

Cham Issue during the Peace Conference in Paris 1919

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Abstract

Chameria was a region inhabited predominantly by Albanians. In 1913, its major part was annexed by Greece, after the Conference of London. Since then, Chams' rights were oppressed; therefore they sought for a solution at the Peace Conference in Paris 1919, which opened officially in January 18, 1919, holding a strong believe that justice would have been made in this international political forum. This article aims to show the efforts for the solution of the Cham issue at the Peace Conference in Paris 1919, and its perspective. The analysis of the qualitative data of this matter will explain the underlying reasons of the Cham issue's position at the Peace Conference' agenda. The weakness of the Albanian state after the Great War, the geopolitical interests of its neighbouring countries, and the International political background were not in favour of this minority's issue, despite the many efforts played especially by the Albanian Diaspora in the United States of America, the promoter of principles of peace and liberty.

Keywords: Cham issue, Peace Conference in Paris, Great War, minority issue, Diaspora

1. Introduction

The Albanians of Chameria were denied the basic human rights after the annexation of the region by Greece. After the Great War, the declaration of Fourteen Points of President Wilson constituted a new hope for the solution of their issue. They saw the Conference of Paris 1919 as a place where justice would have been restored, due to the proclaimed new era of international politics.

As soon as the beginning of the Conference, Albanians were organized in associations, and official governmental representation [even though the latter was arguable] in order to present their national issue in front of this international political forum. The Albanian politicians and especially the Albanian and Cham Diaspora played an important role in presenting their issues to the representatives of the Conference. Their petition was focused in some main points: restoration of Albania with its ethnic borders, therefore correcting the existing borders established after the Conference of London 1913, the establishment of an international commission to evaluate the damages made by foreign military forces, like Greeks to Albania; and next, U.S.A. invited for a mandate in Albania at least for one year, after which the population would have held a plebiscite while being free to decide for their future, different from the situation in which they were living, under the jurisdiction of their neighbour countries.

The Cham community, after the death of Ismail Qemali, appointed Mr. Rasih Dino, as their representative in the Conference sessions. Unfortunately, Mr. Dino was not permitted to go through the Italian and French border. As a result of this, the Cham issue was presented by Mr. Mehmet Konica, and Mr. Mihal Turtulli, in the hearing session, in addition to the several letters sent to the Conference' representatives.

The Cham issue was an integral part of the Southern Albanian issue; therefore it was discussed within the latter's perspective. Despite all the calls, protests, and petitions, from the Albanians, the Peace Conference discussed the Albanian issue in the Commission for the Greek Affairs. This beginning marked the future decisions as well. Greek claims were given priority upon the Albanian ones. However, this commission, after few debates among its members, heard both the parties, the Greek and later the Albanian. These delegations presented their arguments with statistical data, and many other protests followed during all the sessions of the Conference. Albanians in this congress not only did not receive a minimum support for their ethnic population living abroad the national borders established in December 1913, but also the entire country risked dissolution, being considered as a territory to be distributed between the victorious parties of the Great War, while Albania had maintained a neutral position.

In the turmoil of the aftermath of World War I, the aim of the international actors was that of establishing peace on the international level, therefore superficially, and dealing with every minority's fundamental rights was not an easy matter. However, the conference ended up, inter alia, with the Treaties for Minorities, which had little impact on the ground. These facts, among others, explain the indifference of the Great Powers towards the Cham issue.

2. Literature Review

The literature for this article is based on primary and secondary sources. The Cham issue has been treated in the overall situation of Albania during the Paris Peace Conference; therefore many documents depict the general background of the country, without stopping particularly at this case study [the Cham issue]. However, it is worth mentioning the main concrete efforts of this relatively small population in front of the Paris Peace Conference, which are considerably covered in the work of Hajredin Isufi "Chameria in the chronicles of the time 1902-1940" with an illustration of the main articles of the Albanian and Foreign Press, and also in the Albanian Central Archives where it is possible to find the diplomatic movements specifically those in regard to Chameria, also, the discrepancies of the Albanian government and delegations of the time, which is thought to have contributed to the overall background of un/achieved results. An important primary resource is also the translated version of the Memorandum presented by Mr. Venizelos [Prime Minister of Greece] to the Commission for Greek Affairs of the Conference [archive.org], which represents the main platform of Greece' attitudes in disfavour to the Albanian issue, since they were aiming their territorial expansion. The book of author Arben Puto reports the proceedings of the Conference, the hearing sessions of the two delegations Albanian and Greek, regarding the issue of Epirus and Chameria; the latter was mentioned first by Mr. Mehmet Konica, and replied by Mr. Mihal Turtulli, the only official dialogue in which the Cham issue was brought up during this political forum. An important point of view for the conference sessions concerning the treatment of the Albanian issue is to be found also in the book of Destani and Tomes, through the reports of Aubrey Herbert, who clearly conveyed the mistreatment of Cham's human rights.

3. Methodological Aspects and Research Questions

This paper will focus on the case study method, referring to the Cham population in the background of the Peace Conference in Paris 1919. Considering the historical context, the documentary analysis is the most appropriate method to be used through the evaluation of primary and secondary resources.

Throughout this research, a deductive approach will aim to show the superficial importance of minorities' rights in front of the Paris Peace Conference thus applying this theory to the case study [Cham issue]. In order to better understand the results regarding the importance of Cham issue at this international forum, a chronological perspective will be employed in order to show that minority issues were treated only superficially, or not treated at all, when not binding by geopolitical and strategic interests.

Therefore, this paper will try to find answers to the questions:

- What are the underlying reasons that explain the position of the Cham Issue at the Peace Conference in Paris 1919?
- What was the approach of Albania's representatives in regard to the Cham Issue?

4. Cham Issue during the Peace Conference in Paris 1919: Efforts vs Perspective

During this time, the region of Chameria was disputed by Albania and Greece. The latter had previously annexed it after the Conference of London 1913. Meanwhile, during the Peace Conference in Paris 1919, seeing itself as part of the victorious parties, Greece aimed its compensation by claiming the need of annexing, among others, the so-called region of Northern Epirus, found in the Albanian territory according to the existing borders.

On the other hand, the Albanian Diaspora had started lobbying before the official opening of this Conference, with the aim to find a solution to the Albanian issue considering the denial of basic human rights that the Albanian population of the annexed territories by its neighbours was suffering. A crucial role for the Cham issue was played mainly by the Cham and Albanian Diaspora in the United States of America. Meanwhile, several associations were created. The association "Chameria" and the Albanian National Party were created in Worcester, U.S.A., "Brotherhood" association in Hartford, U.S.A., while in Albania, the association "Cham brotherhood", "To save Chameria", "To remember Chameria" were created after World War I. (Akademia e Shkencave e Shqipërisë, 2007, pp. 499) In addition to these movements, in Switzerland, the United Committee of Albanians was created in 1919. (Akademia e Shkencave e Shqipërisë, 2007, pp. 499)

The Albanian Diaspora's participated [in written form] in the Conference as soon as its opening session. On January 18, Albanian newspapers in United States report a letter of Mrs. Dako, [Co-Founder of Albanian National Party in Worcester] sent to the chairman of the Peace Conference. In this letter, she protests for the Greek claims over Northern Epirus, while asking for recognition of Albania with its ethnic borders, unlike of what was established after the Conference of London 1913. (Isufi, 2007, pp. 217) The next act was a telegram sent by Cham representatives to Mr. Clemenceau, the

chairman of the Conference, to President Wilson, Baron Sonnino, Lloyd George, and Saionji Kinmochi. In this act, they denounced the unjust decision of the Conference of London, claiming their sufferings from persecutions and asking for unification with Albania. The signatories of this telegram were Beqo Izeti, the chairman of the association "Chameria", Mete Sejko, Isuf Hyseni, Omer Bako, Refo Çapari, and Gazali Dino. (Isufi, 2007, pp. 228).

After the official opening of the Peace Conference, the Anglo-Albanian association sent a note to "The Times", claiming that the Albanians were denied a hearing session in the Peace Conference, while other parties were invited. (Destani and Tomes, 2012, pp. 319) Despite the fact that Albania was later presented to the Conference with a delegation mandated from the Government of Durrësi, its representation rouse several debates, due to other Albanian presences during the Peace Conference. Referring to this time, a notable Albanian personality, Egrem Bej Vlora declares that Albanians lacked every mean for the organization of a state. (Bej Vlora, Botimi i Trëtë [Third Edition], pp. 440) On the other hand, the British representative of the panel of Commission on Greek Affairs said that it was not appropriate to hear all the parties involved, instead they could have had the possibility to express their requirements in written form, in addition a time of 15[fifteen] minutes would have been granted to them to explain their ideas. (Puto, 2001, pp. 158) While the representative of the United States of America agreed to hear the official delegation of Albania, Mr. Laroche, the French representative claimed that there was not an official delegation for this country. (Puto, 2001, pp. 158-159) However, it [the delegation] was admitted later on, also due to the position in favour expressed by the other members of the Commission.

Before the hearing session of February 27, 1919, on a memorandum of February 12, the Albanian delegation expressed their faith in the fairness of the decisions that the Conference would have made. After this, they demanded the restoration of the ethnic boundaries of Albania, and also sought reparation for a number of villages in southern Albania burned by the Greeks. (AQSH, 251, 1919, 10, pp. 22-25) The second memorandum on February 24 expressed the same requests. In reference with Chameria, they rejected Greek demands on Northern Epirus, as they explained "those aimed to oblige Albanians to give up on requests of Southern Epirus, especially Chameria". (Naska, 1999, pp. 39) This idea was part of a resolution which was also reported in "Albania" newspaper on March 27, 1919. (Isufi, 2007, pp. 239) In this resolution, the author invited the parties to send petitions to President Wilson, as the only mean for a solution to the Albanian [and Cham] issue. (Isufi, 2007, pp. 241) In support to this view [rejection of Greek demands on Northern Epirus, in addition against the attitude of Mr. Carapanos who introduced himself as deputy of this region], Albanian Christians native of the same region [Northern Epirus] sent a letter to the head of the British delegation at the Peace Conference in Paris on July 5. (Elsie and Destani, 2013, pp. 59).

When the Albanian delegation was invited to the panel of the Commission on Greek Affairs, Mr. Mehmet Konica presented some information about Chameria. He said that: "Chameria is inhabited mainly by Albanians, and muslim Albanians, which means that there is no place for Greek national consciousness..." (Puto, 2001, pp. 169) Before this session, Mr. Venizelos was heard in front of the Commission, where he presented his idea that nationality is only based on the national consciousness. (Greece before the Peace Congress, Memorandum translated from French, pp. 3) After the declaration of Mr. Konica, Mr. Turtulli said that Greece in name of nationality was asking many things; when it should have been more coherent to this principle by returning back to Albania a territory [like Chameria] which does not belong to it. (Puto, 2001, pp. 169) In this hearing session, the Albanian representative Mr. Turtulli highlighted Mr. Venizelos' declaration on the Albanian nationality of many notable personalities of the Greek state. (Puto, 2001, pp. 168) In the same situation, the delegation of Northern Epirus presented their position to the matter in front of the panel. Mr. Carapanos said that Epirotes never sought for the Albanian nationality. (Puto, 2001, pp. 170) To support this declaration, he referred to Filat, as an example, despite the fact that this village has always been one of the main centres of Chameria for centuries. Against this declaration, we can refer to Mr. Konica's pronouncement during the hearing session on the Greek Affairs' Commission that in Chameria there was no place for Greek national consciousness. In support to this view, we can also consider statistical data by the Ottoman Empire during the XVI century, where inhabitants of the Cham villages were registered with Albanian names like Gjin, Gjon, Lekë etc., before their conversion into the Muslim religion. (Duka, 2009, pp. 201-207)

All the Greece' representatives claimed that the Greek element was dominant in the Southern Albania, and this fact according to them was due to the Greek schools that were present on that territory during the Ottoman Empire. However, as Puto explains in his book, in the Ottoman Empire populations were recognized in base of their religion instead of their nationality, therefore, the Greeks, as orthodox, were allowed to have their own schools. (2001, pp. 19). Albanians were not permitted to have this right during this period. Orthodox Albanians were an inconsiderable minority. As a result, the Greek schools dominated. (Puto, 2001, pp. 19).

After the memorandums of February, the next Albanian diplomatic move in Paris was a request for an American mandate associated with a plebiscite. (AQSH, 251, 1919, 14, pp. 22) The Albanian representatives were realizing that the

Commission on Greek Affairs was not considering properly their requests, therefore they invited United States of America to administer the disputed territories for a year or two and the population of these territories could have had a chance to express themselves freely and decide for their future thereon. (AQSH, 251, 1919, 14, pp. 22).

On March 13, in Worcester, where the National Albanian Party gathered on its yearly meeting, its chairman Kristo Dako, and its representatives voted unanimously for three resolutions. The first one was to inform President Wilson and the Great Powers representatives for the establishment the Albanian state within its ethnic borders. The second was for the protest against any possible further fragmentation of Albania. The third one was for the establishment of an international commission that would have evaluated the damages caused to Albania during the Balkan Wars and World War I. (AQSH, 251, 1919, 7, pp. 18).

After this, the Cham representatives, Arif Çami, Ahmed Çamëria, Qemo Preveza, Xhevit Ajdonati, sent a letter to the main representatives of the Conference, in which they denounced the Greek acts in Chameria. Chams' representatives conveyed once again on March the idea of a mandate of administration for United States of America, in which commissions could have surveyed the population on their situation and consequently find out the truth of these facts [denounced by Albanian representatives]. (AQSH, 251, 1919, 14, pp. 42) A telegram was sent by Chams to Mr. Tittoni, the chairman of the Italian delegation, and four copies to the American Delegation, President Wilson, Colonel Castoldi, and Mr. Clemenceau. (Isufi, 2007, pp. 245) In this telegram Mr. Vehib Demi, and Jasin Isufi, Cham Albanians, asked him to use his influence for the unification of Chameria with Albania, and furthermore to help Mr. Rasih Dino to join the Conference in Paris. (Isufi, 2007, pp. 245) On May 22 1919, the chairman of "Chameria" association in Worcester sent a letter to President Wilson, insisting for his support for unification of Chameria with Albania, as a mean of granting peace to the Balkans region. (Isufi, 2007, pp. 251).

Luigj Bumçi, the new chairman of the Albanian delegation sent a petition to Clemenceau on July 25, stating the denial of fundamental rights of Cham population especially those who should have been respected according to the bilateral Treaty of Greece with Turkey. (AQSH, 251, 1919, 14, pp. 45-46) In response to this letter, Mr. Haxhi Murat Çami congratulated Bishop Bumçi for his attitude, and asked him to attend the Chams' representative Mr. Rasih Dino to Paris. (Isufi, 2007, pp. 255).

On September 16, the National Albanian Committees in Switzerland sent a letter to the Head of the US Foreign Affairs Commission of Senate in Washington in order to ask for support for their requests [similar and consistent with other Albanian representatives' requests] to the "Great Liberal Republic" [used to describe the United States from Albania's representatives of that time]. (AQSH, 251, 1919, 9, pp. 318).

Representatives of the Albanian National Committees in USA, Canada, and Switzerland sent a letter to the President of the US Foreign Affairs Commission of Senate in Washington, while expressing their belief in the American values as protectors of liberty and peace, with special reference to President Wilson and his statement of Fourteen Points. (Naska, 1999, pp. 60-61) Furthermore, they pointed out, *inter alia*, once again the injustice that Greece was continuously making to the Albanians. (Naska, 1999, pp. 60-61).

Another political movement regarded Cham representatives led by Asaf Çami who sent a letter to Clemenceau while explaining in details the situation of Chameria. They claimed that "Greece would not have lost anything if Chameria was returned to Albanian state due to the fact that it is an Albanian region, inhabited by Albanians". (Isufi, 2007, pp. 264-266) For this fact, the representatives sent also some statistical data to clarify the population presence in this region. This letter was written on October 25, 1919. (Isufi, 2007, pp. 266).

Later on, on November 1919, Mrs. Leila Dino, Rasih Dino's daughter, sent a letter to Mrs. Wilson asking her for the influence of the American President on the Albanian issue. (Isufi, 2007, pp. 259-260) In this letter, she pointed out all the injustices and massacres that the Albanian population, especially [innocent] women suffered in seeing all the consequences of the foreign jurisdiction, as occurred in the annexed territories by Serbs and Greeks. (Isufi, 2007, pp. 259-260).

The next movement of the chairman of the Albanian National Party, Kristo Dako, regarded a letter send to Clemenceau. In this letter, he expressed the disappointment for the support that the Great Powers gave to the Greek-Italian agreement, which would have also included Gjirokastra to Greece' territory. He said that they would have objected every decision that would have not included the recognition of the Albanian state within its ethnic borders. (AQSH, 30, 1920, pp. 56) On February 11, 1920, Vehib Demi and Galip Xhaferri, the main representatives of the Chameria association in Worcester, sent a petition to Clemenceau, asking for the inclusion of Chameria in the Albanian state, because according to them in Chameria there were 30,587 Muslim Albanian, 7,255 Christian Albanians, and only 13,280 Greeks. (Isufi, 2007, pp. 266; Elsie et al., 2013, pp. 62) The same statistics were previously made available to the chairman of the Conference by Asaf Çami and other Cham representatives in the memorandum of October 25, 1919. (Isufi, 2007, pp. 265-266).

On June 1920, "Albania" newspaper reports a protest of Mr. Dako, and Mr. Çami, sent respectively to Mr. Clemenceau, and President Wilson. The first expresses his disappointment with the mandate on Albania that the Conference gave to Italy, while Mr. Çami, on behalf of Chams prays President Wilson to make it possible that this territory be included to Albanian state. (Isufi, 2007, pp. 254).

In a summary, the Albanian written petitions were the only available mean that they had for the salvation of their issue, a part from the few possibilities they received as the possibility of being heard in official and unofficial meetings. However, their potential achievements were debatable due to several factors. While Greece was ranked among the winners after the Great War, Albania had a neutral position. As a result, Greeks claiming was "legitimate", because it was claiming the trophy after the victory of the war.

On the other hand, Albanians had a considerably weak position in the international arena during that moment. Their state was not formed properly, therefore the delegation mandated by the Durrësi government was not considered official, even though some of the Conference representatives admitted it to be heard as a party involved in the matter, but it received the same status as the so-called representatives of the region of Northern Epirus did. By the other side, the government of Greece and Venizelos were welcomed to be heard because this country was already consolidated in comparison to the Albania's situation.

In a confrontation of both the delegations' attitudes, respectively the Greek and after that the Albanian one, it is noticeable the support that Greece received in this international political forum, starting from the fact that the Albanian issue, as well, was discussed in the so-called Commission on Greek Affairs, thus attributing to the Albanian issue a dependency on the Greek interests. Another important argument to be considered in this regard is the declaration of Mr. Turtulli, when he says that there are other nationals Russians, Serbs, Bulgarians, which are orthodox, but they are not Greek. (Puto, 2001, pp. 23) Greeks tendency was that of representing each orthodox Albanian as Greek. On the other side, Mr. Turtulli was an orthodox native from Korça, one of the regions claimed by Greece for future annexation.

The Albanian issue in the Conference of Paris 1919 was highly debated among the representatives of the Commission who dealt with the matters. In their attitudes, mostly the American, but also the Italian representatives were in favour to the Albanian issue. However, the Italians were mainly interested in their mandate over Albania, while the American representatives tempted to be faithful to their nation's position for the principles of peace. President Wilson held a position favourable to the Albanians' situation in general. However, the Cham issue did not receive a proper attention in this political forum. Maybe, it was the American President's declaration of Fourteen Points, who brought all the Chams' [Albanians also] claims and hopes for justice, and the United States' position as a protector of individuals basic rights. (Dishnica, 2004, pp. 244) Nonetheless, the liberal political declarations were only at the early stages, and quite inapplicable for the time. Therefore, minorities could not be granted all the rights on the ground.

5. Concluding Remarks

The Cham issue was part of the Albanian issue. Albania's borders established in 1913 did not include almost half of its total surface and population. Chameria's major part was annexed by Greece, while Albania received only few of its villages. The Albanian delegation's main aim was the restoration of its country's ethnic borders, and this was mentioned almost in every letter that was sent to the Conference of Peace in Paris representatives. Albanians laid their hopes to U.S.A.'s President Wilson, especially due to his declaration of Fourteen Points, which claimed principles that would have maintained the world peace, and populations would have been free to choose for their own future, based on their nationality. A part from these declarations, it was early for the implementation of this idyllic concept of inter- and intra-national politics.

The Albanian Diaspora [also Cham Diaspora] in the United States played an important role. At the end of the Peace Conference, Albania risked its dissolution due to its neighbour countries geopolitical interests. However, the attitude of the American politics is generally admitted to have saved the Albanian issue, at least in avoiding its dissolution while reaffirming the borders established with the Protocol of Florence [1913].

In a summary, if the confrontation of data presented by the Albanian and Greek delegation to the Conference panels was analyzed objectively, based also in the new era of liberal political principles claimed theoretically, maybe the Albanian [also Cham] cause would have won, but this could not occur because the international politics of the time had strong highlights of Realism, and Liberalism was only at its early stages, making as a result quite impossible its implementation, therefore the solution of minority issues like the Cham one.

Despite the positive expectations, the Cham issue received a markedly weak consideration at the Paris Peace Conference due to the fact that Albania [the main political actor for the Cham issue] was not considered a state from many political actors of the time. Furthermore, several delegations from Albania went to this international forum thus

disrupting the main nationalistic aim of the unification of the country within its ethnic borders. The international arena was not prepared to thoroughly respect the minority rights, therefore the Cham issue remained unsolved, and the region [Chameria] remained outside the borders of Albania.

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