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THE REGION OF ELBASAN DURING THE OCCUPATION BY AUSTRIA-HUNGARIAN ARMY (1916-1918)

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Abstract

The arrival of the Austro-Hungarian forces in Elbasan was not opposed by most of the patriots of the region, and those who had emigrated abroad for various reasons. Patriots in the region of Elbasan benefited from the concessions made by the Austrian authorities in the interest of national movement. The economic situation in the region of Elbasan was still difficult. Besides the lack of grain, the biggest problem that existed at this time was speculations by some people who benefited from this difficult situation to be enriched by increasing grain prices. Poverty and economic collapse made it difficult living in this period, this condition had a negative impact on social morality, the health of the population and increasing mortality among the poor population. Austro-Hungarian authorities during this time took several actions to improve the situation but the misery was still present and food prices were not lowered. Austro-Hungarian authorities established in Elbasan and in several other cities military offices, which recruited Albanian soldiers, who were led by Austrian officers. Austro-Hungarian authorities undertook action to disarm the local population by collecting all the weapons in the region of Elbasan. During this time the Austro-Hungarians built a post office in the city of Elbasan, also raises an Austrian trading agency in the city of Elbasan to promote trade in this region.

Keywords: Austro-Hungarian Army, Albanian patriots, region of Elbasan, national congress, economic situation.

In January 1916, the Bulgarian and Austro-Hungarian troops, entered into Albanian territory by occupying most of it. Also, the Elbasan region became part of the occupation. During World War I, the first that invaded this region were the Bulgarian forces have arrived from Macedonia, who settled in Elbasan on 29 January 1916. The first news on the approach

of the Bulgarian troops around the region of Elbasan, the local population received from LefNosi, patriot of the city of Elbasan. After the Bulgarian forces in this region also came the Austro-Hungarian forces. The Austrian-Hungarian located in Albania there were about 100 thousand soldiers.²¹ Between representatives of the city of Elbasan, LefNosi, KasemSejdini, Dr. FilipPapajani, EminMatraxhiut, and the other party Serafimoff Bulgarian captain, company commander Lieutenant Kristoff was signed an agreement. The contents of this agreement included cooperation and recognition of the Bulgarian influence in this region, of course without prejudice to the national rights of Albanians. After signing the agreement, in sign of gratitude, the administration of the Municipality of the city set the Bulgarian and Albanian flags. At that time in the town of Elbasan, entered the national forces led by AhmetZogollit.²²He collaborated with AqifBiçakçiu, LefNosin and other patriots of this region. In a bilateral agreement between the Austro-Hungarian and Bulgarian, Bulgarian forces were obliged to leave from the region of Elbasan and turn to the eastern part of the country from where then put their full influence. The arrival of the Austro-Hungarian forces in Elbasan was not opposed by most of the patriots of the region, and those who had emigrated abroad for various reasons. In a proclamation titled "precious, brotherly loyalty" to the Albanian people on January 28, 1916, by PrengBibdoda, Seid Pasha, FejziAlizoti, LuigjGurakuqi, AqifElbasani, AhmetDakli, who interned in Cetinje Montenegro, indicated that:

“ In recent years we shared with you the evils and sufferings, but we are starting to give you an example to put you completely under the orders of the Austro-Hungarian authorities, showing no doubt, but by honoring and expressing your gratitude towards Austro-Hungarian army".²³

In these conditions AqifElbasan (Biçakçiu) and AhmetDakli in early1916 returned to the city of Elbasan. AhmetDakli in February elected director of finance for the city of Elbasan and then elected mayor of municipality. On February 14, 1916 national commander, Ahmed Zogolli, along with IrfanBeyOhri sent a telegram of Elbasan prefecture where announcing that:

²¹Muin Cami, “Lufta çlirimtare antiimperialiste e popullit shqiptar në vitet 1918-1920”, Tiranë 1969, fq 29.

²²Muin Cami, “Lufta çlirimtare antiimperialiste e popullit shqiptar në vitet 1918-1920”, Tiranë 1969, fq 246

²³Lef Nosi, Instituti i Historisë,“Dokumente Historike 1912-1918”, Tiranë 2007, fq 243.

"The national flag at the Royal Palace in Durres was raised, for tomorrow will march in Elbasan..."²⁴

Chairmanship of the rural area of Elbasan, consisting of: "XhaferrDardha, QemalBey, HalimBey, EminHaxhiademi, RrapushDemeti, GrigorCilka, LefNosi, AhmetDakli, NikollIvanaj, JasharBeyStarova, HajdarBlloshmi"²⁵ on 7 March 1916 took measures for celebration, decoration and lighting of the city to organize a meeting of all people, including the participation of school students. This arrangement was made to honor the anniversary of Prince Wilhelm Wied, who honored the throne of Albania. Initially, the mayor of the city on 18 February1916, reports made to the provinces of the region in order to be made preparations to celebrate 2 years of establishment on the throne of King Wied. Austro-Hungarian authorities were not thought to hold this celebration with the idea that: "Vienna had long considered a closed issue Wilhelm Wied king".²⁶Despite disagreement celebration was held, was sang national songs, were thrown slogans: "Long live the king" and were held different speeches with patriotic spirit. In organizing this celebration stands the figure of the prefect of Elbasan, AqifElbasani and mayor of the municipality of that time XhaferrHilmiDardha. The position of mayor of a municipality he would keep from February to June of 1916. During this period, XhaferrDardha gave his contribution to the organization of a congress of national importance. Many Albanian patriots encouraged by the difficult circumstances that were created at this time, appeared the idea of organizing a national meeting aimed at forming a government of Albania and the return of Prince Wied in Albania. Albanian patriots thought that the Albanian Government will recover by trusting in the help that would give the Austro-Hungarians. Albanian patriots, who believed more in assistance that will give Austria-Hungary, were AqifElbasani, LefNosi, AhmetDakli, SalihCeka, Dervish Hima etc.²⁷The idea to organize a national congress was welcomed with great enthusiasm in all Albanian regions, especially in the city of Elbasan. With the initiative of AqifElbasani, Ahmed Zog and many other personalities not only the city of Elbasan as QemalBeyElbasani, YmerStringa, ShefqetDaiu, Simon Shuteriqi, ThanasFloqi, LefNosi etc., it was taken up an initial commission, which decided:

The Commission will propose to the Minister of the Interior, AqifElbasani, to form the government with ministers, who had not renounced the duties that had, after the departure of Prince Wilhelm of Wied.

²⁴Lef Nosi, Instituti i Historisë, "Dokumente Historike 1912-1918", Tiranë 2007, fq 244.

²⁵Arkivi Qendror Shtetëror, Prefektura e Elbasanit. F. 271, D. 6, viti 1916, fq 16.

²⁶Kastriot Dervishi, "Historia e shtetit shqiptar 1912-2005", Tiranë 2006, fq 72

²⁷Kristaq Prifti, "Dervish Hima", 8 Nëntori, 1987, fq 257

Nomination of new ministers in the cabinet slots and become their choice from the list to be submitted by this commission consisting of the 16 patriots.

Formulation of a national program. The content of his program would:

Expressing of gratitude of the Albanian nation for the Great Powers, which recognized the right of Albanians to raise the national flag everywhere in Albania.

Will be presented to His Majesty, the King the nation's desire to quickly come to Albania.

Will discuss how to govern the country until the king returned to Albania.²⁸

Why the city of Elbasan was chosen to organize this congress?

We think that the main reasons were:

Elbasan, during this period constituted one of the most important centers of the patriotic movement in the country.

The influence of one of the most important personalities in the political and economic aspect, not only in Elbasan, but also in Albania, as Aqif Elbasani who was also one of the organizers of this congress.

The idea to organize a national congress in Elbasan supported the Prince of Wied, who addressed the Albanian nation through an appeal: "to establish an Albanian government in Elbasan, led by, Aqif Elbasani"²⁹. Prince Wied although far Albania, not ever abdicate the throne and there's never stopped working for Albania and Albanians, but waited the possibility of returning to the throne of Albania. Aqif Elbasani, when he returned to Elbasan from Cetinje,³⁰ where he was interned together with many Albanian patriots began its activity for the establishment of the Albanian state administration. He was assisted in its activities by many patriots. Also there was a committee elected by the people, which intended to collect data on existing situation created after the departure of Serb forces. This committee was forced to cooperate by Austro-Hungarians reported various problems of the time.³¹

During 1916, Albania was a difficult economic and political situation:

People are facing shortage of grain because the grain production of last year was low. Serbian army passing through the country, robbed, burned, and used for its own needs most of this production.

Sea routes were closed by the Great War and cannot ensure grain as food for the population.

²⁸Lef Nosi, Instituti i Historisë, "Dokumente Historike 1912-1918", Tiranë 2007, fq 249.

²⁹Gazeta "Koha", Korçë, 1916, 27 prill, artikulli "Fati i Shqipërisë.

³⁰Akademia e Shkencave të Shqipërisë, "Historia e Popullit Shqiptar- III -1912-1939", Tiranë 2007, fq 86.

³¹Arkivi Qendror Shtetëror, Prefektura e Elbasanit. F. 271, D.41, viti 1916, fq 3.

This difficult situation, in March of 1916, would result in a later period a famine. Elbasan villagers took urgent action to set up a committee, which was intended to organize a general meeting. This committee was composed of: QemalBeu – chairman and RrapushDemeti, EminHaxhiademi, Ibrahim Miraku, XhaferrDardha, HysenDakli, GrigorNosin, GrigorCilka, LefNosi – members. The committee set up by villagers of the zone of Peqin, decided that the three delegates sent to Europe to secure permission from the Great Powers to bring grain from America to the port of Durres.³²It also decided that the travel expenses of three delegates, to be paid by the cities. These expenses amounted to three hundred Napoleons gold coin. Specifically: the city of Elbasan – 50 napoleons gold coin, the city of Durres - 50 napoleons gold coin, the city of Berat - 50 napoleons gold coin, the city of Tirana - 50 napoleons gold coin, the city of Lushnja – 25 napoleons gold coin, the city of Fier – 25 napoleons gold coin, the city of Peqin – 25 napoleons gold coin, the city of Kavaja – 25 napoleons gold coin.³³The mission of this delegation will be a human and not political. As representatives of the city of Elbasan, in the committee were elected GregorCilka, LefNosi, and MithatFrasheri. At the general meeting held in Elbasan was reached several conclusions, which do blame the government because: It should have taken immediate action to face this country needs for food, and it was aware of the difficult situation which threatened the Albanian people. Prefecture of Elbasan recommended to the government, to reduce the price of grain and its sale was not as before, because people were not able to pay it. The Committee also decided that the date of opening the proceedings of Congress of Elbasan will be March18, 1916. So began preparations for the convocation of representatives of all Albanian lands. In a telegram from the President of the Commission initiating the Congress, AhmetZogolli, Elbasan on 3 March1916, announcing to all rural areas of the principalities of Berat, Skrapar, Fier, Lushnje, Kavaje, Durres, Peqin, Tirane, Kruje, Shkoder, Diber, Mat, etc., that: “We have the honor to notify you that it was decided to meet here in this city on 5-18 March a National Congress, to talk about affairs of Albania. Please send two delegates who have with them the letter of representation.”³⁴ Telegrams were sent to representatives of the city of Mitrovica, Gjakova, Tetovo, etc. When the Austro Hungarians arrived in the Albanian lands drafted a proclamation which stated that coming into Albania as "friends of Albania"³⁵. But they never helped the patriots in the region of Elbasan, and made all effort to prevent them. These actions justified based on their opinion that the Albanians were not

³²Arkivi Qendror Shteterore, Prefektura e Elbasanit. F. 271, D.36, viti 1916, fq 6.

³³Arkivi Qendror Shteterore, Prefektura e Elbasanit. F. 271, D.36, viti 1916, fq 7.

³⁴Lef Nosi, Instituti i Historisë, “Dokumente Historike 1912-1918”, Tiranë 2007, fq 250-251.

³⁵Akademia e Shkencave te Shqipërisë, “Historia e Popullit Shqiptar- III -1912-1939”,Tiranë 2007, fq 85.

capable to form the government. Concessions made by Austrian military authorities in the prefecture of Elbasan were part of their propaganda to ensure the friendship of the Albanians, as:

Promise to allow Albanians to raise the Albanian flag.

Austro-Hungarians would allow development of the cultural movement in Albania.

Also they will allow Albanians to organize a civil administration.

Patriots in the region of Elbasan benefited from the concessions made by the Austrian authorities in the interest of national movement. Austro-Hungarian forces took repressive measures of a political, economic, social and military, against the population. In the city of Elbasan they took steps to prevent the meeting of the national congress. CzapekMajn (commander of the Austro-Hungarian forces in Elbasan) in an appeal to the Municipality of Elbasan stated that: measures will be taken by us to prevent any accumulation or collection of assemblies on political or commercial purpose without the permission of this command. He also claimed that no man would be allowed to go to Durrës or in other cities without the permission of the command of Elbasan.³⁶ Austro-Hungarian authorities arrested and interned some of the initiators of the organization of this congress, also prevented the return of PrinceWied in Albania. Most of the arrested patriots were imprisoned in the prison of Elbasan, which at that time administered by HajredinDibra. In such circumstances AqifElbasani resigns from the position of chairman the commission for organizing the congress, on 14 April 1916. In the letter that was sent Prefectures, as Minister of Internal Affairs, AqifElbasani announced that: “due to military operations, the Albanian government will temporarily become the Royal Army of Austria-Hungary. From the minute I leave the office. This way of government is temporary, and not due to be upset.”³⁷ Before resigning from the post of Minister of Interior Affairs, he communicated to the prefecture of Elbasan officers that: “continue to do your work with dedication and to accomplish tasks and instructions will be provided from the Austro-Hungarian authorities.”³⁸

Immediately following the resignation of Aqif Elbasani, Austro-Hungarians took the policy of distribution of the Albanian administration, seriously affecting the interests of Albanians to have an independent national state governed by the Albanians. Even after leaving ministerial office, the influence of Aqif Elbasani was important not only in local level but also nationally.³⁹

³⁶Lef Nosi, Instituti i Historisë, “Dokumente Historike 1912-1918”, Tiranë 2007, fq 253.

³⁷Lef Nosi, Instituti i Historisë, “Dokumente Historike 1912-1918”, Tiranë 2007, fq 254.

³⁸Arkivi Qendror Shtetëror, Sheria e Elbasanit, F. 129, D. 59, viti 1916, fq 11.

³⁹Enciklopedi, “Në panteon drejt panteonit 2000”, Elbasan viti 2000, fq,90.

The economic situation in the region of Elbasan was still difficult, in the absence of grain in May-August 1916 Austro-Hungarians issued several decrees on the abolition of all taxes have been imposed by Esad Toptani or local government.⁴⁰ Serious situation that still exists in Elbasan Prefecture due to the intrigues and policies pursued by Esat Toptani and his men, forced Aqif Elbasan at 22 June 1916 to send a complaint letter to the military high command of the Austro-Hungarian located in the city of Shkodra, which informed them about:

The various intrigues Esat Toptani since the declaration of independence until June 1916.

Its collaboration with Serbia, Montenegro, France and Italy, to surrender the city of Shkodra. Esat Toptani efforts to organize the meeting in the city of Kruja to self-proclaimed King of Albania.⁴¹

On August 3, 1916, the Royal Army Command issued an order No.751 which read that: "All people, Albanian or foreign persons, who have been severely damaged by Esat Toptani or his people should be addressing civil court, where their problems will be reviewed and will be guaranteed the right to get the damage bonuses has had caused Esat Toptani. He has to answer for all damages that he has done and his property to be seized."⁴²

Besides the lack of grain, the biggest problem that existed at this time was speculations by some people who benefited from this difficult situation to be enriched by increasing grain prices. Poverty and economic collapse made it difficult living in this period, this condition had a negative impact on social morality, the health of the population and increasing mortality among the poor population. Austro-Hungarian authorities during this time took several actions to improve the situation but the misery was still present and food prices were not lowered.

In Albania in 1916 there was no note about the country's population, and its administrative organization. Austro-Hungarian authorities took measures to establish an office for collecting data about population numbers and names of villages in the area that was under its influence. Only after 1918 were published the first accurate data. In the region of Elbasan, the Austro-Hungarian authorities launched a new administrative organization. In the city of Elbasan, during 1916, these employees resulted in the administration offices.⁴³

⁴⁰ Arkivi Qendror Shtetëror, Prefektura e Elbasanit, F. 271, D. 57, viti 1916, fq 7.

⁴¹ Arkivi Qendror Shtetëror, Prefektura e Elbasanit, F. 271, D.95, viti 1916, fq 10.

⁴² Arkivi Qendror Shtetëror, Prefektura e Elbasanit, F. 271, D.8, viti 1916, fq 4.

⁴³ Arkivi Qendror Shtetëror, Prefektura e Elbasanit, F. 271, D.57, viti 1916, fq 20.

	The position	Name/ Surname	Monthly salary
Sub/prefecture of Elbasan	Chairman	Abdyl Ypi (until August 1916)	400 korona
	Dragoman (translator)	Aleksandër Xhuvani	200 korona
	Secretary	Zihni Bordi	120 korona
	Archivist	Galip Bey	100 korona
	Penman	Ibrahim Zenelxoqja	70 korona
		Demir Librazhdi	30 korona
Servant	Alush Narazani	40 korona	
Sharia	Qadi	Raif Efendi	200 korona
	Penman	Sulejman Mulla Jonus	100 korona
Primary court	President	Abdyl Qerim Çelo	300 korona
		Tefik Delvina	360 korona
	Members	Mehmet Emin Meto	280 korona
		Josif Kostandin Mima	280 korona
	Penman	Beqir Gjirgani	150 korona
Mustafa Zyma		150 korona	
Servant	Mustafa Kodra	60 korona	
Office of finance	Director	Ymer Stringa	300 korona
	Accountant	Mehmet Stringa	150 korona
		Demir Zenel Hoxha	150 korona
	Servant	Qazim Cenko	40 korona
Bank	Director	Mehmed Seri	100 korona
School	Teachers	Ahmet Gashi	120 korona
		Fejzulla Guranjaku	120 korona
		Mustafa Curri	120 korona
		Filip Leci	120 korona
		Simon Shuteriqi	80 korona
		Abedin Çaushi	90 korona
		Xhaferr Dede	80 korona
		Ibrahim Derani	80 korona

	Servant	Xhaferr Abdulla	40 korona
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Austro-Hungarian authorities established in Elbasan and in several other cities military offices, which recruited Albanian soldiers, who were led by Austrian officers. Austro-Hungarian authorities often abused to the Albanian soldiers, who were made part of the royal army. Mention the case of an officer from the city of Elbasan, Abas Hilmi, who in a letter to all his countrymen reported that: “Although I have faithfully served the Austrian Kingdom, without being guilty of shooting condemn me because of the slanders by an Austrian officer.”⁴⁴ Abas Taushani, who served as the Albanian army officer involved in the Austro-Hungarian army, was executed by firing squad by the Austro-Hungarian command.⁴⁵ The cause for which he was executed was opposed to the looting of archaeological objects from Austrian soldiers in Apollonia. Austro-Hungarian authorities during the period from April 24 until November 4, 1916 undertook action to disarm the local population by collecting all the weapons in the region of Elbasan. During this time the Austro-Hungarians built a post office in the city of Elbasan, which was opened in October of 1916. This post office was used by them for military and commercial purposes. On 1 November 1916 the post office provided services for the local population. Also raises an Austrian trading agency in the city of Elbasan to promote trade in this region.

Despite efforts to develop trade and economy, the region of Elbasan continue to face economic difficulties. Austro-Hungarian occupation of Elbasan region during the First World War not only worsened the economic situation but also the political situation.

⁴⁴Lef Nosi, Instituti i Historisë, “Dokumente Historike 1912-1918”, Tiranë 2007, fq 256

⁴⁵Elbasani-Enciklopedi, Sejko, Elbasan 2003 fq.575

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