



The Rise of a National Army or a Colonial One? Albanian Troops in the Austro-Hungarian Army during World War I

Anastas Bezha

Doctoral School of History, University of Szeged

anastasbezha@yahoo.com

The article discusses the under-researched topic of the Albanian troops in the Austro-Hungarian military during World War One. The topic represents a forgotten moment in World War One Balkan historiography, and it is also an unstudied colonial example. Based on English, Hungarian, and German archival and secondary sources, the article first provides a short historical description of the Albanian fighting units under the Ottoman Empire, their organization, and their infamously bellicose nature, up until the independence of the country. The paper then analyzes how these units became part of the Great War (despite the fact that the country itself remained neutral) under the Austro-Hungarian Army; first, as irregular fighting troops (*Freischärler Albanien*) between 1914 and 1916 and later as ethnical regimental units (*Albanisches Korps* or *Albanische Abteilungen*) between 1916 and 1918. Finally, the article compares the Albanian troops to other colonial forces of the time, including how these Albanian units were recruited, trained, and used in the battlefields with the purpose of creating a sense of loyalty to the Habsburg Monarchy. The case study of the Albanian Corps is a prime example of how the inability to ensure safety by force in a newly created state met with the geo-strategic and war necessities of a Great Power through colonial martial practices disguised as transnational help.

Keywords: World War I, Austria-Hungary, Albania, national and transnational army, colonial army, colonial practices

The entry into the Great War found the Austro-Hungarian Army in a precarious situation. By January 1915, the German general Ludendorff told his colleague Falkenhayn that “Austria’s emergency is our great incalculable.”¹ Another German liaison officer reported back to Supreme Army Command (*OHL*) that the Austrians were “exhausted, rotten.”² The frailty of the Austro-Hungarian

1 Ludendorff, *Ludendorff’s Own Story, August 1914–November 1918*, 142.

2 Stone, *The Eastern Front 1914–1917*, 155.

Army had never been a secret to anyone. What was shocking was the dimension that it had acquired in such a short period.

In relative terms, the situation was the direct result of Monarchy's own conditions and faults. For example, in matters of war-economy, there was a crisis of supply and prewar provisions. The 2nd Army fighting in the East had only 2,000 guns (of 45 different types) against the 3,000 of the Russians, and the majority of them were of lower quality, mainly made of bronze. Even more worrisome for the authorities was the incapability of their own industry to mass produce ammunition for these guns.³

Even if weaponry had not been a major issue, the failure by the end of 1914 of the Central Powers' prewar strategy of a swift victory on one front and the repositioning of the troops on the other one unquestionably was. The Germans had failed to seize France quickly, and meanwhile, the Habsburg Armies were stuck with their nose on the ground after three unsuccessful offensives in Serbia. By the beginning of 1915, the k. u. k. forces were spread too thin on multiple stretches of the front, spanning from Poland and Ukraine in the East to the areas on the south in the Balkans and up to the mountain ranges of the Italian Alps. As chief of the General Staff (Armeeoberkommando, AOK), Conrad von Hötzendorf had pushed the *Thronefolger* and the emperor to launch a preemptive war against Italy and Serbia⁴ several times before 1914 precisely to avoid this bleak scenario: the encirclement and tightening of the "Iron Ring around Monarchy's borders."⁵ His warmongering—though also prescient warnings went unheard, and by the time of the conflict, Conrad and his staff had to fight an uphill war for which they were not prepared.⁶

Nonetheless, the greatest military issue was the human cost. By 1914, the Habsburg Empire had called into arms around 3,500,000 young men, which included all the trained reserves and a portion of the untrained territorial forces. In a short period, the intensity of the conflict led to casualties so massive that they were shocking and entirely unanticipated. By the end of 1914, losses amounted to 1,250,000 men, and by the end of the first year of the war, this number had risen to 2,738,500.⁷ The slaughter was as vertical in the martial

3 Ibid., 156–57.

4 See Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 99–118.

5 For a concise explanation of Conrad's preemptive war strategy, see Williamson Jr., *Austria-Hungary and the Origins of the First World War*, 50–51.

6 See Watson, *The Fortress*.

7 Deak, *Beyond Nationalism*, 193.

hierarchy as it was horizontal. By the end of 1914, 3,168 officers had been killed, with total casualties amounting to 22,310, or almost half of the prewar corps of career and reserve officers.⁸ The lack of troops turned into an even greater security problem after 1916, due to the partial occupation of Serbia, Montenegro, and Albania and the resulting need for an administrative force. Thus, the most pressing issue at the time was for the AOK to find a solution that would have helped alleviate the rising military disparity with the Entente forces, furthered the geostrategic plans, and addressed security needs. The envisioned solution was the bolstering of the ranks through the recruitment of forces that were possibly friendly to Austria-Hungary's cause, especially from invaded areas labelled "Friendly occupied territories."⁹

One of these countries was Albania. First and foremost, Albania represented a geostrategic asset for whichever Great Power controlled it. At the height of the prewar rivalry with Vienna, the Italian Foreign Minister Tommaso Tittoni in 1904 had stated, "the true value of Albania lies in her ports and in her seacoast, possession of which would mean for either Italy or Austria-Hungary incontestable supremacy on the Adriatic Sea." Any attempt by one or the other to seize this precious coastline had to be "opposed by all available means." The Austrian position was identical: as long as the Albanian coastline remained nominally Ottoman or independent, there was no threat that another Great Power would risk her maritime and trade lifeline to Venice or Trieste.¹⁰ This position was reinforced by the time of the Balkan Wars of 1912–13, when on November 28, 1912 the Albanians declared through a "rocambollesque" series of events their independence from a collapsing Ottoman Empire¹¹ and a policy of neutrality to defend themselves. The declaration proved insufficient to halt the Serbian and Montenegrin forces from seizing Kosovo and Shkodra, because according to the Serbian prime minister Nikola Pašić, "an independent Albania was neither desirable nor possible."¹²

As a result of the Austro-Hungarian threats of war to Serbia and Montenegro, on December 17, 1912, the Great Powers ambassadors met in London to reach a peaceful settlement. The solution was a smaller and neutral state without key

8 Ibid., 194.

9 In regard to the imperial reasons for the recruitment of soldiers from these countries, see the article by Lehnstaedt, "Ein Ende mit Expansion."

10 Fried, "The Cornerstone of Balkan Power Projection," 428.

11 Csaplár-Degovics, "The Independence of Albania and the Albanian-Ottoman Relations 1912–1913."

12 Swire, *Albania: The Rise of a Kingdom*, 145.

areas that were partly inhabited by Albanians, such as Kosovo, Dibra, Ipek, and Ohrid. The country was not established based on its ethnographic boundaries, but because its existence within the borders specified was considered “essential for the peace in Europe.”¹³ None of the interested parties was happy with the decision, but the Austrians had managed to prevent Russia’s satellite states from gaining a foothold on the Adriatic coastline, and Serbia and Montenegro had almost doubled in size.¹⁴

As Europe’s final diplomatic attempt to prevent war, Albania proved a short-lived experiment. Within a matter of months, the already weak government of Wilhelm zu Wied had collapsed as a result of inner power struggles and two revolts raging in central and south Albania. By September 1914, the country was in a state of anarchy and at the mercy of its neighbors. The first neighbor to take advantage of the situation was Italy, which seized the Saseno island and a month later, in October 1914, landed her forces in Vlora. Greece, fueling the irredentist movement of Vorio Epirus, seized large parts of southern Albania. After June 1915, Serbia took control of most of the country and ultimately installed her Albanian ally, Essad Pascha, as leader.¹⁵ Only with the Bulgarian entry into war on October 1915 and the opening of the Balkan front could the policy-makers in Vienna redirect their efforts to Albania. In the ministerial meeting of January 1916 over the new war aims of the Monarchy, the control of Albania by the k. u. k. armies was made a paramount concern, not only to ensure the safety of navigation for the Imperial fleet but also for the security of the left flank of the Central Forces stationed on the Macedonian front.¹⁶

A second reason for the decision of the AOK to recruit these troops was the long ethnographic policy that Vienna had pursued with the Albanians as a salient counterweight to the “Serbization” or “Slavization” of the peninsula.¹⁷ Mainly by supporting through investments the development of an Albanian national consciousness¹⁸ while simultaneously extending its economic and cultural control, the *Ballhausplatz* hoped to curb Albania’s political trajectory to its own advantage. The natives, who were mainly Muslim and were ethno-linguistically

13 Fried, “The Cornerstone of Balkan Power Projection,” 429.

14 At the end of the Balkans Wars, Serbia’s territory expanded by over 80%. See Clark, *Sleepwalkers*, 99.

15 Fried, “The Cornerstone of Balkan Power Projection,” 434.

16 Bezha, “Austria-Hungary and the Albanian project,” 139–43.

17 On the imperial activity in Albania, see the book of Gostentschnigg, *Wissenschaft im Spannungsfeld von Politik und Militär*.

18 On the Austro-Hungarian involvement in the Albanian national movement, see Toleva, *Der Einfluss Österreich-Ungarns auf die Bildung der albanischen Nation 1896–1908*.

different from and often hostile to the Slavs of the peninsula, represented for the Monarchy an effective buffering force against the plans of her rivals (Italy and Russia). This cultural support along with political support during the Balkan Wars was not without a price. By the eve of World War I, the k. u. k. army, aware of its own weakness, would demand repayment of this “debt” in the form of men at arms.¹⁹

The recruitment of third-party and colonial forces ones during the Great War is a broader and well researched topic. However, in addition to being a subject which has been understudied, the recruitment of Albanian troops by the Austro-Hungarian army represents a rather fascinating historical question due to the dual nature of its problematic: when does support become exploitation in military terms of a weak, defenseless country by an empire? And how can one discern the foggy line between an independent national army and a dependent colonial one? These questions cannot be answered without putting into perspective the characteristics of these military units before and during World War I.

Albanian Troops under the Ottoman Rule

Fundamentally, the Albanian troops were and remained a mercenary force throughout the period of Ottoman rule, thus displaying all the characteristic and weaknesses that the mercenary system had.²⁰ Historically, there were good reasons why the Ottomans chose to recruit these forces. First, in the Albanian lands, the existing strong feudal system endured under the sultan’s rule through the Ottoman process of *istimalet*.²¹ This meant that the Albanian fighters managed to keep unscathed their characteristic social structure, which was centered around local connections and obedience to lords, firstly through the *timar* (*fief*) system (post 1385) and later on the *devshirme*. Second, the Sublime Porte faced a major governance and safety deficit in *Rumeli*, especially after the end of the expansionist campaigns brought by Vienna’s defeat in 1683. The constructed castles and fortresses in the borderlands did not have the necessary manpower

19 ÖHHStA PA I/936, MdÄ to Kral, on July 7, 1914.

20 The mercenary system had indeed a great weakness: when payment came slowly or not at all, mercenaries commonly mutinied, lived off the land, became bandits, or all the three at once; the end result was that the local people always paid the price. Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States ad 990–1990*, 83–84.

21 Inalcik, *The Status of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch under the Ottomans*, 408–10.

despite Istanbul's attempt to fill the gap with Janissaries or state troops. Thus, the only remaining solution was to hire mercenaries with long guns and matchlock guns from Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Albania.²²

These troops served in the Ottoman army as infantry or cavalry units, and commonly the Ottoman records described them as brave, fearless, heroic, hard and warlike.²³ Due to their lifestyle, they generally engaged in guerrilla type warfare, with bands of mercenaries as small as 30 warriors under a sergeant (*bölükbaşı* tur.) up to 1,000 warriors under chieftain (*başbuğ* tur.).²⁴ Despite the existence of several surviving contracts, the number of these units was fluid. For example, the leaders in the southern Albanian speaking *vilayets* (the *Toskë* alb.) based their ability to raise larger numbers of warriors on personal or vassalage connections (*Bey-Agha/Ağa* relationship).²⁵ In the northern Albanian speaking *vilayets* (*Gegëria* alb.), it was much more difficult to recruit soldiers than it was in the south because the methods used were tied to blood or kinship (*fis* alb.) relationships and thus had a tribalistic nature. As such, the size of the mercenary units was linked to the “good name” of the leader's family (*oxhak* alb.) and its origins.²⁶

Usually, the troops served regionally and seasonally, with fighting periods of two, four, or at most six months.²⁷ If called into arms in the summer, many Albanian fighters would withdraw from the battlefields by November, regardless of the current military situation. This scenario, which commonly happened with northern Albanians (the *Gegë* alb.), many times forced the Ottoman state to pay for additional mercenaries during winter rotations.²⁸

As part of their contractual obligations (*mukâvele* tur.), these forces had to bring their own equipment and horses.²⁹ This was a double-edged condition, because on the one hand, it saved the contractor from the obligation of paying for the equipment used by the mercenary forces, but on the other, it often

22 Yıldız, *Neferin Adı Yok*, 17–30, 147–49.

23 Öreñç, “Albanian Soldiers in The Ottoman Army during the Greek Revolt at 1821,” 505

24 Ibid., 507.

25 One of the most powerful noblemen of Central Albania was Esat Paşa Toptani, who during the Siege of Shkodra in 1913 commanded a disintegrating Ottoman army of 35,000 men, of which 15,000 were ex-Ottoman *redif* (reservist) soldiers, mainly Albanians. Vlora, *Kujtime*, 81.

26 Another example from northern Albania was the tribal leader and later King of Albania Ahmet Bey Zogolli (Zogu), who had under his command a band of 2,000 armed soldiers from his area of influence and origin, the Mati region. Heaton-Armstrong, *The Six Month Kingdom*, 92.

27 Yıldız, *Neferin Adı Yok*, 147–49.

28 Öreñç, “Albanian Soldiers in The Ottoman Army during the Greek Revolt at 1821,” 506.

29 Erdem, “‘Perfidious Albanians’ and ‘Zealous Governors,’” 215.

weakened the Ottoman state because a given unit's cohesion and fighting ability were greatly endangered by their lack of equipment or the striking differences in the assorted equipment which they brought to battle. This remained a distinctive characteristic of the Albanian fighting units up until the Balkan Wars, and it was noticed even by the Irish captain Duncan Heaton Armstrong, who served the Albanian Crown in 1914.³⁰

During the Tanzimat Era (1839–1876), the Ottoman state underwent a series of reforms, including the creation of a modern, centralized, and national army similar to the Prussian one. These reforms had an unintentional impact on the Albanian units as well. On the one hand, these strengthened the Albanian fighters by creating the necessary conditions for them to receive a stable income as regular or reservist soldiers and to develop professionally, as they were given a modern education and took part in training, and military drills, opportunities which they had not before (and this had undermined their ability to fight beyond small skirmishes when they operated as seasonal mercenaries).³¹ On the other hand, these reforms proved to be too constraining for the Albanian fighters due to their centenary military practices, mainly in the aspects of longevity of the service (from seasonal to five-year periods), the type of military units (from kinship/vassalage units to modern type regiments), and their deployment (from mainly native regional forces into imperial ones). As a result, the Tanzimat Era in military terms drew a wedge between the Ottoman Army and the Albanians, where one side saw these reforms as a necessity for the survival and safety of the empire while the other interpreted them as an infringement on freedom and military status quo. This led to a number of protests, insurgencies, and rebellions by the Albanians, which were met by the Ottoman authorities with counteroffensives, purges, imprisonments, and disarmament campaigns.³² As a result, by the beginning of World War I, the Albanian fighters had calcified features of a pre modern military unit: they were poorly or rather loosely organized, ill-equipped, and hardly trained, and they had an opportunistic (if not predatory) view concerning how they operated, fought, and attained their military objectives. The only incentive to use them was their military knowledge of the area as natives and their fighting spirit.

30 Heaton-Armstrong, *The Six Month Kingdom*, 90.

31 Beaujour, *Voyage militaire dans l'Empire Ottoman*, 347–49.

32 Pollo, *Historia e Shqipërisë*, 129–30.

The Albanian Irregular Troops (Freischärler Albanien) under the Austro-Hungarian Army (1914–1916)

The secret military operation of September 1914

The creation of a smaller Albanian state in 1912–13, proved a rather powerful incentive for many Albanians to ally with Austria-Hungary in 1914. The keenest supporters of the empire among these forces were the refugee Albanian leaders from the ex-Ottoman *vilayets* of Kosovo and Macedonia. Unsurprisingly, even before the official entry into the Great War, the Austro-Hungarian institutions had made plans for the recruitment of these forces as irregular troops with the hope of opening a second front that would have attacked Serbia from the South. In an encrypted telegram dating July 23, 1914, the *Ballhausplatz* informed its consuls in Albania and the k. u. k ambassador in Istanbul Pallavicini of the possibility of organizing and using the Albanian fighters in the offensive against Serbia. In the introductory section one finds the following: “In the event of the outbreak of war between the Monarchy and Serbia, from our point of view it would be very desirable—and fortunate, given the mood in the Serbian-Albanian border areas—that the Albanian population should be active and expose the Serbian military in those areas as a response to the terrible oppression imposed on them by the Serbian tyranny.”³³

Two days later, on July 25, 1914, Augustus von Kral, the Austro-Hungarian diplomat in Albania, replied positively to Vienna’s military proposition. He had been in continuous contact with nationalist leaders from the north and from Kosovo (Hasan Prishtina, Isa Boletini, Bajram Curri, Selim Batusha, etc.), and they were all in favor of joint military action against the enemy (*shkejau* alb.) in the form of a general uprising. However, in his view, the most logical starting point for the operation was Albania, not Kosovo, because from there, the Monarchy could have shipped the necessary weapons and equipment for the Albanian fighters. From there, these forces, aided by the Monarchy’s officers, could have divided into two groups, which then would attack Serbia on two fronts, one toward Macedonia through the region of Dibra and one from the Albanian-New Serbia border of the Luma region.³⁴

33 ÖHHSStA PA I/936, MdÄ to Löwenthal and Kral in Durazzo, to Pallavicini in Istanbul, on July 23, 1914.

34 ÖHHSStA PA I/936, Kral from Durazzo to MdÄ, on July 25, 1914.

After receiving this encouraging answer and with the hope of gaining a military advantage for the Monarchy's armies, on July 27, 1914 the Ballhausplatz instructed General Consul Kral to deliver to the "Albanian insurgent leaders" the following message:

The declaration of war against Serbia has not been made yet, but it is coming. I ask to You high-born [possibly the name of the leader] to spread the rumor among the Albanian insurgents that the state of war has already occurred, that Belgrade has been abandoned by its court and government, that Kosovo is completely emptied by the [Serbian] troops, and that k. u. k. troops have already crossed the Serbian border.³⁵

The message cited above is significant for three reasons. First, each of the four statements was chronologically false, thus indicating that the Monarchy was willingly lying and quite possibly sending her allies to a slaughter with the hope of gaining a temporary military advantage for her own forces. Second, by initiating the operation from Albania, Vienna was willingly compromising the neutrality of the country, which she had previously protected and guaranteed in the London Conference of 1912–13.³⁶ Third, the way in which these forces would have been organized and armed and the manner in which they would have operated under the directives of the k. u. k. officers were in total breach of the Hague convention of War on Land (1907).³⁷ The archives do not indicate whether the message was ever transmitted through Kral to the Albanian leaders, but the logic of the events that came in the wake of its drafting suggest that it was.

A day later, Vienna reassured Kral (who by then was acting as the leader of the operation) that the Monarchy would provide 2,000 rifles, 100,000 cartridges, and 50,000 Kronen to the "insurgents."³⁸ On July 29, the *Ballhausplatz* also informed the chief of the *Evidenz Bureau* Colonel Hranilovic, who as the k. u. k. army representative had agreed to the necessity and objectives of the operation, of the military details.³⁹ The same day, Kral traveled toward Castelnuovo (Herceg

35 ÖHHStA PA I/936, MdÄ to Kral, on July 26, 1914.

36 After the assassination of the *Thronfolger*, Vienna pressed without success the Albanian Crown to renounce the position of neutrality by joining the war against Serbia. ÖHHStA PA I/66, MdÄ to Macchio, on 19.8.1914.

37 *Convention (IV) respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land and its annex: Regulations concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land*. The Hague, October 18, 1907. See the online version <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/ihl/INTRO/195>. Last accessed on March 31, 2022.

38 ÖHHStA PA I/936, MdÄ to Kral, on July 28, 1914.

39 ÖHHStA PA I/936, MdÄ to AOK officer Hranilovic, on July 29, 1914.

Novi), where he met with multiple Albanian leaders, such as Hasan Prishtina, Isa Boletini, and Dervish Hima, to attempt to organize the operation.⁴⁰ According to the plan, the Austro-Hungarian authorities would have secretly shipped the necessary weapons and ammunitions⁴¹ to the port of Shëngjin in unmarked boxes, along with the Albanian fighters from the Serbian controlled regions of Kosovo along with six k. u. k. army officers. The Albanian leaders on the other side had the duty of securing the landing area and procuring the transportation animals (200–300 horses). After the successful conclusion of the first phase, the forces would divide into two groups and attack the enemy from the Macedonian and Serbian borders, as had been suggested earlier by Kral. The odds of success were fairly high, considering the fact that other tribal leaders from Northern Albania (the so-called great highlands or Malësia e Madhe) had replied positively to Consul Kral's request.⁴²

Despite the initial enthusiasm, by the end of September 1914, the entire operation had become a massive fiasco for the Monarchy. One of the many reasons for this failure was the multiple delays that the operation suffered. By early August, most of the weapons had arrived, but there was no sign of the horses that were needed to transport them⁴³ or even of the key k. u. k. army officers in charge of the action.⁴⁴ These delays became even more persistent throughout the entire operation, since the country had no road or railway system. Even more problematic was the fact that the landing area and the route through which the forces had to travel through were constantly subject to incursions by the peasant (Muslim) rebels⁴⁵ in central Albania and the predatory raids of the tribal highlanders of the north.⁴⁶

40 ÖHHStA PA I/936, Report for the AOK to MdÄ (with title: *Albanian leaders, who worked against Serbia, during the Austrian-Serbian war*), on September 28, 1916.

41 By August 5, 1914, nine crates of explosives and around 500,000 cartridges were shipped from Pola, of which 200,000 were of caliber 7.9mm for the Mauser rifle, while the rest were of caliber 7.65mm for the Turkish Mauser rifles. ÖHHStA PA I/936, MdÄ to Kral, on August 5, 1914.

42 ÖHHStA PA I/936, Halla to MdÄ, on July 29, 1914.

43 ÖHHStA PA I/936, MdÄ to Kral, on August 6, 1914.

44 Lieutenant Colonel Spaits arrived in Albania on August 14, thus delaying even more the operation. ÖHHStA PA I/936, Halla to MdÄ, on August 11, 1914.

45 The peasant rebellion in central Albania in 1914–1915 was organized by Muslim peasants who opposed the nomenclature of a Christian European prince like Wilhelm zu Wied as the ruler of the country. With the motto “Dum Babën” (we want our father), they sought the reestablishment of the Sultan's rule in Albania.

46 ÖHHStA PA I/936, Kral to Berchtold and the Evidenzbüro (AOK), on September 18, 1914.

Another major reason for the failure of the operation was the lack of secrecy from all the actors involved. The Monarchy bore the lion's share of the responsibility for its inability to transport in secrecy most of the troops and weaponry via commercial vessels. These lines, according to the Albanian expert prof. Seiner, were operated mainly by sailors of Italian and Slavic origin many of whom were spies for their own governments.⁴⁷ As a result, by early August, the majority of the interested powers in Albania had caught a whiff of Monarchy's actions on the ground.⁴⁸ The Albanians also bore some of the blame, because multiple Austro-Hungarian reports indicate that personnel close to the Albanian government and even tribal leaders had divulged relevant information to enemy powers.⁴⁹

Nonetheless, the biggest obstacle to the successful completion of the operation of 1914 was the reigning chaos between the chain of command and the forces on the ground. Practically, there was no defined hierarchical organization or even trust between the institutions (the *Ballhausplatz* and the *Evidenz Bureau*) and the actors.⁵⁰ When Kral came down with malaria in August,⁵¹ the operation became even more hectic and chaotic, because the k. u. k. officers had no direct line of communication with the center from where they could have gotten information and orders. The most vivid testimony to the relevance of this issue was the frustrating letter sent by k. u. k. army officer Lieutenant Colonel Spaits on September 10, 1914:

Since August 9, I keep receiving the answer 'as soon as possible' from Vienna and partly from Durazzo. Now that everything is finally in place and all precautions have been taken care of, the order 'later' comes! I will comply with this order, but I hereby decline any responsibility, even if the whole thing fizzles into the sand! Such an endeavor, the preparation of which covers a distance of 100–150 km, cannot be regulated in the same way as the departure of a battalion in the absence of all means of communication!⁵²

Furthermore, under the chaotic AOK/Albanian leadership, it became almost impossible to keep a mercenary and heterogeneous force like the Albanian

47 ÖHStA PA I/936, AOK to Berchtold, on November 16, 1914.

48 ÖHStA PA I/936, AOK to MdÄ, on September 8, 1915.

49 ÖHStA PA I/936, Löwenthal to MdÄ, on August 12, 1914.

50 ÖHStA PA I/936, Kral to MdÄ, on August 12, 1914.

51 ÖHStA PA I/936, MdÄ to Löwenthal, on August 29, 1914.

52 ÖHStA PA I/936, Kral to Berchtold and Evidenzbüro (AOK), on September 18, 1914. Letter nr.1 from Lieutenant colonel Spaits reporting from Bicaj on September 10, 1914.

fighters motivated and organized. By mid-September, the operational funds had gone dry, while expenses for a mercenary force that had not even once fired a gun against the enemy kept increasing.⁵³ The situation grew worse, as the k. u. k. officers had to bargain on daily bases, using money they didn't have, to prevent mutinies, discourage desertion, and cope with threats posed by hostile tribes. In another letter dated September 12, the infuriated Lieutenant colonel Spaits wrote the following to consul Kral: "...these good-for-nothing people in Mirdita, Ibolje, and Fierza! They stage a revolution every day for breakfast! Last night they came and asked for 80 Mauser [rifles], otherwise they wouldn't let us pass through! I prefer to spend 10,000 more kronen—just to keep peace and not to have a riot that the Italians would hear about! This is the only reason why I have approved even the most outrageous demands! Our so-called "Noble Guard," made of twelve men recruited by Nopcsa from Merturi, Rajah, and Sirlu, costs us 48 Kronen every day; they are more of a burden than a benefit to us. These guys are lazy, [and since] the locals are jealous of them, [they have] demanded that we also take a 'guard' from them—of course, a 'man' from every 'fis' [tribe]... All these negotiations come with the same corresponding shouting and 'readiness to shoot,' and they always end up with a bag full of money."⁵⁴

The tribulations of the k. u. k officers in Albania came to an end when, by September 30, the Evidenz Bureau ordered the withdrawal of all of Monarchy's personnel, thus ending the joint offensive against Serbia.⁵⁵ By the beginning of October 1914, the majority of the Monarchy's officers had left the country, which by then had plummeted into anarchy after the departure of the Albanian Crown and Government under the threatening guns of the rebels and the approaching Serbian Army. However, as was typical of them, the Albanian irregulars who had been taking part in the secret operation passed another winter enjoying the fruits of another mercenary expedition that, from their point of view, had been successful, even if not actually fought.

53 There is no real account of the total sum of the expenses for the operation, but the sources indicate that between the period of July 29, 1914 and September 6, 1914, Consul Kral had spent some 45,046 Kronen for the upkeep of the mercenary army, while Consul Halla had spent around 17,128. ÖHHStA PA I/936, MdÄ to Evidenzbüro (AOK) and Kral, on September 22, 1914.

54 ÖHHStA PA I/936, Kral to Berchtold and Evidenzbüro (AOK), on September 18, 1914. Letter nr.2 from Lieutenant colonel Spaits reporting from Bicaj on September 10, 1914.

55 ÖHHStA PA I/936, Halla to Spaits, on September 30, 1914.

The Albanian Legion and the Durrës' offensive (Autumn-Winter 1915–1916)

The military fiasco of 1914 convinced Conrad and the imperial authorities, that it had become, if not impossible, obsolete to conduct modern, large-scale operations in the frame of the Great War with “irregular forces” like the Albanian mercenaries. The country, which since the Balkan Wars had been at the mercy of marauding gangs, had to be secured under the k. u. k military administration. However, using these forces under a “shaky/joint” military hierarchy meant in principle taking more imperial troops from other fronts, and this was a luxury that the AOK could not afford.

For these reasons, by December 1915, the AOK had contacted Hasan Bey Prishtina, an Albanian nobleman from Kosovo, with the proposition of organizing the Albanian warriors into a larger ethnic unit under the k. u. k. army, similar to the Polish legion. During the first two years of the war, Hasan Bey and his 8,000 fighters had fought against the pro-Entente Esad Pasha's troops, the Serbian and Montenegrin forces, thus proving himself worthy for the Monarchy's cause. Additionally, he had good links with the Bulgarian military authorities and had advocated a quick political organization of the occupied parts of Albania while rejecting political offices for himself.⁵⁶

Hasan Bey saw the AOK proposition as positive and, if it were to prove necessary, he offered to travel personally to Vienna to discuss the details. After the Austro-Hungarian armed forces would have concluded the occupation of Albania, he planned to form a strong force of 15,000 men to fight against the Italians on the southwestern front.⁵⁷ Upon receiving this encouraging reply, the AOK put at his disposal 10,000 kronen for the formation of the legion and asked him to raise as quickly as possible a force of at least 10,000 men.⁵⁸ The necessary equipment, including weapons, uniforms, coats, blankets etc. which had been seized by the Montenegrins, could have been collected from the two depots of Mitrovica and Ferizovic (or Ferizaj in Albanian). However, the transport of this equipment had to be arranged by the Albanians themselves, since the rail lines had been destroyed and most of Kosovo's and Albania's horses had been taken by the retreating Serbian forces.⁵⁹ In addition to the money and the rifles, the Legion was also promised eight batteries of guns, each with 240 rounds of

56 ÖStA KA, NFA, HHK AK 3. Armee OPAK, K. 10, December 16, 1915 (Op. Nr. 8166).

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 ÖStA KA, NFA HHK AK 3. Armee OPAK, K. 10, December 19, 1915 (Op.nr. 19280).

ammunition. As a final request, the AOK instructed him to avoid as much as possible any conflict in the newly liberated areas, because these incidents would harm the reputation and safety of the Monarchy's troops.⁶⁰

After many detailed discussions, Hasan Bey agreed to organize a brigade of Albanian volunteers. This would consist of two half brigades, each of two regiments. These would in turn be divided into four battalions, which would respectively consist of four *çetas* of 100 men each. The *çetas* subsequently would be divided into four sub-*çetas*. Hasan Bey would be provided with a k. u. k. general staff officer serving under him as aide-de-camp, fluent either in Albanian or French. The two half-brigade commanders, the four regimental commanders, and the 16 battalion commanders had to be K.u.K officers, while the *çetas* and sub-*çetas* were to be led by Albanians selected personally by Hasan Bey.⁶¹ The first recommendations for these positions by the AOK were Captain Hässler, Lieutenant Colonel Nopcsa, Lieutenant Rudnay, and Captain Steinmetz, along with four other non-commissioned officers. The rest of the officer spots in the legion would have been filled with volunteers. The Albanian legion was subject to the Austro-Hungarian Army orders and its regulations. However, Hasan Bey invoked the right to proceed legally and liquidate spies on the spot, particular Serbian spies.⁶²

Volunteers, who would be between 20 and 25 years of age, would receive basic training and wear the distinctive badges of the Albanian Legion (black and yellow armband with a black and red cockade on it).⁶³ As a final step, they would swear their loyalty with a handshake.⁶⁴ Each one would be paid like an Austro-Hungarian soldier, receiving a payment in advance every ten days, including a daily allowance of one and a half Kronen. The leaders of the sub-*çetas* would receive a payment similar to that of a train conductor, while the *çeta* commanders would get a paycheck of 175 kronen per month. Initially, upon the directives issued by the AOK, the legionnaires were not offered any other benefits (such as food or tobacco) apart from their paychecks, because it was thought that these recruits were doing their patriotic duty. If anyone distinguished himself in the battlefield, they would be given rewards, and bronze medals would be distributed

60 Ibid.

61 ÖStA KA, NFA HHK AK 3. Armee OPAK, K. 10, December 20, 1914 (Op.nr. 964).

62 Ibid.

63 ÖStA KA, NFA, KK XIX. Korps, K. 2574, February 1, 1916.

64 Ibid.

according to soldiers' merits.⁶⁵ Hasan Bey spoke out vehemently against this condition, because he feared that if the volunteers were not been self-sufficient, they might easily turn into a gang of robbers. The legionnaires had to be given the same level of care and remuneration as the Austro-Hungarian soldiers, since generally they had to operate in very resource-poor areas.⁶⁶

The directives of the Third Army Command dating December 12, 1915 stipulated in which areas and under what conditions the Albanian volunteers had to be recruited.⁶⁷ Particular attention was given to the zones where the "good name and influence" of Hasan Bey was thought to be stronger, particularly areas around Vushtrri, Prishtina, Gjiilan, Ferizovic, and Novipazar. The AOK expected him to be able to recruit some 6,000 warriors for the Legion in a period of 20 to 25 days, with at least 2,000 men from his hometown of Vushtrri and another 2,000 from Prishtina by January 5, 1916. Regarding the conditions, there was a strict policy of religious demarcation between the recruits and the area where they would have served. According to this policy, the Muslim or Catholic recruits could only join their own religious units in the legion and serve in areas where their faith was predominant among the locals. As a result, the recruits were to be divided into three groups: the first group of 2,000–3,000 Muslim Albanians from Ipek and Mitrovica under the command of Captain Hässler would have operated in the area of Podgorica; a second group of 3,000–4,000 Catholic Albanians from Gjakova under the lead of Lieutenant Colonel Nopcsa⁶⁸ would have fought in Shkodra and Lezha; and a third group of 1,000 Muslim Albanians from Prizren and Prishtina under Captain Steinmetz would have stormed Kruja. Hasan Bey was against the breakdown of the volunteers according to their religious or tribal affiliations because he feared that this would create dangerous competition between Catholics and Muslims which later could promote separatist tendencies and destroy the vision of Albania's unity. In his opinion, religious conflict was a minor issue in Albania, and it only occurred in the area of Shkodra for political reasons.⁶⁹

Despite the initial enthusiasm of the AOK for the Legion, the recruitment of volunteers from Kosovo proved more tedious and time-consuming than expected. Due in no small part to the disagreements between Austria-Hungary

65 Ibid.

66 ÖStA KA, NFA, HHK AK 3. Armee OPAK, K.10, December 26, 1915 (Op.nr. 8417).

67 ÖStA KA, NFA, HHK AK 3. Armee OPAK, K 10, December 22, 1915.

68 Pollman, *Baron Ferenc Nopcsa's Participation in the Albanian Military Campaign*, 167–86.

69 ÖStA KA, NFA, HHK AK 3. Armee OPAK, K. 10, December 26, 1915 (Op. Nr. 8417).

and Bulgaria over the respective zones of influence and military control in Djakova and Prizren,⁷⁰ the recruitment process almost came to a halt during the entire month of December 1915. Another factor which led to delays was the typical slow pace of the Austro-Hungarian bureaucracy, which was made even more hesitant and cumbersome by the racist attitudes of many army officers regarding the Albanian legionnaires and their lack of trust for their would-be brothers in arms. A certain Captain Lauer, for instance, wrote the following:

I don't expect anything at all: so far, the Albanians have done nothing, and they will not do anything in the future. They stroll behind the front just to annoy us, and if there is any action on the front, then they are not available. They just want to eat at our expense, ... [they are] nothing more than an undisciplined, rotten, unreliable burden. Together with their leaders.⁷¹

By January 26, 1916, the Third Army Command had compiled a report with title "Results of the actions directed by the VIII - XIX Corps Commando."⁷² According to the data, the recruitment of the Albanian legionnaires had gone more slowly than expected: Nopcsa had gathered only 2,000–3,000 men in Blinisht, and Steinmetz had managed to sway only some 1,000 volunteers and Captain Ghilardi expected to recruit only 1,000 warriors from Prizren. Hässler had only 200 men ready to fight in Ipek, and he was expecting to recruit more people from the region of Dibra with the help of the nationalist nobleman Murad Bey Toptani. Additionally, another squadron of 700 men in Vushtrri (probably under the command of Hassan Bey) was available to engage on the front. These relatively small numbers notwithstanding, the army command saw these forces as adequate to start the offensive in Albania and thus secure two main objectives: first, to liberate 15,000 men held captive by the Serbian forces who were attempting an escape by sea from the port-cities of Durrës and Vlora; second, the Italians had to be driven from all Albanian territory, if possible.⁷³

Upon receiving these orders, most of the members of the Albanian Legion under the command of the imperial officers began to prepare for the final charge toward the sea. Steinmetz moved with his men from Prizren to Selita,⁷⁴ from where he headed towards Lezha and Durrës, later joining Nopcsa's group

70 Valkov, *When Bulgaria and Austria-Hungary were Neighbors*, 240–59.

71 ÖStA KA, NFA, KK XIX. Korps, K. 2574, without date.

72 ÖStA KA, NFA, KK XIX. Korps, K. 2574, January 26, 1916.

73 Gostentschnigg, *Wissenschaft im Spannungsfeld von Politik und Militär*, 499–500.

74 ÖStA KA, NFA, HHK AK 3. Armee OPAK, K.68, January 21, 1916 (Op. Nr. 739).

on January 30, 1916.⁷⁵ Nopcsa and his forces had been struggling to march toward the front due to the encirclement between the fleeing Serbian and Montenegrin forces and their allies in the region of Mirdita. The tribal leader (or bayraktar in Turkish) of this area—the catholic Prenk Bibë Doda—had been involved in pro-Serbian activities, and he had prevented the recruitment of 1,000 men from his tribe to the Albanian legion, as previously promised to the k. u. k. army. Only when Gjakova fell into Austro-Hungarian hands could Nopcsa and his men travel toward Tirana. There, his forces met with the forces of Hässler, who had left Prizren along with 1,600 men on January 30 and was charging with full speed toward Durrës.⁷⁶ Hässler's legionnaires were the first troops initially to seize Tirana,⁷⁷ and on February 16, 1916, they encircled the Italian rear forces in the small town of Kavaja from a hilly position. In the heat of the fight and without the necessary artillery cover, Hässler's unit pressed the offensive on its own while storming an important hill in front of Durrës and seizing two mountain guns. In the process of conquering the city, Hässler himself was badly wounded.⁷⁸ Despite this victory, the pursuit of the enemy forces fleeing toward Vlora was halted, as the Austro-Hungarian forces were spread too thin and a second regrouping was necessary in order to replenish the supplies.

Nonetheless, the offensive against the Entente forces in the south resumed quickly under the lead of the Bulgarian standing Captain Ghilardi,⁷⁹ who had entered the service of the k. u. k. VIII. Corps Command. In a short period of time, he managed to set up nine battalions with 500 men, mainly with recruits from northern Albania. After first securing the plains south of Durrës, Ghilardi then directed his forces toward the region of Myzeqeja. By March 8, he had taken Lushnja and Berat, and the following day he captured the city of Fier. After successfully driving off the Italian rear guard across the Vjosa river, his forces camped on the northern bank of the river near Këlcyra, a position which they would have held until the end of the war.⁸⁰ The military regrouping of the k. u. k. XIX Corps Command under Lieutenant Marshal Ignaz Trollmann on

75 ÖStA KA, NFA, KK XIX. Korps, K. 2574, February 1, 1916.

76 Ibid.

77 Gostentschnigg, *Wissenschaft im Spannungsfeld von Politik und Militär*, 501.

78 Ibid. 502.

79 Csaplár-Degovics, "Komandanti I Djelmenise Shqiptare," 112–77.

80 Ibid.

March 3, 1916 brought “the colonial campaign”⁸¹ with the help of the Albanian Legions to an end.

Attempts to build an Albanian Army (Albanisches Korps) between 1916 and 1918

While it may have offered an excellent example of a major victory for the Monarchy against the Entente forces, the invasion of the country turned into a major administrative challenge for the military authorities, especially in regard to the safety question. As a result of the low number of the imperial troops in the country, the gang activity of the natives and proximity to the Italian and French forces, the AOK opted to create an Albanian Army. By February 1916, the army command announced a proclamation asking all physically fit male Albanians between the ages of 18 and 50 to enroll as volunteers. According to this command, each house had to provide at least one man for military service, usually the youngest and healthiest.⁸² The volunteers would receive six to eight weeks of training, which included, in addition to military exercises, instruction in German and Albanian. In a similar fashion to the recruitment propaganda used on Bosnians soldiers in 1878,⁸³ the proclamation made an appeal to the bellicose spirit, sense of duty, and patriotism of the Albanians and encouraged them to take arms:

Shqypëtare!

... we now turn to you with the request that you protect your fatherland with arms in hand alongside us. No capable Albanian would watch idly while the enemy bursts into his country, no one would find it compatible with his honor not to dedicate his weapon and his life to the fatherland to defend it against every enemy... Remember, brave Shqypëtare, that Albania's best days were those when the greatest Albanian folk hero Skanderbeg, with his well-trained soldiers, was horror to the enemies of Albania. He and his brave comrades are your role models!⁸⁴

81 *Österreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg* (v.4), 80. The authors of this officious war account put the term in quotation marks themselves.

82 Kerchnawe, “Die Militärverwaltung in Montenegro und Albanien,” 289–91.

83 Šuško, *Bosniaks & Loyalty*, 535.

84 San Nicolo, *Verwaltung Albanien*, 83.

The initial idea of the AOK was to organize this army into eight and later eleven battalions with 600 to 800 men⁸⁵ trained by Dalmatian and Bosnian-Herzegovinian officers and soldiers. The first cycle of enlistment and training would start on May 15, 1916, followed by annual cycles every first of September and December.⁸⁶ Additionally, commissions were created for the enlistment of the volunteers in each military district, and if anyone attempted to avoid the conscription, he had to face punishments which began with fines in gold or cattle and went to being driven from their homes or even burned by the authorities. Certain categories of people were excluded from the obligation to enlist, such as clergyman, free professionals, civil officials, tribal elders, and adult sons who were providing care for sick and weak family members.⁸⁷ The enlisted had to bring their own weapons, including ammunition and cartridge belts, as well as bread sacks and water bottles.⁸⁸ Meanwhile, the k. u. k. army had the responsibility of equipping them with uniforms and insignia similar to the Albanian Legion consisting of volunteers from Kosovo (hats with red and black cockades and a yellow armband).⁸⁹

Though the AOK actively used the clergy and tribal leaders to bolster the recruitment process, it managed to recruit less than half the expected number of soldiers during each of the three cycles: 2,452 men were recruited in the first cycle, 1,889 in the second, 2,876 in the third, and an unexpected increase in the fourth and final cycle, which managed to produce 4,292 volunteers.⁹⁰ The reasons for this failure were multiple, starting from the wrong policy of initially applying a voluntary form of enlistment addressed to a skeptical and indifferent society. Even when enlistment was made obligatory, the authorities couldn't enforce their own decisions. They simply didn't have the necessary manpower to chase down deserters or gang members. Yet interestingly, the main problem was the fact that most of the instructors didn't know Albanian.

In a final attempt to address this problem, during the third and fourth cycles, the authorities opened training courses for aspiring officers with the hope of turning them into instructors for the other Albanian recruits. The basic conditions for their enrollment in the program were: having a clean penal record,

85 Kerchnawe, "Die Militärverwaltung in Montenegro und Albanien," 291.

86 Schwanke, "Zur Geschichte der österreichisch-ungarischen Militärverwaltung in Albanien," 404.

87 Scheer, *Zwischen Front und Heimat*, 178.

88 Kerchnawe, "Die Militärverwaltung in Montenegro und Albanien," 289–91.

89 Schwanke, "Zur Geschichte der österreichisch-ungarischen Militärverwaltung in Albanien," 404.

90 *Ibid.*, 405–11.

knowledge of reading and writing in Albanian, and being from a “good family.”⁹¹ After performing service on the frontlines for six weeks, these officers were named “Ensigns of the Albanian Militia.” However, the Austrian-Hungarian military authorities recognized that,

due to their low level of education, it is of course not possible to apply [to them] the same standard of classification as applied to our junior officers. For this reason, the main focus rests on their military, practical, and moral suitability as leaders and instructors in the state militia.⁹²

Though the rhythm of applications for both programs increased in time, opposition to the entire process remained strong. At the center of the critics were the Austro-Hungarian officers stationed in Albania, who saw the organization of an eight-week training program for the Albanian militia as a difficult, unreasonable, and very costly endeavor. One senior officer pointed out in March 1917 that of the expected 800 men for the sixth Albanian battalion in Lushnja, only nine volunteers had enlisted.⁹³ Another officer wrote of the demoralizing effect that the Albanian trainees had on the Austro-Hungarian forces working with them:

It remains a sad picture when one sees our old countrymen working hard in the most miserable swamp areas, while young *Albanians in neat uniforms*, go for walks in the cities.⁹⁴

By August 1917, the officer’s critical remarks had caught the attention of the Operational Department of the AOK. As a result, the department ordered the XIX. Corps Command stationed in the country to stop playing “soldiers’ games” with the Albanians and use them for agricultural purposes or in workers’ departments. A detailed report on the “Albanian Militia” experiment was also mailed with the order. It was written for the most part in a tone of disappointment and despair:

forcing the occupying forces to provide non-commissioned officers for training purposes is downright damaging to our force due to the low number of troops... [even] if the Albanians are eventually trained with a great deal of effort, they will desert to the enemy side at the

91 San Nicolo, *Verwaltung Albanien*, 92–94.

92 Ibid., 94.

93 Schwanke, “Zur Geschichte der österreichisch-ungarischen Militärverwaltung in Albanien,” 408.

94 Scheer, *Zwischen Front und Heimat*, 181.

first sight. They'll grab their weapons or will form gangs of robbers in the mountains. If you catch a deserter [...] you cannot treat him with the full strictness of our laws, because the Albanian has not taken an oath, but only a vow... Finally, these Albanian battalions, which no commander dares use in battle, are a blessed propaganda tool for the Entente, which points out that we brought military service to the Albanians instead of freedom.⁹⁵

A National Army Experiment or a Colonial One?

Answering this question is not an easy task because generally it involves taking into consideration two interconnected elements: first, the context, meaning the precise nature of the relations between the two countries and the direction which this relation took during the war, and second, the historical/military evolution that the Albanian troops underwent as part of the k. u. k. army.

Regarding the context, there is a rich bibliography on this period which indicates Albania's strong and increasing dependency on the empire.⁹⁶ This dependency⁹⁷ had grown more intense by the time of the Great War due to the unilateral decisions of the Habsburg policy-makers, which initially sought to drag the newly-born and weak state from its safe position of neutrality⁹⁸ and later compromised its territorial integrity as a bargaining chip, offering territories first to Italy⁹⁹ and later to Bulgaria and Greece.¹⁰⁰ After the successful "colonial campaign"¹⁰¹ in Albania, matters of neutrality and territorial integrity became obsolete topics, since the imperial policy-makers threw the existence of the country as a whole into question. In the GMR meeting of January 1916 over the new war aims of the Monarchy after the successful invasion of Serbia and Montenegro, two factions split over the future of the country. On one side, the *Ballhausplatz* with Minister István Burián sought the creation of a friendly and bigger Albania with territories from Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro as a counter solution to the Slavic problem in the peninsula. On the other side stood the AOK, with Conrad advocating the annexation of the entire country

95 Ibid.

96 See the book by Gostentschnigg, *Wissenschaft im Spannungsfeld von Politik und Militär*.

97 According to international law, between 1870 and 1945, dependency came in three forms: colonies, protectorates, and mandate territories. Fieldhouse, *Colonialism*, 16–19.

98 ÖHStA PA I/66, MdÄ to Macchio, on August 19, 1914.

99 Fried, "The Cornerstone of Balkan Power Projection," 431.

100 Ibid.

101 *Österreich-Ungarns letzter Krieg* (v.4), 80.

as the ideal solution for a failed state-building experiment in the Balkans.¹⁰² De jure, the GMR didn't reach any agreement over the fate of the country, but de facto the country was run and modelled administratively by the Army to match and further promote its integration into the Monarchy (legally, fiscally, and financially), similarly to the quasi-colonial Bosnian model.

As the context gave meaning to the actions of the k. u. k. army in Albania, we can certainly argue that the *historical/military evolution* of the Albanian troops during the war served and gave shape to the colonial agenda of the Monarchy in the country. I use the word colonial because this evolution had similar characteristics to other cases of colonial armies used by other Great Powers of the time.

The first characteristic was the passage from a premodern to an institutionalized fighting force. Historically speaking, with certain exceptions,¹⁰³ the Albanian soldiers remained largely outside the Ottoman military either due to their komitadji/mercenary nature or due to the rather loose and atrophying authority of the Ottoman state. This deviation from the institutions remained a staple characteristic even during the Tanzimat Era, when a number of revolts in the Albanian-speaking areas were directed against the obligatory enlistment of soldiers serving abroad or in other parts of the empire.¹⁰⁴ The entry into the Great War changed this military paradigm, because due to the managerial qualities of Austria-Hungary as a Great Power, a large number of Albanian warriors were involved in large-scale, modern, and complex military operations. This change is only comparable with other colonial armies of the time (such as the French Armée d'Afrique and Armée Coloniale, etc.), where alien bellicose groups without past institutional or state-building experiences entered into the service of modern national or imperial armies (post-mercenaryism).¹⁰⁵

This institutionalization came thanks to the military regimental system. The regiments as a western modernity replaced the previous socio-military structures, where at the center were the personal, vassalage, or kinship connections.¹⁰⁶ As a

102 Bezha, "Austria-Hungary and the Albanian project," 139–43.

103 One of these figures was also Isa Boletini, who for a certain period of his life served in the Sultan's royal guard in Istanbul. See Blumi, *Reinstating the Ottomans*, 145–46.

104 Pollo, *Historia e Shqipërisë*, 129–30.

105 For a comprehensive analyzes of the colonial French Armée d'Afrique, see Clayton, *France, Soldiers and Africa*.

106 The closest case of similarity with the Albanian one is the replacement of the precolonial Moghul military system of *Mansabdari* with the modern British colonial regiments in India. See Roy, *Military Manpower, Armies and Warfare in South Asia*, 45–120.

result, the ability to enlist and send into war the fighters shifted from individuals to a chain of command which—importantly—was alien to the natives. Additionally, the regimental system brought other changes that aimed toward the creation of a cohesive, loyal, and professional fighting body, such as: a periodical salary and a pension, continuous drills and training, a defined period of military service, a system of rewards (medals, acknowledgments, etc.) and punishments based on a military law or code, a common regimental culture/*camaraderie*, etc. Last but not least, all the colonial regimental units were distinguished by unique regimental colors, distinctive signs, badges, accessories, or uniforms, which symbolized the union between the old and the new or the native and the colonial power.¹⁰⁷ These patterns of a modern but colonial regiment were visible in the Albanian units during the Great War, especially in the cases of the Albanian Legion and the Albanian Army.

The second characteristic was the introduction of the Albanian soldiers in the Austro-Hungarian army as a martial race.¹⁰⁸ This concept is distinctive for the majority of the colonial units of the time, because it represented the fusion of the prejudices of the Western authorities (binary view Occident/Orient, realm of progress vs. realm of war) and their need to uphold their military power in the “new lands.” As a result, different native communities/races were elevated to a special social and military status due to their “innate martial qualities,” and they were rewarded with the “honor” of serving along with other imperial troops as special units. The British were the most successful among the other colonial powers to encourage the construction of artificial communities for their bellicose interests, where for example between 1885 and 1912, three allegedly martial races (Sikh, Gurkha, and Rajput) played an increasingly important role in the British Indian Army.¹⁰⁹

The Austro-Hungarians, famous for their “army of many nations,” had a regimental system that was quite open and adaptable to different ethnical groups.¹¹⁰ However, only after the invasion of Bosnia-Herzegovina 1878 and the recruitment of the Bosnians did the colonial concepts of “martial races”

107 As an example, we can recall the badge of the Gurkha units, symbolized by two crossed Nepalese daggers (*kukri*) under the British lion or imperial crown. One could also think of the Sikh uniforms, which are a mixture of the British ones and the famous turban as headgear.

108 The Martial Race theory was partly the product of an anthropological quest by the British civilian and military officers. They engaged in ethnology, which meant the study of racial physiognomy and ethnography and the study of social customs. See Chene, “Military Ethnology in British India,” 121–22.

109 Roy, “The Construction of Regiments in the Indian Army,” 130.

110 Scheer, “Habsburg Languages at War,” 62–78.

jump inside the Habsburg military. The *Bosniaken*, though militarily very capable, remained during the whole period of their service a foreign and exotic fighting entity for the imperial authorities and general public, mainly due to their alien/oriental nature.¹¹¹ The same approach was visible with the Albanian units, where the majority of the k. u. k. troops were instructed to treat the Albanians differently, not for political reasons, but also due to their socio-anthropological peculiarities and alleged proclivity for war.¹¹² According to the General Staff officer and military historian Hugo Kerchnawe:

It is understandable that, under these circumstances, efforts were made to use the human resources of the country for purely martial purposes, rather than as a liberator, as an ally, while at the same time meeting the warlike wishes of the population. This way, we pacified the troubling elements and used them wherever. They could express their warlike spirit in an expedient manner, especially at the front.¹¹³

These characteristics, along with other minor elements such as the use of ideological mechanisms to motivate the troops (support of the Albanian nationalism) and distinctive elements of racism, point to the idea that the Albanian troops under the k. u. k. army went through a transformative process that aimed their evolution (purposely or not) into a quasi-colonial unit more than a national and independent army. Despite the fact that these military processes are very similar with the Bosnian counterpart and other colonial regiments of the time, the answer remains to the basic question (was this an imperial force or a colonial one) inconclusive due to the short lifespan of this “military experiment,” which came to an end with the end of the war.

111 The representation and conversion of the ex-Muslim enemy into the proud, loyal, and exotic warrior of the empire was an academic invention of anthropologists such as Solomon Friedrich Krauss, who was commissioned to travel and document epic songs and other ethnographical sources in Bosnia by Vienna’s Anthropological Society. At the same time, the new image of the Muslim Bosnians was put forward by the army as a PR. stunt for the general public with the purpose of demonstrating that the empire was on par with other colonial military forces, such as the French Foreign Legion or the British Indian Imperial Army. See Cordileone, “Swords into Souvenirs,” 169–70.

112 Most officials were completely unfamiliar with the situation in Albania. The corps command had to hold its own instruction courses, which were based on a brochure written by the Albanian missionary Lovro Mihacević in 1906, “Tribal Structure, Norms, and Customs of the Albanians.” The brochure stated that the Albanians had to be viewed differently, because even if “the Albanian has plenty of weapons and ammunition and likes to shoot, he does not do it with malicious intent, but rather to show that he has a weapon.” Schwanke, “Zur Geschichte der österreichisch-ungarischen Militärverwaltung in Albanien,” 415.

113 Kerchnawe, “Die Militärverwaltung in Montenegro und Albanien,” 289.

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