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Tribes in Arms Gjon Marka Gjoni and the Irregular and Paramilitary Volunteer Forces of Northern Albania during the Fascist Occupation (1939–1943)

Abstract: This paper analyzes the relationship between Gjon Marka Gjoni, head of the Mirdita tribes in North Albania, and the phenomenon of mobilization and recruitment of many men from the hinterland of North Albania in the irregular and paramilitary forces, i.e., in the voluntary bands and the *Milicia Fashiste Shqiptare* [Albanian Fascist Militia], during the Italian occupation (1939–1943). In addition to his personal role and interpersonal ties, it focuses on the personal motivations of these forces, with an emphasis on both economic ones – wages, benefits, and potential banditry opportunities – and emotional ones, the latter driven by various kinds of fears. Finally, to better understand their local activity and the dynamics that emerged, this paper also addresses the nature and the extent of their violence and the consequent impact on the population.

Keywords: Albania, Second World War, Fascist occupation, Gjon Marka Gjoni, irregular and paramilitary forces, indirect rule

Introduction

With the fascist occupation of Albania, the Italians identified Gjon Marka Gjoni, the leader of the Mirdita tribes in the North, as one of the crucial figures on which to invest. Promoted to the rank of Senator of the Kingdom of Italy, Gjon Marka Gjoni was considered, throughout the period of the fascist occupation (1939–1943) and also later, during the Nazi occupation (1943–1944), one of the strongest leaders of the country due to his ability to mobilize many men in his region and beyond.

His personal involvement and that of his family with the occupying forces led communist historiography to later condemn him as a collaborator and traitor¹ and, in the wake of this, the historian Bernd J. Fischer, in his work *Alba-*

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¹ S. Pollo, *Historia e Shqipërisë 3 (1912–1944)* (Tiranë: Akademia e Shkencave e RPS të Shqipërisë, Instituti i Historisë, 1984), 482, 604–605.

nia at War 1939–1945,² described him as the most ruthless repressor of the Partisan forces concentrated in the south of Albania, also suggesting his personal responsibility for the punitive operations that led to the burning of numerous villages and the killing of many civilians.³ With regard to the repression of the Partisan forces, which in many cases also affected the civilian population, there was also a tendency to present them as violence executed by northerners against the population of the south, indirectly alluding to the divisions between north and south Albania.

In this paper, I propose to analyze the relationship between Gjon Marka Gjoni and the phenomenon of mobilization and recruitment of many men from the northern hinterland into the irregular and paramilitary forces, that is, in the voluntary bands and the *Milicia Fashiste Shqiptare / Milizia Fascista Albanese*. What was the role of Gjon Marka Gjoni and the other local élites in the mobilization and poor defection of these men? In addition to the attraction and intermediation that the local élites could carry out, what were the personal motivations that led many to enlist and then find themselves carrying out campaigns of repression against the resistance forces in the south of the country? Finally, in the repressions of the resistance forces in which they were deployed, what was the extent and form of their violence, and what impact did they have on the local population?

To answer these questions, we must first try to reconstruct the complex and particular social structure and historical context from which these men came.

Mirdita and the hinterland of the north: between strongmen and tribes

For centuries, during the Ottoman rule the region of Mirdita and the mountainous provinces of the northern hinterland, which constituted the heart of the *gegnia*,⁴ had preserved a kind of autonomy, living isolated and practicing their

² B. J. Fischer, *Albania at War 1939–1945* (London: Hurst & Company, 1999). In this paper, I will use the Albanian translation: B. J. Fischer, *Shqipëria gjatë Luftës, 1939–1945* (Tiranë: Cabej, 2004).

³ It should be noted that, in this statement, Fischer incorrectly refers to Gjon Marka Gjoni as Minister of the Interior of the collaborationist government of Maliq Bushati (February–April 1943); however, the minister was his son Mark Gjonmarkaj, who in his decisions seems to have followed his father's political line. See: B. J. Fischer, *Shqipëria gjatë Luftës, 1939–1945*.

⁴ The term *Geg / gegni* describes the population of north-central Albania and the region of Kosovo, distinct from *Tosk / toskëri*, the inhabitants of the southern part of the country. They spoke different dialects and had a different social organization and family structure.

own customs.⁵ This isolation had instilled in them a strong sense of belonging to the group and preserved their rigidly patrilineal social structure. Organized into various tribes headed by a *pleqni* (elders) or a single tribal chieftain, as in the case of the region of Mirdita, they had territorial unity and strong social solidarity, particularly in matters of revenge.⁶ Even though, in terms of religious identity, the region of Mirdita had a large Catholic majority, there was nonetheless a strong presence of Muslim tribes, such as those in the region of Luma, which spanned from the northeast of Albania to the southwest of Kosovo region.

Formed by the tribal unification of five Catholic *bajrak* (mobilization zones or subtribes)⁷, the region of Mirdita was led by a *Kapedan* (or *Kapidan*), who was based in Orosh and belonged to the Gjonmarkaj family (or Gjumar-kaj), whose office was hereditary. Impoverished and involved in banditry⁸, this region had always been characterized by marked particularism that manifested itself even within the new Albanian state in the determination to preserve the privileges enjoyed during the Ottoman Empire. If during the first years of the nascent Albanian state, the region of Mirdita, led by its own *Kapedan* Prenk Bib Doda, had enjoyed not only a series of privileges in the field of self-government but also a relevant national political role – during the government of Prince Wilhelm of Wied (March – September 1914) Bib Doda had been minister – following the death of the latter in 1920, the relationships between the region and the central government suffered serious setback. As he died without male heirs, Bib Doda's office was inherited by his cousin and rival Marka Gjoni (1861–1925),⁹ who, however, was not held in high regard in Tirana and soon came into conflict with the central government. Thus, following a direct confrontation with the Minister of the Interior, Mehdi Frashëri, over certain local prerogatives, Marka Gjoni, with the support of Yugoslavia, proceeded to proclaim the Republic of Mirdita in the summer of 1921.¹⁰ Despite Yugoslav support, Marka Gjoni had a limited following among its population, and the central authorities managed

⁵ O. J. Schmitt, *Die Albaner. Eine Geschichte zwischen Orient und Okzident* (München: C. H. Beck Verlag, 2012), chapter 3.

⁶ N. Clayer, *Në fillimet e nacionalizmit shqiptar. Lindja e një kombi me shumicë myslimane në Europë* (Tiranë: Botime Përpjekja, 2012), 25–27.

⁷ This union could sometimes comprise up to twelve *bajrak*, involving the seven neighboring *bajraks* in addition to the five of Mirdita. P. Doçi, *Mirdita vatër e qëndresës antiosmane: vështrim etnologjik e historik, 1479–1912* (Tiranë: Mirdita, 1999).

⁸ N. Clayer, *Në fillimet e nacionalizmit shqiptar*, 60.

⁹ J. Swire, *Albania: the rise of a kingdom* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1929); T. Zavalani, *Historia e Shqipnis* (Tiranë: Phoenix, 1998).

¹⁰ On the causes that led to the proclamation of the Republic of Mirdita, see: B. Pula, *State, law and revolution: agrarian power and the national state in Albania, 1850–1945*, (PhD dissertation)(Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2011), 186–204.

to pacify the rebellion and regain control of the region, leading to the rapid fall of his “Republic”.

Although Marka Gjoni’s attempt was reduced to nothing, from that moment, the central authorities and, in particular, starting from 1928, the Crown, embodied in King Zog, turned to establishing direct government in the northern mountain regions, abandoning the strategy of trying to control these areas through tribal chiefs. Obviously, there were attempts to rebel against this new policy: in 1926, the northern region of Dukagjini rebelled against such centralist policies that aimed to stifle the privileges enjoyed since the times of the Ottoman Empire,¹¹ and the subsequent application by Zog of a government law that established the requisition of weapons aroused much discontent in almost all the population and northern hinterlands.¹²

The failure of the secessionist attempt and the new centralist measures, however, did not reduce the influence of the Gjonmarkaj family in their region. In fact, when Marka Gjoni died in 1925, the hereditary leadership of the area passed to his son Gjon Marka Gjoni (1888–1966), who, despite the heavy shadow of the central authorities, continued consolidating his prestige within his region.¹³ That said, throughout the period of the Zog era, both Gjon Marka Gjoni and the other tribal leaders of the north always remained distrustful towards the new sovereign due to the latter’s attempt to extend his authority at the national level and the will of the former to preserve their privileges and local power.

Fascist occupation: cooptation and rise to central power

With the Italian occupation of Albania in 1939 and the end of the reign of Zog, the fascist authorities moved in two directions: reproduction of its structures in the Albanian space and continuity with the past. Obviously, in the reproduction of its own structures, the reorganization of all Albanian armed forces had to play a central role. Consequently, the Albanian army was incorporated into the Italian, while public security was entrusted to the Carabinieri – which had, in the meantime, absorbed the old Albanian Gendarmerie, the Police Corps, incorporated into the Italian Police Corps and the *Milicia Fashiste Shqiptare / Milizia Fascista Albanese* (MFSH / MFA), established in September 1939.¹⁴

¹¹ R. Morozzo della Rocca, *Nazione e Religione in Albania 1920–1944* (Nardò: Besa, 2001), 102–103.

¹² B. Pula, *State, law, and revolution*, 234.

¹³ It turns out that, in August 1937, Gjon Marka Gjoni was at the head of an assembly that met in Mirdita to discuss a series of customary rules. Hylli i Dritës, vj. XIII korrik–gusht 1937, nr. 7–8, 417–418.

¹⁴ A. Basciani, *L'impero nei Balcani. L'occupazione italiana dell'Albania (1939–1943)* (Roma: Viella, 2022), 61–62; S. Trani, “L'unione fra l'Italia e l'Albania (1939–1943)”

Created according to the fascist model and integrated into the *Milizia volontaria per la sicurezza nazionale* (MVSN) – better known as the “*camicie nere* [Blackshirt Divisions]” – the MFSH was a paramilitary body that had to contribute to the maintenance of internal order and the security of the state. Composed of officers from Italy appointed by the General Command of the MVSN and by Albanian subordinates, recruitment into it was voluntary and open to both Italians residing in Albania and Albanians between 21 and 55 years of age enrolled in their respective fascist parties.¹⁵

However, in order to avoid a social upheaval which could have created a series of problems, the authorities decided to maintain continuity with the past by relying on the local nobility in their efforts to build a fascist regime, especially on the bey landowners of the central-south and the chieftains of mountain tribes of the north. This was a response to the full awareness of the personal prestige enjoyed by the beys in their territories of domination and the strong bond between the peoples of the northern mountains and their local leaders. Implementing a form of occupation, in many respects of the colonial type¹⁶, the Italian authorities heavily invested in offices and subsidies to the Albanian nobility, especially those who had been opponents of King Zog, in order to ensure their loyalty and, indirectly, that of all their retinue. The figures coopted for the new political course of fascist Albania included Gjon Marka Gjoni, who received the highest honor among all the leaders of the north and Catholic Albanian, becoming Senator of the Kingdom of Italy.¹⁷ In addition to this prestigious appointment, which earned him a salary of 4000 lire per month, the *Kapedan* of Mirdita also received a series of extraordinary subsidies¹⁸, leading thus to a substantial improvement of his economic situation.

Clio: Rivista trimestrale di studi storici 30 1 (1994), 164–165; S. Trani, *L'Unione fra l'Albania e l'Italia. Censimento delle fonti (1939–1945) conservate negli archivi pubblici e privati di Roma* (Roma: Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali, Direzione generale per gli archivi, 2007), 51–62.

¹⁵ P. Crociani, *Gli albanesi nelle Forze Armate italiane (1939–1943)* (Roma: Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, 2001), 165–175.

¹⁶ A. Basciani, *L'impero nei Balcani*, 84–86; B. Pula, “Becoming Citizens of Empire: Albanian Nationalism and Fascist Empire, 1939–1943”, *Theory and Society* 37 6 (2008), 574–578.

¹⁷ Four Albanian Senators of the Kingdom of Italy were appointed following the fascist occupation: the abovementioned Gjon Marka Gjoni, Mustafa Merlika Kruja, Shefqet Vërlaci and Vangjel Turtulli. P. Milo, *Shqiptarët në luftën e Dytë Botërore I (1939–1943)* (Tiranë: Botime Toena, 2014), 59.

¹⁸ See the list of reserved expenses incurred in the financial year 1939–1940 in Archivio Storico Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri (henceforth ASDMAE), F. Gabinetto Albania, B. 99.

For the Italians, the appointment of Gjon Marka Gjoni as a Senator, with all the privileges granted to him, had, first of all, to guarantee the stability and loyalty of the population of Mirdita to the regime, and, when the time came, also the mobilization of his men and his mediation, as a powerful and influential man, with the other northern tribes. It is, therefore, not surprising that in the region of Mirdita, during the Italian occupation, there was no consistent military garrison¹⁹, and this was due both to the personal power of the Gjonmarkaj family in maintaining peace in its region and the fact that, from November 1940, an irregular armed unit known as “Albanian Voluntary Bands” or “Albanian Armed Bands” was formed. Created mainly in the northern hinterland around local leaders and influential figures, these formations had the task of ensuring public order and the local defense of their respective regions, with the exception of the areas where the regular armies operated.²⁰ And in fact, one of the first areas where these units were constituted was the region of Mirdita, where, according to documentary sources, under the leadership of Gjon Marka Gjoni, a band was mobilized, the most consistent of all, composed of a thousand armed men.²¹

If initially these irregular bands operated only in their districts, with the emergence of anti-Italian resistance forces, they had to be reorganized and deployed even outside their native territories. This was initially determined by the action of the first anti-fascist bands, which operated in the central part and the north of the country and were formed around three leading figures, Muharrem Bajraktari, Myslim Peza and Abaz Kupa.²² The threat of these first anti-fascist bands led the second collaborationist government, headed by Mustafa

¹⁹ Archivio dell'Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito (henceforth AUS-SME), F. N.1-11, B. 969, fasc. Diario Storico, Bimestre: Gennaio-Febbraio 1942, Comando Superiore Forze Armate Albania, Quadro di battaglia, Copia nr. 15.

²⁰ P. Crociani, *Gli albanesi nelle Forze Armate italiane*, 271-272.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 273.

²² Both Muharrem Bajraktari and Myslim Peza were known long-standing opponents of King Zog and, because of this, had spent many years in exile, returning to Albania only after the Italian occupation. The former operated with his men in the area of Luma in the northeast of the country, while the latter worked in the area of Peza, a few kilometers from Tirana, where he came from. Unlike them, Abaz Kupa was a staunch supporter of King Zog and had, with his men, as the commander of the gendarmerie of Durrës, put up the only concrete resistance during the Italian invasion. After a period of exile in Istanbul and Belgrade, in April 1941, he returned to lead an armed band in the area of Kruja in the central part of the country. B. J. Fischer, *Shqipëria gjatë luftës*, 49-50, 157-158; M. Dezhgiu, *Shqipëria nën pushtimin Italian (1939-1943)* (Tiranë: Eneas, 2015), 62, 186-187, R. Shtëpani, *Shtëpanët e Shëngjergjët në rrjedhën e shekujve: origjina e mbienrrit, gjenealogjia ngujimet dhe miqësitet në gjithë Shqipërinë: nga viti 1610 deri 1990* (Tiranë: Globus R, 1999), 175.

Merlika Kruja,²³ to resort again to the mobilization of voluntary bands. Once again, among the influential figures appointed for their organization, there was Gjon Marka Gjoni, placed, in March 1942, in charge of the recruitment of men in Luma and Puka, as well as in Mirdita.²⁴ Once established, these had to be located in the zone of Luma, where M. Bajraktari was operating, and the area of Kruja, where A. Kupa was operating, with the clear aim of preventing and possibly repressing any action carried out by their bands. Although under the responsibility of the personalities who had formed them and under the direct command of their local leaders, these voluntary bands were nevertheless under the high command of the MFSH, not only to allow their coordination but to draw from them, once employed, the most suitable elements to integrate into the MFSH ranks.²⁵

In line with these new directives, the first large-scale operations for the suppression of these anti-fascist bands began after a few weeks. Between 21 and 26 April 1942, a major operation was undertaken by voluntary bands flanked by a battalion of the MFSH in the Luma area to suppress and capture the Bajraktari band. The escape of Bajraktari and the partial failure of this operation led the central authorities to temporarily disband the irregular units and to turn to the reorganization of the MFSH forces for the suppression of the resistance bands.²⁶ In September, another major operation followed; this time, it was carried out by the MFSH formations in the Peza area against the Myslim Peza band and against the base of the PKSh [*Partia Komuniste Shqiptare* – Albanian Communist Party], which also failed in part due to the escape of M. Peza and almost all members of the PKSh.²⁷

The use of the voluntary bands of the north, however, did not end with the Luma operation against the forces of Bajraktari; indeed, during the winter of 1942–1943, these units were reorganized and deployed in the south of the country to suppress the Partisan and nationalist bands. Thus, in addition to the unity of Dibra volunteers deployed to pacify the Partisan and nationalist resistance bands in the Gjorm village in the Vlorë district between the end of

²³ On the figure of Mustafa Merlika Kruja see: E. Papa-Pandelejmoni, "Albania during WWII: Mustafa Merlika Kruja's Fascist Collaboration", *The European Legacy* 19 4 (2014), 433–441.

²⁴ AUSSME, F. N.1–11, B. 969, fasc. Diario Storico, Bimestre: Marzo – Aprile 1942.

²⁵ AUSSME, F. N.1–11, B. 970, fasc. Diario Storico, Bimestre: Novembre – Dicembre 1942.

²⁶ M. Dezhgiu, *Shqipëria nën pushtimin italian*, 137.

²⁷ ASDMAE, F. Gabinetto Albania, B. 196/1, Report (Reserved) of Lieutenant Francesco Jacomoni to the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tirana 9 October 1942.

December 1942 and the beginning of January 1943,²⁸ volunteers from Luma led by the Gjonmarkaj family were mobilized in Berat at the same time against the Partisan forces operating in the area of Skrapar.²⁹

In addition to enlisting men from his region and his loyal followers in the voluntary bands, at the same time, Gjon Marka Gjoni began to strengthen his family's position within the state and government structures. Many of his family members were placed in command roles in the forces of the MFSH³⁰ and the reconstituted Gendarmerie in March 1943. His eldest son, Mark Gjonmarkaj, after being appointed Undersecretary of State at the Ministry of the Interior during the Kruja government (December 1941–January 1943), was promoted to Minister of the Interior during the Maliq Bushati presidency (February–April 1943).³¹ In this way, Gjon Marka Gjoni and his family, having embraced the new political course, were fully integrated into the central structures, strengthening their political power at the national level as never before. Thus, if during the interwar period the Gjonmarkajs had been relegated to a marginal role, with the fascist occupation they became one of the main actors on the Albanian political scene.

In fact, in the Bushati Government, which immediately claimed to be ready to firmly face the serious situation resulting from the intensified actions of the Partisan bands,³² Mark Gjonmarkaj, as Minister of the Interior, showed himself as the more determined man in the fight against the Partisan resistance. With the support of his father, Gjonmarkaj was, for the duration of the Bushati government, the chief intermediary between his government and the Italian authorities. While he held the office of Minister and with his approval, the Italian army carried out a series of impressive repression campaigns against the Partisan

²⁸ P. Milo, *Shqiptarët në luftën e Dytë Botërore*, pp. 293 e 302; AUSSME, F. N.1–11, B. 1089, fasc. Diario Storico, Bimestre: Gennaio – Febbraio 1943.

²⁹ Arkivi Qëndror i Shtetit Shqipëtar (henceforth AQSh), F. 165 Milicia Fashiste Shqipëtare, V. 1943, D. 15.

³⁰ The fallen in the MFSH ranks during the Italo-Greek war included the captain and Gjonmarkaj's family member Frok Doda Gjonmarkaj. P. Crociani, *Gli albanesi nelle Forze Armate italiane*, 171–172.

³¹ ACS, M.I, P.S, F. Ispettorato Generale presso la Luogotenenza del Re a Tirana, B. 6, fasc. 30.

³² In introducing the new government to Lieutenant Francesco Jacomoni and the Superior Commander of the Armed Forces of Albania, Lorenzo Dalmazzo, the former Prime Minister Kruja served almost like a guarantor. Another fundamental supporting figure for this government was Senator Gjon Marka Gjoni, who through his son had extended his power over the Interior Ministry. AUSSME, F. N.1–11, B. 1089, fasc. Diario Storico, Bimestre: Gennaio-Febbraio 1943; ACS, M.I, P.S, F. Ispettorato Generale presso la Luogotenenza del Re a Tirana, B. 6, fasc. 30, report by the former Permanent Police Councilor Giovanni Travaglio, Tirana 14 February 1943.

bands of the south.³³ As part of these repressive policies against the resistance forces concentrated in the south, Gjonmarkaj also approved a series of harsh and hitherto postponed measures, such as the introduction of curfews in the provinces of Vlorë, Gjirokastër, Berat and Korçë; taking hostage the families of the Partisan fugitives; and executing on the spot anyone who had been found armed and had violated public security.³⁴ However, it should be noted here that if, until that moment, the collaborationist governments had used the voluntary bands of the north to suppress the resistance forces, during the Bushati government, that is, during Gjonmarkaj's term in office, these bands were dissolved and the task of repression was entrusted directly to the Army. The implementation of these measures did not fail to arouse many tensions within the government, leading to its dissolution just over two months after its formation, following the resignation of Prime Minister Bushati, who, in contrast to Gjonmarkaj, frequently complained about not being asked regarding the repressions carried out in the south.³⁵

After the parenthesis of the fascist occupation in September 1943, the Gjonmarkaj family nevertheless continued to maintain a role of primary importance even later, during the Nazi occupation. Especially after the Partisan forces passed through the center of the country in the summer of 1944, they resumed organizing irregular armed units materially supported by the Germans with the clear aim of curbing "the communist advance" in the north.³⁶ However, the gradual retreat of the German forces in November 1944 and the seizure of power by the Partisan forces led many collaborationist and anti-communist figures, including Gjon Marka Gjoni, to flee abroad. The killing in 1946 of his son Mark Gjonmarkaj, at the head of anti-communist resistance units, marked the definitive end of the power of this family in Albania.

³³ AUSSME, F. N. I–II, B. 1196, fasc. Diario Storico, Bimestre: Marzo–Aprile 1943, report of the Superior Command of the Armed Forces Albania, 20 March 1943.

³⁴ Although, for political reasons, no state of war was proclaimed in the southern provinces, a move that would have transferred all powers to military authority, the prerogatives granted to the Armed Forces fully matched such a situation. AUSSME, F. N. I–II, B. 1089, fasc. Diario Storico, Bimestre: Gennaio–Febbraio 1943, Allegato 89, 2 and Allegato 91; AUSSME, F. N. I–II, B. 1196, fasc. Diario Storico, Bimestre: Marzo–Aprile 1943, Promemoria 9 March 1943.

³⁵ B. J. Fischer, *Shqipëria gjatë luftës, 195–197*; ACS, M.I, P.S, F. Ispettorato Generale presso la Luogotenenza del Re a Tirana, B. 5, Report, Tirana 24 April 1943.

³⁶ H. Neuwirth, *Qëndresë dhe bashkëpunim në Shqipëri (1939–1944). Një analizë historike e gjedhes kulturore të mikut dhe armikut* (Tiranë: Instituti i Dialogut & Komunikimit, 2006), 121.

The reasons and motivations for recruitment

After having reconstructed the parable of the power of the Gjonmarkajs and introduced the formation of the MFSH and the voluntary bands, it is necessary to reflect on the motives that led many of the Mirdita men and other northern hinterlands to enlist. If we analyze the purely personal role of the Gjonmarkaj family, it is undeniable that it carried significant weight, considering that mobilization, especially in the north, always took place under the guidance of the local leaders and almost always reflected parental and tribal criteria. It was certainly no coincidence that Gjon Marka Gjoni was appointed Senator and that he was given the task of recruiting men into voluntary bands. The centrality of the parental structure in enlistment came to the fore; in the case of the Gjonmarkajs, it was also apparent in the appointment of some of the family's members to leadership roles both at the MFSH and in the voluntary bands, as mentioned above. However, a distinction must be made here between the voluntary bands and the MFSH, since if the voluntary bands always operated under the direct guidance of their leaders and in many ways emulated the traditional practice of fighting on a clan and tribal basis, the MFSH, even if some commanders came from local élites, tried to overcome this traditional way of waging war in the military vision of northern Albania to build a more institutional structure.

In addition to the attraction that the local élites had, a very important role in the enlistment belonged to material incentives. In fact, if we minutely examine the methods of mobilization of voluntary bands, in addition to the supply of light armament, their members also received a monthly salary, which ranged from 600 Albanian francs (Fr. Alb) for battalion commanders to 400 for company commanders to 300 for platoon leaders and 100 Fr. Alb for private volunteers.³⁷ And again, in line with the direct role played by influential figures, it was up to them to supply their troops with weapons from the Armed Forces and pay them from the government's coffers. So, the person in charge of distributing weapons and paying the volunteers from Mirdita, Luma and Puka was precisely Senator Gjon Marka Gjoni.³⁸

If the conscripts in the voluntary bands received a salary, those enlisted in the MFSH, in addition to personal remuneration, also received a small allowance for their families, depending on the number of members of the household and the days of service of the soldier.³⁹ In this way, for many of the men from Mirdita and the northern hinterland, isolated and poor, enlistment meant a good

³⁷ AUSSME, F. N. I–II, B. 969, fasc. Diario Storico, Bimestre: Marzo–Aprile 1943, Ordinance of the Prime Minister M. Kruja, Tirana March 5, 1942.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ AQSh, F. 337, Nënprefektura e Mirditës, V. 1941, D. 16.

opportunity for employment and additional revenue. Unsurprisingly, in both voluntary bands and the MFSH, most of the recruits were poor villagers.⁴⁰

In addition to wages and subsidies, the real value of which was decreasing during the war due to galloping inflation – suffice it to say that a kilogram of sugar in April 1943 had reached 25 Fr. Alb⁴¹ – for many men in the northern hinterland as well as the recruits in the militia from the south, enlisting in these two armed formations also meant a good opportunity for banditry. As mentioned, banditry had been a very widespread phenomenon in the northern hinterland and, in particular, among the poor population of Mirdita, and during the war, the population frequently complained that plundering, sometimes even trivial, was carried out by the members of the voluntary bands and the MFSH.⁴²

If interpersonal and material factors played an important role, emotional factors should not be neglected – the fear of the communist danger and the potential Yugoslav and Greek threats. Regarding to the communist danger, it was the Albanian Catholic Church that conducted strong anti-communist propaganda, already from the interwar period⁴³ and during the war, among the Catholic population of the north, portraying the Partisans as ruthless criminals⁴⁴ and warning against the prohibition of religion and land property that the communists would certainly impose.⁴⁵

The Yugoslav threat was shrewdly fueled by the collaborationist government forces on account of the presence within the PKSh and the LNÇ [*Lëvizja Nacional Çlirimtare* – National Liberation Movement] of two members of the Yugoslav Communist Party (YCP), Miladin Popović and Dušan Mugoša, and the direct links of the PKSh with the YCP.⁴⁶ To underline the Greek threat, the

⁴⁰ H. Neuwirth, *Qëndresë dhe bashkëpunim*, 20. However, it should be noted that not all recruits of the MFSH were from the northern hinterland, as Neuwirth suggests in his book. Many of them came from the southern regions.

⁴¹ ACS, M.I, P.S, F. Ispettorato Generale presso la Luogotenenza del Re a Tirana, B. 5, fasc. 2, Report on the situation in Albania signed by Kol Mjeda, Tirana 19 April 1943.

⁴² AQSh, F. 165 Milicia Fashiste Shqipëtare, V. 1943, D. 5, Report of the Commanding General of the MFSH, Giuseppe Volante, Tirana January 11, 1943; AQSh, Arkivi i Partisë – Lufta (APL), F. Kujtime, Memories of Zylyftar Veleshnja, 16.

⁴³ R. Halimi, *Il dibattito intellettuale e politico in Albania tra le due guerre mondiali. Mehdi Frashëri tra “i vecchi” e “i giovani”*, (PhD dissertation), (Venice: Ca' Foscari University of Venice, 2013), 182–196.

⁴⁴ Interviews conducted in northern Albania in the period January–March 2017.

⁴⁵ N. Bardhoshi, “Studiuesit e huaj mbi Shqiptarët në Post-Socializem. Bernd Fischer Albania Highland Tribal Society and Family Structure in the Process of Twentieth Century Transformation”, *Kultura Popullore* (2010), 281.

⁴⁶ About the work of the two members of the YCP inside the PKSh and the LNÇ and on the direct links between PKSh and YCP, see: K. Frashëri, *Historia e lëvizjes së majte në Shqipëri dhe e themelimit të PKSH 1878–1941* (Tiranë: Akademia e Shkencave e Shq-

various collaborationist governments claimed that the presence of Greek bands in the territories bordering the southeast was dangerous and that they could invade the Albanian territory.⁴⁷ In fact, although the populations of the north were much more vulnerable to the Slavic danger, they were not indifferent to the potential Greek threat in the south of the country. The fascist authorities themselves, as well as the Nazi authorities who succeeded them, tried to exploit the existing inter-ethnic tensions for their own political interests.⁴⁸

Last but not least, the recruitment of these men was also influenced by the opportunity to be armed. The link between the peoples of the northern mountains and arms possession was very strong, and having arms was seen as synonymous with honor. In fact, being armed gave the possibility of self-defense and defending one's honor in the event of an offense.⁴⁹

Thus, for many of these men, enlisting in voluntary bands and in the MFSH was the best way to reconcile economic income, an opportunity for booty, the possibility of self-defense and strengthening one's sense of honor.

On-the-ground action

Once recruited, what was the scope of the action of these forces? If we analyze the direct actions of both the voluntary bands of the north and the MFSH, it seems that the former, when really willing to intervene, were in their actions more incisive than the militia forces. Although they had had a short training period, just like the militia members, they were more effective. This "efficiency" in their actions can be explained by the fact that the voluntary formations, although under the high command of the MFSH, always operated under their local leaders, which had instilled in them more cohesion than the Albanian troops operating in the MFSH, where the commanders in most cases were Italians. This element may have also led to some episodes of clear refusal to take action in certain contexts and a tendency to act independently. In this regard, Zylyftar Veleshnja, commander of the Partisan band "Riza Cerova" operating in Skrapar (Berat), recalls that in December 1942, the voluntary forces of the north (the voluntary bands of Luma) mobilized in Berat, realized that in the region of Skrapar did not operate Greek bands, as they had been told, but Albanian Partisan

ipërisë, 2006); K. Dervishi, *Lëvizja Komuniste në vitet 1924–1944 dhe formimi i PKSH-së* (Tiranë: Shtëpia botuese 55, 2016).

⁴⁷ AQSh, APL, F. 14, Lista 1, D. 148/2.

⁴⁸ F. A. Zaugg, "From the Milizia Fascista Albanese to SS Division "Skanderberg": between Imposing Fascist ideology and Adapting Local Warfare". In *Fascist Warfare 1922–1945. Aggression, Occupation, Annihilation*, eds. M. Alonso, A. Kramer, J. Rodrigo (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), 280.

⁴⁹ B. Pula, *State, law, and revolution*, 233–235.

forces supported by many local peasants, and refused to engage with them and even to hand over weapons and be demobilized.⁵⁰

Even the phenomenon of desertion was much less widespread among the voluntary bands from the north than among the units of the MFSH and all other units of the army where Albanian forces operated. Obviously, in this case, the fact that enlistment was carried out by the local leaders based on parental and tribal criteria and that the troops operated under their direct authority made these units highly cohesive and, consequently, the phenomenon of desertion much more uncommon.

A number of factors influenced desertion among the MFSH members, which progressively increased since the fall of 1942 and lasted until the end of the fascist occupation.⁵¹ It must be immediately specified, however, that even within the MFSH, there were the recruits of the South who deserted more⁵², compared to those coming from the North, so as to induce Mark Gjonmarkaj during his ministry, in February 1943, to decide on the disarmament and dismissal of all Blackshirts from the four southern prefectures.⁵³ The reasons for this phenomenon were determined, first of all, by the concentration of Partisan resistance right from the fall of 1942 in the south, against which both voluntary bands and MFSH forces were deployed. Operating in a foreign territory made the recruits of the north less vulnerable to the action of Partisan bands than the recruits of the south. Not in a few cases, in fact, to curb the action of repression and dissuade the Albanians operating in the MFSH, the Partisan bands resorted to kidnapping adult men from the families of the latter – that is, those residing in the villages of the south – to then forcibly enlist them in their bands.⁵⁴ Even the property of the MFSH members from the south was much more exposed to confiscation by the Partisan forces than that of their northern comrades, which

⁵⁰ AQSh, APL F. Kujtime, Memories of Zylyftar Veleshnja, 17–18.

⁵¹ From 1 October 1942 to 1 March 1943, 237 soldiers deserted, but 344 more deserted in the months of July and August 1943. AUSSME, F. N.1–11, B. 1196, fasc. Diario Storico, Bimestre: Marzo–Aprile 1943; AUSSME, F. N.1–11, B.1313, Notiziario Mensile N. 8, August 1943.

⁵² On the list of men who deserted from MFSH from 1 October 1942 to 31 January 1943, a vast majority was originally from the provinces of the south, see: AQSh, F. 165 Milicia Fashiste Shqipëtare, V. 1943, D. 3.

⁵³ AUSSME, F. N.1–11, B. 1089, fasc. Diario Storico, Bimestre: Gennaio–Febbraio 1943, Allegato n. 89.

⁵⁴ AQSh, F. 165 Milicia Fashiste Shqipëtare, V. 1943, D. 19, Communication (Secret) of G. Volante, 24 January 1943.

were located in areas where Partisan forces were scarce if not, as in Mirdita, non-existent.⁵⁵

Another important element that discouraged the men of the north operating in the south to desert was the simple fact that they were in a foreign territory. This not only strengthened the solidarity between them, but also prevented them from abandoning their units and running away, unlike their comrades-in-arms from the regions of the south, for which defecting in many cases meant reaching their home a few kilometers from where they served.

Finally, if we take into account the scope and nature of the violence of both armed formations, they did not shy away from acts of harsh repression, which often affected the civilian population. In the operations to suppress Mu-harrem Bajraktari's band in April 1942, twelve houses were burned down;⁵⁶ on the other hand, during the operations for the repression of Myslim Peza's band carried out in Peza e Madhe in September of the same year, in addition killing some members of his band and burning many houses, numerous crimes were committed against the peasants with the clear intention of spreading terror and setting a strong example.⁵⁷ No less harsh were the operations conducted with the participation of voluntary formations from Dibra at the end of December 1942 to suppress the resistance bands in the area of Gjorm. The losses suffered by the volunteers of Dibra in this action, amounting to ten dead and nine wounded⁵⁸, led to general frustration, culminating in the killing of the Prefect of Vlorë, Qazim Kaculi, and Mayor Lele Koçi, accused of being in contact with the Partisan forces and thus responsible for the losses suffered.⁵⁹

Impact on the local population: an accentuation of invisible barriers?

The actions of the voluntary bands and the units of the MFSH had a decidedly negative impact on the population of the areas where they were deployed, not

⁵⁵ Starting from September 1943, the LNC, with the approval of the Statute and Regulations of its local councils, officially established the confiscation of assets that belonged to everyone active in the militia. AQSh, APL, F.40, Lista 1, V. 1943, D. 5, Statute and Regulations of the National Liberation Councils, 26.

⁵⁶ M. Dezhgiu, *Shqipëria nën pushtimin Italian*, 137.

⁵⁷ AQSh, APL, F. 14, D. 5, Report of Koço Tashko for the Comintern, October 1942, 9; ASDMAE, F. Gabinetto Albania, B. 1089/1, Report (Reserved) of Jacomoni to the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tirana 9 October 1942, 3.

⁵⁸ A relatively high number considering that the Army recorded five dead and the militia only one. AUSSME, F. N.1-11, B. 1089, fasc. Diario Storico, Bimestre: Gennaio – Febbraio 1943, Telegram of the General Spatocco for the Supreme Command, 4 January 1943.

⁵⁹ M. Dezhgiu, *Shqipëria nën pushtimin Italian*, 364.

only because of the violence perpetrated against the civilian population, both in the south and the north, but also, as mentioned, because of widespread theft. These actions appeared even more serious in the popular perception because they were Albanians in the context of occupation and the serious economic situation caused by the war. If the Albanians enlisted in the MFSH wore the black shirt, a more apparent symbol of fascist rule, the position of the members of the voluntary bands was aggravated by the fact that they were irregular troops recruited and paid to carry out certain policing duties and acts of repression. In fact, in many of the documents produced by the members of the resistance, they are labeled as nothing but mercenaries.⁶⁰

Consequently, the transfer of the voluntary bands composed of northerners to the southern territories to carry out acts of repression against the Partisan bands and whoever supported them, in itself, led heightened the tension between the local population and these units: in addition to the phenomena of violence and other episodes of indiscipline, the mere presence of armed men from the north had a negative impact on the local population. This negative perception had roots in the opposition between the north and south that characterized Albania⁶¹ and only increased during the war. It is no coincidence that Zylyftar Veleshnja, in his memoirs, referred to the men of Luma sent to Berat to suppress the Partisan bands of Skrapar by the term *malokët*⁶², a derogatory term used by the inhabitants of the south for the inhabitants of the northern mountains.⁶³ The presence of the volunteer bands of Luma in the city of Berat was the source of a series of debates and tensions both with the local authorities and with the population. So, in December 1942, following strong disagreements between the leaders of the voluntary bands and the Prefect of Berat, the latter banned the movement of volunteers after 17:00.⁶⁴ Towards the end of January 1943, all authorities of the province of Berat thought that the volunteers of Luma had to get away as soon as possible, in the meantime telling all the Luma leaders that they

⁶⁰ The communist historiography also uses the term “mercenaries” for the voluntary bands of the north, see: N. Plasari, Sh. Ballvora, *Histoire de la lutte antifasciste de libération nationale du peuple albanaise (1939–1944)*, Vol. I, (Tirana : Ed. 8 Nëntori, 1976), 305–312.

⁶¹ About the opposition between North and South Albania see: G. De Rapper, « Les Guègues et les Tosques existent-ils? L’opposition Nord/Sud en Albanie et ses interprétations », *Espace populations sociétés* 3 (2004), 625–640.

⁶² AQSh, APL, F. Kujtime, Memories of Zylyftar Veleshnja, 18.

⁶³ On the pejorative meaning of the term *malok*, still used today among the population of the South or originally from the South, see: G. De Rapper, *Les Guègues et Les Tosques*, 631–637.

⁶⁴ AQSh, F. 165 Milicia Fashiste Shqipëtare, V. 1943, D. 19, Promemoria N. 81 (Secret), Tirana 1. 1. 1943.

needed to keep their men under control and supervision to ensure maximum discipline and prevent theft or violations of any kind.⁶⁵ Despite this, in early February, some attacks took place with gunfire and the throwing of bombs by some inhabitants near the camps of the volunteers, leading the latter, on their own initiative, to surround the neighborhood where the riots had occurred and block all access roads to the city, completely preventing movement.⁶⁶

Therefore, everywhere in the southern regions, both the voluntary bands and the forces of the MFSH, which after February 1943 were made up almost entirely of men from the north, aroused a gradual but increasingly marked hostility in the local populations. This hostility was even more pronounced if we consider that, in addition to violence and indiscipline and the fact that these formations were composed of “people of the north”, with the continuation of the war, the Partisan ranks that opposed them increasingly included local recruits, relatives and acquaintances of much of the southern population.

Conclusions

The fascist occupation of Albania and the consequent end of the monarchy of King Zog entailed, in the Italian intention not to upset the existing social order, the co-optation of previously sidelined leaders and the promotion of their local realities neglected by the central government. In many ways, this political choice corresponded to a system of the colonial type of indirect rule, which in Albania during the period of fascist occupation justified the appointment of Gjon Marka Gjoni and his family to the highest government and state offices, as well as the choice to mobilize irregular voluntary bands to maintain public order and suppress any armed rebellions.

In pursuing this policy, the Italians showed that they were well aware of the importance of social networks in Albania, both of the parental and tribal networks of the northern territories and the clientelist ones constituted around the bey in the south-central areas. The constitution of the voluntary bands and the mobilization of many men from the northern hinterland in the MFSH were facilitated by the existence of these social networks and, above all, by the strong bonds that characterized them. In addition, purely personal motivations and, in particular, financial incentives also played a fundamental role in the recruitment of these men, in terms of both remuneration and subsidies and potential pos-

⁶⁵ AQSh, F. 165 Milicia Fashiste Shqipëtare, V. 1943, D. 19, Promemoria N. 101, Tirana January 31, 1943.

⁶⁶ AQSh, F. 165 Milicia Fashiste Shqipëtare, V. 1943, D. 19, Promemoria N. 103, Tirana 3 February 1943.

sibilities for banditry amidst the poverty and lack of prospects that had always characterized the isolated mountain hinterland of the north.

The rise of the Gjonmarkaj family to central power and the mobilization of many men from Mirdita and the northern regions loyal to them in the voluntary bands and the MFSH, in addition to ensuring a series of economic and material advantages, also contributed to their (temporary) integration into the new national reality, namely the fascist one. Having crossed the boundaries of their territories and been integrated into the state structures, despite all the contradictions that emerged on the ground, these men came closer for the first time to central power, which until then had been perceived as alien and in many ways hostile. In this process of national integration, however, their deployment in the territories of the south had an adverse effect: the accentuation of the north-south division and the consequent alienation of much of the southern population from the central collaborationist authorities with their gradual rapprochement to the Partisan resistance.

The end of the fascist occupation and subsequently of the Nazi one with the seizure of power by the Partisan forces led by the Albanian Communist Party heralded the sunset of the power of the Gjonmarkajs and the beginning of a post-war period for the region of Mirdita and almost the entire hinterland of the north, still characterized by repression and political neglect by the central authorities.

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