R) as well as by S.I.S through section D, this service, proved unsuccessful. The failure of british attempts to act in Northern Albania was associated with the british mentality in the perception of Albania and the Albanian issue. By british author Reginald Hibbert noted that, “In the early years of the war was underestimated Albanian nationalism and its significance in relation to its neighbors.” Great Britain was not worried about the invasion of albanian lands from Greece after seeing Albania from a new angle of interest, in view of the connections with Greece.

The role of Great Britain has had its importance of determining the fate and future of Albania. In Britain there were two secret services that can be loaded with conducting operations in the italian area in Albania. One was M.I. (R) (The Military Intelligence Research), created within the Ministry of War in late 1938. Its aim was to organize irregular military operations. Next was Section D, created after the annexation of Austria in March 1938, which was part of the Secret Service S.I.S. (Secret Intelligence Service, known and as M.I.6) until the late summer of 1940. By the end of autumn it returned to the Office of Special Operations (Special Operations Executive-SOE), which depended on the Ministry of Economic Affairs.⁷⁶

In April 1940, M.I. (R) developed a plan for an uprising in Albania, with which will join the agents of Section D in Yugoslavia. They got in touch with the three groups that could be involved in the action. The first was led by former Yugoslav ambassador in Tirana, J.Djonovic, second from Gani Bey Kryeziu and, third from M.Kaloshi colonel, who had Dibra as base (being that came from an influential family in Dibra). Both last organizations sent to Albania informants to gather information about the italian army and the general situation in the country. Section D reported that the chances of organizing the incidents and for a general uprising in the eastern part of the country, particularly in the area of Mirdita were good.⁷⁷ But this plan was not approved and remained only on paper.

On June 10, 1940, the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs informed the British Ambassador that Italy would declare war on Britain midnight of that day. A similar notice was extended to the french government, after which the italians attacked french troops in front of the Alps. In response, Britain declared war on Italy. Thus, the policy of reconciling to B.Mussolini finished with a complete fiasco.

In June 1940 the british government stated: “We will work with dignity to the Mediterranean area.”⁷⁸ This meant that the United Kindom will also commit to derecognition the occupation of Albania by fascist Italy. Already it began to consider the implementation of proposed plan months ago by Maxime Weygand french commander for the creation of a Balkan front.

⁷⁶ Elisabeth Barker, *British Policy in South-East Europe in the Second World War*, London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1976, p.30.

* M.I.(R) (The Military Intelligence Research), Branch of british military intelligence service, which was created to carry out sabotage and unconventional warfare, and sabotage operations behind enemy lines.

⁷⁷ E. Barker, *British Policy in South-East Europe in the Second World War*, p.48.

⁷⁸ Ibidem, p.49.

This new development of events allowed British, to organize anti-Italian operations in the territory of the latter, including Albania. At the end of June, the office of section D suggested promoting a revolt in Albania from the Yugoslavia's territory, seeking 5,000 weapons to take this attack. Supreme commander for the Middle East, didn't want an uprising there in those moments, objected to the plan. Section D agents were instructed to maintain contact with the Albanians, but not provoke incidents.⁷⁹ The Yugoslav capital, they were able to establish contacts with a number of Albanian immigrants of different currents. These contacts they settled with Kryeziu brothers who were opponents of A.Zogu, Abaz Kupa (was his supporter) and with communist Mustafa Gjinishi.⁸⁰

At the same time, section D made preparations and from Greek territory, including the recruitment of agents and munitions depot building near the Albanian border, but in a way that to not give the Italians a reason to attack Greece. In late August, the High Command for the Middle East approved of Section D plan for Albania. Foreign Office also gave approval for stock subversive organization by the Albanian state.⁸¹ Meanwhile, the British government was faced with the problem of adopting a new attitude towards the status of Albania as a whole, and to its former king in particular.

In late June, after many hardships, A.Zogu and his family finally arrived on British soil. A.Zogu decided to stay there instead of traveling to Spain, as previously planned. I agree with the statement of Bernd Fischer researcher, who said that the former king A.Zogu was determined to return to the throne at any cost, with British help, offering his support for the organization of military operations in Albania.⁸² It should add also that this support was not a primary goal, but he was interested in the first place to represent the state sovereignty of Albania.

The issue of king in exile was discussed at a meeting of the Foreign Office held on July 2, 1940. Participants were Omre Sargent, Percy Loraine, A.Ryan and L.Graffey Smith. From a preliminary analysis they judged A.Zogu as too compromised and incompetent, as to promote an uprising in Albania, as well as to run it. For this reason, his staying in Britain was undesirable so he will be sent to America. Regarding the future of Albania, meeting participants concluded that the country was unable to survive alone after the war. They also stressed that this survival was impossible without the support of a great power that can ensure the establishment of standards of living for its inhabitants. Under discussion were asked that Albania to remain again under the domination of Italy (which would not have a fascist government after the war), as a counterweight to Germany in the future.⁸³ These conclusions were irrational though these were in line with British mentality as a great power. Albania's status was already decided once.

The British government appointed A.Ryan to communicate A.Zogu his future fate, which he announced as early as tomorrow. During the meeting head on, A.Zogu expressed willingness to join the Allied cause, and offered his help to organize military operations in Albania.⁸⁴ This willingness on the part of the former king A.Zogu was closely associated with the status that would be placed on him. Without forgetting that here enter in game the Greek interests taken into account by the British government. A return of A.Zogu to Albania, think that would be a return to the top of his government after the war.

⁷⁹ Ibidem, p.49-50

⁸⁰ Julian Amery, *Approach March: Venture in Albania*, London: Hutchinson, 1973, p.163-164.

⁸¹ Vasileios Kontis, *A British Attempt to Organize a Revolt in Northern Albania during the Greek-Italian War*, in *Greece and the war in the Balkans: (1940-1941)*, Thessaloniki, 1992, p.113-118.

⁸² Bernd J Fischer, *Mbreti Zog dhe përparimet për stabilitet në Shqipëri*, Tiranë: Çabej, 2004. (*King Zog and the Struggle for Stability in Albania*), New York, 1982, p.291-292.

⁸³ *The National Archive*, Foreign Office 371/24868, Foreign Office relation with title "Albania", 19 July 1940.

⁸⁴ Ibidem

This would undermine the interests of all Greek to get the Albanian territories, so nothing can undertaken in Albania without the prior opinion of the greek government.⁸⁵

The staying for the status of Zogu king, the british government considered this fact that he had abdicated, concealing the true fact that His Majesty's government had recognized the new status of Albania, on October 31, 1939. This demise rule out the possibility that he recognized as sovereign of his country.⁸⁶ However, a little later, as a result of favorable comments from A.Ryan, the intervention of General Jocelyn Percy (who had once organized albanian gendarmerie), and his personal efforts, A.Zogu was allowed to remain in the country after being it sets as a condition that should not deal with political activity inconsistent with his position.

On July 23, A.Ryan met again with A.Zogu, bringing greetings by Lord Halifax. A.Zogu again expressed willingness to join the Allied cause. Former British minister in Tirana, already withdrawn from official diplomatic activity would be permanent official mediator between A.Zogu and british authorities.

At this point, the position of the Foreign Ministry in connection with Albania was leaning towards visible reluctance to undertake commitments for the restoration of Albania Independence. Immediately after Italy entered in the war, the british government stated that it would retain full freedom of action in connection with any venture provided in the past by the italian government concerning with the Mediterranean region, the regions of North Africa and the East, also in Middle East. In other words, it wanted to express "nullifying the recognition that was made by the british government for the italian invasion". Immediately after this statement, the Foreign Office said it did not include the re- knowledge of Albania's independence.⁸⁷ By December 1942 the british government drew up a set of plans, but never committed ourselves to concrete action for the recovery of independence.

In a memorandum of September 1940, the head of the albanian section of the Foreign Office, P.Dixon, suggested antiitaliane propaganda organizing among the albanian population, in association with SOE. According to him, this effort could be hampered by the unclear status of the country, although he again defended the thesis that Albania was not ready for independence. Once Italy have lost the war, it should be left under the care of the latter, as a counterweight to Germany. P.Dixon also suggested not taken commitments (more on status), and the emphasis to be placed only in the fight against the italians, without promising anything to the albanians. As radio broadcasts and distribution of leaflets could only be through the territory of Greece and Yugoslavia, the british suggested that it was necessary to guaranteed respective governments that antiitaliane propaganda will not be linked to the status of Albania.⁸⁸

In early November 1940, the British Ministry of Information itself announced that it was ready to start propaganda in albanian on BBC radio.⁸⁹

Italy attacked Greece from albanian territory on October 28, 1940.⁹⁰ After an initial advance, in the greek territory, the italian army faced stiff resistance and surprise by greeks, who, in return, organized a successful counterattack in albanian territory. Meanwhile, Britain and Italy were engaged in open conflict on their territories in North and Eastern Africa.

⁸⁵ TNA, FO 371/24868, Reminder of the Foreign Office official, Pearson Dixon, 11 december 1940.

⁸⁶ TNA, FO 371/24868, Foreign Office relation with tittle "Albania", 19 july 1940.

⁸⁷ E. Barker, *British Policy in South-East Europe in the Second World War*, p.49.

⁸⁸ TNA, FO 371/24867, Memorandum by Pearson Dixon official of Foreign Office, 25 september 1940.

⁸⁹ TNA, FO 371/24867, Note by British Information Ministry, 9 november 1940.

⁹⁰ Mario Cervi, *The Hollow Legions, Mussolini's Blunder in Greece, 1940-1941*, London: Chatto&Windus, 1972, On the role and place of Albania in this war shih edhe: Bernd Fischer, *Albania and the italian ivasion of Greece, 1940*, in Greece and the War, p.91-100.

In these conditions, the british saw again an excellent opportunity to cause problems for the enemy in albanian territory. The events also brought back into the center of A.Zogu figure, who was willing to take part in this british enterprise. The Foreign Office thought was that, even if it included A.Zogu will not be accepted as monarch, but as an albanian patriot, under the title: Ahmet Bej Zogu. This was a negative attitude not only towards the figure of Ahmet Zogu, but also to Albania. Regarding the future of Albania, the most acceptable opinion to the british government was that under which, this issue will be reviewed in the peace talks after the war.⁹¹

Self A.Zogu made plans for a revolt in which will activate personally. He initially wanted to go to Istanbul, where will mobilize about 14 thousand of his supporters, who will transfer then to Thessaloniki. It will join there with other immigrants from Bulgaria and Egypt. However, A.Zogu can not rely on the albanian diaspora in America, which was most of his opponents because of republican-democratic views.⁹² We must not forget that the former king A.Zogu found support in some patriotic circles in the USA. Greater support A.Zogu found in the districts of the Pan-Albanian Federation “Vatra” headquartered in Boston.⁹³

Foreign Office and SOE, and ease up the attitude on him, drew up a plan to use the albanian king as a support to the greek allies. It was decided that he transported to Greece, from where it will be addressed a message to his compatriots on the occasion of National Independence Day, November 28.⁹⁴ A.Zogu accepted, but decided as a condition the appointment with the Prime Minister or the Foreign Secretary before departure. Apparently he wanted to discuss his status. British authorities maintained distance and officially took no contact with him, using A.Ryan as mediator. This cold attitude by the british instance, come from unwillingness to not take any political commitment to A.Zogu.

Foreign Office informed the greek government on this issue, specifying that the attitude of the United Kindom to the status A.Zogu and independence of Albania remain unchanged. The plan was not carried out because the greek prime minister Ioannis Metaxas, not willing to accept A.Zogu on his territory.⁹⁵ This attitude is explained by the fact that after the military successes achieved, and especially after receipt of Korca, the greek government expressed the desire to keep themselves occupied territories and to change the boundaries in its favor. Also, the government wanted the inviolability of the A.Zogu status and independence of Albania, to seek post-war territorial claims.

Pearson Dixon suggested that A.Zogu held in reserve for the best time, and be used only if the situation overturned again in disfavor of the greeks. Right now, he would be sent to Cairo, to maintain contact with his compatriots.⁹⁶

Finally, on November 9, Foreign Office and SOE decided that in the current circumstances, can not be used A.Zogu.⁹⁷ Britain decided to foreground the interests of Greece, and was so careful to say only goal for “the liberation of Albania by fascist hoof”.

At the same time, was not completely abandoned the idea to promote a resistance movement among albanians but, without making them promises of independence, restoring A.Zogu or post-war borders.⁹⁸

⁹¹ TNA, FO 371/24868, Note by Foreign Office to include Ahmet Zogu in the resistance that will organise in Albania, 8 november 1940.

⁹² TNA, FO 371/24868, Note by Foreign Office to include Ahmet Zogu in the resistance in Albania, Ahmet Zogu plan to promote a revolt in Albania, 8 november 1940.

⁹³ TNA, FO 371/37136, In this file are included a lot of telegrams sending between albanian emmigrants of America and albanian emmigrants in London. Correspondence by Foreign Office with british embassy in Washington.

⁹⁴ TNA, FO 371/24868, Note by Foreign Office, file connected with the plan of bringing A.Zogu in Greece the day of Albania Independence, 23 november 1940.

⁹⁵ E. Barker, *British Policy in South-East Europe in the Second World War*, p.50-51.

⁹⁶ TNA, FO 371/24868, Note by Pearson Dixon for Foreign Office, 23 november 1940.

⁹⁷ TNA, FO 371/24866, Note by Foreign Office and SOE in regarding to return of Ahmet Zogut in Albania, 15 december 1940.

The attitude of Yugoslavia towards Albania differed from the greek attitude. Belgrade authorities were not against the independence of Albania, or against its territorial integrity, but they maintained a negative attitude towards the figure of Ahmet Zogu. Prince Pavel was concerned that intense activity of SOE in Belgrade could provoke italians. He collaborated with the british somewhat of organizing subversive acts in Albania, but reluctantly.⁹⁹ Office of SOE's in Belgrade was not very troubled by this fact and in December, drew up a new plan for a revolt in northern Albania, with the participation of one of the leaders of tribal Gani Kryeziu, who will be assisted with supplies from the air. There were also plans to establish an albanian provisional government, which would be recognized by the United Kindom (and even text recognition was ready). For this purpose, in addition to weapons and ammunition, was also appointed a total of 60 thousand pounds. For this it asked the greek government approval.¹⁰⁰

This plan, which was accepted by Foreign Office, the Ministry of War and Air Ministry, was rejected again by Athens. On December 21, 1940, the british ambassador to Greece, Michael Palairet, reported that the greek government had expected much worse idea of creating a provisional government in Albania. At this point, the royal air force had no technical possibilities to take supplies from the air. General Staff of the greek and british experts were of the opinion that the best option was the infiltration of small guerrilla groups. Greeks suggested that this be done by the Yugoslav territory. Eventually, SOE in London drew attention to its agents that they had exceeded its powers, by reminding them that the decision for albanian revolt was to depend on the military in Cairo and Greece. At this time, the greeks were reaping successes to the albanian front. Judge to approve a general uprising could lead I.Metaxas's government in decisions that were quite undesirable for the moment, because the greek government would become impossible dream come true to win "Northern Epirus" after the war.¹⁰¹

However, SOE agents in the Balkans continued their efforts. This time from the office of Istanbul, where W.Stirling colonel (who had served as gendarmerie inspector and adviser in the Ministry of Interior during the government of Ahmet Zogu) was assigned to a deal with the albanians. Under his leadership, the albanian political emigrants formed the Committee for the Liberation of Albania, with leader former albanian minister in London, Mehmet Bey Konica. The Committee urged the british government draft a statement to promise the restoration of Albania, in its borders before April 7, 1939 (It had referred also to other countries) and the immediate establishment of a national albanian government in exile.

This should be done in order to be encouraged albanians to resist, and to doubts on the annexation of the albanian territories from Greece. On February 25, 1941, W.Stirling proposed Foreign Office The Albanian Committee to be transformed into a provisional albanian government.¹⁰² A provisional government will give courage to the albanian people. Foreign Office, giving no importance to this problem, did not hold a position on the initiative. On March 27, 1941, in Belgrade was created a military coup led by General. D.Simovic. This coup had the support of SOE's.¹⁰³ Britains urged the new government to attack the italians in Albania, but it was disorganized and busy other domestic issues.

We should not leave without mention that, like Greece and Yugoslavia had expansionist goals to territories in the north of Albania. Even if undertaken such an attack, it could be interpreted as an open attack

⁹⁸ TNA, FO 371/24867, Note by Foreign Office and SOE in regarding to return of Ahmet Zogut and boundaries of Albania, 15 december 1940.

⁹⁹ E. Barker, *British Policy in South-East Europe in the Second World War*, p.51.

¹⁰⁰ TNA, FO 371/24867, The plan of SOE-së in Belgrade for a revolt in Northern Albania, 19 december 1940.

¹⁰¹ E. Barker, *British Policy in South-East Europe in the Second World War*, p.52-53.

¹⁰² TNA, FO 371/29719, Proposal by W.Stirling colonel for Foreign Office, 7 March 1941.

¹⁰³ David Stafford, "SOE and British Involvement in the Belgrade Coup'd'Etat of March 1941", *Slavic Review*, vol.36, No.3, 1997, p.398-419.

against the fascist government.¹⁰⁴ These did Yugoslavia attracted to come out in defense albanian question, without knowing that the turn of the fascist attack would come very quickly in their gate.

Finally, it was possible to organize an operation in the Albanian territory. A group of albanians, led by D.Oakley Hill Lieutenant-Colonel (another former gendarmerie officer Albania before the war), entered the albanian territory and advanced to Shkodra. Unfortunately, besides the lack of logistical support, this operation coincided exactly with the date of the German attack on Yugoslavia and Greece on April 6, 1941. The group was dissolved, while self Oakley Hill, dressed as an albanian refugee, returned Belgrade and sought refuge in the USA embassy. Since the request was refused, he decided to surrender to the germans who was transferred then to a camp of prisoners of war.¹⁰⁵ Capturing O.Hill brought and end of British plans for a revolt in occupied Albania.

British policy towards the occupied Albania, however, had not left without options. Different politicians, public figures and other important people, who were not indifferent to the fate of Albania, raised its voice in defense.

At the end of 1940, the Foreign Office was disturbed by the appearance of a committee called “Friends of the Albanian people”. Committee announced his release in writing in the London newspaper “The Times”, on November 29. It demanded a statement from the british government (with the occasion of the Independence of Albania), to promote the resistance of the albanian people. The Committee was composed by Lord Cecil, Vernon Bartlett, V.Cazalet, M.E.Durham, R.M.Hodgson, Geoffrey Le M.Mander, Lord P.Noel Baker, F.W.Pethic Lawrence and Ben Riley. The newspaper published an item broadcast on BBC radio by Lord Cecil (winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1937) on the occasion of National Day of Independence of Albania. The article ended with the words: “In any case, friends of freedom in Britain will insist on the restoration of the independence of Albania, and promote with all their options heroic prosperity of your country.”¹⁰⁶ In the United Kindom there were career diplomats who wanted to help Albania without any interest, but simply analyzed the issue of human aspect.

The event committee “Friends of the Albanian people” drew the attention of the greek ambassador, who wanted to know if he enjoyed the support of the government. Foreign Office advised him to turn for more information P.Noel Baker himself, who was one of the founding figures of the committee.¹⁰⁷

On January 23, 1941, the Foreign Secretary, A. Eden declared Lord Cecil that the british government was for an independent Albania but for the moment it was obliged to coordinate its policy with the wishes of the greeks.¹⁰⁸ Often flaring a continuity of british policy coordination with the wishes of the greek government. This refers with interests that had the british government against Greece in the future, as a geostrategic and geopolitical location. British documents mentioned frequently in Greece and Yugoslavia were allies of the british during the war, when such an assertion was not referred to Albania.

Balkan Committee in London also did not stay indifferent and lay the same claim in defense of the albanian issue. This committee was composed of a number of british personalities associated with the countries of the peninsula. It was an informal body for which the Foreign Office had expressed anti-greek orientation.

¹⁰⁴ E. Barker, *British Policy in South-East Europe in the Second World War*, p.53-54.

¹⁰⁵ Nicholas Costa, “Invasion-Action and Reaction. Albania, a case study”, *East Quarterly*, vol.X, No.1, 1976, p.55.

¹⁰⁶ TNA, FO 371/24867, Article by “The Times” newspaper, 29 november 1940, note by Foreign Office, 24 december 1940.

¹⁰⁷ Ibidem

* Noel Baker- laburist, humanist i njohur dhe pacifist, fitues i çmimit Nobel në vitin 1959.

¹⁰⁸ E. Barker, *British Policy in South-East Europe in the Second World War*, p.51.

Members of this committee were V.Cazalet, Lord Noel Buxton and president E. Boyle. At a meeting on January 27, 1941, the Committee adopted a resolution addressed to the government, in which express sympathy for the greek and albanian peoples and the desire for complete restoration of Independence of Albania. In addition, the document present a description of the previous activity of the Committee for the protection of peoples in the Balkans and made an appeal to the british government about the importance of protecting the ideal of self-determination.¹⁰⁹

On February 6, 1941, V.Cazalet major, wrote a letter to the Foreign Secretary suggesting that the independence of Albania to declare as one of Britain's military intentions, but without commenting on the issue of the future borders and the return of A.Zogu. The answer, came a week later, was informed briefly the idea of a declaration which would give the albanians confident about the future of their status. This issue was under consideration, but for various current reasons, it can not be made public.¹¹⁰ No doubt that these reasons have been nothing but a reconciliation with greek and yugoslav interests.

The official position of the United Kingdom remained unchanged for a long time, while the other variants considered for the future of Albania. By the end of 1941, Foreign Office prepared a project, under which Albania would become part of the Balkan Federation. The first step which needs to perform would be an agreement between the greek and yugoslav governments, which were migrating to London. The idea this time was that Italy not known its position in Albania, and it was replaced by a greek-yugoslav protectorate, within the Federation.¹¹¹

Only on December 17, 1942, the british Foreign Secretary announced the recognition of the independence of Albania, in the form of a response during questions in parliament.¹¹² British policy at that time was beginning to face new challenges, to which should be adapted. Challenges came from Albania itself, the birth and growth of the anti-fascist resistance movement.

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¹⁰⁹ TNA, FO 371/29714, Note by Balkan Committee in London in regardin to Albania Indipendence, 7 february 1941.

* V.Cazalet, member of the Balkan Committee. Conservator and close friend of Winston Churchill.

¹¹⁰ TNA, FO 371/29714, The answer of A.Eden, British Foreign Minister, for V.Cazalet, the member of the Balkan Committee, 12 february 1941.

¹¹¹ TNA, FO 371/29783, Note by Foreign Office for Albania, 24 november 1941.

¹¹² TNA, FO 371/37144, The answer by A.Eden in House of Commons on 17 december 1942 in regarding to Indipendence of Albania, 15 october 1943.