

# The Borders of Albania from a Political, Geographical, Ethnic, and Military Point of View in the 1920s

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## Abstract

The borders of Albania in the 1920s were a subject of political, geographical, ethnic, and military significance. Politically, Albania faced territorial disputes with neighboring countries, including Italy, Greece, and Yugoslavia, as they sought to expand their influence over Albanian territories. Geographically, the country's borders encompassed diverse landscapes, ranging from the rugged mountains of the north to the coastal plains in the west and the inland regions in the east. Ethnically, the population consisted of various groups, including Albanians, Greeks, Serbs, and others, which added complexity to the question of border demarcation. From a military perspective, Albania's limited resources and nascent armed forces posed challenges in defending its borders against external threats. This abstract provides an overview of the multidimensional nature of the borders of Albania in the 1920s, highlighting the political tensions, geographic diversity, ethnic complexities, and military considerations that shaped the country's territorial integrity during that period.

**Keywords:** political borders, Albania, Greece, King Zog, ethnic population

## 1. Introduction

In the 1920s, Albania experienced significant political and social changes that shaped its history for decades to come. Here is a brief overview of Albania's history during the 1920s. Albania declared its independence from the Ottoman Empire on November 28, 1912. However, the country faced a series of political and territorial challenges in the following years. Various European powers, including Italy, Greece, and Serbia, sought to exert their influence over Albania, leading to territorial disputes and political instability. In 1920, the Lushnja Congress established a provisional government, aiming to stabilize the country. Ahmet Zogu emerged as a prominent political figure and later became Prime Minister. In 1928, Zogu declared himself King Zog I and sought to consolidate his power by centralizing authority and suppressing

opposition. King Zog I implemented several modernization initiatives during his reign. He aimed to strengthen Albania's infrastructure, education system, and economy. Efforts were made to develop industries, build roads and bridges, and establish diplomatic relations with other countries. However, progress was slow due to limited resources and political challenges. Albania faced economic difficulties during the 1920s, exacerbated by a lack of foreign investment and a weak industrial base. The agricultural sector, which was the backbone of the economy, struggled due to outdated farming practices and land disputes. The economic hardships and social inequalities led to growing discontent and occasional outbreaks of social unrest. Albania's geopolitical position in the Balkans made it a target for neighboring countries seeking to expand their influence. Italy sought to exert control over Albania and pursued aggressive policies. In 1926, Zogu signed the Treaty of Tirana with Italy, which granted significant economic and political concessions to the Italians. In 1928, King Zog I introduced a new constitution that centralized power further. The political system became increasingly autocratic, limiting the rights and freedoms of the Albanian people. The political opposition, including leftist and nationalist groups, protested the monarchy's growing power, leading to sporadic clashes and government repression. Albania faced external threats during the 1920s, primarily from Italy and Yugoslavia. The territorial integrity of Albania was repeatedly challenged, leading to diplomatic tensions and occasional border skirmishes. Albania sought alliances with other countries to protect its sovereignty, including signing treaties with Yugoslavia and Turkey. The 1920s marked a period of political and social turbulence for Albania. While some modernization efforts were undertaken, the country grappled with economic difficulties, political instability, and external pressures. These challenges would continue to shape Albania's history throughout the 20th century.

## **2. Retrospective look of Albania borders before 1920s**

Although the Albanian people have preserved their own individuality over the centuries, Albania never had its own borders as a unit in its own right.

In the last years of Ottoman rule over Albania, Italy and Austria had preponderant influence there: that in the south and this in the north. But both agreed, in the interests of peace, to support independence when in 1913-1914 the Conference of Ambassadors in London tried to settle all the questions resulting from the Balkan wars.

The borders which were then summarily assigned to the state of Albania, represented a compromise between the Albanian aspirations, sponsored essentially by Italy and Austria with the support of Germany, and the Montenegrin - Serbian - Greek ones, supported mainly from France and Russia.

To define the details of those frontiers on the ground, two commissions of representatives of the great powers were appointed. The one for northern Albania, made up of soldiers only, was on the ground between the mouth of the Boiana and

Lake Ohrid in the autumn of 1913 and in the first summer months of 1914 until the outbreak of the world war, but could not come to any practical conclusion, due to the irreconcilability of the theses of the two political groups represented in it. That of southern Albania, a mixture of military and civil officials, was in the places from Erseke to Gjirokastra from October to December 1913, and while he left the border between Lake Ohrid and Mount Gramos undefined, he drew instead on a sketch 1:100,000, representing an Austrian 1:200,000 map enlargement, with some hastily made corrections on the ground, the boundary from Mount Gramos to Ftelia Bay. He then delivered his conclusions in the minutes of his fifteenth session, in Florence, on December 17, 1913.

After the Great War, through very complex diplomatic events closely intertwined with the arrangement of the Adriatic, Albania managed to obtain recognition of the borders of 1913. But to them, essentially to somehow satisfy the requests Yugoslavia, four amendments were made by the Conference of Ambassadors in Paris on November 9, 1921:

*-the first, to ensure the protection of the Montenegrin city of Podgorica and at the same time to allow the Albanian tribes the free passage from the plain of Scutari to their mountain pastures;*

*-the second, to leave Prizrend its natural approaches from the west and assign, again to Yugoslavia, the entire clan (tribe) of the Gora;*

*-the third, to leave entirely to the State S.H.S. the Dibra-Struga road;*

*-the fourth, to arrange that the small village of Lin on Lake Ohrid, which the Commission of 1913 had proposed to leave to Serbia, should instead be part of the Albanian state.*

A special international commission, made up of military representatives of Italy, France and Great Britain, presided over by the Italian representative, was sent in 1922 to define this frontier on the ground, from the mouth of the Boiana to Lake Ohrid. Subsequently it was also entrusted with the task of defining the boundary between this lake and Mount Gramos, as well as marking on the ground the boundary from Mount Gramos to the bay of Ftelia, which, as has been said, the Commission of 1913 had defined only on a very rough map, in Florence. That is, he had to identify the entire land border of Albania on the ground.

The Commission had the power to propose small amendments to the protocols which, while still producing the passage of a minimum quantity of the population from one State to another, considered local economic interests. However, definitive approval was always reserved for the Conference of Ambassadors in Paris.

### **3. The Borders of Albania in the 1920 period**

The Commission operated on the ground between 1922 and 1925; his work proceeded through multiple diplomatic difficulties and vicissitudes on the spot. The

officers of the first Italian delegation, presided over by General Enrico Tellini, were treacherously massacred on the rolling stock near Delvinachi on 27 August 1923.

The layout of the border following the delimitation operations is consecrated in the two protocols of Florence: of 27 January 1925 for the Greek - Albanian border and of 26 July 1926 for the Yugoslav - Albanian border. It can be summarized as follows:

**a) Yugoslav-Albanian border.** - It has a development of approximately 477 km. Starting from the mouth of the Boiana on the Adriatic, it follows the course of the river up to the village of Gorica; thence leaving the Tarabosch to Albania, and the village of Skia to Yugoslavia, it crosses the lake of Scutari up to the Liceni Hotit bay. It leaves the hill of Raps to Albania, crosses the Cem stream, and through the peaks of its right bank, I reach Mount Vila. From here it makes an acute salient, north of the watershed between Cem and Lim, up to Gieva Glava, and then south, on the watershed between Lim and Drin, following it up to Mount Giaraviziza. Thus he leaves to Yugoslavia the two villages of Gussinio and Plava in the Lim valley. Then, west of Giacova, it first follows the watershed between the upper and middle valleys of the White Drin, then it cuts this river south-west of Prizrend and climbs the Coritnich and Calabach mountains, leaving the Liuma tribe in Albania and that of the Gora in Yugoslavia. Indi is held first on the crests of Corab and Desciat; it then descends to Drin Nero which it follows for a small stretch and then climbs up to the peaks of Mount Raduc and Mount Calcan, leaving the cities of Dibra and Struga and the road that unites them to Serbia. It finally reaches Lake Ochrida between the villages of Radosda and Lin, crosses the lake towards the southeast, mounts the crust of Galiscizza, descends to Lake Prespa and reaches, in it, the point common to the three states, Albania, Yugoslavia and Greece, southwest of Velichi Grad islet.

**b) Greek-Albanian border.** - It has a development of approximately 257 km. It begins at the point common to the three States; it crosses the peninsula of Suhagora, then the small lake of Prespa, and, roughly following the watershed between the Devoli (Adriatic) and the Vistrizza (Aegean) reaches the Gramos range; it follows its crest to descend, along a ridge between the villages of Radati and Cursaca, to the Sarandaporos river, which it borders up to its outlet in the Voiussa; climbs to the summit of Tumba, stays in the high region north of Vosotina and, south of Mount Burato, descends to Drinos, passes Cacavia, follows the crust of the hills south of Cseria, passes between the villages of Castaniani and Cossovizza, touches the tops of the Murgana and Stugara mountains, crosses the Povla torrent, passes between the villages of Verva and Saiada, and, running south of Conispoli and on the crest of the Capo Stilo hills, reaches the bay of Ftelia on the Corfu channel.

**c) Border signs and documents.** - The frontier was accurately indicated on the ground by the erection of 353 concrete milestones and a few dozen auxiliary pyramids; the data necessary to accurately trace all the stones were collected. Border, memorial stones, pyramids, have been minutely described, with the exposure of all the relative data, in special documents annexed to the border protocols, which include

only a map regularly surveyed at a scale of 1:50,000, on a strip of 2 km approximately for each band of the border.

#### **4. Geographical border of Albania**

The current borders of Albania do not respond to any of the geographical concepts usually followed in the determination of frontiers: the state limit indeed crosses lakes, river basins, ridges, and passes from one watershed line to another, etc. Considering the consequences with regard to Albania, it can essentially be observed: to the north, a part of the basin of Lake Scutari is given to Albania, the remainder to Yugoslavia; of the effluent of the lake (Boiana), Albania is the owner of only one part, while of the remainder it has to share the enjoyment with the neighboring state. Of the Drin basin, Albania does not possess the vast part constituting the upper basin of the White Drin; and of the Black Drin and private from the upper upstream part of the region of Dibra. Of Lake Ohrid, like of the two branches of that of Prespa, it has only a very small part, in the southern extremities. Of the same high basin of the Devoli here and there some clipping is left in Greece, as well as the more mountainous part of the basin of the Voiussa and its tributaries, Sarandaporos and Drinos, is left outside Albania. The same fact is repeated for the basin of the Povla stream which flows into the lake of Butrint, and it could not be otherwise, given that the concepts which presided over the various stages of the Albanian question, in determining the frontier of the new state, were essentially dictated by political expediency of the moment. Ultimately, the border itself left all three states concerned unsatisfied, but especially Yugoslavia and Greece, for which the existence of the Albanian state is an obstacle to the fulfillment of territorial aspirations.

#### **5. The border from an ethnic point of view**

The border, as it has been established, encloses a compact mass of Albanians, a mass which only presents less homogeneity in the south, due to the infiltration of Greek elements into the districts of Gjirokastra and Tepeleni; of a small minority of Aromanians (Cuzzo-Vlachs) and of an almost insignificant minority of Macedonians (Bulgarians) between the lakes of Ohrid and Prespa. But the Albanians who are outside the border are greater in number than those who populate Albania and are divided between Yugoslavia and Greece. The Albanian claims, declaring themselves based on ethnography, would therefore like Albania to include the old Turkish vilayets (regions) of Scutari, Cossovo, Monastir, Gianina [Janina], and part of that of Thessaloniki. The frontier that on these concepts the Albanian delegation at the peace conference (1919-1921) claimed, therefore had the following trend: starting from the bay of Spizza north of Antivari, it headed north-east, it incorporated the tribes of Tuzi, Hoti, Gruda, Triepsi and the city of Podgorica, then followed the pre-1912 Montenegrin borders, and included the district of Ipek [Peja], the western part of that of Mitrovizza, those of Pristina, Gilan, Ferizovich, Catoianich, a part of that of Uscub, those of Calcandelen, of Gostivar, of Cherciov and of Dibra, to reach the mountain between the lakes of Ohrid and Prespa; it included the *cazà* of Corizza [Korça] up to

the Gramos, followed its crest, towards the south, and headed for the gulf of Prevesa, leaving Conizza, Metsovo, Gianina [Janina] and Prevesa in Albania. In this way Albania would have included over two million Albanians, of whom less than a million are in its current borders. Undoubtedly these are maximum aspirations, but it is equally certain that in the north of Lake Scutari the tribes of Tuzi, Gruda, Hoti and Triepsi are Albanians, that in the upper Lin valley the villages of Gussinie [Gucia] and Piave are eminently Albanian, despite the violent denationalization efforts by Yugoslavia, that Giacova, Prizrend and Dibra have a tiny minority of non-Albanians and that irredentist sentiment, especially in the last two cities, is very strong. The plain of Kosovo (between Mitrovizza and Pristina) and the valley of Calcandelen are mostly inhabited by Albanians. To the south in the region, now held by the Greeks, called Ciamuria [Çameria] (between Gianine [Janina] and the sea) the Albanians are again in a great majority. So that from an ethnographic point of view Albania has been reduced to the minimum possible terms.

## **6. The border from an administrative point of view**

The frontier defined by the international protocols mentioned above could not even respect the administrative limits, which were, moreover, very uncertain, and often it was not even able to respect the limits of the tribes. Thus, for example, in the north the tribe of Hoti was divided between Albania and Yugoslavia, the territory of the tribe of Clementi was ceded in part to Yugoslavia to leave it the villages of Gussinie and Plava with their immediate dependencies. The border between Mount Giaravizza and Drin Bianco cuts the *cazà* (prefecture) of Giacova in half and the border further south, passing between the Liuma tribe (Albanian) and that of the Gora (perhaps of Turkish origin, but with Albanian feelings, and not at all Serbian) does not respect the administrative limit, much discussed in this region. Further south, in the Dibrano, the administrative divisions are not observed at all. The same fact still occurs in the region between the lakes of Ohrid and Prespa, and even between this and Mount Gramos, the limit of the *cazà* of Corizza [Korça] is partially rectified, to eliminate the arbitrariness of the ancient Turkish limit. Finally, from Gramos to the bay of Ftelia, the compromise border, studied by the Commission in 1913, it was not possible to worry in the least about administrative divisions. However, throughout the frontier, making use of the relative latitude that was left to it, the Commission of 1922-26 always tried to leave the towns or villages located near the border sufficient breathing space, both to feed the city market, and to leave to the peasants at least the fields indispensable for their livelihood, within the State to which they belong.

## **7. The border from an economic and political point of view.**

The findings that a simple look at the map allows you to make are far from comforting. To the north, the city and the lake of Scutari are cut off by a good part of the territory which naturally should have belonged to it as it happened in the past. To the east, the cities of Jacoba and Prizrend, which should have formed the natural outlet for the whole mountain region straddling the border, have remained in Yugoslavia, so that

the populations of a large part of those regions are deprived of their natural market and are the other part too far from Scutari, to which they are connected only by long and difficult mule tracks, to go there to sell their pastoral products and to buy food and the few artefacts they need. Dibra is cut off from a good part of its surroundings, creating enormous economic difficulties for its inhabitants who cannot freely buy and sell their products. In the extreme south, the large village of Conispoli which dominates the Corfu channel from above, is separated from the sea, immediately below, by the non-natural border.

It is therefore not wrong to declare that the current economic conditions of Albania are difficult also because of the border. Only the intensive valorisation of the land remaining in Albanian territory will be able to partially compensate, economically, the amputations endured.

The International Boundary Commission has taken care of these conditions, and has stipulated some special protocols, aimed at alleviating them in part. A protocol regulates navigation on Lake Scutari and on the Boiana; another regulates communications between the regions of Scutari and Podgorica with the upper valley of the Lim (region of Vermosc, Gussinie, Plava) for both Albanian and Yugoslav citizens. Still another allows free access for mountain Albanians to their traditional market in Giacova, and also allows cultivation in the land that the border left in the Yugoslav state. Another protocol allows Orthodox Albanians to access the monastery of St. Naum, which remained in Yugoslav territory, on the south-eastern shore of Lake Ochrida. It would also have been necessary to achieve the free transit of the Albanians on the road that connects Santi Quaranta to Corizza to Han Calibachi, through Greek territory: but it was not possible to resolve a question that was not discussed in 1913, when the protocol of Florence, relating to that side of the frontier. The Albanian aspirations have already been mentioned. In part, they are tangibly represented by the fact that, although these are cities and territories located in neighboring states, the Albanian government maintains the prefectures of Kosovo and Dibra and the sub-prefecture of Ciamuria on its territory. They are matched by the Yugoslav and Greek aspirations, which, taken together, would almost completely suppress Albania. On the Yugoslav side, the demands have Durres as a maximum program, the Drin as an average request, a border adjustment in northern Albania as a minimum aspiration, in order to guarantee the S.H.S. territory (State of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians) from any danger coming from Albanian territory. The Greek aspirations arrive at a line which follows the Voiussa as far as Glisura and then joins the lakes of Ochrida and Prespa.

## **8. The border from a military point of view**

After what has been said, it is evident that the conditions of Albania with respect to its security, in the face of the invader, are very difficult. The Yugoslav outlet on Scutari is facilitated by the immediate proximity of the border, especially to the south of the lake. The invasion in the heart of Albania is made easy through the basins of the White

Drin and the Black Drin, whose mountain areas are, as has been said, Yugoslav: from Dibra to Tirana it is just 65 km in a straight line. The Yugoslav outlet on Corizza is also facilitated by the proximity of the border near S. Naum, to the Pogradec-Corizza road [Korça].

As regards Greece, this has the head of a tributary of the Devoli, and therefore from Florina you can easily descend along the Corizza road. From Gianina then you can also aim according to the communications of Voiussa [Vjosa] and Drinos on Berat, on Vlora and on the coast from Santi Quaranta [Saranda] to Vlora itself.

On the other hand, however, Albania, reaching as far as the bay of Ftelia, breaks the unity of Greek possession of the channel of Corfu, in its northern entrance: the importance of this factual circumstance is great, since it prevents said channel from being able to become, since peacetime, an undisturbed offensive base against other neighboring Mediterranean states.

## 9. Conclusions

The borders of Albania in the 1920s were marked by a complex interplay of political, geographical, ethnic, and military factors. From a political standpoint, Albania faced territorial disputes with neighboring countries, most notably Italy, Greece, and Yugoslavia, which sought to expand their influence and lay claim to Albanian territories. These disputes created significant political tensions and posed challenges to Albania's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Geographically, Albania's borders encompassed diverse landscapes, ranging from mountainous regions in the north to coastal plains in the west and inland areas in the east. This geographical diversity played a role in shaping the country's internal dynamics and the distribution of ethnic groups across its territory. Ethnically, Albania was a heterogeneous nation, consisting of Albanians as the majority population, alongside significant minority groups such as Greeks and Serbs. The presence of different ethnic communities within Albania's borders added complexity to the question of border demarcation and often fueled tensions between the various groups.

From a military perspective, Albania faced significant challenges in defending its borders. The country had limited resources and a nascent armed force, which made it vulnerable to external threats and incursions. The lack of a robust military apparatus hindered Albania's ability to assert control over its borders and protect its territorial integrity.

In conclusion, the borders of Albania in the 1920s were characterized by political disputes, geographical diversity, ethnic complexities, and military challenges. The territorial integrity of the country was constantly under pressure, and the multidimensional nature of the border issues made it a significant challenge for Albania to maintain control over its territories. These factors would continue to shape Albania's history and its relationships with neighboring countries in the decades to come.



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