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An Ottoman Story Until the End: Reading Fan Noli's Post-Mediterranean Struggle in America, 1906-1922

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Abstract:

As the lives of so many men and women in the late nineteenth century Ottoman Balkans collapsed, many began to invest in ways to circumvent the accompanying powers of the modern state. An equal number attempted to manage the changes by availing themselves to the evolving Ottoman state with the hope of fusing efforts of reform with the emerging political-cultural structures of the larger world that was explicitly geared to tear the multi-ethnic Ottoman Balkans apart. By exploring the manner in which some members of the Balkans' cultural elite adapted as their worlds transformed, this article introduces new methods of interpreting and narrating transitional periods such as those impacting men like Fan S. Noli. His itinerary itself reveals just how complex life in the Balkans and Black Sea would be during the 1878-1922 period, but not one entirely subordinate to the ethno-nationalist agenda so often associated with him.

Keywords: Albanian Nationalism, Egypt, Diaspora, Migration, Autocephalous Orthodox Churches, Ottoman Empire, United States of America

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Introduction

Many men and women who lived through the dramatic transformations of the late Ottoman Empire (1878-1922) contributed their fair share to the process. As their Ottoman homelands collapsed in face of pressure from Western banks demanding payment of debts, the resulting wars transformed the state institutions that were increasingly invested in socially managing its subjects. Accordingly, many among those targeted by the state responded in ways that resulted in political-cultural ideals that directly clashed with what we understand today as modernity. Within a generation, these challenges to the “modernization” process spread across the world, resulting in the subsequent constructive friction that birthed our modern world order.

As will become evident below, some of the prominent mechanisms for collective action were individual and group adjustments to these disparate processes. Often, the results included the creation of social and sports clubs, new places of worship, labor unions, secret order committees, theatre groups, and intellectual salons. As well reflected in the literature, these creations infested cities throughout the late Ottoman territories. Invariably associated with the founders of ethno-national successor states, nationalist historians have worked overtime to identify such communities as crucial agents of the modern nation-state. More important still are the suggestions that out of these organizations came individuals who have since been celebrated as the post-Ottoman nation’s heroes.

Unfortunately, the roles such “national heroes” must perform in retrospective nationalist historiographies disguises the deep intersection of interests that often compromised the explicit “nationalist” function allocated to these individuals. Missing from much of the narrative is the documented patronage of individuals and the groups with which they were associated from powerful capitalist interests. The pre-World War I sponsorship of politically entrepreneurial organizers, today associated exclusively with nationalist activism against, for instance, Ottoman or Habsburg rule, often downplay their contribution to the “patriotic struggle.” Clearly research, however, suggests the consular staffs of powerful states based throughout the Eastern Mediterranean actually played a more direct role than allowed in the heroic descriptions of these individuals and groups. It is now well-documented that support of foreign interests included subsidizing the publication of pamphlets and newsletters while covering the expenses related to recruiting, training, and then unleashing activists when the time proved ideal. This was

certainly the case for the Ottoman-Albanian, Greek, Bulgarian, Serbian, and Arabic language material produced at this time.

Today in the Balkans, the idea that Ottoman-era “patriots” could have served the strategic interests of outside powers seeking the destruction of their societies is an uncomfortable paradox if not handled well. Especially in the context of the late Ottoman Empire, individuals and groups considered as “patriotic” that strived for ethno-national separation and thus “liberation,” supposedly aimed to secure “independence” from the Ottoman state. It is also assumed that the relationships maintained with outside interests during this often long, drawn out period of struggle were both essential and entirely contradictory to the survival of the cosmopolitan Ottoman Empire.¹

What is missing is the possibility that as, for instance, the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) successfully overthrew the entrenched Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamid II in 1908/9, it helped reinsert a set of institutions that explicitly sought to accommodate those seeking a solution to the crisis that began with the end of the Tanzimat era. Clear from their rhetoric and grand declarations after the successful revolt in late 1908, many diverse peoples throughout the empire seemed to actually work to preserve a cosmopolitan, ecumenical Ottoman society.² In other words, many Armenians, Albanians, Arabs, and Greeks, all of various faiths, often struggled well into World War I to reform and thus preserve the Ottoman Empire.³ Failing to accommodate such possibilities hints at a selective interpretive reading of the activities of such social groups and the individuals associated with them. As argued below, the frequent misreading of these actions have both methodological and philosophical consequences.

The following counter-reading of various Ottoman Albanian activities seeks to challenge the entrenched logics often found in the scholarship that naturalize exclusivist identity politics and ethno-nationalist activism. As one of the most celebrated Albanians coming out of this late Ottoman era, Fan S. Noli’s (1882-1965) biography upsets some of the conventions about how the many socio-cultural, let alone explicitly

¹ Stavro Skendi, *The Albanian National Awakening, 1878-1912* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967).

² See Isa Blumi, *Reinstating the Ottomans: Alternative Balkan Modernities, 1800-1912* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2011).

³ Richard E. Antaramian, *Brokers of Faith, Brokers of Empire: Armenians and the Politics of Reform in the Ottoman Empire* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2020) and Hasan Kayalı, *Arabs and Young Turks: Ottomanism, Arabism, and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908-1918* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

political, activisms are historicized. In his case, the apparently exceptional man often claimed by scholars as a uniquely heroic engine of modern Albanian nationalism, actually proves to be abrasive, contradictory, and often a source of conflict during the post-Ottoman nation-building process.

By looking at a cluster of men around Noli who formed the Albanian-speaking Ottoman communities found scattered throughout the world by 1900, I resist making the ethno-national story coherent to the ideological expectations of future generations of historians (and those commissioning their writing). Instead, the following highlights the larger social contexts of these men, settings that includes and at times aggressively excludes individuals like Noli. This approach requires moving beyond normative claims about their ethno-national cohesion and returning to more ambiguous, socially fluid moments that compelled men like Noli to adapt as much as create.

Founding Fathers

From at least the beginning of the Communist era, Albanian historians have lionized the careers of Ismail Kemal Bey (Qemali), Fan S. Noli, the Frashëri brothers, Dervish Hima and others as the quintessential nationalist hero.⁴ Out from the many communities that Albanian-Ottoman activists emerged in the late nineteenth century, men like Noli became by 1906 central for what they initially sought in theory and only later embraced in practice. What is left out of these histories is the fact that supporters of these thinkers for many years were advocates of sustaining the Ottoman Empire and only later embraced Albanian nationalism that privileged a regional, most often Southern Tosk, and specifically the areas around Korçë (Görice in Ottoman), reference.⁵

Unfortunately, ever since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans, nationalist historians have demanded from our often reluctant heroes to accept an agenda that seeks the entire effacement of their

⁴ Arshi Pipa, "Fan Noli as a National and International Albanian Figure," *Südost Forschungen* 43 (1984): 241-270.

⁵ Hailing from a distinctive region known as Toskalik in Ottoman and locally as Toskëria (Southern Albania), the most remarkable factor among these late Ottoman activists is their regional bias. These men all promoted differentiating their immediate homelands in the South-western Balkans from others, including Albanian-speaking regions to the north. Known as Gegs, these northern Albanian-speakers were mostly Catholic and Sunni Muslim, while the southern Tosks were Orthodox Christian and Bektashi. For details see Blumi, *Reinstating the Ottomans*, 20-23, 52-71, 86-88, and Nathalie Clayer, *Aux origines du nationalisme albanais: La naissance d'une nation majoritairement musulmane en Europe* (Paris: Karthala, 2007), 315-321.

contemporary cosmopolitan Ottoman world. This act of separation from the Ottomans conjoins, it assumes, the foundation work of establishing the “inevitable” future ethno-national, Albanian collective. This has meant historians interpret the lives of Noli (and by default those with whom he interacted) as exclusively that of an agent for ethno-national delivery. The problem, however, is being an ‘Albanian’ was (and still is) much more complicated than asserting a simple monolithic ethnic association.

Often lost is just how constitutive those social, economic, and cultural contexts nurtured in, for instance, Ottoman-era social clubs or underground opposition parties (the Committee of Union and Progress, led by, among others, the Romania-based Albanian Ibrahim Temo), were to shaping those individuals mobilized by our biographies of them. As much the product of what would eventually collapse—multi-ethnic empires like the Ottoman and Habsburg cases—the myriad of actors whose lives shaped that of men like Noli end up being analysed as agents of change while actually striving to avoid it. In other words, Noli’s (and the many around him) Ottoman context is irredeemably antithetical to life as an Albanian nationalist after the empire’s destruction by war.

Our quest here is to discover how dynamic and complex the late Ottoman past was and perhaps to begin to explain what efforts were taken to navigate life during this transitional period in ways that avoid a narrow, exclusivist nationalist view. Looking into Noli’s life prior to the collapse of the Ottoman state upsets the normative origin stories that seek to anachronistically place those active during the 1870-1918 period fundamental to the Albanian (or other) national story. Instead, we can observe (and read) the works of many activist Ottoman-Albanians as part of a more expansive, multi-regional orientation that often embraced the Ottoman Empire (in its many factionalized orientations) as their home while fighting for principles that were increasingly global in spread.⁶

While his development as a young man in the beginning of the 20th century is treated as a uniformly nationalist “Albanian” story, there are more specific factors that shape the configuration of associations that

⁶ Similar movements were found throughout the industrializing world. They too avoided an exclusivist, ethno-national orientation that contradicted their “universalist” objectives. From Lenin’s Bolshevism, José Rizal’s anarchism, various cultural brotherhoods throughout the Americas, and masonic lodges, an ecumenical spirit predominated, explicitly defying the narrowing spectrum of ethno-national exclusivism that taints most research on the late Ottoman Empire. Benedict Anderson, *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-colonial Imagination*. (London: Verso, 2005).

ultimately contribute to Noli's ascent into History. For instance, Noli's parents came from what is today southern Albania/Northern Greece – Korçë – and resettled as internally displaced migrants in Ottoman administered Eastern Thrace (now Bulgaria). Originally named Theofanes Stylianos Mavromatis, Noli was born into an Albanian Ottoman community of the Eastern Orthodox faith that faced persecution from a Church elite keen on halting the expansion of nationalist autocephalous churches in the non-Greek Balkans. Noli's primary conflict growing up was thus addressing the resulting alienation from a Church that educated him in a manner that sought to erase his distinctive ethnic heritage.

Going to Greek-language elementary and secondary schools was the only option for those neglected subjects of the Ottoman state already losing influence in the Balkans due to the rising sectarianism, irredentism, and the identity politics after 1878. Noli thus grew up seeing his use of language as key to claiming political rights that could be granted by the Ottoman state.⁷ Crucially, while the resulting activism has been made to service an ecumenical nationalist Albanian cause, in actuality the associations Noli made until World War I were predicated on an explicitly regional (Korçë) and Southern Albanian (Tosk) cultural agenda that recognized value in reforming the Ottoman Empire, not destroying it. This regionalist bias would inform Noli's entire political career.⁸

The deracinated state he must have felt while growing up reflected Noli's eagerness for opportunistic flight when the resources were available. First making his way to independent Greece by 1900, he was able to exploit his polyglot upbringing. Amid translation jobs that utilized his knowledge of Ottoman, Arabic, Bulgarian, Greek and Albanian, Noli also landed himself a place in the world of the performing arts. Within two years he joined a new cadre of like-minded vagabonds and relocated to Egypt.⁹

⁷ For details of conditions in the region see Theodora Dragostinova, "Speaking National: Nationalizing the Greeks of Bulgaria, 1900-1939," *Slavic Review* vol. 67, no. 1 (2008): 154-181.

⁸ To thwart these Pan-Hellenic efforts, members of the Tosk diaspora forged political clubs in Romania, Bulgaria, Egypt, and the larger Ottoman Empire. For much of the time these social clubs advocated not separation from the Ottoman Empire, but reforms that could harness ideologies of solidarity that helped stem the empire's collapse. For further detail see Blumi, *Reinstating the Ottomans*, 165-168 and Clayer, *Aux origines du nationalisme albanais*, 394-410.

⁹ For an accounting of the dynamic society Noli likely faced see Lucia Carminati, "Alexandria, 1898: Nodes, Networks, and Scales in Nineteenth-Century Egypt and the Mediterranean," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 59, no. 1 (2017): 127-153.

After almost three years in Egypt, Noli, once a simple, enthusiastic young man who just wanted to perform in the theatre, is vexed by conflicting demands on his skills. By the time his Tosk Albanian-Egyptian patrons identify him as a valuable weapon against the Pan-Hellenic activism threatening to lay claim to all Orthodox Christian communities, Noli had to occupy a plurality of roles. Straddling often exclusive social, ideological, and cultural circles, Noli sat at conjunctures of power that make it difficult to identify him any longer as the key ingredient to the subsequent rise of Albanian nationalist politics in Egypt, the US, or Balkans. It is perhaps for this very reason that the flexible and intellectually dynamic Noli is ultimately chosen by the community in Egypt to resettle in industrializing North America. Moving to the factory-towns of the Northeast of the United States in 1906, where many Albanian-Ottoman subjects had already migrated in search of work, we must see Noli's maturation as part of a larger collaborative effort. His emigration to the US helped consolidate a network of Tosk Albanian-Ottomans from Korçë who were based in Brussels, Romania, Egypt, and North America (especially Boston, Buffalo, and Detroit). These links put Noli in a setting beyond him playing an individual nationalist "hero." As Noli interacts in various settings throughout the Eastern Mediterranean, ultimately reaching Egypt by 1903 and then moving to the US in 1906, we benefit by reading the context of a region not yet impacted by World War I.

Birthing Ethno-Nationalism in Egypt

Men based in newly independent Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Egypt or Italy and the Habsburg Territories hired the talented polyglot Noli to pursue agendas that aimed to gain concessions from the Ottoman state. The motivations were to assure more protection for their homelands at the time facing irredentist claims by now independent Serbia, Greece, and Bulgaria. A quick re-reading of the region's history between 1890s to the 1908 reminds us that a diverse group of activists forming the CUP struggled to reinstate a constitutional monarchy that had been destroyed with the rise of Sultan Abdülhamid II in 1876.¹⁰ This was the CUP's primary objective as an opposition party and then one in power, a struggle fully embraced by men who are today exclusively associated with ethno-nationalist narratives. Indeed, almost all the major activist intellectuals at the time were eager to secure a justly run, multi-ethnic state that would thwart the evils of sectarianism, Slavic and Hellenic

¹⁰ Eyal Ginio, "Shaping the Constitutional Sultanate: The Reign of Mehmed Reşad (1909–18)," *Turkish Historical Review* 10, no. 1 (2019): 50–70.

irredentism, and/or the resulting ethnic separatism so many in Europe supported.

Among those we would today consider nationalist Albanians—İbrahim Temo, the Frashëri brothers, Dervish Hima, İsmail Qemali (Kemal) and those around Noli—all positioned themselves at key moments as Ottoman patriots fighting to preserve their collective homeland. What activists among those Tosk elites who recruited Noli by 1902-1903 ultimately wanted was the reversal of an alliance between the Abdülhamid II regime and the ‘traditionalists’ within the (Rum) Eastern Orthodox Church based in İstanbul/Constantinople.¹¹ The consequential forging of a generation of activists shaped the social, political, and cultural parameters of activism that made Fan S. Noli possible.

Throughout his young adult life, Noli would be followed by the conflicted demands on his sensibilities and loyalties. As these were times both of tumult and opportunity, Noli joined the hundreds of thousands of other Balkan men to wander the Eastern Mediterranean in search of work and reason. As in Athens from 1902-1903, Noli worked as a common labourer in a theatre group while also teaching Greek to Albanians based in the boomtowns of Egypt’s Nile Delta.

This setting is critical as it again upsets the logic often found in the scholarship on Balkan diasporas. What Noli found when he migrated to Egypt was a large number of distinctive Albanian-speaking communities spread throughout the territories. Already settling in large numbers to become major land-owners, merchants, engineers, a rising Albanian-Egyptian intelligentsia was also a major patron of the arts while investing heavily in local politics that necessarily engage a British-led occupation regime, established since 1882. What Noli entered into upon his arrival was a set of mature Albanian-Egyptian communities eager to translate their wealth into influence over the fate of their homelands in the Balkans.

The resulting political and economic partnerships these mostly Tosk Christians forged confused the neat binaries filling the scholarship since the end of World War I. For example, many Southern Tosk Albanian-

¹¹ Already by 1870, a schism between “traditionalists” who stressed the need to continue using ancient Greek (the original biblical language) in church ceremonies and what we today call “nationalist” advocates of mobilizing the native languages of the various non-Greek speakers. The contested establishment of the Orthodox Bulgarian Exarchate, supported by the Russian Tsar and established by decree from the Sultan defied the Patriarchate of Constantinople. Denis Vovchenko, *Containing Balkan Nationalism: Imperial Russia and Ottoman Christians, 1856-1914*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

Egyptians reached out toward the Catholic Habsburg Empire in recognition that Austrian-Hungarian ambitions in the Balkans could prove mutually beneficial. Documents produced by Austrian consuls based in Cairo offer a rich picture of how the Ottoman-Albanian migrants and the Habsburg Empire operated in Egypt. The Austrian embassy reports from 1900 to 1902, in particular, reveal that alliances were formed around groups who strategically maintained good relations with representatives from Italy, or, if they were Muslims, the Egyptian state, but were never resigned to any one partner.¹²

Clearly the political acumen and/or economic weight of these Tosk Ottomans helped them mobilize seemingly contradictory associations by catering to rival European states' needs for influence. Italian or Austrian officials in particular sought to gain otherwise impossible access to the day-to-day affairs of the Ottoman Balkans through these Ottoman Tosk activists. The primary tool mobilized at the time was the printing press, with newspapers proving especially useful when soliciting direct support from the many European agents seeking influence in the Balkans. In need of still limited numbers of translators, Noli became an ideal vehicle for the very foundations of the eventual 'nationalist' programs that men like Noli was paid to represent.

Already in 1894, an association calling itself *Vëllazëria e Shqipëtarëve*, or the Albanian Brotherhood, took on the task of recruiting European state support for the protection of the homeland. Established by Milo Duçi (1870–1933) a Cairo-based activist who was also the son of a powerful cotton merchant from Korçë, the function of the club was use its broad network of allies to shape a generation of Albanian-Egyptian activism.¹³ Among the most visible accomplishments was the establishment of bi-lingual newspapers, including in 1900 *Besa-Besën* (meaning 'word of honour', the first newspaper using a specially designed alphabet for the Tosk dialect). Furthering these efforts, *Vëllazëria* collaborated with the poet Thoma Abrami to set up the newspapers *Toska* (1901–1903) and *Shqipëria*. These papers were specifically geared to ideologically shape the Albanian Orthodox Christian community living in Cairo. While largely forgotten in the historiography after Albania's independence, at the time Duçi's activities

¹² Isa Blumi, *Foundations of Modernity: Human Agency and the Imperial State* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 131–35.

¹³ See Faik Konitza, "Mémoire sur le mouvement national albanais," Brussels, January 1899, found in Haus-Hof- und Staatsarchiv, Vienna (hereafter HHStA), PA, XIV/18, Liasse Albanien XII/2, pp. 11–12.

attracted the attention of many in the larger diplomatic community based in Egypt.¹⁴

The resulting political links helped Milo Duçi's family emerge as an important player in the general economic development of Egypt's delta region and by extension the larger Eastern Mediterranean. By 1901, Duçi started working with his well-connected uncle, Loni Logori (1871-1929), on projects that explicitly tied the commercial interests of members within the British administration and local landowners. Crucially, Logori, who had built much of the canal network in the Minah district several years earlier, was known to have maintained contacts with members of émigré organizations in Bucharest, Athens, Istanbul, Italy, and Brussels.¹⁵

These interlinking channels of political, cultural, and economic exchange were collectively mobilized to protect the homeland from irredentist Hellenism. Much money from these Albanian-Egyptian communities ended up supporting the CUP efforts. Some of these exchanges were driven by political expediency, no doubt, but much was also informed by the assumption that the Ottoman Empire's survival in the Balkans assured protection of these Tosk communities' homeland.¹⁶

Paradoxically, as it appears the case with Noli whom Duçi recruited for his linguistic skills,¹⁷ despite aggressive Greek policies, many Albanian Orthodox Christian (AOC) migrants took advantage of Athens' identity politics. The Greek state had long laid claim to every Orthodox non-Slav Christian living in the Balkans and the Middle East. As a way to assure recognition of these claims by major powers (for the purposes of

¹⁴ Although it is not clear whether it is the same Albanian Brotherhood, as late as December of 1912, an organization calling itself the *Vellazërisë Shqipëtarëve* was writing letters to Thanas Tashko and Sotir Kolea (the two men who bankrolled Noli's career in the US) demanding that Tosks in Egypt help fund Albanian-language schools in the homeland. See Arkiv Qendror i Shtetit, Tirana (hereafter AQSH), F.54.D.67.f.54-55, Vellazërisë to Tashko, dated Cairo, December 6, 1912.

¹⁵ HHStA PA XIV/16 Liasse XII/7, Velics to Gołuchowski, dated Cairo, 18 December 1901.

¹⁶ The collaboration remains somewhat cryptic in the scholarship, but it did translate into a unified armed front in the Balkans that led to overthrowing the Hamidian regime in the summer of 1908. See M. Şükrü Hanioğlu, *Preparation for a Revolution: The Young Turks, 1902-1908* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 257-258.

¹⁷ Duçi was constantly forced to stop publication projects due to the lack of effective writers, something resolved with the recruitment of Noli in 1903. I. Blumi, *Reinstating the Ottomans*, 205 n. 51.

negotiating the redrawing of boundaries taking place since the 1870s), Athens offered diplomatic patronage to any Tosk willing to play along.¹⁸

For AOCs, the opportunity to exploit this was clear. For example, there is evidence that many seeking to obtain travel documents claimed Greek citizenship by equating their faith as Orthodox Christians to being ethnically Greek. This appears to be the case with Noli, who first needed the right to work in Athens from 1900 to 1903 and then permission to travel to Egypt after his recruitment by Duçi. Traveling under his original name Theophanis Stylianos Mavromatis, Noli secured a position as a Greek language teacher in Alexandria and did not attract the attention of his superiors for being hostile to his assumed Greek identity.¹⁹

The Austrian Consul Velić based in Cairo reported that the Egyptian government grew concerned with this policy of granting Greek nationality to Tosks. The concern was that such liberal distribution of Greek passports to non-Greeks from the Ottoman Balkans helped Athens infiltrate local markets (and labor unions), thereby threatening to divert regional trade (and political loyalties) into “Greek” hands.²⁰ Indeed, this issue became such a central concern that the Cairo-based Albanian newspaper *Toska* published an entire issue on the subject in 1902.²¹ To them (and the Khedive’s government), this constituted a crisis that reflected how successful Greek challenges to Tosk interests had become.

Such a willingness to reach out to interested foreign parties goes a long way toward presenting the varied and often conflicting interests of Egypt’s Tosk communities in a more nuanced manner. The Ottoman state monitored these activities and was frequently surprised by the profile of those who participated in the unity meetings held in enemy territory. For example, the Ottoman embassy in Athens reported that Ismail Qemali (in 1912, one of the “rulers” of several states in Albania) held negotiations with an organization called *Hellenismos* funded by wealthy Tosks and the Greek state.²² This prominent ex-Ottoman governor apparently was

¹⁸ HHStA, PA XIV/28, Albanien XX/3, “Mémoire über Albanien (Ende 1901 bis Anfang 1905),” dated Vienna, 14 April 1905, p. 15.

¹⁹ Metropolitan Fan S. Noli, *Fiftieth Anniversary of the Albanian Orthodox Church in America, 1908-1958* (Boston: AOCA, 1960), 104-108.

²⁰ Isa Blumi, *Ottoman Refugees, 1878-1939: Migration in a Post-Imperial World* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 195 n. 76.

²¹ See *Drita* (Sofia) no. 14, dated 22 July 1902.

²² Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, Istanbul (hereafter BBA) HR.SYS 128/18, 10070/157, Ottoman Legation to Sublime Porte, dated Athens, 27 June 1902.

prepared to forge “una liga Greco-Albanese” with the enemy as late as 1907.²³

Cairo-based Austro-Hungarian diplomats wanted to give ammunition to the AOC efforts to challenge Ismail Kemal (Qemali)’s dangerous scheme to conjoin the Korçë homeland to a Southern Balkan union that would not only thwart the Ottomans, Russians, Italians, but also the Habsburgs.²⁴ As many observed from the base in Egypt, many AOC organized outside the main circles of influence among the rich landowners who paid for Noli’s life in Egypt, these Albanian-Egyptian migrants appear to have paid lip-service to something akin to ethno-nationalist separatism via union with Greece. Indeed, many journals published in British-occupied Egypt, while short-lived, started to articulate support for “Albanian” political rights in both Egypt and the Balkans.²⁵ But these activities need to be put in this larger context in which the community is actually divided. The fact that Vienna, fundamentally opposed to seeing Greece (or Serbia in the north) monopolize the Balkans, funded so many of those Albanian-language publications today heralded as nationalist separatist projects warrants deeper consideration.

There was an increasingly strong connection Austro-Hungarian consuls maintained with AOC in Egypt, many who were primarily concerned with distinguishing their homelands from Greek claims to “Greater Epirus.” Those recognizing the value of Vienna’s support to ward off expansionist Hellenism making inroads among the poorer labouring Tosk Albanians in Egypt humoured the Austrian-Hungarian authorities. In time, a more intimate collaboration emerged, with key recruits like Dervish Hima specifically sent off to work with Austrians (while also willing to use Italian money) to help protect the larger Adriatic from Greek and/or Serbian expansionism.²⁶ Doing so, however, the multiple trajectories that result pointed to very different objectives

²³ For details of these operations as interpreted in Athens by Italian intelligence, Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Rome (hereafter ASMAE), Serie P Politica, Busta 665, no. 365/108, Consult to Foreign Ministry, dated Athens, 26 April 1907.

²⁴ Many European powers shared Vienna’s concerns. ASMAE, Serie P Politica, Pacco 665, Consular report on “Ligue albanasie” led by colonel Sekos, dated Athens, 21 February 1902 and Archives du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Paris (hereafter AMAE), NS Turquie, Vol. 12, Comte d’Ormesson report, dated Athens, 16 June 1900.

²⁵ AQSH F.23.D.25.f.5–6, enclosure, 30 June 1900, copy of journal *Bashkimi i Shqiptarëve* published out of Cairo.

²⁶ Hima’s activities were first in Bucharest (a major hub of AOC activity) and then Rome on behalf of both host governments (and at times in conflict). ASMAE SAP Pacco 667, no. 1144/103, consult to MAE, dated Bucharest, 22 May 1902.

among Albanian-Egyptians, objectives that rarely fit under the goal of creating an ecumenical, universal Albanian state.²⁷ A closer look into those who would ultimately mobilize Noli to fight their seemingly contradictory causes will help stress this corrective to the historiography.²⁸

A prominent advocate for first AOC (despite being born a Muslim) and then later Albanian cultural rights more generally was the premier political interloper of the period, Faik Konitca (1875-1942). Based in Brussels since 1896, he was known for managing a close relationship with the Khedive's family (of Albanian-Tosk origin) that helped a select group of Ottoman Tosks living in Egypt.²⁹ Konitca himself would benefit from Egyptian financial support (along with funds from Vienna) for his important bi-lingual newspaper, *Albania*, which he published out of Brussels until 1909.³⁰ Importantly, there is some indication that Konitca's strong connections to Egypt included the same sources of funding that would first recruit Noli from Athens in 1903 and then send him to the US in 1906. The previously mentioned Milo Duçi, for example, actually published the first two issues of his important newspaper *Toska* in Brussels, courtesy of Konitca's established printing operations there.

Visibly eager to position himself as the primary agent for the evolving AOC cause, Konitca enthusiastically reported to Austro-Hungarian authorities about his ambitions to create an intellectual space for "responsible" leaders to collaborate. Unfortunately, officials in Vienna became frustrated that Konitca regularly expressed in his letters an unwillingness to defer to others on major issues. Consequentially, Konitca's Vienna (and Egypt-based AOC) backers quietly reigned him in and tried to promote other, more collaborative members of the Tosk diaspora.³¹

²⁷ AQSH F.19D.32/2.f.278-280, Hima to Temo, dated Rome, 20 March 1903.

²⁸ Blumi, *Ottoman Refugees, 1878-1939*, 80-82.

²⁹ For instance, the uncle of the Khedive, Ahmed Fuad Pasha, supported the publishing of Albanian-language journals, both in Arabic and Greek script, throughout Egypt and the larger Mediterranean world. HHStA PA XIV/18 Liasse XII/2, Konitza to Zwiedinek, dated Bruxelles, 5 May 1899.

³⁰ The Italians, competing with the Austrians for influence in the Balkans wrote an extensive report on Konitca's relations with Vienna, including a long discussion on the newspaper *Albania* and how it served its backers well. Documenti Diplomatici Italiani, Serie 3: 1896-1907. Vol. VI. (Roma, 1985), 187. Doc. N. 251, Leoni to MAE Prinetti, dated Roma, 15 marzo 1902.

³¹ HHStA, PA XIV/19, Albanien, XII/2, "Faik Bey's, des Herausgebers der 'Albania,'" Kral to Zwiedinek, dated Scutari, 5 December 1905.

Clearly the intersecting pathways of Noli's mentors do not have a single geographic starting point. As Tosk activism disperses in the late Ottoman era, so too the network of influence that ultimately shapes Noli into a potential leader. Critically, Noli will have to leave Egypt for his true worth to surface. But much would have to happen from the time he arrives penniless in 1903 in Alexandria to the point when he is enthusiastically sent off to the United States in 1906.

At the forefront of his cultivation in Egypt (perhaps already in Athens) was his lifelong mentor, Thanas Tashko (1863-1915). Known as the great actor and patron of the first opera in Fayum, a wealthy suburb of Cairo, Tashko represents the privilege that powerful Tosk-Albanians like him secured in British-occupied Egypt. As their extended families managed massive plantations, talented men like Tashko sharpened their trans-continental political networks by recruiting men like Noli.

In collaboration with a number of luminaries in Ottoman-Albanian culture, Tashko mobilized the printing-press, along with theatre, to, as the French consul in Kosova put it, "beat-up" the Greeks.³² Indeed, through a 1906-1909 publication Noli likely had a brief role in starting named *Shkopi* (the Stick), Tashko and partner Jani Vruho (1863-1931) established a thriving activist community. They spent large sums of money to distribute their newspapers *Shkopi* and *Rrufeja* (Lightening Strike) for free. The tone of the papers were humorous but critical, no doubt drawing on Noli's eventually revealed talents as a writer.

As much as these efforts seem cohesive to a common narrative in the historiography, with a closer look there are deeper complexities to an otherwise straight-forward story of Albanian "nationalist" activities. Unhelpfully, it is simply accepted in much of the scholarship that the newspapers published by organizations throughout the Balkans and larger Europe and West Asia, North Africa (WANA) reflect the dynamism of the Rum Orthodox, Vlach, Armenian, Turkish, Kurdish, Albanian, Arab, and/or Ladino Jewish communities. On the contrary, most peripatetic Ottomans were simply not interested in participating in the kind of politically active groups mentioned in this article.

Indeed, in Romania, Bulgaria, Egypt, or larger Europe, such organizations never enjoyed a membership of more than a few hundred people. The actual distinctions within these "diaspora" groups thus require closer analysis as dispersed, often openly hostile, rival

³² AMAE, Turquie, Vol. VI. Politique Interieure, Albanie, dated, Uskub, Vice-Consul to MAE, 21 May 1907.

communities and not uniformly aligned. For example, a majority of Albanian-Ottoman activists residing in Romania, Bulgaria, and Egypt actually came from the previously mentioned Korçë region in what is today south-eastern Albania. This constitutes a (sub) regional orientation among members of the most active proto-nationalist groups that helps explain why those exile/refugee communities created in such contexts should never be treated as monoliths. In other words, Albanian Ottomans living in exile simply did not coalesce exclusively around “Albanian” associations.

Traditionally assumed “nationalist,” activism associated with bi-lingual newspapers, textbook publication, and schools actually suggest that in the pre-1908 Ottoman context these social clubs were supporting Ottoman unionist parties first. That is, they advocated for regional autonomy within a strengthened (and reformed, post-Hamidian) Ottoman state. In the particular case of the famous social club *Drita*, based in Bucharest, its leaders often communicated to the larger Ottoman diaspora via *Osmanli*, the publication of the CUP based in Geneva, to highlight their commitment to Ottoman union. To them, without a unified Balkans under Ottoman rule (or some other mega state), battles between rival interests would continuously tear at the seams of society, leaving the otherwise productive (and wealthy) homeland in a state of constant violence and social chaos.³³

Venturing Further Afield

Destinations of Ottoman refugees like British-occupied Egypt as a result became a magnet for talented Ottoman Albanians to settle. Crucially, these areas also become springboards for another wave of migration to the New World, especially Brazil, Argentina, and the United States of America. One of the most famous migrants would be Fan Noli, whose new calling would rapidly translate into an entirely different set of opportunities and life trajectories as he moves to the United States. It is in this period of transition that sees him develop into a major (but not without challenges) representative of first his Egyptian-Tosk, Korçë-born allies and later a new segment of an emerging global Tosk Albanian political network. While the evolution from his departure for Buffalo, New York in early 1906 to his becoming both a major political actor in the Western Balkans and Albanians’ first Archbishop in 1922 is seemingly the necessary follow up to an already interesting life, this last section explores but a limited portion of the story.

³³ Blumi, *Ottoman Refugees*, 71-88.

As much as others have already developed the complicated story of the post-World War I era in Albanian history (indeed volumes are dedicated to Noli's role in the period), his maturation while in the US is still largely neglected. We thus reserve the rest of this article to the task of reading Noli's extraordinary evolution through the increasingly complex relations with others who have invested (and divested) in him. By the time he is established as "representative" of a major diaspora group in Boston in 1911, a role that translates into his failed attempt to return the Balkans and claim a leadership role in the creation of a post-Ottoman state, Noli's personage must be read as both a political "leader" but also a political rival. Be it his own making or not is what we shall determine while ending this study with his formal placement as agent of an expanding Egypt/Romania/Bulgaria faction of the AOCs into the morass of post-Ottoman Balkan (and larger European) politics. It is this AOC network that hoped to utilize their number one North America asset to both lobby the United States and then, in time, hijack the post-war allocation of political (and economic) rights that will take place in Geneva between 1920 and 1922. As such, we must treat Noli as an adversary whose objectives are at once shaped by patrons and the extensive resistance from other Albanians.³⁴

The origins of his conflicted relationship with a transformed AOC community was Noli's confrontation with a rival claimant to its leadership. Noli had already crossed paths with another Korçë native while in Egypt (and perhaps earlier in Athens), Sotir Peçi (1873-1932) who moved to the US in 1905. Settling in Boston and establishing himself immediately as a leader of the small but growing AOC community, Peçi helped create the Patriotic Brotherhood of Dardha (Albanian: Vëllezëria Patriotike e Dardhës), while translating the money he brought from Egypt into the weekly newspaper *Kombi* (The Nation). The move constituted a preparation of sorts for Noli's subsequent arrival the next year. Indeed, by the time Noli arrives in Buffalo, an infrastructure is already being laid out for his next stage of cultural development.³⁵ The problem is Peçi had changed since leaving Egypt.

³⁴ Impossible to cover in detail here, the post-Ottoman era constitutes a complex set of competing projects that is explored in Robert C. Austin, *Founding a Balkan state: Albania's Experiment with Democracy, 1920-1925* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

³⁵ Noli is initially sent to join Petro Nini Luarasi (1865-1911) in Upstate New York. An Orthodox priest also from Korçë, Luarsi came to Buffalo in early 1905 to set up a diaspora group called *Malli i Mëmëdheut* (Homeland Calling). Having fled the Balkans under pressure from the Orthodox Church (for establishing Albanian language courses while serving as a priest), he would soon return to the Balkans to help run several presses and eventually teach

Noli quickly abandons his lumber job and small community in Northern New York to join Peçi in Boston and start building a cultural infrastructure that aspired to challenge Hellenistic expansionism in North America. But by July 23, only a month after Peçi gave Noli his first serious activist position as deputy editor of the newspaper *Kombi*, they were already rivals. While the original idea was for Peçi to ease Noli into his designated role in the larger community, the former elected to not pay Noli enough for him to properly live in Boston.³⁶

Finding himself without a formal role because Peçi refused to (or could not) bankroll him, Noli gravitated toward his religious calling. Seeing his faith a tool to do what was originally expected of him, Noli reached out to the larger Orthodox community. By January 6, 1907, Noli is President of a newly created society (*Besa-Besën*) that likely took its lead, and funds, from the Duçi group in Cairo. Considering the challenges he would face from a rival claimant to the leadership of the Boston community, all through the next year Noli had forgotten about marriage and apparently resolved his money problems.³⁷ Indeed, by early 1908 Noli was armed with a considerable new following of AOC supporters.

When Kristaq Dishnica, a member of the AOC was, because of his advocacy of Albanian-language education, denied proper burial in late 1907 by the Hellenist-led Church authorities in Boston, Noli led a confrontation that eventually resulted in a fateful alliance with the Russian Archbishop Platon (Rozhdestvensky). Sharing a common cause against the chauvinism of the Greek bishop in the city, the Russian ordained Noli as priest on March 18, 1908. The challenge to Greek authority over AOC lives initiated a new phase of activism among US-based AOC that eventually created the Albanian Orthodox Autocephalous Church. This rapid change of fortunes projected Noli into an entirely new direction, one that none of his backers envisioned when they sent him to Buffalo, New York two years earlier.

Immediately raising money, Noli and his supporters throughout the AOC diaspora in the US, Balkans and Egypt created an independent

again as the new CUP-run government permitted Albanian-language instruction in late 1908. Greek nationalists would murder him in 1911. Noli, *Fiftieth Anniversary*, 100.

³⁶ Noli, *Fiftieth Anniversary*, 103. He later confided to Tashko in Egypt that he broke free of Peçi because he was 'too different'. Letter Noli to Tashko, dated Boston, 23 July 1906 in Fan S. Noli, *Topi i Lidhur*. ed. Anton Pashku, (Prishtine: Rilindja, 1977), 176.

³⁷ By 1907 Peçi's *Kombi* had become recognized by Vienna as the most important diaspora newspaper after *Drita* in Sofia.

church with Noli translating liturgy into Albanian. Already by March 22, in fact, he gave his first sermon in Albanian at the Knights of Honor Hall of Boston.³⁸ The society *Besa-Besën* collected enough donations to rent out the establishment and eventually buy it, resulting in it becoming the Saint George Albanian Orthodox Cathedral, now the seat of Albanian Archdiocese of the Orthodox Church in America.³⁹

All the while, Noli starts his studies at Harvard University, leading first to a BA in Fine Arts.⁴⁰ Over the course of this 1908-1912 period of taking classes, translating dozens of liturgies into Albanian, he also maintained and expanded *Besa-Besën*, creating by February of 1909 the still-running *Dielli* (The Sun) newspaper, which he also managed. Oddly, during all of this activity, Noli is at the same time writing Tashko back in Egypt that things are not going that well personally. In May, for example, Noli again declares his intentions of going back to the Balkans but now to help fight the newly established CUP government in Istanbul.⁴¹ In direct contradiction to all that the AOC diaspora had struggled to realize – the successful overthrow of the Hamidian regime – Noli seems lost in the political discourse of the United States. His attempt to reassure Tashko that he intends to ‘service’ his homeland by way of bringing ‘Nietzschean’ values to the Balkans is not reassuring to his patrons in the East Mediterranean. Perhaps a subconscious slip for a lingering political reorientation taking place in his own life, within the time it takes to exchange messages, Noli retracts somewhat and tries to reassure the great landowning patron of the Egyptian opera (and later film industry) that he actually intended to continue his service to the Church by translating two or three more books of liturgy.⁴²

This attempt at reassuring Tashko that Noli was maintaining an active translation schedule, one already started in Egypt, and not veering dangerously towards ideals antithetical to his benefactors’ interests, becomes obvious in the next letter to his deep-pocketed sponsor. Noli wrote that his intentions of returning to fight the new regime in Istanbul would have to wait on account of the debt he had accumulated. No figures are provided but he somewhat shames Tashko by highlighting the fact that the newspaper *Dielli* was so successful because ‘I have paid for it’. Claiming that he has reached his financial end, he requests a ‘loan’ to be paid back with all the older funds his Egyptian patrons sent over

³⁸ Noli, *Fiftieth Anniversary*, 104-108.

³⁹ Skendi, *The Albanian National Awakening*, 162-163.

⁴⁰ Austin, *Founding a Balkan State*, 4.

⁴¹ Letter Noli to Tashko, dated Boston 5 May 1909. *Topi i Lidhur*, 189.

⁴² Letter Noli to Tashko, dated Boston 5 May 1909. *Topi i Lidhur*, 190.

the last two years.⁴³ Perhaps in response to what appears from a distance a quick decline in Noli's capabilities, by the autumn, Faik Konitca, with his Brussels mission (and *Albania* newspaper) now terminated, reunites with Noli. As it becomes clear from subsequent measures, Konitca was expected to take over the day-to-day management of the newspaper and also look after Noli.⁴⁴

This fortuitous reunion saves Noli from what seems an inevitable clash with his main supporters in the Eastern Mediterranean. He is allowed to continue with his foundational work as an ordained priest. On more practical matters, however, he would have to work under close supervision as the tandem of Noli and Konitca attempt to build capacity for the next phase of advocacy, necessary as so much has, in the meantime, changed in the homeland. With the 1908/9 coup in the Ottoman Empire translating into growing tensions between rival powers coveting the empire's valuable resources, the heavily invested Austro-Hungarian project of cultivating an Albanian team faces declining returns from Konitca in Brussels. Already facing criticism for Konitca's abusive handling of relations in the larger European context, even he would admit he did not have the full support of key collaborators from among the southern Tosk elites (like those bankrolling Noli). By the time his money ran out in Brussels, he seemed to have no immediate choice but take the offer given to him by Tashko and others to move to Boston and help an overwhelmed Noli with the growing diaspora in the Americas.⁴⁵ The results were immediate.

The AOC diaspora was in disarray at the time. A number of rival groups had emerged since Noli's split with Peçi in 1906. Indeed, Peçi's operations continued to grow while a number of other Albanian-American organizations arose to vie for the leadership role. The turmoil had its consequences, especially in respect to securing manpower and money to secure leverage within the American political system. As it was made clear to Noli when he left Egypt in 1906, the main objective was to successfully organize a community that was emerging in an up-and-coming Atlantic power. The noted divisions, however, not only threatened the larger cause of protecting the homeland, but the leverage Tashko et al. in the Eastern Mediterranean also suffered.

Again, events in Europe and thus the Ottoman Empire were rapidly changing. As evident from the apparent disconnection between Noli,

⁴³ Letter Noli to Tashko, dated Boston 8 August 1909. *Topi i Lidhur*, 191.

⁴⁴ Austin, *Founding a Balkan state*, 12-13.

⁴⁵ Skendi, *The Albanian National Awakening*, 156-159.

very much isolated in Boston, and his mentors back 'home', things seemed to be getting out of control. Indeed, by the time the 1911 Ottoman-Italian war is unleashed (with the Albanian coast a prime target), it is becoming increasingly clear that new measures would need to be taken, in the homeland and overseas.

Noli himself bore witness to the rapidly changing dynamics on the ground with a visit to the Balkans, funded in part, he claimed to Tashko in a letter, by his selling his personal library.⁴⁶ No doubt trying to secure more funds from the Egyptian-AOC community, the accounting of his 1911 trip to the Balkans explain travels to Sofia and then onto Romania and even Odessa on the Black Sea. Drawing from this experience, Noli concludes that the homeland faces disaster. Everyone he met was warning that, because of the Italian war, the Greeks, Bulgarians, and Serbs were geared to take all of the homeland.

Space does not permit us to move much beyond this stage of Noli's career, which would take an entirely new set of turns by the time he and Konitca were able to forge in April 28, 1912 an alliance between *Besa* and half a dozen smaller Albanian-American clubs. The resulting creation of the organization *Vatra* (Hearth) would prove too little too late; before they could push the Americans to protect their increasingly exposed and vulnerable homeland from foreign occupation, the Balkan Wars would break, destroying the last of the Ottoman Empire's presence in the region.

The calls Noli and Konitca were making to the Americans for Albanian socio-political self-determination within the Ottoman Empire became pointless. To make matters even more precarious for Noli and Konitca, as the Balkans burned, a new wave of refugees from the homeland shifted the balance of power within the diaspora. Noli's much celebrated "leadership" role started to prove, with closer reading of the archival material, contested.

Conclusion

As when he was in Egypt, the different contexts in the Balkans, larger Europe, and the Americas, all registered differently on who Noli actually was and over whom he had influence. Indeed, for a considerable time after the celebrated 1912 creation of the *Vatra* alliance, Albanians throughout the US and the government grew increasingly alienated with Noli. Even with his delegation to Albania itself in 1913 leading the way, the claims that *Vatra* could bring some order to the now post-Ottoman

⁴⁶ Letter Noli to Tashko, dated Boston 20 July 1911. *Topi i Lidhur*, 192.

homeland, did little to impress the American-based diaspora.⁴⁷ Clearly, by then, the Albanian community had fragmented into independent, and thus competing, networks of movers and shakers.

As events in the Balkans change, so too do the interests, which all reflect new calculations as the Ottoman army fades away and new rulers over the AOC homeland fight it out for ascendancy. In other words, there are competitors to Noli, not only for the limited resources that fund social clubs, but also for the attention of governments. Even the still relatively small Albanian-Orthodox community in Boston/NYC is fragmented by the time the crook Ismail Qemali declares a mini-state in late 1912. Just as many counter-claims to authority would arise in the homeland from 1912 until late in the 1920s, a chaotic state equally reflected in the Albanian-American diaspora.

The most important actors shaping the future possibility of an Albanian existence as a people were those living in the Tosk-Ottoman diaspora that had spread globally by the end of the 19th century. This is not by mistake. To understand why may require further inquiry into the persistence of differential politics among Ottoman peoples throughout the 1800-1922 period. The exposé of Fan Noli's contribution reflected the complex intersecting paths of transition that helped contain the skills of such personalities for important points in their lives. For this, the social and cultural, let alone political economic, context of the geographically scattered locales in which those around activist Ottoman Albanians lived were necessarily the arenas of focus.

Far from the entrenched categories systematically applied to diplomatic principles during the interwar period, progressive politicians and cultural leaders like Noli necessarily meant a dramatic departure from the past. It is this break in Noli's political (and spiritual, cultural) calculations that marks the end to our (anti)biography. In this frame, one that would see how actors around Noli (as much as him personally)

⁴⁷ Representing *Vatra*, Noli goes 'home' for the first time in 1913. As his long assumed mandate to lobby Europeans with the weight of a wealthy diaspora network behind him proved more and more precarious, the delegation left without securing an 'independent' Albanian already occupied by new powers. The community of influential (and now exiled) Tosks accompanying Noli included Dervish Hima, Mark Kakarriqi, Faik Konitca, Stefan Tefë Curani, Masar bej Toptani, and Hilë Mosi. Their almost irrelevant trip "home" reflected a diversion of aspirations and sensibilities that would separate those living in the homeland and those in the relative comfort of exile. Most of the Albanian-lands had by 1913 become occupied killing zones that witnessed either massive expulsions or forced assimilations of those very people the rich AOC claimed to represent. The disjuncture would afflict Albanian politics for generations to come.

departing onto yet more alien trajectories in the post-Ottoman/Habsburg Balkans, reflect another set of contingent associations that equally demand a new look. In this context, however, we begin to finally uproot the interwar era from its variety of conflicted, mutually exclusive narratives that exclude that which preceded 'modern' history, namely the Ottoman period covered throughout.

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