



Research Report

League of Nations

Issue 2: Preventing escalation and promoting diplomatic resolution during the Yugoslavia–Albania border conflict (1921)

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Introduction

The frontier struggle between Yugoslavia and Albania in 1921 is a simple probe to test the degree of effectiveness of the new international system. The Balkan Peninsula became a political no-man's land as the Byzantine Empire, Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires had collapsed effectively leaving ethnic groups with little more than their own internal border lines. There are currently two factions, one being the Kingdom of Serbs Croats and Slovenes while the other is newly created such as the Principality of Albania. It escalated into open warfare, as Yugoslav forces usurped large swaths of northern Albanian territory under "strategic security" grounds and internal uprisings and the Mirdita Republic threatened to turn the sovereignty of Albania into a fully failed state.

The problem after the invasion acquires a key role in international relations since it threatens one of the provisions for one of the central concepts of an organization conceived by the treaty as that whose main purpose is to defend sovereignty. If military force is permitted to enable larger nations to move national boundaries without consent, the League of Nations will cease to exist. Furthermore, because both Italy and Greece have a stake in the Adriatic, this conflict runs the risk of sparking a wider Balkan war. In order to guarantee a fair demarcation of borders and to show that the League has the collective will to impose peace through diplomatic and economic pressure rather than more violence, this crisis must be resolved through multilateral cooperation.

Definition of Key Terms

1. The covenant of the League Of Nations:

The League of Nations' founding charter is known as the Covenant. Since they specify the collective duty to defend a member state's territorial integrity and the application of sanctions against aggressors, Articles 10, 12, and 16 are the most important in this conflict.

2. The Conference of Ambassadors:

Following World War I, an interallied body called the Conference of Ambassadors was established to supervise the observance of peace agreements. They frequently engaged in a "tug-of-war" over jurisdiction with the League of Nations because they had the legal power to establish Albania's borders.

3. Delimitation:

The formal procedure used to pinpoint a boundary's precise location. The fact that Albania's 1913 borders had never been "demarcated" or physically marked on the ground, creating "gray zones," served as fuel for the conflict in 1921.

4. Sovereignty:

A state's ability to rule itself is known as sovereignty. Albania's neighbors regularly questioned its status as a sovereign state, claiming it was more of an unstable territory or "protectorate" than a real state.

5. The Mirdita Republic:

The Yugoslav government secretly supported the creation of the Mirdita Republic, a puppet state established by Catholic tribes in northern Albania.

6. Demarcation Line:

The demarcation line, also known as the "Line of 1913," is the boundary set by the Treaty of

London after the Balkan Wars. Albania maintained that this line was the sole legal foundation for their territory, while Yugoslavia claimed it was no longer relevant.

7. Economic Sanctions:

Economic sanctions are the main tool used by the League to enforce its rules. Theoretically, under Article 16, all other members had to cut off all financial and commercial ties with a member who went to war in violation of its covenants.

8. Irredentism:

A popular or political movement that asserts a claim to territory in another nation based on shared ethnicity or past ownership. Irredentist rhetoric was used by both Albanian and Yugoslav factions to assert their claims to border areas.

Background

History: The London Treaty of 1913's Ghost

The conflict has its origins in the Balkan Wars (1912–1913). To delineate Albania's borders, the Great Powers convened in London prior to the Great War. However, these boundaries were not physically marked on the ground; instead, they were depicted on maps in offices located far away. Albania was overrun by several foreign armies when World War I started, and its central government essentially fell. The "new" political reality of the post-war era necessitated "strategic frontiers" that extended far into Albanian territory, according to Yugoslavia's 1921 claim that the 1913 borders were no longer valid.

Albania's League Admission (1920)

The admission of Albania as a League of Nations member in December 1920, despite the country's unrecognized borders, was a significant event. This was a nightmare for Yugoslavia but a diplomatic win for Albania. The admission suggested that Albania was a "sovereign and independent state" with Article 10 of the League Covenant protecting its territory, whatever it may be. However, Yugoslavia persisted in viewing northern Albania as a "no-man's land" in which they were free to act as they pleased.

Escalation: The Military Occupation and the Mirdita Rebellion

The conflict escalated from a diplomatic disagreement to an armed confrontation in the summer of 1921.

The Puppet State: A local chieftain named Marka Gjoni established the "Mirdita Republic" in northern Albania, asserting independence from the Tirana government, with the financial and military support of the Yugoslav Union.

The Incursion: Under the pretext of protecting this "new republic" and securing their

own borders, Yugoslav regular troops crossed the 1913 line, burning villages and displacing thousands of Albanian civilians.

The "Neutral Zone": The Great Powers created a temporary "Neutral Zone," but Yugoslav forces regularly broke it in an effort to reach a fait accompli (a done deal) before the world community could respond. 4. Conventions and Treaties That Are Relevant

Three main frameworks define the legal environment of this conflict: The original, albeit shoddy, legal foundation for Albania's borders was established by the Treaty of London (1913). Particularly, Article 11 of the League of Nations Covenant, which declares that any war or threat of war affects the entire League, and Article 16, which permits the use of "Economic Weapons" (sanctions). At first, the Paris Peace Conference (1919) left the "Albanian Question" open and referred it to the Conference of Ambassadors.

Development of the Problem

The conflict reached a breaking point by the end of 1921. The Albanian government accused Yugoslavia of waging an aggressive war and made a formal appeal to the League Council. This compelled a confrontation: Would the League act independently to defend a small member state against a larger neighbor, or would it submit to the "Great Powers" at the Conference of Ambassadors? The first time the League's "teeth" were genuinely displayed on the global scene was when the British government threatened to apply Article 16 against Yugoslavia.

Major Countries and Organizations Involved

Principality of Albania:

Albania joined the League as its first member in 1920 to maintain its independence while establishing its 1913 border boundaries. The government in Tirana views the Yugoslav occupation and the Mirdita rebellion as existential threats and relies entirely on the League of Nations for protection because it lacks substantial military capabilities.

Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (Yugoslavia):

Yugoslavia claims the 1913 borders which currently exist should be replaced with new borders because it requires "strategic frontiers" for its upcoming union. The country believes that Albania lacks the ability to self-govern according to its proof from the Mirdita Republic. Belgrade aims to extend its territorial boundaries in southern and western directions until international economic sanctions force them to stop.

Great Britain:

The Great Britain functions as the "enforcer" who upholds the League of Nations authority. Britain initiated the League Council meeting demand to discuss Article 16 sanctions against Yugoslavia during November 1921 under Prime Minister Lloyd George. The British government aims to preserve regional stability while establishing the League as an effective deterrent against attacks.

Kingdom of Italy:

Italy considers Albania as its exclusive area of control which serves as its gateway to the Balkan region. Italy maintains official support for Albanian independence because it wants to stop

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Yugoslavia from accessing the Adriatic Sea but its true goal is to establish a protectorate over Albania. Italy uses its Conference of Ambassadors power to obtain special economic rights for its interests in Albania.

France:

France serves as the main ally of Yugoslavia because it considers the Kingdom to be essential for maintaining the "Little Entente" which prevents future German and Hungarian attacks. France avoids backing strict penalties against Belgrade because it prefers to settle the conflict through the Conference of Ambassadors which gives Great Powers more authority than the League Assembly.

Possible Solutions

1. Enforcement of the "Economic Weapon" (Article 16):

The League Council needs to make an official declaration that Yugoslavia acts as an aggressor before they can proceed to implement a complete financial and trade embargo against the country.

Feasibility: High impact, as Yugoslavia is financially vulnerable following the Great War.

The advantages of this approach enable military forces to withdraw from the area without requiring a League military presence, which at the same time establishes the League's power.

The first option will lead to two outcomes because it will either push Yugoslavia towards stronger ties with anti-League countries or result in a complete economic collapse across the Balkan region.

2. International Commission of Delimitation:

The International Commission of Delimitation functions as an international body for which the League has authority to create an independent commission composed of cartographers and military officers who will establish the 1913 borders through ground-based surveying which will include a "Neutral Zone" that international observers will monitor.

Feasibility: The method is both feasible and established as a standard practice within European

diplomatic relations.

The pros of the proposal eliminate all "gray zones" which Yugoslavia uses to justify its military operations.

The process of border marking requires multiple years to complete yet it fails to resolve the existing humanitarian emergency and the ongoing Mirdita rebellion.

3. The "Mandate" or Protectorate Option:

Some delegates may argue that Albania is a "failed state" which requires temporary rule by a Great Power under a League of Nations Mandate according to their assessment.

Feasibility: The situation presents political challenges because it remains politically sensitive while Italy supports the plan and Albania and Yugoslavia both oppose it.

Pros: The system delivers both internal security and professional administrative support which enables the construction of infrastructure projects throughout Albania.

The principle of self-determination gets violated by this action which enables Italy to establish permanent control over the territory.

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