

THE CITY OF VLORA: THE BIRTHPLACE OF ALBANIA'S STATEHOOD IN THE FRONTIERS

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Abstract. *Vlora, the city on the coast of Albania, became the birthplace of modern Albania with the declaration of independence in 1912. Why was this city chosen as the place for the launch of independence? The city offered the advantage of having a history of connections between Albania and the rest of the world. In the pre-independence era, this city was a vibrant imperial corner connecting the Ottoman Empire with Western Europe. Vlora's elite, including the founder of modern Albania, Ismail Qemali bej Vlora and his cousins Syrja bej Vlora and Eqrem bej Vlora, persuaded the Albanian elite of the time that Vlora was worthy of being chosen as the seat of the declaration of independence. Most observers of developments in and around Vlora have accepted that it had a considerable legacy of regional and international importance. The aim of this article is to further our understanding of the process by which Albania sought and gained statehood and recognition through the history of Vlora before and around 1912. This examination will hopefully provide us with significant insights into what the historical connections of the frontier city of Vlora have meant for the broader statehood of the Balkan nation of Albania.*

Keywords: *Vlora, Albania, statehood, frontiers, Ismail Qemali bej Vlora, Syrja bej Vlora, Eqrem bej Vlora.*

1. Introduction

Historically and geographically, Vlora (Valona or Avlona) was Albania's door to the world. The metaphor is not absurd, as the city's central position on the coast has given Albania a degree of exceptional connection with the outside world. However, Vlora as a city within sight of Italy has been less known than the northern or southern edges of Albania. Vlora is located in the south-west of Albania, and its ideal geographical position is a characteristic that would later be added to its significant historical features. Vlora is an exception in mountainous Albania, with its partly lower land and access to the sea. It is the Albanian city closest to the Italian or Western European countries, with the Strait of Otranto, about forty-five miles, dividing the two sides of the Adriatic and Ionian seas. In terms of connections, the Strait of Otranto, to the west of Vlora, was a big difference, and it remained so from the Middle Ages until at least 1912.

Vlora has long occupied a strategic position in Albania's international and internal connections, and since Roman times has served as a meeting point for trade routes, cultures, economies and diplomacy. It is probably Albania's most strategic coastline on the Adriatic and Ionian Seas, where trade routes have passed through different historical periods, from antiquity to the Middle Ages and modern times. Historically, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Normans, Bulgarians, Serbs, Venetians, Turks

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and Italians came to this Albanian city one after the other. These foreign peoples successively controlled the city or its strategic port.

Vlora's location has contributed much to its connections and links and to its political status. Despite foreign influences, it had a little fear of outsiders (Ackerman, 1938), and its service and dedication to Albanian culture, identity and self-determination was continuously proven, culminating in 1912. It has also been a land of access and connection for the whole of Albania. It was one of the most accessible cities in the vast Albanian territory.

The assessment of the role of places like Vlora is one of the overlooked important factors that must be taken into account when examining the establishment of Albanian statehood and independence. First, we have the slow economic and cultural revival within Albania, in particular places like Vlora. Then we have the activities and work of a small vanguard of Albanian intellectuals and aristocrats from these emerging Albanian cities. An important part of the emergence of Albanian nationalism was developed in certain cities or by the Albanians from these cities who served in the Ottoman administration. The geographical and political importance of the city of Vlora is such that the history and conditions of this city deserve serious consideration today, given that its feudal aristocrats were apparently able to play a direct role in the struggle for independence.

Anthropologists and geographers who have studied Albania, such as Durham (1909), Bouchier (1911), Peacock (1914), Barnes (1918), Woods (1918), Scriven (1919), Almagia (1932), Ackerman (1938) and many others, have not failed to visit Vlora, some of them arriving first in Vlora and then continuing their visits to other parts of the country, and from their visits have left rich notes on the city's connections, geography, culture, economy and politics. The geographical and socio-economic situation on the ground is mainly informed by these works and researches on Albania, which allow us to better understand Vlora on the eve of 1912.

2. Geography and population

Geographically, its importance is due to the fact that Vlora occupies a position which makes it the natural means of entry into and exit from a large part of south-western Albania (Woods, 1918). It is located between Fier and Dhermi along the south-western coast of Albania. The territory of Vlora lies south of the Vjosa river as it flows into the Adriatic Sea and extends southwards to the Llogara or Acroceraunian Mountains (Woods, 1918). This is a characteristic of the Vlora region, which in the north ends where the direct influence of the sea ends on the southern flanks of the Vjosa river and its delta flowing into the Adriatic Sea. The left bank of the Vjosa River forms a precise dividing line between Vlora and the north. The Vjosa river, which flows into the Adriatic Sea halfway between the towns of Fier and Vlora, and its picturesque valley, can be said to separate the city of Vlora from other parts of the country to the north (Woods, 1918). The city extends far into the interior, corresponding to the valleys of Vjosa and Semeni valley to the east. To the east are high mountains with a rather sparse population (Almagia, 1932). And to the south are the seaward slopes of the Acroceraunian Mountains. These steep, dry mountains with a karst character are extremely limited in resources, and there are few landing sites on the steep coast. The Acroceraunian peninsula is almost entirely uninhabited, with a few villages in the south perched high above the steep coast, overlooking the sea (Almagia, 1932).

Like the whole of Albania, the region of Vlora is another vertical rather than horizontal main structural line, dividing the country into long belts that can communicate more easily with what lies to the north or south of them, whether sea or land, than with what lies to the east. Thus, the whole district between the sea and the mountains remains strictly Vlora (Barnes, 1918). No better border for the city could be imagined than the one that nature has drawn along the ridges of Kanina, Orikum, Llogara, the Karaburun peninsula and Sazan Island. From the mountains along Kanina, the main vertical ridge that defines the eastern boundary of geographical Vlora continues, culminating in Mount Llogara between Orikum and Dhermi in the south (Barnes, 1918; Scriven, 1919).

South of Vlora is the northern border of Greek influence in southern Albania (Todorova, 2009). Despite the proximity of the Epirus region to the south in Himara, where Hellenic elements are present, or to the north in Divjaka, where Vlach elements are present, this area of Laberia, as Vlora region is known, is compactly inhabited by Albanians, often referred to as Lab, an Albanian subgroup living in this mountainous geographical region (Barnes, 1918). The Vlonjat, or people of Vlora, are a warlike, lawless people and it has features of northern Albania as it was made up of a number of warlike tribes, many of whom lived a feudal life. Although they are Tosk in their dialect, the Labs are as warlike as the Ghegs in the north (Woods, 1918). To the south there is a considerable Albanian population, but partly they have been Greek villages or Hellenised villages, and their economic and commercial interests were tied to Greece (Barnes, 1918). Vlora had a population of about 6,000 on the eve of 1912 (Woods, 1918), the majority of whom were Albanian. Most of the inhabitants were Muslim, with some Greek Orthodox communities, including Albanians, Greeks and Aromanians or Vlachs. Figures from early Ottoman censuses show that in 1510 Christians outnumbered Muslims in Vlore by thirteen to one (Winnifrith, 1992), but with gradual conversion and migration this ratio would change in favour of the Muslims. Woods (1918) reports that by 1912, two-thirds of Vlora was Muslim and one-third Orthodox Christian.

The population was not dense. Several factors contributed to the pattern of settlement in Vlora. Large expanses of mountains and generally rugged terrain made the construction of land transport routes difficult; poor soil and lack of water for part of the year did not support large concentrations of people; and finally, mineral and other resources were generally not readily accessible or difficult to exploit. Most of the population lived in rural areas in a widely dispersed pattern of small villages that were mostly tribal or fortified settlements (Carter, 1973).

Vlora is probably named after the Valonia oak, a tree used for tanning, which was brought to Vlora by the Venetians from Corfu (Martin, 1992). For Durham, the name Vlora, Valona or Avlona is in fact a corruption of the name Apollonia (Durham, 1917), which lies on the coast to the north of Vlora, and was in ancient times a famous university or, more precisely, an ancient Greek trading colony which developed into an independent polis and later a Roman city.

3. Frontier to the world and to the interior of Albania

The proximity of the sea to Vlora has always favoured external influences. Foreign powers have always wanted to secure possession of Vlora, as it offered access to both the sea and Albania. By virtue of its location on the lower Adriatic, Vlora virtually commands the Strait of Otranto, and the government in control there would control the Adriatic (Woods, 1918). It occupies an enviable geographical position with the makings of good ports on the narrowest part of one of the most important waterways in the world

(Barnes, 1918). For this reason, countries historically were particularly interested in the southern Albanian port of Vlora.

It was initially an Illyrian site from the 11th century BC. In the 7th century BC, Vlora had a safe anchorage at its head, where a city called Orikum (Oricum) had been founded by Greeks from Corinth returning from the Trojan War. Greeks sailed up to Vjosa (Aous) river, established good relations with the local Illyrians, founded a joint settlement and built a river port. They named their city Apollonia, after the god Apollo, in 558 BC. The Greeks of Corinth thus established and often controlled a relatively safe route between Vlora and Greek ports for sailing from the eastern Mediterranean to the west (Hammond, 1992). Vlora later became part of the Roman and later Byzantine Empire. In the 11th century, in the spring of 1081, Vlora and other nearby towns were taken by the Normans (Martin, 1992). In the 13th and 14th centuries there were important colonies of Venetian and Ragusan merchants in Vlora, each with its own consul. The Venetian interest moved northwards from Vlora to Durres (Durazzo). It was easier to defend the northern part of the country, which by 1400 had become known as 'Venetian Albania'. The salt trade from Vlora was largely in the hands of the Ragusans. However, there are many indications of Venetian interest and involvement in the salt trade. The dominant Venetian family in Vlora were the Contarinis, who specialised not only in commercial loans but also in ransoming prisoners from the Greeks. In 1319, a dispute with the citizens of Vlora led to the destruction of Venetian houses in the city. In Vlora, more expensive goods such as silk were traded than in the north. But the most of the export was the Albanians themselves. From 1380 Venice was heavily involved in what was effectively a trade in Albanian slaves, including from Vlora to Venice (Martin, 1992).

One borderline characteristic of Vlora's position was its location on the edge of two worlds, a division that began with the division of the Roman Empire into East and West. At first, Vlora was on the westernmost edge of Byzantium, much further from Constantinople. This division was exacerbated when the Turks took over the Byzantine Empire. Vlora was then on the western edge of the Ottoman world, with some modifications that lasted until 1912. From the time of the Ottoman conquest, which can be said to have been completed around 1478, shortly after the death of the famous Albanian hero Skanderbeg, until the Balkan Wars in 1912-1913, Vlora, like all of Albania, was part of the Ottoman Empire and nominally ruled from Constantinople. However, such was the strength and sentiment of the people of Vlora that they actually enjoyed a considerable degree of independence during this period, being governed largely by unwritten laws administered by local chiefs (Woods, 1918). The Ottomans left a slight mark on Vlora, including some roads, buildings and tombs, and will be remembered by locals for their obstruction of education in the Albanian language (Scriven, 1919).

Despite the incompatibility of empires and faiths as well as driven by its neighbours into the isolation that its rugged land allowed it, Vlora was able to take advantage of the few benefits that its surroundings offered. During the hundreds of years when Albania as a whole was mainly linked to the economic centres of the East, Vlora missed no opportunity and was able to take advantage of all the activities that surrounded it, making the best possible use of its environment (Almagia, 1932). For hundreds of years it was natural for Vlora to establish relations with the West, especially with the Italians. The Italians were the preferred nation over the Greeks or the Serbs because of the latter's expansionist tendencies towards Albanian lands. Italians were allowed or invited to take the place of the Ottomans because of the fear of Greeks and Serbs. Italian

influence became a mutually beneficial arrangement for both Albanians and Italians (Fischer, 2014; Barnes, 1918). The Strait of Otranto, which separates Vlora from southern Italy, has always acted more as a bridge than a barrier, providing escape or exchange. The proximity of the two areas facilitated numerous connections, including classical contacts and the establishment of large Albanian colonies in southern Italy after the defeat of Skenderbeg in the 15th century (Fischer, 1985). The 200,000 Albanians or Arberesha living in Italy, who found refuge there from the Ottoman conquest, will form a strong link in the chain of friendship (Barnes, 1918).

Italian interest in Vlora was also an important factor in the national awakening that led to independence. The Italian state's motivation for its involvement was linked to the age of the new imperialism and the protection of national interests. For the Italians, the Albanian lands, especially Vlora, were of particular importance because of the stretches of Adriatic coast facing Italy. Italy had no suitable base for naval operations off its west coast. Italy wanted Vlora in particular because of its bay and proximity to the Italian peninsula. It rushed to secure advantages by sponsoring economic connections and influence. Through its cultural contributions, Italy exposed many Albanians to new ideas and different cultures and to the hitherto outside world (Fischer, 2014). This interest made some Albanian intellectuals, including those from Vlora, aware of the possibilities of connecting with the other side of the Adriatic.

Vlora's history has been characterised by relatively high levels of external relations, but low levels of internal communication with the interior of Albania. Vlora remained separated from other parts of the country due to limited communication channels and huge mountains (Todorova, 2009). Tribal organisation and local independence persisted throughout the country, hindering internal communication. Little trade and cultural isolation were inevitable consequences. Only on the eve of 1912, as part of the initiative for Albanian independence, was Vlora reattached and connected to other Albanian lands. For a long time, however, it remained on the periphery, given the limited internal connections, the independence of local tribes and the internal turmoil that accompanied the great wars on the periphery of the Ottoman Empire.

4. The economy

The economic contrasts with other cities in Albania's historic hinterland are more familiar. While other cities remained isolated, disconnected and poor, Vlora was historically one of the more connected, rich and advanced cities. In 1912 it had no railway, but its port, which had been in use for centuries, was considered one of the best on the Albanian coast. Over the years, it grew to become one of the most important port centres on the Albanian coast. In the past it was difficult to reach, but later, with the development of international shipping, it was regularly visited by steamers from Trieste, Fiume, Brindisi and other Italian and Austro-Hungarian ports, as well as by many Greek and Turkish coasters. The port was well protected to the west by the Karaburun peninsula and the island of Sazan (Saseno). The cable and telegraph line from Otranto in Italy to Istanbul (Constantinople) in the Ottoman Empire had an important station at Vlora (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1911). It was the fastest mail route from London to Suez via Brindisi, Vlora, Janina and Piraeus (Barnes, 1918). The city benefited culturally and economically from the trade and travel it controlled with Italy and other parts of the Ottoman Empire. Communication was easy with the neighbouring Italian territory and partly with Greece, a trade that contributed to the growth of the city.

The local economy on the eve of 1912 was mainly based on pastoralism, with sheep and goats at the centre. Animal products were exported, including goat's cheese, wool and live animals. Sheep used to be part of the cargo of Italian ships leaving the port of Vlora for Bari, Italy (Ackerman, 1938). The Vlonjat would feed their flocks in the valleys in winter or on the high hillsides in summer (Scriven, 1919). The few agricultural areas were concentrated on the bottoms of the main valleys, forming isolated communities. The interior basins, offered space for agriculture such as vines, olives, tobacco, wheat, maize, cotton, rice, potatoes, fruits, silk, cotton, wool, leather (Barnes, 1918), but suffered the handicap of unfavourable conditions of water supply and poor drainage. Malaria was widespread. Some of the products obtained were not marketable due to the lack of roads (Almagia, 1932). The centre of Vlora long had a more oriental function, with bazaars selling local products. It served as a centre for the peasantry of the surrounding region, for the collection of taxes, and for the dissemination of news and information (Carter, 1973). Valuable mineral deposits were recorded, but their economic exploitation had to wait for later years. Vlora's economy gradually moved from subsistence to pastoralism, agriculture, commerce and foreign trade, which in turn facilitated the spread of ideas of independent statehood.

5. Local political organisation: feudal aristocracy, landlords and timar

Socially and economically, Vlora had no self-conscious class. The middle class was tiny and the economy small. The organisation of the society was based on a tribal system. The tribal system of Vlora was such that people owed their allegiance to local bejs, landowners, feudal aristocrats or timar owners, to whom they turned for guidance in all matters of importance (Woods, 1918). Local bejs will own land and economic resources, local people will be employed on these lands, and in return the Ottoman state will receive taxes and military support when needed. These feudal aristocrats of Vlora, owners of the large estates or timar in and around Vlora during the Ottoman period, owned huge feudal estates and played an important role in the local economy (Winniffrith, 1992). It was patriarchal. Any interference with tribal and feudal customs, sanctified by generations of tradition, would only end in revolt (Barnes, 1918; Almagia, 1932). Feudal lords retained greater economic, political and military power by maintaining armed followers. Difficulty of access contributed to the preservation of a strong sense of autonomy among the inhabitants. This isolation has favoured the preservation of a tribal regime, which was still in full force in 1912 (Almagia, 1932).

At the beginning of the 19th century, the timar system began to break down, as there was less need for armed cavalry and less opportunity for timar owners to fight in wars on the distant frontiers, and finally, as the frontiers began to recede, less opportunity for the Ottoman government to reward soldiers with timar holdings in conquered lands; it became necessary to reform landlordism with more centralised elements of taxation. The Albanian landlords objected to these attempts at central control and rebelled. In the Ottoman history of Vlora, between the 15th century and 1912, there were a number of revolts (Winniffrith, 1992).

6. The role of Vlora and Vlorajt in the birth of Albania's statehood in 1912

Vlora gave birth and provided the Ottoman state apparatus with eminent statesmen such as Ismail Qemali bej Vlora, Syrja bej Vlora, Eqrem bej Vlora, all three of whom belonged to the Vlora family, which held large estates as timar owners of the Vlora region for several centuries during the Ottoman rule. All three Vlorajt, i.e. members of

the Vlorë family, were official delegates to the Vlorë Assembly that declared independence on 28 November 1912. The Vlorë family came from Kanina, an originally Vlorë village to the east Vlorë (Winnifrith, 1992). The Vlorë family ruled the region for generations as timar holders, sometimes fighting with the Sultan, sometimes serving him, sometimes maintaining the balance in a difficult period that included the first movements for Albanian independence. The three Vlorajt, first served the Ottoman administration and later became active in laying the foundations for Albania's independent statehood. These and other notable Albanian figures earned a reputation for service to the country, intellect and courage (Falaschi, 1992). These statesmen and feudal aristocrats played an important role in encouraging the Albanian national movement. The three notable members of Vlorajt all later became prominent in the political struggle for Albanian nationhood. Their works and efforts did much to inspire a sense of nationhood among the Albanians (Winnifrith, 1992; Fischer, 2014). With the clear defeat of the Ottomans in the First Balkan War in 1912, the time was ripe to declare Albanian independence, and on 28 November 1912 Ismail Qemali bej Vlorë landed in Vlorë to raise the Albanian flag of independence (Winnifrith, 1992). The formal proclamation of independence on the day of 28 November 1912 was made in the guest hall of the Vlorajt family palace and the Albanian flag, inherited from the Skenderberg period, was hoisted in one of the windows of this palace.

Albanians were actively recruited for high-level administrative and military positions in the Ottoman Empire. A fifth of all Grand Viziers or Prime Ministers, some thirty of them, were Albanians. The courage, charisma and intelligence of the Albanians enabled them to rise high in the Ottoman government and army (Durham, 1941). As such, they would have some privileges in joining the administration and rising to high positions in the Ottoman administration. There were many Albanian speakers or people of Albanian descent in the Ottoman government (Winnifrith, 1992). The Albanians were treated with the utmost respect and the Sultans did everything in their power to ensure their support in times of need (Woods, 1918). At the same time, the Ottoman rulers practiced co-opting the local Albanian chiefs and expanded his reliance on influential families (Fischer, 2014). It is not surprising, then, that some of the first signs of Albanian cultural nationalism appeared among intellectuals who had access to the Ottoman high bureaucracy, which in turn provided freedom of travel within and outside the empire.

Among the three most prominent intellectuals and technocrats in the Ottoman bureaucracy in the late 1800s and early 1900s were Vlorajt: Ismail Qemali bej Vlorë (1844-1919), Syrja bej Vlorë (1860-1940) and Eqrem bej Vlorë (1885-1964). The Vlorajt were an unlikely series of people of Albanian blood and Vloran descent who achieved a kind of fame outside Vlorë and in the wider Ottoman lands. The Vlorajt were part of Rilindja Kombëtare (1836-1912) or the National Awakening or National Revival, an intellectual movement of elite Albanian intellectuals and activists that later gave birth to the League of Prizren in 1878, which campaigned for autonomy and independent statehood for the Albanian lands (Brisku, 2020). The Albanian national Rilindja lasted from the mid-nineteenth century until the first two decades of the twentieth century. This is often interpreted in Albanian historiography as a mythical period (Schvandner-Sievers, 2004). This period corresponds to the processes of nation-building and state-building in Albania (Brisku, 2020). The movement demanded a new role for intellectuals in advocating modern state structures (Ypi, 2007).

The turmoil of the French Revolution and the internal crisis of the Ottoman Empire forced the Sublime Porte to undertake a series of late reforms to establish modern

state structures, a process known as Tanzimat, or reform. The imperial decree of 1839, better known as the Tanzimat reforms, made radical changes to the administrative and legal system of the empire, including the formal recognition of some liberal rights (Ypi, 2007). While these reforms may have seemed appropriate in theory, they encountered serious difficulties in practice. Local populations perceived the reforms as an imperial move aimed at destroying their autonomy. Especially in Albania, where social affairs were regulated on the basis of local autonomy and local rivalries, the Tanzimat reforms were met with hostility. Tanzimat further divided Albanian lands into four administrative units (vilayets), to the dismay of Albanian demands (Ypi, 2007). Despite the Tanzimat reforms, no Albanian schools were established in the first half of the 19th century, and the frequent divisions and subdivisions of Albanian territory into different vilayets was seen as an attempt by the Porte to diffuse Albanian nationalism (Winnifrieth, 1992; Barnes, 1918).

The Young Turk revolution in Istanbul in the summer of 1908 promised freedom and equality for all. Albanians, including Ismail Qemali bej Vlora, were instrumental in its early successes. There was to be freedom of the press, and Albanian newspapers sprang up as a result. Schools teaching the Albanian language and alphabet were quickly opened. A congress was held in Manastir (Bitola) to standardise the alphabet and orthography, and a universal system was adopted. But then came the radicalisation of Ottoman politics from 1909 onwards and with the emergence of the the Balkan wars in 1912-13, both of which reversed the gains of the 1908 revolution (Durham, 1941). With Ottoman defeat only a matter of time during the Balkan wars, the Albanian leaders were desperate to prevent the loss of Albanian lands. Thus, the proclamation of independence in 1912 was dictated by the circumstances resulting from the Balkan Wars, which made it impossible for the Albanians to remain tied to the empire (Fischer, 2014).

If the Albanians were to be successful in defending their territories in practice, they first had to provide theoretical evidence that these territorial claims were legitimate. The Albanians needed a national narrative to make their sovereignty claims plausible. Supporting active resistance with an intellectual and literary movement that argued for national sovereignty, freedom and self-determination became extremely important (Ypi, 2007). In this context, the nation-building project initiated during the period of the Rilindja Kombëtare had proved largely successful in reviving a political entity that had existed only in the dreams and aspirations of the few intellectuals who championed its cause. The myth of the nation, the discourse that there was a group of people who shared a language, a common historical past, and deserved to rule together despite their religious differences, gradually gained credibility both in the eyes of the Albanians themselves and of international audience. Rilindja Kombëtare's intellectual efforts were in keeping with the discourse of nation-building, with its constant need to invoke Western categories to prove that the country was sufficiently modern to warrant self-determination, and to highlight those elements of national culture that placed the Albanians on the side of the civilised nations (Brisku, 2020).

What Albanian intellectuals did during these years was to increase the sophistication of their thinking on nationalism and independent statehood. It is worth looking briefly at three of prominent contributors to pre-independence nationalism and some of their basic ideas, which generally combined being Albanian, Vloran, and Ottoman. These were multi-identity elites who had been integrated, even assimilated, into the Ottoman establishment, rather than monolithic, single-minded patriots (Elsie, 2010; Brisku, 2020). It was in this context that the Vlorajt acted, publishing their own

works and studies on the need for Albanian nationhood and self-determination, demonstrating the right of Albanians to statehood and independence, and through their individual memoirs, commemorating the Albanian struggle first for autonomy and then for independence. In their works, statements, discourses and diplomatic activism, the Vlorajts argued that Albania should be regarded as a distinct people, with its own history and language, with its own national traditions and ideals, deserving of independent statehood and recognition. Although they did not act as a team, they individually contributed in the late 1890s and early 1900s to the efforts to promote steps towards Albanian autonomy and independence, giving the Vlorajts some national prominence and demonstrating their willingness to participate in the affairs of the motherland. They mobilised national and international public opinion and raised the profile of the Albanian question. Following the example of nationalists from other nations under Ottoman suzerainty, the Vlorajts produced and worked to raise the national consciousness of the Albanian elite and the wider population. Their work with diplomacy and connections with countries such as Greece, Italy, Austria-Hungary, Britain and others was an important service to the national awakening (Fischer, 2014). Their activities acted as a powerful stimulus to the national movement in Albania, which might otherwise have been considerably delayed.

The involvement of the Vlorajts became crucial as they added an international and diplomatic dimension to the struggle for nationhood. Their emergence as more internationally minded leaders laid the groundwork for international recognition. Their claims and efforts, and of course those of others in the Rilindja era, were formally recognised by the whole of Europe, including the Great Powers, at the Conference of Ambassadors held in London in the winter of 1912-13, which gave birth to the new independent state of Albania (Barnes, 1918), as a follow-up to the declaration of independence in Vlorë on 28 November 1912. It is said that from this point a determined struggle for independence by intellectuals, supported by a significant percentage of the population, developed rapidly. Large popular rallies supported these intellectuals and, on the eve of the Balkan wars, a huge movement for independence emerged throughout Albania, demonstrating the remarkable level of political maturity the masses had achieved (Bland, 1992).

The first of the three prominent Vlorajts, Ismail Qemali bej Vlorë, who died in 1919, will serve as part of the first generation of the Albanian revival movement. He is often referred to as the father of Albanian independence and is remembered as the “Elder of Vlorë”, the “Wise Elder” (Brisku, 2020). He was an Ottoman politician and dignitary who served as provincial governor-general throughout the Empire, including Varna, Constanza and Tripoli, governor of the Ottoman Bank, publicist, and heir to a powerful Albanian family Vlorë that had faithfully served the Empire for centuries in consolidating its power in Albanian lands (Scriven, 1919). Born in Vlorë in 1844, he was only six years old when his father, who had led a revolt against new restrictions imposed by the Sublime Porte, was sentenced to a long deportation to Asia Minor. The rest of the family were taken from Vlorë and exiled to Salonica for several years, including Ismail Qemali bej Vlorë. In 1877 he was exiled again to Asia Minor for seven years. In 1900, he escaped another attempt of internment and fled Istanbul, devoting all his energies to the Albanian cause. He settled in Brussels, then in Rome, but moved around Europe, living mainly in Paris and London, working hard to get the powers to accept the idea of an autonomous Albania.

In Bucharest, where there was a large and prosperous Albanian community, a historic meeting took place at the beginning of November 1912, in which Ismail Qemali bej Vlora took part. Immediately after the decision in Bucharest, he went to Vienna, and from Trieste sailed first to Durres and from there to Vlora, where on 28 November 1912, Ismail Qemali bej Vlora proclaimed Albania's independence in front of a cheering crowd assembled from around the country. The executive committee was elected by an assembly of no less than 70 delegates who had arrived in Vlora. Ismail Qemali bej Vlora became the head of this executive committee or provisional government (Falaschi, 1992).

He argued that all Albanians should be allowed to live in a single province and use their own language. He called for autonomy, arguing that the Albanians were capable of self-government (Durham, 1941). He was an enthusiastic supporter of the early Tanzimat period, which aimed to establish a somewhat more decentralised system in the Empire, but his basic aim of saving the Empire is clear throughout his writings. He saw himself as both Ottoman and Albanian. He described the Albanians as a community of noble savages who needed the protection of a benevolent Ottoman Empire. He saw the connection of Albania to the empire as a way of both strengthening Ottoman rule in the Balkans and preserving the Albanians as a separate and distinct people (Fischer, 2014). Ismail Qemali bej Vlora initially championed the national cause, which meant self-rule and language rights for Albanians within a constitutional empire (bej Vlora, 2009). He was more invested in a continued imperial future for the nation, provided that the empire was reformed along federal and national lines, because he doubted the political and economic viability of small nation-states (Brisku 2020; Todorova, 2009). Thus, he refused to abandon the empire until it became clear that it could no longer provide the protection the Albanians needed (Fischer, 2014). The lack of response from the Sublime Porte for more rights for Albanians, and the threats to Albanian territories from Bulgaria, Greece, Montenegro and Serbia, led to a logical shift from cultural to political independence (Brisku 2020).

Another member of the Vlora family representing the second generation of Rilindja thinkers was Syrja bej Vlora, who died in 1940. Syrja, cousin of Ismail Qemali bej Vlora and brother of Grand Vizier Avlonyali Ferid Pasha (1851-1914), was one of the leading intellectuals of the late Ottoman period and is remembered as a bureaucrat, politician and writer. He served as an economic advisor to Abdul Hamid II and was the Director General of the Ottoman Customs. Syrja was a member of the Ottoman Parliament from 1908 (bej Vlora, 2013). He believed initially like Ismail Qemali bej Vlora that the Albanians were not ready for independence and supported a future autonomous Albania becoming a protectorate under Austria-Hungary at the beginning of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire (Skendi, 1967).

The third prominent member of Vlorajt is Eqrem bej Vlora, who died in 1964. Eqrem is considered the last "Vlorajt". Eqrem grew up in his home town of Vlora and received his first lessons from private teachers, as his family was relatively well-off. After working for the Ottoman Foreign Ministry, he joined his cousin Ismail Qemali bej Vlora in the independence movement. As a writer, Eqrem is best known for his two-volume German-language memoirs, published posthumously as *Lebenserinnerungen* in Munich in 1968, which provide an insight into the world of early 20th-century Albania and lay the foundations for the Albanian understanding of world politics and international relations (bej Vlora, 2010). Since the establishment of Albania was brought about by the rivalry between the powers, especially between Austria and Italy (Woods, 1918), Eqrem was able to maintain friendship with both.

7. Conclusion

The above analysis is not sufficient to establish all the facts and the situation regarding the city of Vlora and its role in the emergence of Albanian statehood. Nevertheless, a story of causality between the city's history and geographical location and its national and international role emerges. The facts of Vlora favoured the rise to power of intellectuals such as Vlorajt, who advocated a pragmatic strategy that promoted the emergence of Albania first as autonomous and then as an independent state. The way in which their activism actually played out demonstrates the strong influence of individuals in shaping statehood politics.

This approach opens up new spaces for understanding how cities and their histories, such as Vlora, can effectively shape policies to advance national priorities at national and international levels by mobilising city and nationwide resources.

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