

## On the Front Line in Someone Else's War: Mallakastër, Albania, 1916–18\*

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*Albania was not a belligerent in the First World War, but several armies fought, uninvited, on its territory. From 1916 until the final retreat in 1918 the river Vjosa formed the Front Line between the Italian and Austro-Hungarian armies. Drawing on contemporary documents, this article discusses the consequences for the inhabitants on the right bank, occupied by the Austro-Hungarians. There was only minor fighting on this front line, but it damaged property in villages, and men were taken hostage by the Italians. Inhabitants of the most exposed villages sought shelter elsewhere. Men were pressured into work brigades and the army; many deserted. The presence of large numbers of troops caused serious food shortages. Finally, in midwinter, the army forced the evacuation of all the riverside villages. The occupiers saw the hardship they had caused as an inevitable consequence of war, but failed to recognize their culpability in inflicting it on others.*

Albania was not a belligerent in the First World War. Following its declaration of independence in 1912, in 1913 representatives of the six major Powers<sup>1</sup> proclaimed it an autonomous principality and guaranteed its neutrality. No government, including that established by the International Control Commission, ruled over the entire country, nor were any undisputed during those first years. When the Commission collapsed with the outbreak of World War I, the

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<sup>1</sup> The Powers were: Germany, Austria-Hungary, Italy, France, Great Britain, and Russia.

country was left without an authority that might resist foreign aggression or even negotiate. Moreover, during its short existence Albania had already been invaded by its neighbors to the north and south in pursuit of territorial gain, causing widespread devastation and displacement of population.

As the war progressed, the remainder of the country, in the center, was invaded and occupied by opposing powers, each wanting to prevent the other controlling the Adriatic or moving troops to other fronts.<sup>2</sup> In late 1914 Italy occupied the island of Sazan (Saseno) outside the port of Vlorë (Valona) at the entrance to the Adriatic, then the port itself. In December the area of Italian occupation was extended to a wide arc around Vlorë, and a brigade was sent north overland to occupy the port of Durrës (Durazzo, the Roman Dyrrachium). The army of the next major power to enter Albania, Austria-Hungary, arrived in January 1916 after defeating the Serbian army and the Montenegrins, in the wake of the catastrophic retreat of the former across Albania's northern mountains. It established its headquarters in the northern town of Shkodër, which subsequently also became the seat of its civilian administration.

At that point Austro-Hungarian war aims in Albania had not been defined, but the army was ordered to proceed beyond the original operational limit, the River Mat, to take Durrës (from the Italians), which it did in late February.<sup>3</sup> The occupied area was then further extended to the River Shkumbi, which bisects the center of the country from east to west, to the south of which was an Austro-Hungarian area of influence, controlled by Albanian guerrilla mercenaries paid by the Austrians. By mid-March the mercenaries had reached the River Vjosa, which bisects the southern half of the country from southeast to northwest, and pushed the Italians back across the river, to its left bank.<sup>4</sup> On 11 June the Austro-Hungarian army took over the right (east) bank of its lower course from the guerrillas, thus facing the Italian forward positions, and extended its control 40 kilometers upstream to the gorge at Drizar. When the Italians advanced further upstream along the left bank at the end of August, pushing back the retreating Greek Army which had occupied southern Albania in 1913 and 1914, the Austro-Hungarians extended their control of the east bank upstream to where it is joined by the River Luftinjë, 70 kilometers from its mouth. This was the ultimate southern extent of the Austro-Hungarian occupied area. Thus the villages close to the River Vjosa found themselves on the Front Line between the armies of two major Powers. The gap in the Front

<sup>2</sup> Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, Kriegsarchiv (KA) Armeoberkommando (AOK) Op. 30.191, 7 September 1916 (letter from Thurn to Conrad).

<sup>3</sup> Helmut Schwanke, "Zur Geschichte der Österreichisch-ungarische Militärverwaltung in Albanien 1916–1918" (PhD diss., University of Vienna, 1982), 65; Georg Veith, "Der Feldzug in Albanien," in *Der Große Krieg 1914–1918*, Vol. 5: *Der österreichisch-ungarische Krieg*, ed. M. Schwarte (Leipzig: Johan Ambrosius Barth, 1922), 511–58, esp. 517, 520–24.

<sup>4</sup> Veith, "Der Feldzug in Albanien," 525, 526; Schwanke, "Zur Geschichte," 121; KA, Nachlässe B/45, diary of Hauptmann Professor Hans Riedl (Riedl), 12 March 1916.

in the mountainous area between the Vjosa and Lake Ohër (Ohrid, on the border with Macedonia) was filled by guerrilla mercenaries<sup>5</sup> until the final assault from the southeast by Entente forces in September 1918.

This account considers the effects of the two years of occupation on the inhabitants of the district within which these villages are located, Mallakastër. It occupies the right bank of the Vjosa to within 20 kilometers of its mouth and extends inland to about 20 kilometers from the river. It is an area of hills, a series of spurs, on which most of the dispersed hamlets that made up the villages were located, separated by deep valleys. Dwellings were built high on ridges to avoid the risk of malaria. There were neither roads nor towns. The economy was based on herding sheep and goats as well as cultivation, notably of olives. It was said then to be the most densely populated and prosperous part of the Austro-Hungarian occupied area. Notwithstanding, some men went on *kurbet* (periodic labor migrations) to Turkey or North America.<sup>6</sup>

The sources used for this study are documents from the Austrian National Archives, including diaries of Austro-Hungarian officers who served on this Front, the results of an unpublished census of the civilian population undertaken by the Austro-Hungarian authorities in 1916–17, and the manuscript of the, very detailed enumeration lists of a census of the areas under Austro-Hungarian control conducted in the spring of 1918. Enumeration for the latter started on 1 March and, in Mallakastër, the last village was counted on 10 May. Just five days later the French army started its northward advance through the mountains from the area it occupied in the southeast of Albania, and on 7 June the Italians began their first offensive across the Vjosa.<sup>7</sup> The census thus shows the situation of the civilian population just as the Austro-Hungarian occupation was about to end.

Between 1998 and 2003, while doing fieldwork for a study of post-communist Albania, in which Mallakastër was one of the areas studied, I visited many villages, including most that bordered the Vjosa. The very few people I met who remembered the war shared their memories, but they were by then

<sup>5</sup> Veith, "Der Feldzug in Albanien," 527, 528, 529; Ramiz Fiçorri, *Ushtritë e huaja në Shqipëri 1912–1922* (Tiranë: Shtëpia Botuese "Mokra", 2002), 284.

<sup>6</sup> Georg Veith, *Der Feldzug von Dyrrachium zwischen Caesar und Pompejus* (Vienna: Seidel, 1920), 15, 25; Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften (OEAW), "Volkszählung in Albanien in dem von den österr.-ungar. Truppen 1916–1918 besetzten Gebiete" ("Volkszählung in Albanien 1918"), schedules for Mallakastër (Boxes 46 and 47). Mallakastër refers here to the Austro-Hungarian administrative area, "Kreis Malakasta," KA, Neue Feldakten (NFA) 2651, E.V. Res. Nr. 22, 8 January 1917. K.u.k. Bezirkskommando V (Grenzbestimmungen in Bezirk V.), which consisted of most of the present district of Mallakastër and areas which now belong to the districts of Tepelenë and Fier. In an Albanian context a village is an area equivalent to a parish in which there are several scattered groups of houses (*mehalla* or *lagja*), each usually inhabited by a kin group or groups.

<sup>7</sup> OEAW, "Volkszählung in Albanien 1918," manuscript census schedules; Veith, "Der Feldzug in Albanien," 540, 544–47.

too old to give much detail, and only very limited amateur local histories have as yet been published. Local inhabitants showed me a few remaining relics, a pile of stones from a destroyed house and tunnels build to store ammunition (just then about to be destroyed), and passed on what little had been handed down to them. However, much testimony has now been lost, and much of the physical infrastructure of the period, such as the larger houses, was removed in the communist era.

### Civilians between the Enemies

Though foreign armies did not reach Mallakastër until mid-1916, effects of the war had been felt before then. In the first months of 1914 Greek soldiers and guerrillas burnt down all the Muslim villages over a wide area of southern Albania, almost two hundred in all, including three at the easternmost edge of Mallakastër.<sup>8</sup> Their inhabitants, over 40,000 persons, fled. Most went towards towns such as Vlorë and Berat. Others took refuge in the areas adjacent to those destroyed, such as Mallakastër. When the Italian army took over southern districts from the Greeks, a few refugees returned, but in 1918 about seven hundred refugees from the destroyed areas remained in Mallakastër, most living with local families.<sup>9</sup>

Until the final assault there was only minor fighting on the Front Line on the Vjosa. Repeated references to skirmishes in military press reports eventually gave it the rather deprecating name of the "*Geplänkelfront*" (skirmish front). Officers complained about "the evident trivialization of the significance of this war theater for the general situation." It was said to have been an open secret in the Army General Staff that many higher officers were reluctant to serve there as there was insufficient opportunity to earn medals.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, the fighting caused considerable disturbance, not to say distress, to the civilian population, especially in villages near the Vjosa.

<sup>8</sup> Teki Selenica, *Shqipria më 1927* (Tiranë: Shtypshkronja "Tirana", 1928), 1: cxxx–cxxxv; Justin Godart, *L'Albanie en 1921: L'enquête de la Société des Nations* (Paris, PUF, 1922), 267; Fiçorri, *Ushtritë e huaja*, 206–18.

<sup>9</sup> KA, NFA 2651, E.V. Res. Nr. 135/V, Tirana, 9 April 1917; KA, Riedl, 12 September 1916; OEAW, "Volkszählung in Albanien 1918," manuscript census schedules; Beryl Nicholson, "Accommodating the Internally Displaced in South-Central Albania in 1918," *New Issues in Refugee Research*, Research Paper No. 267 (Geneva: UNHCR, 2013), 4, 7, available at [www.unhcr.org/52ab272a9.html](http://www.unhcr.org/52ab272a9.html), accessed 30 June 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Veith, "Der Feldzug in Albanien," 528. The nearest town, Fier, suffered a number of air raids, in some of which houses were destroyed and civilians were killed or injured. KA, Riedl, 9 September 1917; 4 May 1918; Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, Haus- Hof- und Staatsarchiv (HHStA), PA I 1007, Telegr. No. 9052 (to Graf Thurn, 2 September 1916, No. 1204); Schwanke, "Zur Geschichte," iii, 19.

The inhabitants of hamlets nearest the river in its lower course, where the land is flat on both banks and there is little shelter apart from a few small hills, fled to neighboring villages almost immediately. Military operations and the positioning of artillery in villages such as Varibop, which is on a small hill, making it a target, led to more evacuations as time went on.<sup>11</sup> In the first months of the occupation villages on the Front were subjected to Italian incursions, and during the whole occupation houses were burnt down or destroyed by artillery fire. Further upriver, where the plain is narrower and villages are built on hills, the village of Klos, lying immediately below the important strategic position of the ancient hilltop fort of Byllis, was described after a year of occupation as “badly shot up and almost uninhabited” (*stark zerschossen, fast nicht bewohnt*). On one occasion it had been subjected to two hours of heavy artillery fire following a battle all the previous day in the whole area around it, a strategic river bend, and this was not unusual. Of the 379 people who had lived in Klos in 1916, only 76 were still resident in 1918.<sup>12</sup>

Still further upstream, where it was possible to wade across the river when the water level was low, there were more incursions by Italian patrols. Several attempts were made to install pontoon bridges, though they would be washed away after a few days.<sup>13</sup> Sometimes the Italians would drag away local people as hostages; the reports suggest just men. Several men, among them some who had fought for the Austrians, were described in the census as being “in Italian custody” in Vlorë or even Italy.<sup>14</sup> Those who escaped would report to the Austrians what they had seen. Some were sent back so they could tell people that life was better on the Italian side.

In villages visited by patrols from the two armies, both inflicted retributions on the inhabitants. In spite of the formally neutral status of Albania, each required that local people would support their side, and they punished anything they regarded as support for their enemy. Thus when the Italians, on an incursion into an Austrian-held village, Çorush, found Austro-Hungarian weapons in the house of a Muslim clergyman, they took him away. In the next village, Kalivaç, on the same day, immediately some Austro-Hungarian soldiers had left, the inhabitants told the Italians. However, the Austrian commander returned unexpectedly, decided who was the main culprit, and, in the

<sup>11</sup> OEAW, “Volkszählung 1916–17, Häuserzählung 1917,” Manuscript (“Volkszählung 1916–17”); KA, Riedl, 12 April 1917.

<sup>12</sup> KA, Riedl, 31 August, 2, 3, 18 September 1916; 4, 5 February, 6 July 1917; OEAW, “Volkszählung 1916–17”; OEAW, “Volkszählung in Albanien 1918,” Manuscript. Compensation for the damage was to be paid after the war. HHStA PA I 1006, 6074 Z 122/P, 15 June 1917. It is not known if this was indeed done, but other evidence suggests it might not have been. See Turhan Pashë Përmeti, *Shqipëria përballë Konferencës së Paqes Pais 1919*, 2nd ed. (Tiranë: Uegen, 2007), 119–23.

<sup>13</sup> KA, Riedl, 5 September, 15, 21, 25 October 1916; 4 May, 5 August 1917; Veith, “Der Feldzug in Albanien,” 533.

<sup>14</sup> KA, Riedl, 31 August, 4, 5 September 1916; OEAW, “Volkszählung in Albanien 1918,” Manuscript.

term used by the army, “justified” (*justifizierte*)—hung—him. The episode is still remembered in the village. Similar occurrences were reported elsewhere.<sup>15</sup>

### A Friendly Neutral Country: Governing Civilians

Away from the Front Line little military action was seen until the Italians began their assault in the summer of 1918, but the occupation had far-reaching effects on people’s lives. As occupier, Austria-Hungary was, in accordance with the international conventions of the time, obliged to administer and look after the well-being of the civilian population. In Shkodër, where the military also had its headquarters, a civilian administration was established headed by an Austrian Consul General, Ritter August von Kral. Kral was a respected career diplomat with considerable knowledge of Albania, having already held several consular positions there and in neighboring countries, and who had been Austro-Hungarian representative on the International Control Commission in 1914.<sup>16</sup>

The guiding principle, according to the Austro-Hungarian Foreign Ministry, was that Albania was not to be regarded as a conquered enemy country. It was an autonomous state under the protection of Austria-Hungary, administered by indigenous authorities, though under the control of the army Command.<sup>17</sup> The Albanians were to be treated as a neutral people well disposed to “the Monarchy” (Austria-Hungary). They were to be prepared to take responsibility for their own affairs and Albania was to be put on course to become a civilized state.<sup>18</sup> So while Albania was, in effect a colony, there was an adamant refusal to countenance making it a protectorate because “Such an arrangement would be damaging militarily for the Monarchy in the Balkans.”<sup>19</sup>

The areas of responsibility of the central administration, under the Consul General, included education (the minister was Luigi Gurakuqi) and finance; taxes were collected to meet its costs.<sup>20</sup> The occupied area was subdivided into prefectures, with a District Commander (*Bezirkskommandant*) in the role of Pre-

<sup>15</sup> KA, Riedl, 5 September 1916. On “justifications” (*Justifizierungen*), see KA, Nr 159/P, letter from Generalkonsul Kral to Burián, Schkodra, 14 September 1916.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen Taylor, ed., *Who’s Who in Central and East Europe 1933* (Zurich: Central European Times Publishing Co., Ltd, 1935/Berlin: Janus Press, 1995), available at <http://www.dreyblatt.org/whoswho/DiplomaticCareers.HTML>, accessed 30 June 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Veith, “Der Feldzug in Albanien,” 527; HHStA, PA I 999 Trautmannsdorf an Burián, 31 343, Baden 12.7.1918; HHStA, PA I 999, letter from Burián to Trautmannsdorf, 236, Vienna, 29 July 1918.

<sup>18</sup> Schwanke, “Zur Geschichte,” 88, 95; KA, AOK, Fasz. 67, Op. 23 604, v. 4 April 1916; KA, AOK, Fasz. 65, Op. 22 002, v. 22 March 1916.

<sup>19</sup> HHStA, PA I 1005, No. 11030, 4 May 1916 (von Erzherzog Friedrich).

<sup>20</sup> HHStA, PA I 1006, 7245 Nr. 163/P, 30 June 1918 (Die Zehentsteuer in Albanien seit unserer Okkupation—6 Beilagen).

fect, to whom the lower levels of administration, which were in the hands of Albanians, were accountable. The local administration built on pre-existing structures (except in the northern mountains), and was extended to the southernmost areas a few months after they were occupied. A judicial system for the civilian population was also established,<sup>21</sup> though, as we will see, it was not always adhered to.

The army had to adapt to the behavior required in a non-enemy country, and orders were issued to that effect. For example, it was not permitted to burn down houses and drive away cattle.<sup>22</sup> Predictably there were conflicts between the aims of the civilian administration and what the military saw as its needs and imperatives. The military considered that the Foreign Ministry and the administration in Shkodër did not understand the circumstances under which they operated. Some senior officers justified their authoritarian and violent approach with their opinion that Albanians were on a low cultural level, and without strong leadership they were “the least reliable element” in the Balkans. They argued that their officers already knew more about Albanians than the experienced Balkan experts in the Foreign Ministry, whom they dismissed as “*Albanerschwermer*” (Albania swooners). The administration, for its part, considered the military was too heavy-handed.<sup>23</sup> Kral was a consistently moderating influence, about whom senior officers no less consistently complained. He sought to prevent actions that would provoke the local population into taking, possibly violent, countermeasures.

Ultimately, what mattered above all else to the occupying power was the security of its troops, and this imperative could be used to override other considerations. So, though a judicial system had been created and was indeed used (in 1918 at least a dozen men from Malakastër were in prison), it could be bypassed if the “facts were clear,” presumably to the military, when a summary punishment could be administered. The execution of the man in the village of Kalivaç, cited above, was one such example. It was of more consequence for people in their daily lives that individual soldiers did not always follow orders. Throughout the occupation this resulted in “excesses,” about which military authorities did not always show concern.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> HHStA, PA I 1000, 1010 res. (Confidential letter from Kral to Burian, Skutari, 7.10.1916); KA, NFA 2651, E.V. Res. Nr. 22, 8 January 1917 (K.u.k. Bezirkskommando V, Grenzbestimmungen in Bezirk V).

<sup>22</sup> HHStA, PA I 1006, E.V. Nr. 453-Res., 30 June 1916.

<sup>23</sup> K.u.k. Armeoberkommando Chef des Generalstabes. Op. Nr. 32 120 (Misstände in Albanien. Standort des AOK am 9. Nov. 1916: 1–2); HHStA, PA I 1005, Op. Nr. 24 070, Teschen, 18 April 1916 (letter from k.u.k. Chef des Generalstabes to Burián); KA, AOK Fasz. 3084, Qu. Op. 70 796, v. 22 August 1916; Nr.159/P (letter from Generalkonsul Kral to Baron Burián, Shkodra, 14 September 1916).

<sup>24</sup> K.u.k. AOK. Chef des Generalstabes, Op. Nr. 32 120 (Misstände in Albanien. Standort des AOK am 9. Nov. 1916, 14); OEAW, “Volkszählung 1918,” Manuscript; HHStA, PA I 1006, XIX Korpskommando E.V. Nr. 453-Res., 30 June 1916; KA,

## The Occupiers and Women

Soldiers were told to take care not to offend local sensibilities, not the least of which were those that concerned women. This was especially important when seeking living quarters or undertaking house-searches. Towards the end of the first year of occupation the army command boasted that they knew of no case in which an Austro-Hungarian soldier had transgressed against a Muslim woman. To the extent that this is true, it can most likely be ascribed to the vigilance of the Albanians in keeping women secluded. Outside the private sphere, women were rarely seen at all.<sup>25</sup> Thus not only were forms of treatment meted out to women in an enemy state out of the question, the common expectation of soldiers that they would find local girlfriends were not met, at least not among the local population.

It was apparent that sexual partners were sought and found among the army's civilian female staff, "*weibliche Hilfskräfte*," who were recruited from Austria-Hungary. There were around 500 of these in the administration, kitchens, and hospitals at any one time (compared with over 100,000 troops, not counting non-combatants). There were a very few Albanian prostitutes in towns, not all of them known to the police. Of the very few women who received hospital treatment for venereal disease, only an insignificant number were Albanian.<sup>26</sup>

This presumably explains a request sent to Army High Command by the Commandant in Albania requesting the allocation of five brothels (with a specified number of prostitutes for officers and men) in the occupied area. The document draws on prejudices and stereotypes to reinforce its case that it was "*dringend wichtig*" (imperative). Officers as well as men, it argued, were forced to consort with "a few, dirty gypsies," and besides the danger of disease, they became infested with lice. The army responded that it was not permitted to establish "*derartige Häuser*" (houses of that kind). However, private brothels could be tolerated, and the army would undertake the necessary inspections.<sup>27</sup>

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Riedl, 15 March 1916; HHStA, Nr. 14 120, Beilage (Thurn) Teschen, 8 September 1916 (Sehr dringend. Streng vertraulich).

<sup>25</sup> Schwanke, "Zur Geschichte," 438; HHStA, PA I 1006, letter from Kral to Burián, 107 p, Skutari, 13 June 1916; KA, K.u.k. Armeeoberkommando, Chef des Generalstabes Op. Nr. 32.120. Misstände in Albanien. Standort des AOK am 9. Nov. 1916, 9; KA, Riedl, 15 March 1916.

<sup>26</sup> KA, Nachlässe B/557, diary of Pflanzer-Baltin, 21 July 1918; KA, Riedl, 15 March 1916, 24 April 1918; KA, NFA 2663, Materielle Gruppe des K.u.K. Korpskommando. Zu Res. Q. Nr.1. Beilage 1.a. zur mat.Sit. v. 1 January 1918; KA, NFA 2665, E.V. Res. Nr. 846, Bez Komm Tirana, Verwaltungsbericht pro August 1918. Beilage 5.

<sup>27</sup> KA, XIX Korpskommando Res. Q. Nr. 11.021., 8 January 1918. There were fewer than 6,000 Roma in Albania. In Mallakastër there were just 64 (all Muslims), of whom only 13 were women between the ages of 15 and 50. Franz Seiner, *Ergebnisse der Volkszählung in Albanien in dem von den österr.-ungar. Truppen 1916–1918 besetzten Gebiete*, Schriften der Balkan Kommission, Linguistische Abteilung, Vol.

The documentation does not contain any record of this line of action being followed.

### The Burden of the Army

The sizeable military presence, the army and accompanying non-combatant personnel, probably increased the population by thirty percent or so (24,464 civilians were enumerated in Mallakastër in 1918), causing considerable disruption to people's lives. Houses were requisitioned by the army for the use of their officers, for payment, so the owners had to find accommodation elsewhere; at least one family moved into their own cowshed. Most of the soldiers and their horses were accommodated in tents that occupied sizeable areas of pasture. Constant troop movements in a district with no roads caused still further damage to crops by men and horses.<sup>28</sup> The back and forth movement of soldiers between the plains and the hills in the malaria season spread the disease to the hill areas that had been free of it and infected civilians as well as soldiers.<sup>29</sup>

Heavy-handed actions by the army and restrictions imposed by the occupiers caused resentment. Prohibition of movement in and out of the Austro-Hungarian occupied area effectively prevented migrant workers from Mallakastër—there were about a hundred in North America or Turkey—from returning to bring money to their families. A few Albanians who did return were interned as suspected opponents of Austria-Hungary. Among the refugees present there were masons from the Tomorica district who usually traveled over wide areas of the former Ottoman Empire to ply their trade.<sup>30</sup> They were unable to pursue their livelihoods for the duration of the war.

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13 (Vienna: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky A.-G., 1922), 9; KA, AOK Fasz. 2904, Qu. Nr. 9018, 16 January 1918. Among the documents of the 19th Corps, the regiment that served in Albania for most of the war, is one of five typewritten pages, undated and unsigned, entitled "Organisationsstatut für die Errichtung und den Betrieb von Bordellen" (Organizational statute for the establishment and running of brothels). KA, NFA 2671, Referat IV (Gendarmerie) Einzelstücke ohne Nr. 1917/18.

<sup>28</sup> Schwanke, "Zur Geschichte," 371–72; OEAW, "Volkszählung in Albanien 1918," Manuscript; HHStA, PA I 1006, No. 107/P, Shkodër, 13 June 1916. (Die Unterbringung unserer Truppen in Shkodër (Kral)); KA, NFA 2661, 19. Korps Mat. Grp. Zu Res. Q. Nr.1. (Beilage 1a zur mat.Sit. v. 1 January 1918), 20; Hajredin Elmazi, *Bek-tash Çorrushi* (Tiranë: Mokra, 2005), 43; Nishat Sh. Hamitaj, *Hekali dhe Mallakastra në thellësi të shekujve* (Fier: n.s., 2000), 159.

<sup>29</sup> Max Eugling "Über Malariabekämpfung; Beobachtungen und Untersuchungen aus dem albanischen Malaria-Gebiet," supplement, *Archiv für Schiffs- und Tropenhygiene* 25 (1921): 1–16.

<sup>30</sup> HHStA, PA I 1006, 8447 Telegr. 18 August 1916; OEAW, "Volkszählung in Albanien 1918," Manuscript; HHStA, PA I 1003, No 88/P, Beilage, 22 May 1916, (Verzeichnis

Worst of all, food became very scarce. The sometimes insurmountable difficulties faced in getting supplies to the southernmost districts of the occupied area made it necessary for the army to obtain as much of its food as possible locally. Even in good years there was not a surplus in Albania, and the winter of 1916–17 was exceptionally hard. The war and activities of the military made matters worse. Near the front line fields were sometimes set on fire and crops were destroyed. Besides food, the military requisitioned draft animals and other equipment needed to produce it and required the people in charge of the animals to work for them. Supplies were requisitioned and were supposed to be paid for. Payment was made on presentation of a receipt, but some soldiers would cheat the illiterate population by giving them meaningless pieces of paper, so that they got nothing. In some villages people now say they were always paid, while others say that the Austrians did not pay. With or without payment, it placed a heavy burden on the populace. Each family was allowed to keep specified numbers of animals and volume of supplies; everything else was taken for the troops. People tried to withhold all they could, but food was invariably short, and people tended to be apprehensive that more would be asked for. Even in the first months of the occupation it was difficult to obtain animals for slaughter, and supplies were described as already exhausted. By the second winter a few Albanian families were crossing to the Italian side of the Vjosa to escape hunger<sup>31</sup> (there was very little movement in the opposite direction). In one village relations between the population and the troops got so tense that it was said the inhabitants went across the river and demanded weapons from their neighbors to resist the predations of Austro-Hungarian soldiers.<sup>32</sup>

The overriding popular memory of the occupation is of hunger. Soldiers too would come to the villages asking for food, and hunger and short rations led to desertions and suicides. They, as well as local people, ate wild spinach and roots. Increasing numbers of poor people were begging in the streets of the neighboring towns of Fier—where a soup kitchen and children’s home had been set up—and Berat. Beggars were so numerous that the troops were given instructions on how to avoid them. An officer commented in his diary “*Jetzt freilich haben wir alles wegrequiriert*” (Sure enough, we have requisitioned everything away now).<sup>33</sup>

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über die in Drosendorf, Niederösterreich, internierten u. konfinierten Albaner); Johann Georg von Hahn, *Albanesische Studien* (Jena: Mauke, 1854), 43.

<sup>31</sup> Schwanke, “Zur Geschichte,” 86, 382–83; KA, Riedl, 1 October 1916, 10 January 1917.

<sup>32</sup> KA, Riedl, 30 December 1916, 3 January 1917, 31 March 1918; Hamitaj, *Hekali dhe Mallakastra*, 159; Veith, “Der Feldzug in Albanien,” 533.

<sup>33</sup> KA, NFA 2539, AOK Qu Abteilung 321008, 24 May 1918. (Die Verwaltungsberichte pro April der Gruppe A, B und W.S. der Etappenverwaltung für Albanien); KA, E.V. Res. Nr.31, K.u.k. Bez.Kmdo V Bereich Berat an das k.u.k. Korpskmdo in Skutari, 28 April 1918; KA, NFA 2679, K.u.k. XIX Korpskommando Korpskommando-

## Working for the Occupiers

In the situation of shortages that was created there were nonetheless those who saw opportunities to make profits. As Austria-Hungary was not an enemy, merchants could trade with the occupiers without being stigmatized as collaborators. The army experienced constant difficulties in obtaining agricultural produce. The population refused to sell produce for paper money, which they did not trust, so the army was obliged to bring in supplies of silver and gold coins to pay them. The Austrians accused the merchants of shameless profiteering, and instances of theft revealed that some families had indeed amassed considerable sums. In the census material, twenty-five of a total of the forty men described as merchants were evacuees from the southern districts, suggesting that, while some might already have been traders or turned to trade to make a living, there may also have been opportunists among them.<sup>34</sup>

The Albanians who held positions in the civilian administration set up by the Austrians were, except for the lowest grades, salaried employees of the occupiers, appointed by the Korpskommandant. They were paid according to a graded scale and the number of their dependants and were required to work for at least three hours a day. The imposition of disciplined work was intended to have an “educational” (*erzieherisch*) effect on those employed, as were other requirements. The offices (and other public buildings) were to be kept clean so that their neat and respectable appearance would have an “educational” effect on the population. Most often, however, not only were they neglected, but they were untidy too. Not surprisingly, not all who were appointed to local government did their jobs with enthusiasm or follow, as they were supposed to, the instructions of the district military commander. Their salaries were low and reduced in value by inflation, and in some cases, such as the deputy prefect of Mallakastër, their political loyalties were suspect.<sup>35</sup>

Local men were recruited as gendarmes. Most Albanian gendarmes worked with gendarmes from Austria-Hungary. Those in the south worked without supervision. However, they were paid less than non-Albanians and only in the most exceptional cases could they be promoted. Each district administrator had two gendarmes to assist him and still more were employed for law enforcement, which for a large part consisted of seeking out robber bands.

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befehl Nr. 28, 13 February 1918. 14. SCh. Nr.100. (Bettelnde Kinder – Abwehr); KA, Riedl, 1 May 1918.

<sup>34</sup> KA, NFA 2654, W.A. Nr.3154/I, Landesproduktaufbringung—Höchstpreise. An Kriegsministerium, 31 August 1917; Veith, “Der Feldzug in Albanien”, 515, 529; KA, Riedl, 2 April 1918; OEAW, “Volkszählung in Albanien 1918,” Manuscript.

<sup>35</sup> HHStA, PA I 1006, 3250 Z56/P, Shk. 5/4 1917; KA, K.u.k. XIX Korpskommando E.V. Nr. 5610 Ex. 1917. Reinlichkeit in den Amtlokalitäten der albanischen Behörden; KA, NFA 2652, E.V. Nr. 2200, 1918. Herstellung von Ordnung in den albanischen Ämter; KA 1637/II, E.V. Nr. 55/6. K.u.k.Bezirkskommando Berat an das k.u.k.XIX Korpskommando, 11 February 1918. Maksut Unterpräfekt Erhebung.

There were thirty-six men resident in Mallakastër in 1918 who were gendarmes, a few of them posted to other districts. They were often accused of stealing and selling arms (which were bought by the soldiers, though this was not criticized), and taking bribes.<sup>36</sup>

Attempts were also made to organize men into Work Companies to work for the military. This would, it was argued, benefit the country, and the Albanians themselves, who were widely regarded by the occupiers as “notoriously work-shy” (*notorisch Arbeitsscheu*), would become accustomed to regular work. Men who were capable of work and were not needed to work in their family’s fields were required to join the Work Companies. Those who were unemployed, evacuees, and *öffentliche Schmarotzer* (public parasites) were also to be mobilized for work, most of it aimed at solving the problems of transporting supplies. From the port of Durrës and the military headquarters in the north, transport to the south and the Front Line was by packhorse. For part of the year it was necessary to wade through waterlogged bogs over long stretches. Hence the army expended considerable effort on building roads and light railways, for which it sought to use local labor.<sup>37</sup>

Persuading Albanians to join Work Companies was far from easy. District commanders were empowered to distribute free food to families in which there were thought to be male family members not occupied tending the family fields, conditional on their performing some work, but these sanctions had little effect. There was some improvement when payment in kind and money was offered, but as the amounts were insufficient to support a family, few volunteered and, notwithstanding its doubtful legality, conscription was resorted to. Matters got worse when, in 1918, the numbers required were raised and the length of service was extended. Local administrators had the task of rounding up the workers, but were not very effective. The workers were said not to have a sufficient sense of duty and were not very cooperative, though it was conceded they also feared retribution. Those to be pressed into Work Companies often learned about it in advance and hid when patrols of gendarmes came to take them, and those who did join soon deserted. Only about a dozen men from Mallakastër were in Work Companies at the time of the 1918 census, most of them building a road at the village of Visokë that was to link the small district administrative center, Ballsh, with the town of Fier.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> OEWA, “Volkszählung in Albanien 1918,” Manuscript; Universitätsbibliothek Wien, Kanzleivorschrift für die k. k. Gendarmerie in Albanien, 1918, 66 and 97; KA, AOK, Fasz. 3509, MV 301 174, 14 January 1918.

<sup>37</sup> Mario San Nicolo, *Die Verwaltung Albaniens durch die k.u.k. Truppen in den ersten zwei Jahren der Besetzung des Landes an Hand der ergangenen Befehle* (Wien: n.s., 1918), 101, cited in Schwanke, “Zur Geschichte,” 424; Schwanke, “Zur Geschichte,” 427; KA, AOK, Fasz. 3104, Qu 100 157 v. 30 July 1917.

<sup>38</sup> San Nicolo, *Die Verwaltung Albaniens*, 102, cited in Schwanke, “Zur Geschichte,” 425; HHStA, PA I 1006, 398. No. 3/P, 7 January 1917 (Technische Arbeiten im Bereiche des XIX Korps. Kral an Czernin); HHStA, PA I 1006, 5884 Nr 115/P, 7 June 1917 (Verwendung von albanischen Arbeitern im Bereich der k.u.k. Etappenver-

The reluctant workers, referred to disparagingly by the army as “*indolente Material*,” were expressing resentment at what they regarded as an imposition. Moreover, the work they were required to do was often extremely unpleasant and dangerous. Near the Front road, builders risked being shot at by enemy artillery. Where roads were built on the plains north of Mallakastër, workers were prone to malaria. Around 70 to 90 percent of the 400 workers, 150 of them Albanians, who built a fifteen-kilometer embankment to carry a new road across the swampy plain north of Fier became infected, and for some it was fatal. Nor were they well treated. It was found necessary to issue orders reminding supervisors of their duties to ensure workers had food and clothing and were not mistreated. The demands made by the army were also excessive and inept. Workers would be sought repeatedly from villages near road-building sites and army and gendarme posts, so they were unable to tend their fields, while those further away were rarely called upon. Understandably this gave rise to complaints.<sup>39</sup>

### Fighting for the Occupiers

As the occupying army was not an enemy, not only were Albanians required to work for them, but also to fight for them. When the war reached Mallakastër much of the male population was said to have been fighting with the Albanian guerrillas who preceded the Austro-Hungarian army to the Vjosa, though not all of the guerrillas were necessarily fighting on the same side. All the occupying armies paid freelance guerrillas to fight on their behalf and sought to recruit Albanians into their armies. The Austro-Hungarians sought to form Albanian battalions that were deployed side-by-side with Austro-Hungarian troops, and were intended to supplement them in areas where conditions were poor, such as those prone to malaria, and to provide valuable local knowledge.<sup>40</sup>

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waltung); KA, NFA 2665, E.V. Nr. 6545 (k.u.k. Bez Komm Tirana to XIX Korpskommando, Etappenverwaltung, 13 July 1918. Arbeiteraushebungen – Neuregelung); OEAW, “Volkszählung in Albanien 1918,” Manuscript; KA, 2659 Res. Q. No. 201. K.u.k. Infanteriedivisionskommando Op. Nr. 374, Blg 6 (Stand am 1. Jänner 1918).

<sup>39</sup> KA, NFA 2679, Op. Nr. 1196. (Behandlung der AlbZivArbKomp., Reservat Korpskommandobefehl Nr. 13, 19 February 1918); San Nicolo, *Die Verwaltung Albaniens*, 105, cited in Schwanke, “Zur Geschichte,” 429; KA, Riedl, 2 December 1916, 5 December 1916, 18 March 1918; Veith, “Der Feldzug in Albanien,” 536; Eugling, “Über Malariabekämpfung,” 7; HHStA, PA I 1006, 398. No. 3/P, 7 January 1917 (Technische Arbeiten im Bereiche des XIX Korps. Kral to Czernin, 11); HHStA, PA I 1006, 5884 Nr. 115/P, 7 June 1917. According to customary law in this part of Albania, it was the head of the household who decided what work each member should do, not the individual. Ismet Elezi, *E drejta zakonore e Labërisë* (Tiranë: Toena, 2002), 69–70.

<sup>40</sup> KA, NFA XIX Korps, Fasz. 126 (Schreiben Kral an Burián, v. 12 June 1916); HHStA, PA I 1007, (Kral an Czernin, 93 p, Skutari, 20 May 1917).

There was no forced conscription, but men between the ages of 18 and 50 were urged to volunteer. Each house was supposed to provide at least one man for military training, but far fewer volunteered than had been hoped for. Army high command complained that even by providing subsistence, free clothing, pay, and benefits for dependants<sup>41</sup> they did not succeed in raising a dependable body of troops. Unsurprisingly, attempts to motivate recruits by telling them that they were fighting against the enemies and oppressors of Albania and that it was the duty of every Albanian to defend his homeland, did not prove successful. The guerrilla mercenaries who fought did so for adventure and because they liked to use guns.<sup>42</sup> Many who volunteered for the Albanian battalions deserted again, so a company might sometimes be at only half its strength, and those who continued to serve were not too obedient. Complaints about the poor quality and unreliability of Albanian recruits were commonplace. Less remarked were the instances of Albanians who were relied upon to undertake difficult operations to obtain intelligence about the other side.<sup>43</sup>

By the latter stages of the war there were up to 1,500 men serving in the eleven Albanian battalions in total.<sup>44</sup> About half of these, over 700 men, were from Mallakastër, equal to over a quarter of men aged from 18 to 50. Others were with the guerrillas in the mountains. The proximity of the Front Line, where at any one time five Albanian companies were posted with Austro-Hungarian troops, presumably made these men more willing than others to be recruited as mercenaries to an army in whose cause they had no interest. The still higher proportion of recruits among refugees from other areas,<sup>45</sup> who may have had other sources of livelihood, might suggest that, for them, military service was regarded pragmatically, as a way of earning a living. On the other hand, it may have been harder for them to evade it.

### Evacuation of Villages near the Front Line

It was a constant concern of the army that the Front along the River Vjosa was full of holes. It allowed Italian propaganda—that threatened to cause anxiety—and discontent to spread to the civilian population. The Austro-Hungarians knew, because they used the Front for the same purpose, that information

<sup>41</sup> Schwanke, "Zur Geschichte," 401; HHStA, PA I 1008-9, 5706 Nr. 110/P, 14 June 1917 (Gebühren für albanische Kriegsfreiwillige).

<sup>42</sup> KA, NFA 2652, E.V. 2815, 25 June 1917 (Anwerbung von Albanern für Frontdienste); KA, AOK MV 130.804, v. 3 September 1917.

<sup>43</sup> KA, Riedl, 4, 11 September 1916, 25 June, 28 September 1917.

<sup>44</sup> HHStA, PA I 1005, Trautmannsdorf an Czernin, 28.190. Baden, 1 April 1918; KA, NFA 2659, Res. Q. No. 201. K.u.k. Infanteriedivisionskommando Op. Nr. 374 (Stand am 1. Jänner 1918. Blg 6).

<sup>45</sup> OEAW, "Volkszählung in Albanien 1918," Manuscript.

useful to the enemy could reach the other side. Albanian guerrillas on both sides would communicate with one another and engage in smuggling.<sup>46</sup>

By the summer of 1917 the army commanders along the Front were asking for the evacuation of entire riverside villages, whose inhabitants they suspected of spying. The evacuation was started in late January, which that year was exceptionally cold, and it was done with some haste,<sup>47</sup> the first evacuees being forced to leave behind their animals and stocks of food. Some of the inhabitants of the first village to be evacuated, Buzë, were sent on foot towards Tirana (over 100 kilometers away), and it soon became apparent they were in great need. Local notables complained to the Austrian authorities about the way in which the evacuees were being treated. Within days a modest sum of money was authorized to help those evacuated. New instructions were issued that the evacuees must be allowed time to transport their belongings, but it was insufficient to avoid continued hardship.<sup>48</sup> From then on evacuees were moved to villages immediately behind those that bordered the Vjosa. This enabled them to return to their fields to tend their crops. Several men, listed in the census as evacuated, were reported to be in their home villages working their land (which they did at night to avoid being shot).

By the time of the census in spring 1918, 5,802 people in Mallakastër (and a further 177 from evacuated villages adjacent to its borders), almost a quarter of the population, were displaced within the district, and an unknown number had moved elsewhere, some to the area occupied by the Italians. As well as those who had fled early in the occupation, it appears from the census that some people may have moved to stay with relatives in less dangerous villages before they were ordered to, but most seem to have been caught up in the forced evacuation.<sup>49</sup> In villages in the immediate vicinity of those evacuated, evacuees made up twenty, thirty, or even forty percent of those resident, most of them taken in by their inhabitants. The small and poor village of Zhulaj, which bordered on the larger riverside villages of Krahës and Kalivaç, had the highest proportion evacuees of all: they outnumbered its population four to

<sup>46</sup> Schwanke, "Zur Geschichte," 441, 467, 486–87, 491; KA, Riedl, 5 September 1916; Veith, "Der Feldzug in Albanien," 529, 530.

<sup>47</sup> HHStA, PA I 1007, Storck an Czernin, 19.608, Baden, 18 May 1917; KA, Nachlässe B45, Georg Veith, Tagebuch AOK, 24 January 1918; Veith, "Der Feldzug in Albanien," 536.

<sup>48</sup> Evacuees were indeed taken to Tirana, where the inhabitants already lived in cramped conditions because troops occupied most of the houses. By August most had returned south. KA, NFA 2665, E.V. Res. Nr. 846 Bez. Komm. Tirana. (Verwaltungsbericht pro August 1918. Beilage 5); HHStA, PA I 1006, Beilage zum Bericht ddo Skutari, 9 February 1918, No. 31/P. (Abschrift eines streng vertraulichen u. persönlichen Privatbriefes Generalkonsuls Ritter von Kral an seine Exzellenz G.d.I. von Können-Horák, d.d. Skutari am 8 Feber 1918); HHStA, PA I 1006, Nr.34/P (Evakuierung einheimischer Bevölkerung aus dem südlichen Frontbereiche, 19 February 1918; Beilage. – eines vom 11. Feber 1918 E.V. Nr. 1357/Res.).

<sup>49</sup> Nicholson, "Accommodating the Internally Displaced," 13.

one.<sup>50</sup> Many of the evacuees were forced to live in temporary huts in Zhulaj, in Toç, another nearby village, and in a hitherto uninhabited part of Krahës furthest from the river. By the time the last villages were enumerated in the census, the evacuees had been living in these crowded conditions for two months, and would probably stay there for several months longer, perhaps until the final retreat of the Austro-Hungarian army in September 1918.<sup>51</sup>

## Conclusion

In the context of the brutality and violence of the First World War in Europe and in other parts in Albania, in Mallakastër the effects of invasion by a major power were minor. Yet Albania had never sought to participate in the war; indeed it had been a condition of its independence that it was bound to be neutral. Nevertheless, though a non-combatant, its sovereignty was transgressed, and its inhabitants suffered damage to their property, hunger, illness, and in some cases death. A war between two neighboring Powers about their own on-going political disagreements that had nothing to do with the Albanian state or its people was allowed to legitimate hardship, repression, and brutality towards them.

In retrospect it was conceded on the part of the Austro-Hungarian occupiers that mistakes had occurred, and that not all of the occupiers had been sympathetic to the ways of Albanians.<sup>52</sup> It was also admitted that the population had indeed been exposed to many hardships that resulted from the “inexorable demands of war.” Yet, by regarding these consequences as inevitable, a “natural outcome of the strife,” the full extent of suffering they inflicted upon the civilian population was played down.<sup>53</sup> The more fundamental question of whether it could be justified solely by the desire of others to pursue their own interests, no matter at whose cost, was not asked.

## Postscript

Though the Great War formally ended with the Armistice on 11 November 1918, it was not yet over for Albania or for other smaller countries in Eastern Europe. Albanian independence had already been recognized by the Powers

<sup>50</sup> OEAW, “Volkszählung in Albanien 1918,” Manuscript; KA, NFA 2512, E.V. Nr. 2866, Verwaltungsbericht pro Feber, 8 March 1918: 4.

<sup>51</sup> By that time the Austro-Hungarian sources had become silent about the civilian population.

<sup>52</sup> Veith, “Der Feldzug in Albanien,” 527.

<sup>53</sup> Nikos Marantzidis and Giorgos Antoniou, “The Axis Occupation and Civil War: Changing Trends in Greek Historiography, 1941–2002,” *Journal of Peace Research* 41, no. 2 (2004): 223–31, esp. 227.

in 1913, but it was decided by the victorious Powers that, notwithstanding the fact that Albania had not been a party to the war, its independence should be put on the table at the Congress of Versailles to be negotiated all over again. Albania was not even permitted to take part in the negotiations, so there followed a period of intense lobbying of more powerful foreign friends,<sup>54</sup> and their efforts on Albania's behalf were ultimately successful.

And still there remained the small matter of persuading the last of the occupying armies, the Italians, to leave. After the cessation of hostilities, the Italian army had withdrawn to an area around the town of Vlorë while also patrolling in a wider radius, reaching as far as the left bank of the Vjosa, opposite the riverside villages of Mallakastër.<sup>55</sup> Finally, in June 1920, an uprising of volunteers was initiated in Vlorë, in which many men from the surrounding districts, including Mallakastër, took part. The Italians finally agreed to withdraw from the Albanian mainland, though even then they maintained their presence on the island of Sazan (Saseno).<sup>56</sup> The Italian army left Vlorë during the first half of August, and in the middle of the month Albanian authorities were reinstalled in the town.<sup>57</sup> In the *Proces verbal* of the first session of the Albanian parliament in 1923 it is recorded that "a woman from Mallakastër made a plea for a small pension to care for the child which had been left by her husband who fell as a martyr in the war in Vlorë,"<sup>58</sup> another casualty of someone else's war.

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<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Fatmira Musaj and Beryl Nicholson, "Women Activists in Albania Following Independence and World War I," in *Aftermaths of War: Women's Movements and Female Activists, 1918–1923*, ed. Ingrid Sharp and Matthew Stibbe (Leiden: Brill, 2011) 179–96, esp. 183–84.

<sup>55</sup> Fiçorri, *Ushtritë e huaja*, 301.

<sup>56</sup> Fiçorri, *Ushtritë e huaja*, 308–9; Akademia e Shkencave e Shqipërisë, *Historia e Popullit Shqiptar* (Tiranë: Toena, 2007), 3: 150–67.

<sup>57</sup> *Historia e Popullit Shqiptar*, 3: 165.

<sup>58</sup> Arkivi Qëndror i Shtetit (Tiranë), Fond 246, 1923 dosje 66, page 129. Parlamenti Proces verbal 1923 Mbledhjeve 16–35, Sesionit të parë të legjislaturës së parë.

