

“Un centro d’intrighi”: The Tainted Collaboration of the Axis Powers in the Borderlands of “Greater Albania”

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Abstract:

During the Second World War in the northeastern border areas of “Greater Albania”, Serbia, and Montenegro the two occupying powers, Italy and Germany, were forced to work together from 1941 to 1943. From the beginning, the collaboration, which evolved during the Balkans campaign in 1941 following the redistribution of the territories between the Axis powers, was marked by deep resentment and distrust. Both occupying powers acted against opponents in the most brutal manner in order to destroy enemy groups and keep their part of the territory under control. But at the same time, both wanted to keep the influence of the other occupying power as subdued as possible by manipulating and instrumentalising the pre-existing interethnic conflicts between locals for their own purposes. The following article seeks to shed light on these Italian-German occupation strategies, which have not been thoroughly investigated thus far.

Keywords: Second World War, Axis powers, Albania, Greater Albania, Serbia, Italy, Germany, persecution, recruitment

Introduction

Despite the official image of a cordial friendship between Mussolini and

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Hitler, the everyday reality in “Greater Albania” and its border territories -where Italian and German authorities were obliged to work together from 1941 to 1943- was quite different. The relationship between the two Axis powers was hardly a cordial one, but rather corroded by suspicion, envy, and mutual accusations. These tensions became visible particularly in the territories near the demarcation lines in Northern Kosovo and the Sandžak region. Therefore, after a short introduction and overview, this article focuses on Italian and German occupation structures, their superficial collaboration, their efforts to harm the rival in “Greater Albania” and its border territories and their efforts to instrumentalise already smouldering interethnic conflicts of the region.¹ Furthermore, this paper will shed light on intentions, strategies and the active involvement of local players within the machinations of the occupying forces.

Becoming an Italian colony

After the 2018 Football World Cup “Greater Albania” became common talk once again. To build “Greater Albania” was not only an Albanian national intention since 1912,² but a long-term Italian project too, as we will see. On Christmas Eve of 1924, Fan Noli, one of the fast-changing prime ministers, who tried to lead the young state towards democracy, was overturned by a coup led by Ahmed Zogu and his followers.³ Zogu immediately established a dictatorial regime, persecuted his opponents harshly and finally crowned himself King on 1 September 1928. Under Zogu, Albania became increasingly dependent on Italy and formed the base of Mussolini’s expansionist efforts in Southeast Europe in the interwar period.⁴ The growing Italian influence in the economic sector became visible through the multitude of diverse Italian companies, which settled in Albania beginning in the 1920s and exploited mineral resources mainly for the Italian defence industry. In 1925 Mussolini founded the *Società per lo Sviluppo Economico in Albania* (SVEA), which would dominate

¹ On various perceptions of Italians and Germans as occupiers see H. James Burgwyn, *L'impero sull'adriatico. Mussolini e la conquista della Jugoslavia 1941-1943* (Gorizia: LEG, 2006), 368-376 and Filippo Focardi, *Il cattivo tedesco e il bravo italiano. La rimozione delle colpe della seconda guerra mondiale* (Roma: Laterza, 2016).

² Since the Albanian National Congress on 28 November 1912 in Vlorë/Valona the discussion on the seize of the Albanian state never stopped. See for example report by Safranek, 21 May 1917, Liasse Krieg Serbien, AT-OeStA/HHStA PA I 977-32k.

³ Zogu was supported by the Russian White Guard and the government in Belgrade. Bernhard Tönnies, *Sonderfall Albanien, Enver Hoxhas "eigener Weg" und die historischen Ursprünge seiner Ideologie* (München: Oldenbourg, 1980), 366.

⁴ Elena Aga Rossi and Maria Teresa Giusti, *Una guerra a parte: I militari italiani nei Balcani, 1940-1945* (Bologna: Mulino, 2011), 30.

the entire Albanian economy.⁵ A stereotypical example, which represents nearly all Italian enterprises in Albania in this period was the *Azienda Generale Italiana Petroli*, better known as *AGIP*. Founded in 1926 in Rome, its influence in Albania increased rapidly. A few years later, *AGIP* already had established a branch in Albania, the *Azienda Italiana Petroli Albanesi* (*AIPA*).⁶

Among the most remarkable expressions of the growing Italian influence were the two Tirana Agreements: The First Tirana Agreement was set for five years and was signed on 27 November 1926 as a “friendship- and security-pact”. The Second Tirana Agreement, a defensive alliance for the next twenty years, was formalized between the two states on 22 November 1927.⁷

On 22 June 1938, Ciano and General Alberto Pariani, Chief of the General Staff, discussed possible implementations for the further exploitation of Albania. The oil field of Devoll was seen as highly essential for the military autarky of the Italian state in the occurrence of a future military conflict.⁸ In September 1938 the concrete lines of a military scenario to annex Albania had already been initiated, given that Yugoslavia and Greece remained neutral.⁹

Finally, Ciano and Mussolini set up a pro forma ultimatum for 6 April 1939.¹⁰ During the night from 6 April to 7 April, Italian forces under the command of general Alfredo Guzzoni invaded Albania. An Italian newspaper headline demonstrates the official view on the occupation: “Albania connected to Italy forever!” The new Albanian government was portrayed as being grateful for belonging to the great imperial and fascist Italy now.¹¹ The German ambassador in Tirana Eberhard von Pannwitz

⁵ “Society for Economic Development in Albania” founded on 23 April 1925. Tönnes, *Sonderfall Albanien*, 375.

⁶ Davide Conti, *L’occupazione italiana dei Balcani. Crimini di Guerra e mito della “brava gente” (1940-1943)* (Roma et al.: Laterza, 2016), 145. Bernhard Kühmel, “Deutschland und Albanien 1943-1944: die Auswirkungen der Besetzung auf die innenpolitische Entwicklung des Landes” (PhD diss., Universität Bochum, 1981), 32.

⁷ Tönnes, *Sonderfall Albanien*, 384.

⁸ Massimo Borgogni, *Tra continuità e incertezza, La strategia politico-militare dell’Italia in Albania fino all’Operazione “Oltre Mare Tirana”* (Mailand: Franco Angeli 2007), 257.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 257.

¹⁰ Galeazzo Ciano, *The Ciano Diaries 1939-1943: The Complete, Unabridged Diaries of Count Galeazzo Ciano, Italian Minister for Foreign Affairs 1936-1943*, ed. Hugh Gibson (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1946), 5 April 1939, 60. Ciano, *The Ciano Diaries*, 8 April 1939, 62.

¹¹ News in brief “Albanien für immer mit Italien verbunden!”, *D.N.B.*, Nr. 557, 13 April 1939, PAAA, R102359. As Rodogno points out Albania was the only European conquest

observed on the morning of 7 April that, "Italian warships came to Durazzo during the night opening fire in the morning, to which the Albanians responded. Italian planes dropped flyers, which advised the population against resistance. Italian forces would stay in the country only until order, justice and peace would be established. Every resistance will be broken."¹² There were only a few exceptions like Abaz Kupa, an Albanian notable and former officer in Zogu's armed forces, who resisted with his private army in Durrës (Durazzo).¹³

Creating "Greater Albania"

Mussolini and Ciano were well aware of the ethnic situation and irredentism throughout Albania and the bordering territories and knew of the integrational drive of the concept "Greater Albania" for the realization of their own intentions: Still in April 1939, only a few days after the invasion, Ciano considered the integration of about 850,000 Kosovars to double the population of Albania.¹⁴ His goal was to focus the attention of Yugoslavia away from the Italian activities and towards the Kosovo region, "an inner Balkan problem" as he noted.¹⁵ Mussolini himself saw Albanian irredentism as "a small light at the end of a dark tunnel". Both were convinced that this was "the ideal future lure to keep the Albanian national sentiment alive and unified".¹⁶ One year later, in 1940, Ciano noted after a journey through the country that, "the Albanians are very belligerent and want Kossowa [sic] and Ciamuria. Therefore, it is easy for us to augment the sympathy by supporting the Albanian nationalism."¹⁷

accomplished by the Italians without the help of the Germans. Davide Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire: Italian Occupation During the Second World War*, trans. Adrian Belton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 57. Tönnes, *Sonderfall Albanien*, 415-416.

¹² Telegram, Consulate General Tirana, from von Pannwitz to Auswaertiges Amt (AA), 7 April 1939, PAAA, R28845.

¹³ Hubert Neuwirth, *Widerstand und Kollaboration in Albanien 1939-1944* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2008), 41. Tönnes, *Sonderfall Albanien*, 421.

¹⁴ The number of potential "New Albanians" depends on the various sources: 850,000 (Ciano, *The Ciano Diaries*, 21 April 1939, p. 69), 750,000 (see Willibald Kollegger, *Albaniens Wiedergeburt* (Wien: Wiener Verlagsgesellschaft, 1942), 147) and 500,000 (see von Pannwitz an AA, 11.10.1938, PAAA, R103286, p. 66). See for Albanian initiatives for a "Greater Albania" shortly after the Italian invasion Luca Micheletta, "Il sostegno alla grande Albania: Il caso del Kosovo," in *L'occupazione italiana dell' Jugoslavia (1941-1943)* ed. Francesco Caccamo and Monzali Luciano (Firenze: Le Lettere, 2008), 259.

¹⁵ Ciano, *The Ciano Diaries*, 21 April 1939, 69.

¹⁶ Ciano, *The Ciano Diaries*, 3 June 1939, 92.

¹⁷ Ciano, *The Ciano Diaries*, 22 May 1940, 254. Ciamuria/Tsamouria/Çamëria is a border region in the south of Albania towards Greece.

Two years later, in April 1941, the goal to enlarge the Italian occupied territory became reality: After the coup d’état of anti-German and anti-Italian officers in Serbia on 25 March against the government Dragiša Cvetković, the underaged Peter II was crowned king. Only two days later, on 27 March, Hitler decided to destroy Yugoslavia as a state.¹⁸ On 6 April the Balkan campaign started -and just days later on 17 April, the operation came to its conclusion.¹⁹ Kosovo was separated in three parts: South and Middle Kosovo became “New Albania” and were now part of “Greater Albania” under Italian control. Northern Kosovo with parts of the Sandžak remained with Serbia under German military control, and a smaller eastern part now belonged to Bulgaria. Many of the Albanians in this region saw the Balkan campaign as a liberation of the so-called ‘Serbian yoke’, and therefore were willing to collaborate with the Axis powers.²⁰ Nevertheless, at the same time resistance against the invaders grew.²¹

New neighbours: Quarrels and collaboration

Italy and Germany now became neighbours, and as allies they needed to collaborate and set up a functioning system to rule the region. The Germans were primarily interested in the economic exploitation of the “Greater Albanian” border territories. The Italians however, were looking for a political and military domination of “Greater Albania” - besides the satisfaction of economic interests. Holm Sundhausen characterized the resulting conflicts of interests with the following words: “A special problem was the diversification between the NS-‘Grossraumwirtschaft’ [wider area economy] and Italian spheres of interest in Southeast Europe. The distinction always remained hazy and noncommittal; additionally, it was obscured by distinct (and notably unrealistic) differentiations between political and economic spheres of

¹⁸ Detlef Vogel, “Eingreifen Deutschlands auf dem Balkan,” in *Der Mittelmeerraum und Südosteuropa: Von der “non belligeranza” Italiens bis zum Kriegseintritt der Vereinigten Staaten*, vol. 3, ed. Gerhard Schreiber, Bernd Stegemann, and Detlef Vogel (München & Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1984), 343-344. Jozo Tomasević, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia 1941-1945, Occupation and Collaboration* (Stanford: University Press, 2001), 47.

¹⁹ Tomasević, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia*, 61-64.

²⁰ Henriette Riegler, “Angst vor Großalbanien – Konstruktionen, Realitäten und Szenarien,” in *Albanien: Geographie, historische Anthropologie, Geschichte, Kultur, postkommunistische Transformation* ed. Peter Jordan (Wien & Bern: Peter Lang, 2003), 329-342, 333.

²¹ For early resistance movements in the region see Franziska Zaugg, *Albanische Muslime in der Waffen-SS, Von “Großalbanien” zur Division “Skanderbeg”* (Paderborn: Schöningh 2016), 64-74. Franziska Zaugg, “Resistance and Its Opponents in the Region of Sandžak and Kosovo,” in: *Les Cahiers Sirice* 1, no. 22 (2019): 85-99.

influence and between super- and sub-spheres. This ambiguity created a lot of space for manifold interpretations, and was filled with most diverse contents (political, geopolitical, economic, ideological and ethnic-political) by the rivalling centres of power and authorities in the Third Reich."²²

As a consequence, neither the diverging interests of the Axis powers nor those of particular Balkan states (Albania, Serbia, Montenegro and Bulgaria) were satisfied with the situation regarding Kosovo. A contrary scenario unfolded and, "in the Balkans evolved a permanent side theatre whose challenges the [German] political and military leadership couldn't take."²³ It became a hotspot of diverse overlapping conflicts between various local ethnic and political groups, between these groups and the Axis powers, and finally between the two fascist powers as well.

In the last years before the Italian invasion, the German ambassador in Tirana Eberhard von Pannwitz voiced misgivings claiming that there was an anti-Italian mindset among the population because they feared they would become part of a war theatre once again. Even the annexation of Kosovo would not change this attitude.²⁴ Shortly after the Italian invasion in July 1939, von Pannwitz noted sarcastically that the speed of the fascistisation confused the Albanians who were "used to oriental tranquility".²⁵ One year later he reported that the "noisy and feisty Italian attitude did not evoke integrity by the calm and serious Albanians" and therefore they would never respect the new rulers.²⁶ He labelled the Italians as being unmanly, deceitful and sneaky.²⁷ Fascist state visits were described by von Pannwitz as grotesque events: "When Ciano arrives, *Fascio*-girls are presented in uniform. They parade with 100 bicycles, 100 tennis rackets and 50 fencing masks and swords. But there are neither tennis courts nor a tennis instructor, nor a fencing hall, nor a fencing instructor. They only do some cycling from time to time." According to him, the Albanians were offended by the Italians' aimlessness, arrogance,

²² Holm Sundhaussen, "Improvisierte Ausbeutung - der Balkan unter deutscher Okkupation," in *Das organisierte Chaos: "Ämterdarwinismus" und "Gesinnungsethik": Determinanten nationalsozialistischer Besatzungsherrschaft*, ed. Johannes Houwink ten Cate, Johannes and Gerhard Otto (Berlin: Metropol, 1999), 56.

²³ Olshausen, *Deutsche Balkanpolitik*, 724.

²⁴ German embassy Tirana to AA, 4 August 1937, PAAA, R103286, p. 043-044. Von Pannwitz to AA, 11.10.1938, PAAA, R103286, 66.

²⁵ Von Pannwitz to AA, 10 July 1939, PAAA, Altes Amt, Tirana 4/8, 238723.

²⁶ Von Pannwitz to AA, 20 April 1940, PAAA, Altes Amt, Tirana 4/8, 238703.

²⁷ Von Pannwitz to AA, 10 July 1939, PAAA, Altes Amt, Tirana 4/8, 238717. See also Bernd J. Fischer, *Albania at War 1939-1945* (London: Hurst & Company, 1999), 89.

and corruption.²⁸ It was hardly surprising when Ciano asked the *Auswaertiges Amt* to withdraw von Pannwitz.²⁹ In autumn 1940 Ernst von Weizsäcker had to recall von Pannwitz due to pressure from Mussolini and Ciano.³⁰

According to Pfeiffer, at the consulate general in Tirana, the Italians’ distrust only increased during the Balkan campaign when an Albanian proverb was mentioned at that time, which said that the Italians would tear the tongue out of anyone who dared to speak positively about the brief period in government of the German Prince Wilhelm zu Wied in 1914. He also describes the case of an Albanian who was warned by an Italian officer after wanting to meet with an employee of the German Consulate General for a glass of wine over the phone. The Italian officer was prompted to stop such phone calls.³¹

In the same period, not only in the north-eastern periphery, but also in the south on the Albanian-Greek border, resentments between Italians and Germans were smouldering at their highest levels, as Ciano confirms: “By the way, I have had enough of the Germans since [Field Marshal Wilhelm] List signed the armistice with Greece behind our backs and ever since the soldiers of the Casale division, who come from Forlì and hate the Germans, found a German soldier on the Perati bridge who blocked their path and stole the fruit of victory [over Greece]. Personally, I have had enough of Hitler and his actions. I do not like conversations that are introduced by a whistle; whistles are used to call waiters. And what other conversations are these? I have to listen to a really boring and useless monologue for five hours.”³²

²⁸ Note von Pannwitz to AA, 4 June 1940, PAAA, Altes Amt, Tirana 4/8, 238695.

²⁹ Von Mackensen to AA, 23 May 1938, PAAA, R103286, 047.

³⁰ Weizsäcker to Ribbentrop, 25 October 1940, PAAA, R28845, 25. The day after von Mackensen urged von Pannwitz to leave Tirana immediately, hence Ciano did not meet him again when he visited Tirana for the next time. Von Mackensen an Weizsäcker, 26 October 1940, PAAA, R28845, 26.

³¹ Consulate general Tirana, Pfeiffer to the German embassy in Rome, “Notes on the situation in Albania”, 19 April 1941, PAAA, R28845, 31.

³² Ciano, *The Ciano Diaries*, 10 June 1941, 333. For detailed insights into the German and Italian war fare and occupation policy in Greece see e.g. Anestis Nessou, *Griechenland 1941-1945: Deutsche Besatzungspolitik und Verbrechen gegen die Zivilbevölkerung - eine Beurteilung nach dem Völkerrecht* (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2009) or Paolo Fonzi, *Fame di Guerra. L’occupazione italiana della Grecia (1941-1943)* (Rome: Carocci 2019).

Half a year later the newly drawn demarcation line added more tinder to the fire.³³ Shortly after the Balkan campaign, criticism arose due to the mutual economic claims in the region. The Italians were convinced that the Germans would not effectively contain the anti-Italian activities in northern Kosovo. On the German side it was rumoured that the Italians would try to destroy the amicable Albanian-German relationship.³⁴ Admittedly, the Italians got the major part of Kosovo and the territory around Debar and Struga in what is today Macedonia. However, the Germans insisted they would gain the region of Mitrovica and therefore inherit the mineral wealth found in the zinc and lead mines of Trepça/Trepča.³⁵ They also claimed the ore mine in the Ljuboten region.³⁶ The only German claims left unsatisfied were the economically enticing border territories east of Prishtina/Priština and Ferizaj/Uroševac.³⁷

In November 1941, Otto von Erdmannsdorf, of the political department of the *Auswaertiges Amt*, continued to emphasize the importance of mutual “peace and order in political respect” for the implementation of economic interests in the region.³⁸ However, at the same time, Italian authorities began to suspect a growing anti-Italian movement on the German side of Kosovo.³⁹ The Italian ambassador in Berlin Dino Alfieri refers to a hub of intrigues in Mitrovica - “un centro di intrighi” - because the Albanians there who did not accept the Italian

³³ Schliep an AA, 3 August 1942, PAAA, Altes Amt, Tirana 4/3. Generalkonsulat Tirana, Pfeiffer an German embassy in Rome, “Notizen zur Lage in Albanien”, 19.04.1941, PAAA, R28845, 31.

³⁴ OB Südost, name illegible, report “Entwicklung der militärischen Lage in Albanien im Herbst 1944”, undated, BArchF, RW 40/116a, 17.

³⁵ Oliver Jens Schmitt, *Kosovo: Kurze Geschichte einer zentralbalkanischen Landschaft* (Wien: Böhlau, 2008), 212. Originally, Trepča was set up in 1926 by the British. Živko Avramovski. “Treći Reich i ‘Velika Albanija’ posle kapitulacije Italije (1943-1944),” in *Radovi Zavoda za hrvatsku povijest Filozofskoga fakulteta Sveučilišta u Zagrebu* 1 (1976): 93-213, 106-109. See also Klaus Olhausen, *Zwischenspiel auf dem Balkan: Die deutsche Balkanpolitik gegenüber Jugoslawien und Griechenland von März bis Juli 1941* (München: R. Oldenbourg 1973), 160.

³⁶ Avramovski, “Treći Reich,” 106-109. Neuwirth, *Widerstand und Kollaboration*, 60.

³⁷ Klaus Olhausen, “Die deutsche Balkanpolitik 1940-1941,” in *Hitler, Deutschland und die Mächte: Materialien zur Außenpolitik des Dritten Reiches* ed. Manfred Funke (Kronberg: Athenäum 1978), 722.

³⁸ AA, Otto von Erdmannsdorf to general consulate Tirana, 15 November 1941, PAAA, Altes Amt, Tirana 4/3.

³⁹ On the ambiguity of the demarcation line see also “Linie von Wien” office of border questions to the Albanian cabinet, note Italian foreign ministry, Abteilung politische Angelegenheiten, 2 January 1942, ASD, AP, 1931-1945, Bulgaria, Busta 28, sottofasc. 2 “incidenti vari al confine”. See also report of Italian ambassador in Berlin to Italian foreign ministry, 5 November 1941, ASD, AP, 1931-1945, Bulgaria, Busta 28, sottofasc. 2 “incidenti vari al confine”.

domination went over to the German side and publicly boasted their support for the Germans. Therefore, the Italians requested to send some troops into the northern region.⁴⁰ However the ambassador in Rome, von Mackensen, had been instructed to forbid the Italians from doing so.⁴¹

Wegener, from the consulate general, did not deny the accusations, but brought up the objection that the Italians would support Četnik units in the same territory.⁴² Vice consul Emil Geiger reported to Ribbentrop that the Italian intelligence service was ordered to implement an action in “New Albania” with the aim to enlarge the “Greater Albanian” territory again.⁴³

Volkstumsreferent Dr. Otto Feninger confirmed that there was “camaraderie and banter among German military personnel and Albanians based on an anti-Italian bias”.⁴⁴ Some days later Ciano officially accused German military authorities of supporting an “Albanian irredenta” in the Serbian part of Kosovo. He did not fail to outline Italy’s own territorial claims, and that it would be an appreciated “gesture of the Fuehrer to allocate this territory to the ancestral Albanian homeland”.⁴⁵

Wegener again did not neglect the German military support of the anti-Albanian resistance, but he related it to similar practices among the Italians: “We don’t have to do a ‘pater peccavi’ towards the Italians for they have committed similar sins and have quite a record because they try to convince the Albanians on our side to go for an Italian dominated ‘Greater Albania’”.⁴⁶

To answer these Italian “infiltration plans” the Germans continued to set up and equip an Albanian security service in northern Kosovo,⁴⁷ “to promote connections between us, and the Italian occupied territories and finally to seek a close contact to the consul general in Tirana and the

⁴⁰ Ibid. See also Christoph Stamm, “Zur deutschen Besetzung Albaniens 1943-1944,” *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen* 30, no. 2 (1981): 100.

⁴¹ Von Bülow an Ribbentrop, 20 November 1941, PAAA, R101024, 006. Geheimrat von Bülow to Ribbentrop, 20 November 1941, PAAA, R101024, p. 005-006.

⁴² German general consulate Tirana, in Vertretung: Wegener to Deutsche Botschaft in Rome, 12 November 1941, PAAA, Altes Amt, Tirana 4/3.

⁴³ Vice consul Emil Geiger, via Legationsrat Luther to Ribbentrop, 17 November 1942, PAAA, R101024, 011

⁴⁴ Von Bülow to Ribbentrop, 20 November 1941, PAAA, R101024, 005.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 004.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 005. Deutsches Generalkonsulat Tirana, in Vertretung: Wegener to Deutsche Botschaft in Rome, 12 November 1941, PAAA, Altes Amt, Tirana 4/3.

⁴⁷ Here were mentioned Albanian units under German command for the first time.

German district commander in Mitrovitza [sic]".⁴⁸ Because "the danger of the Mitrovica region becoming a source of German-Italian misunderstandings and frictions has to be avoided, in regard of the present necessary military and political collaboration with the Italians in the Balkans".⁴⁹

A proposal from the German office in Belgrade to resettle about 100,000 persons of the Albanian *Volksgruppe* (ethnic Albanians) to "Greater Albania" and therefore satisfy at least a portion of the Italian claims -to ameliorate the atmosphere among Italian and German authorities and to calm the situation among Serbs and Albanians in the border territories of Mitrovica- had been discussed, but, has not been realized then.⁵⁰

However, shortly after these vehement mutual accusations, the Commissioned Commanding General (*Bevollmächtigter Kommandierender General*) in Serbia, general of the infantry Franz Böhme admitted that the suspicion of the Italians was right.⁵¹ To placate the allies he instructed all officers of units deployed in the Kosovska Mitrovica region to create more distinct relations in the future: hence, Albanians who had immigrated into northern Kosovo from the "New Albanian" part of Kosovo were to be deported back to the Italian territory. Personal contacts with Italian officers abroad should be stopped and private invitations should be refused in the future. Also, the Albanians in the Serbian part of Kosovo should be admonished to end their "undisciplined and wild hatred against everything, which is not Albanian".⁵²

The continuing quarrels thwarted common proceedings and further destabilized the region. Due to the mutual charges and the bloody conflicts among Serbs and Albanians the poisoned atmosphere became more and more convoluted. During 1942 the situation deteriorated rapidly and the consul general in Tirana Martin Schliep was convinced

⁴⁸ Von Bülow an Ribbentrop, 20 November 1941, PAAA, R101024, 004.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 006. The Italian accusations against the German proceeding in Mitrovica 1941/42 and the support of the anti-Italian movements in this region did not stop after the Italian capitulation. Report to the Italian foreign ministry, without signature, 19 April 1944, ASD, Albania Busta 51, fasc. Alb. 1/1, 2.

⁵⁰ Von Bülow an Ribbentrop, 20 November 1941, PAAA, R101024, 004.

⁵¹ Bevollmächtigter Kommandierender General und Befehlshaber in Serbien Franz Böhme to Wehrmachtbefehlshaber Südost, General der Pioniere Walter Kuntze, "Italienische Wünsche bezüglich Kos. Mitrovica", 9 December 1941, BArchF, RW 40/23, 24.

⁵² Parzer "Durchführung des Sonderauftrags des Bevollm. Kdr. General in Serbien an Major Parzer", 4 December 1941, BArchF, RW 40/23, 25-26.

that the Italians did everything to goad the Albanians into provoking further incidents; for example, the Carabinieri had no sense for Albania,⁵³ and would show a “remarkable indifference” towards the border incidents, pretending to have them under control.⁵⁴

Despite the knowledge that only a straightforward collaboration among the axis-powers would lead to a detente of the interethnic conflicts and the containment of the growing resistance the two-sided accusations remained. Still in summer 1942, Schliep claimed that the Italians would try to turn the Albanian attention away from all other border issues and to the “Mitrovica question” by accusing the Germans of an anti-Italian resistance. Through an “intensive Italian whisper propaganda” they would try to integrate the Mitrovica region into their state. But he was convinced that this never would happen because “the inhabitants of the Kosovo region saw the German soldiers as the liberators from the yoke of Serbian foreign rule”. Therefore, they seemed willing to collaborate and remained loyal. However, the opinion persisted that the Italians instrumentalised the “alleged common wish of the Albanian population” for their own territorial claims.⁵⁵ Simultaneously, Ciano was convinced that the Germans were involved in the Bulgarian frontier violation in Albania because they were interested in the mines of Jerosina.⁵⁶ This was only two months after he himself questioned the demarcation lines which were drawn after the Balkan campaign 1941, claiming a territorial expansion, namely northern Kosovo, the Sandžak region and the Albanian territories that now belonged to Bulgaria.⁵⁷

Distracted by these mutual intrigues, Italians and Germans failed to detect the growing resistance in the “New Albanian”, Serbian and Montenegrin border territories during 1942. An informant of the “Gruda” tribe reported to the Germans that the Italians admittedly had seven to nine divisions deployed in the region, but even Italian military officers

⁵³ Schliep an Deutsche Botschaft in Rom, “Angebliche Kommunistentumtriebe in Albanien”, 23 March 1942, PAAA, Altes Amt, Tirana 4/6.

⁵⁴ Schliep an AA, Bericht “Lage in Albanien”, 16 September 1942, PAAA, Altes Amt, Tirana 4/7.

⁵⁵ Schliep an AA, Aufzeichnung “Albanische Grenzfragen”, 3 August 1942, PAAA, Altes Amt, Tirana 4/3. Also von Bülow reported Ribbentrop in the end of 1941 already that the Italians would plan a tortious influence to the German occupied Mitrovica-territory. See von Bülow to Ribbentrop, 20 November 1941, PAAA, R101024, 004-006.

⁵⁶ Ciano, *The Ciano Diaries*, 16 August 1942, 516.

⁵⁷ Chef der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD, i.V. Müller to Himmler, “Italienischer Vorschlag zur Änderung der bisherigen Demarkationslinie zwischen Montenegro/Albanien einerseits und Serbien/Bulgarien/Mazedonien andererseits”, 2 June 1942, BArchB, NS 19/3896, 10.

did not trust that they would be ready to intervene before the end of winter.⁵⁸

The rapid deterioration of the situation in “New Albania” is described in a letter by the soldier Luigi Memoli of the 72nd *infantry regiment “Puglie”* to Rita Bazzani in February 1943. “I am still in the ex-Yugoslavian territories annexed by Albania; here we become witnesses of an emerging situation from which who knows who is going to escape, a situation which is getting worse from day to day. [Concerning] the personal security one is not secure anymore like before, they begin to take advantage from our weakness, already some severe incidents happened. We are in the hand of the Lord!”⁵⁹

Even Josef Merfels of the consular office in Tirana reported to the *Auswaertiges Amt* that the Albanians acted now in an “ostentatious anti-Italian manner”.⁶⁰ According to Merfels this evolution based on a “chain of Italian errors and mistakes wherein the many unfulfilled promises played a decisive role.”⁶¹

Instrumentalisation of interethnic tensions for military support and recruitment

Such resentments as well as local smouldering conflicts often facilitated the recruitment efforts of one or the other occupying force. Early recruitments for the *Milizia Fascista Albanese* (MFA), the Albanian branch of the Italian *Milizia Volontaria per la Sicurezza Nazionale* (MVSN), better known as *Camicie Nere*, can be traced back to Summer 1939.⁶² To exploit interethnic tensions in the South and North of the country was considered an important strategy within the recruitment process. The German war correspondent Willibald Kollegger stated that the Albanians in Italian ranks had given the Greeks and Serbs many “a nut to crack”.⁶³ Here, the ‘nut-cracking’ metaphor refers to fighting methods

⁵⁸ Von Scheiger, “Die Lage in Montenegro”, 3 January 1942, PAAA, Altes Amt, Tirana 4/3. Schliep an AA, Abschrift der Aufzeichnung “Lage in Montenegro” von von Scheiger vom 03.01.1942, 30 January 1942, PAAA, Altes Amt, Tirana 4/3.

⁵⁹ Censorship of the Prefecture of Pavia, Letter of Luigi Memoli, 72nd Inf. Rgt. “Puglie” to Rita Bazzani, February 15th, 1943, ACS, MI, D.G., Aff. Gen. 1940-1945, b. 55, fasc. 20, sottofasc. 11.

⁶⁰ Merfels über Unterredung mit Jacomoni to AA, 1 February 1943, PAAA, Altes Amt, Tirana 4/7.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Zaugg, *Albanische Muslime*, 59.

⁶³ Kollegger, *Albaniens Wiedergeburt*, 65.

unacceptable to western understanding of the laws of war, i.e. the declared aim of the MFA was to drive out the non-Albanian population by looting, persecuting, torturing, and murdering. Albanian officers had been sent into the “New Albanian” territories “especially for such duties”.⁶⁴ In all Albanian border regions atrocities against resisters and civilians were tolerated or even commanded by superiors as Ciano and the German diplomat Peter Pfeiffer stated.⁶⁵

In the eyes of Kollegger, the MFA soldiers acted “tough and brave, they have withstood wherever they were ordered to [serve]”.⁶⁶ The fact that they were ready to fight to the last is also mentioned in a commemorative publication written for the 19th anniversary of the MVSN: “The Greeks, superior in numbers, got to know the value of the Albanian legionaries”.⁶⁷ Their potential for violence reached unprecedented levels of infamy. In summer of 1941, even Ciano noted in his diary that one of Mussolini’s most favoured generals -probably general Alessandro Pirzio Biroli- encouraged his soldiers in Albania, “I have heard that you are good family men. That’s very well at home, but not here. Here, you will never go too far in being thieves, murderers and rapists.”⁶⁸

In retaliation, soldiers of the MFA often fell victim to ruthless massacres as well: The German consulate general in Tirana reported after the MFA had deployed on the Greek front and, in the spring of 1941, on the Yugoslav front, to the embassy in Rome that the Albanian Blackshirts would be massacred if they were captured, in contrast to other soldiers in the Italian service.⁶⁹ The MFA Albanians who operated in the border areas with Montenegro suffered the same fate: “Blackshirts, however,

⁶⁴ Letter o the brotherhood of Dibra, Galičnik und Struga to the Prime Minister of Bulgaria, Bogdan Filov, 25 November 1942, ASD, AP, 1931-1945, Bulgaria, Busta 28, sottofasc. 3 “incidenti alla frontiera albano-bulgara a danno di cittadini bulgari”. Embassy in Tirana, Wegner to AA and embassy in Rome, 3 January 1943, PAAA, Altes Amt, Tirana 4/7. See also: “Angebliche Kommunistentumtriebe in Albanien”, Schliep to German embassy in Rome, 23.03.1942, PAAA, Altes Amt, Tirana 4/6.

⁶⁵ Pfeiffer to German Embassy in Rome, 14 October 1941, Altes Amt, Tirana 4/3, report Nr.1007. Ciano, *The Ciano Diaries*, 17 July 1941, 378.

⁶⁶ Kollegger, *Albaniens Wiedergeburt*, 65.

⁶⁷ Festschrift zum 19. Jahrestag der MVSN, ACS, SPD CO, b. 847, fasc. 500.020/II, 65.

⁶⁸ Ciano, *The Ciano Diaries*, 17 July 1941, 378.

⁶⁹ Consulate General in Tirana, name illegible, to German Embassy in Rome, 3 December 1941, PAAA, Altes Amt, Tirana 4/3.

were mostly cruelly massacred in retaliation for the acts of violence they had committed.”⁷⁰

Two German specialists of the region, *Volkstumsreferent* Dr. Feninger and political advisor on Albanian affairs to the *Auswaertiges Amt* Franz von Scheiger, commented on the situation in the northern border provinces after the 1941 Balkan Campaign: “It follows that the Arnauts drive out Serbian settlers from the Albanian area by burning their houses, in some cases entire villages. However, these measures on this side [the German side] of the German-Italian demarcation line are far from reaching the level of the territories occupied by Italy, where -on your way from Mitrovica to Pec [Peć/Pejë] one can observe many burning Serbian villages and Serbian and Montenegrin refugees in large number in the streets.”⁷¹ In spite of the ongoing interethnic conflicts, the Germans decided to recruit Albanians for support and to refill the ranks of their armed forces - whichever side -the Germans’ or Italians’- of the demarcation line the recruits came from. Such recruitments can be traced back to as early as December 1941, when Böhme ordered to limit recruiting -at least officially- to the German ruled part of Kosovo and Sandžak, and, as far as possible, to abstain from conscripting refugees from “Greater Albania”, which was under Italian control.⁷²

In 1943 at the latest, the interdependence between the German support of Albanians, mostly Albanian Muslims of anti-Italian disposition, and the German toleration of pogroms against the Serbian population in this region became evident. A report of an Italian V-man documented the “constantly increase of coercive measures against the Serbs in Kosovo” lead by German-supported circles. Understandably, the Italians feared an eventual secession of the nationalist Serbs, for these insisted on the Italians being responsible “for the accentuation of the

⁷⁰ Report ‘The situation in Montenegro’ by von Scheiger to AA, 3 January 1942, PAAA, Altes Amt, Tirana 4/3.

⁷¹ Volkstumsreferent Dr. Feninger with the Bevollmächtigten of the Auswaertiges Amt in Belgrade, Report “On the journey into the Arnaut region of Kosovska Mitrovica and Novi Pazar”, 15-26 October 1941, PAAA, R261153, 53. See also: Report Franz von Scheigers to the Auswaertiges Amt, 25 October 1941, PAAA, Altes Amt, Tirana 4/7, 255900.

⁷² Cf. Schreiben “Italienische Wünsche bezüglich Kos. Mitrovica”, Bevollmächtigter Kommandierender General und Befehlshaber in Serbien, General der Infanterie Franz Böhme, an Wehrmachtbefehlshaber Südost, General der Pioniere Walter Kuntze, 09.12.1941, BArchF, RW 40/23, 24.

pressure against the Serbs and Montenegrins”.⁷³ One of the exponents of this persecution of the Serbs was a V-man in German services, the future Albanian Interior Minister Xhafer Deva. He had been accused of showing an obvious “Italo-phobic attitude”.⁷⁴ He became highly involved in the early recruitments of Albanian Muslims into the *Albanisch-Musulmanische SS-Freiwilligenlegion* in the region of Mitrovica in 1943 and later was responsible for the recruitments of the *13th Waffen-Mountain-Division of the SS “Handžar”* and the *21st Waffen-Mountain-Division of the SS “Skanderbeg”* division in 1944.⁷⁵

The role of local leaders and politicians

Xhafer Deva was only one of various local protagonists in the Axis powers’ Balkan theatre. Notably the local elites refused to be mere pieces in a Chess game, as one military report stated in October 1944.⁷⁶ They had their own agenda and on their part tried to instrumentalise the German and Italian authorities. A telling example is the Draga family from Mitrovica, well known for their restless political activities in the region and their decade-long involvement in the machinations of the Great Powers in the Western Balkans. Ferhad Bey Draga and his brother Nexhip had been strong supporters of the Austro-Hungarian occupation (“administration”) of the Sandžak of Novi Pazar, which lasted from 1878 to the Balkan wars and from late 1915 until the end of World War I. Because of this and his alleged anti-Serbian stance, Ferhad Bey was German-friendly, too; indeed, the German Wehrmacht, Waffen-SS and authorities in that region were often filled with Austrian personnel who

⁷³ Auswertestelle Süd, 24 August 1944 unterzeichnet vom Chef der Heeresarchive Oberstleutnant Neumeister, “Lage in Albanien im Mai 1943”, 31 August 1944, BArchF, RH 18/407. The Germans still were convinced that the Italians would collaborate with Četnik-units. Report Reichel, AA Inland IIc, 12 April 1943, PAAA, Inland IIg, R100998. However, these circumstances should not hide the fact that the Italians too, implemented “a policy of persecution and repression of the Slavic populace in Kosovo e Macedonia, focusing on the exasperation of the interethnic conflict [...]”. Conti, *L’occupazione italiana dei Balcani*, 151.

⁷⁴ Bevollmächtigter des AA beim Militärbefehlshaber Serbien Felix Benzler to AA, 31 March 1943, PAAA, Inland IIg R100998. In this period Deva was a V-man in the German Wehrmacht in northern Kosovo. Ibid.

⁷⁵ Berger to AA Abteilung D VIII, 9.4.1943, PAAA, Inland IIg, R100998, H297616. On the instrumentalization of interethnic tensions and conflict and the involvement of Xhafer Deva, Rexhep Mitrovica and Bedri Pejani in the recruitment of “New Albanians” into German units see Zaugg, *Albanische Muslime*, 143-147. Attempts for future recruitments were already noticed in the end of 1942. Generalstatthalter Albanien, Gabinetto Diplomatico to the Italian foreign ministry about the situation in Serbia, 7 December 1942, ASD, AG, 1923-1943, Busta 1492 (AG Serbia 54).

⁷⁶ Bericht “Entwicklung der militärischen Lage in Albanien im Herbst 1944”, undatiert, Name unlesbar, BArchF, RW40/116a, 14. Zaugg, *Albanische Muslime*, 250.

belonged to the *Grossdeutsches Reich* since 1938. In addition, residing in both Mitrovica and Tirana, he acted as personal advisor to the Italian general governor Jacomoni, who was deployed in Albania, thus gaining confidential insight about all processes within the Italian administrative apparatus. Through his son, Ali Bey Draga, he would be well informed about the German recruiting efforts in Northern Kosovo and the Sandžak region.⁷⁷

Ali Bey became one of the protagonists of the anti-Serbian and anti-Italian movement, with Mitrovica as its centre, and bolstered by leading Albanians in the Serbian part of Kosovo, who generally refused to cooperate with the Italians -even though the latter were considered allies of the Germans.⁷⁸ As an Albanian *Volksgruppenführer* (ethnic group leader), employed in Serbian Kosovo, he became strongly involved in the early and later recruitments mentioned above. Ali Bey played a major role in rallying able young men and channelling them into the German ranks, while coordinating the recruitment for the Waffen-SS with local SS-authorities like *SS und Polizeiführer Sandžak* Karl von Krempler.⁷⁹

Escalation of violence against the former allies

On 8 September 1943 Italy surrendered; its forces in Albania remained uninformed. They heard the critical piece of information on the radio, as reported by second lieutenant Nazzareno Garat Crema.⁸⁰ Even the supreme commanders of the 6th and the 9th Italian army in Albania, General Ezio Rosi and General Lorenzo Dalmazzo, were ignorant and had no orders accordingly.⁸¹ In consequence, chaos ensued. 100,000 or more Italians⁸² were stranded in Albania at the time of the surrender, crowding the streets and squares, or waiting in vain in the harbour towns to be shipped back to Italy. Without any further orders most were lost and completely abandoned. Anti-Italian riots after the Italian surrender reveal the support of anti-Italian circles by German circles. Various

⁷⁷ Bericht an das italienische Außenministerium, ohne Namensangabe, 19 April 1944, ASD, RSI, Aff. Pol., Busta 51, fasc. Alb.

⁷⁸ Bevollmächtigter des AA beim Militärbefehlshaber Serbien Benzler an AA, 30 October 1941, PAAA, R261153.

⁷⁹ SSPF Sandžak von Krempler to the commander of the Muslim Militia, Casim Sijaric, 1943 (without exact date), VA, HEM.OK. BOJCKA, 9/6/10.

⁸⁰ Report by sottotenente Nazzareno Garat Crema, 10/27/1943, USSME, I3/b13/f1. Cf. also Avagliano Palmieri, *Gli internati militari italiani, Diari e lettere dai lager Nazisti 1943-1945* (Torino: Einaudi 2009), 3.

⁸¹ Rossi and Giusti, *Una guerra a parte*, 310.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 309.

German reports testify the desperate situation of clueless Italian soldiers wandering about in Tirana and in other Albanian cities -persecuted now by the German Waffen-SS and Wehrmacht and the once suppressed Albanian population.⁸³ Nevertheless, many documents witness the Albanian population’s support for the former Italian soldiers with shelter, food, work and concealment - hiring them as employees or day labourers; this helped thousands of Italians to survive the wrath of their former ally.

But still, Dalmazzo’s and Rosi’s hesitation and indecision allowed the Germans to capture four of the six Italian divisions -the *Parma*, the *Puglie*, the *Brennero*, and the *Arezzo*. Meanwhile, parts of the 41st Infantry Division *Firenze* and the 151st Infantry Division *Perugia* defected to the partisans.⁸⁴

Even though Italy’s Fascist rule frequently enforced its own punitive actions, the degree of their former allies’ cruelty towards civilians in Southeast Europe shocked the Italian soldiers. On the prisoner’s march to the concentration camps the Germans left a trail of destruction as Italian Roberto Rubolotta stated, “On the trip to Valona the Germans burnt down every single house they found”; several fellow comrades reported similar incidents.⁸⁵ Second lieutenant Moncalvo gave account how people desperately offered bread to the Germans hoping to avoid the destruction of their homes in doing so.⁸⁶

After the capitulation, German and Italian relations rapidly deteriorated. In fact, the Germans were well prepared for Italy’s imminent surrender. As a preventive measure, parts of the 100th *Jaeger* division of the *Wehrmacht* deployed in Albania - approximately 1,000 men -in the summer of 1943⁸⁷, followed by further units securing the airports and the harbour of Durrës on the eve of the capitulation. After 9 September 1943 parts of the 2nd tank army moved up and took the rest of

⁸³ Report by sottotenente Nazzareno Garat Crema, 10/27/1943, USSME, I3/b13/f1. Hermann Neubacher, *Sonderauftrag Südost 1940–1945: Bericht eines fliegenden Diplomaten* (Göttingen: Musterschmitt, 1956), 106.

⁸⁴ Ilio Muraca, “I partigiani all'estero: la Resistenza fuori d'Italia,” in *Dizionario della Resistenza*, ed. Enzo Collotti, Renato Sandri and Frediano Sessi (Torino: Einaudi, 2006), 173. Fate of the *Perugia* detailed cf. Rossi and Giusti, *Una guerra a parte*, 322-337.

⁸⁵ Report by Roberto Rubolotta, undated, USSME, I3/b13/f3, S. 2. Report by Camillo Magnaghi, USSME, I3/b13/f3, p. 3. Report by Marsilio Marsili, 6/19/1944, USSME, I3/b13/f3.

⁸⁶ Report by sottotenente Emilio Moncalvo, 9/21/1943, USSME, I3/b13/f1, 1.

⁸⁷ Aga Rossi and Giusti, *Una guerra a parte*, 309.

Albania.⁸⁸ The High Command Southeast (*OB Suedost*) reported the occupation of the cities would be completed “with relative ease”;⁸⁹ although Fischer states that -before the capitulation- the strength of the two and a half second rate German troops was critical when compared to the power of six Italian divisions.⁹⁰ But the ensuing chaos triggered by Italy’s disinformation crippled the resistance of its own troops.

In ornate style the *Sonderbeauftragter Suedost* Hermann Neubacher emphasises the muddled and violent situation. In parts, even the Germans had lost control as he stated. The disarming did not proceed in an orderly manner - in fact, “many Albanians seized the moment to increase the stock of their own armaments.”⁹¹ After his return to Italy, second lieutenant Emilio Moncalvo described the changing situation in Albania, “Da alleati ad aperti nemici. Ora i tedeschi [hanno] gettato la maschera.” - “From allies to open foes. Now the Germans have dropped their mask.”⁹²

The sources imply that the Germans lacked regulations for handling captive former Italian soldiers. If you had served the German army as a sworn auxiliary or a “Black Shirt” (*Camicie Nere*) prior to the armistice, you had nothing to fear; your allegiance to the German cause was accepted, your status remained intact.⁹³ If you were uncovered after hiding away, you most likely were shot on the spot;⁹⁴ if you surrendered or turned yourself in, you might eventually be executed, anyhow - especially if you turned out to be an officer. At best, you were unarmed and interrogated, and held captive. Then, you might be force-marched - e.g. to Prilep in Bulgaria- to one of various concentration camps under

⁸⁸ Aga Rossi and Giusti estimate about 3,000 men. *Ibid.*, 310. Cf., also Marenglen Kasmi, *Deutsche Besatzung in Albanien* (Potsdam: ZMSBw, 2013), 9.

⁸⁹ Report “development if the military situation in Albania in autumn 1944”, German Field Army Command Southeast, name unreadable, undated, BArchF, RW 40/116a, 5.

⁹⁰ Bernd J. Fischer, “Kollaborationsregimes in Albanien 1939-1944” in *Europa unterm Hakenkreuz, Okkupation und Kollaboration (1938-1945), Beiträge zu Konzepten und Kollaboration in der deutschen Okkupationspolitik* ed. Werner Röhr (Berlin & Heidelberg: Hühig 1994), 372. Besides the 100th Jaeger division there was first the 118th Jaeger division, which was replaced by the 181st infantry division and the 297th infantry division. Kühmel, “Deutschland und Albanien 1943-1944,” 207. See also, Neuwirth, *Widerstand und Kollaboration*, 121.

⁹¹ Neubacher, *Sonderauftrag Südost*, 107.

⁹² Report by sottotenente Emilio Moncalvo, 9/21/1943, USSME, I3/b13/f1, 2. Cf. also report by Lamberto Francesconi and Roberto Ponsard, 10/31/1943, USSME, I3/b13/f1, 1.

⁹³ Report “development if the military situation in Albania in autumn 1944”, German Field Army Command Southeast, name unreadable, undated, BArchF, RW 40/116a, 43

⁹⁴ Reports by Ernesto Bianchi, 01/25/1944, USSME, I3/b13/f2, 2; and Lamberto Francesconi and Roberto Ponsard, 10/31/1943, USSME, I3/b13/f1, 7.

precarious humanitarian conditions; later, you might be deported to Italy or to “the Reich” for forced labour.⁹⁵

Of the six Italian divisions in Albania, about 90,000 Italian soldiers were disarmed by German troops or Albanians. The Italian Domenico Perari recalls how he and his comrades were captured; when the German interrogator asked them to join the fight for *Greater Germany* they answered “No!” and demanded a treatment according to the Geneva Convention; even so, they were caged.⁹⁶ Of the Italian troops which were led to the mountains - to the partisans respectively - by their officers, some 7,000 soldiers left their formations and handed themselves over to the Germans; regardless of their request to be recruited in to the German army, they were detailed to forced labour.⁹⁷ Strangely enough, even Italian die-hard fascist troops like the “Black Shirts” were deported despite their wish to be incorporated into the *Waffen-SS*.⁹⁸

The POW’s nutrition and the accommodation situation were critical. Surviving Italians testified that the disarmed soldiers were all undernourished, receiving only 100 grams of bread a day or no food at all⁹⁹ -insufficient for the forced labour, as registered by the commissioner of the Italian *Republican Fascist Party* in Albania.¹⁰⁰ Clothing was miserable, shoes lacked completely; the Italian prisoners had to walk barefoot even in snow. Concerned with the damaging effect these miserable former Italian soldiers might have on the prestige of the

⁹⁵ Report “development if the military situation in Albania in autumn 1944”, German Field Army Command Southeast, name unreadable, undated, BArchF, RW 40/116a, p. 43. There exist many publications about Italian soldiers in German internment and concentration camps after September 1943. E.g. Avagliano Palmieri, *Gli internati militari italiani, Diari e lettere dai lager Nazisti 1943-1945* (Torino: Einaudi, 2009) or Gerhard Schreiber, *Die italienischen Militärinternierten im deutschen Machtbereich 1943 bis 1945: Verraten-Verachtet-Vergessen* (München: Oldenbourg, 1990.) See also: Nevila Nika, “Storie di italiani dopo l’8 settembre in Albania,” in *Caro nemico: Soldati pistoiesi e toscani nella resistenza in Albania e Montenegro, 1943-1945*, ed. Lia Tosi (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2018), 147-152.

⁹⁶ Report by Domenico Perari, 30/06/1944, USSME, I3/b13/f3, 2.

⁹⁷ Note for the German liaison staff, representative of the Republican Fascist Party in Albania, name unreadable, 7/14/1944, BArchF, RH 31-XVI/7, Bl. 127. Blackshirts cf. also Kuehmel, *Deutschland und Albanien*, 311.

⁹⁸ Zaugg, *Albanische Muslime*, 63, 91.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 8. Report by Tucci; Sivestri; Territo; Stefania, 12/21/1943, USSME, I3/b13/f1. To the Command of the Inf. Div. “Legnano”, 10/13/1943, USSME, I3/b13/f1, 1.

¹⁰⁰ Note for the German liaison staff, representative of the Republican Fascist Party in Albania, name unreadable, 7/14/1944, BArchF, RH 31-XVI/7, 128.

remaining fascist state of Salò -the *Repubblica Sociale Italiana*- the same commissioner pleaded their removal from Albania.¹⁰¹

In general, former Italian officers were eliminated -a strategical measure taken to cripple the enemy's cohesion even more. The officers - and common soldiers, too- were concentrated near Valona/Vlorë and shot by German Soldiers of the *Wehrmacht* and *Waffen-SS*. Many surviving Italians reported such atrocities. Like Marco de Ferrari, D'Ulivo, Fabbri, Sacchelli, Santi and De Vita tell us, "In Valona many Italian officers were butchered by the Germans. Every Italian officer -even if unarmed- was shot immediately by the Germans when found."¹⁰² In the region of Cermenica the Italian officer Emilio Gamucci was shot together with over a hundred Carabinieri.¹⁰³ Another source tells us, "The Germans gradually advanced, killing everyone they found, mercilessly und indiscriminately."¹⁰⁴ To this day, many of these massacres remain unexamined -although thousands of Italian officers and soldiers were killed.

Conclusion

The transitions between mutual accusations, support of anti-Italian, and -to a lesser degree- anti-German resistance and the active recruitment for the MFA and various *Waffen-SS*-formations were fluid. From today's perspective, the Italian accusations regarding the German support of an anti-Italian movement can be confirmed.¹⁰⁵ The military and financial support of mainly Albanian Muslims, which directly followed the Balkan campaign of 1941, can be seen as a precursor of the later German recruitments for the *Waffen-SS*, the "Handžar" and the "Skanderbeg" division in 1943 and 1944. Likewise however, on the Italian side efforts were made to support an irredentistic Albanian movement by recruiting Albanians for the MFA, and to create a "Greater Albania". This project was partially realised in 1941; it lasted until the Italian capitulation in September 1943 and the German retreat in November 1944 respectively. Both the Axis power's quarrels and their attempts to instrumentalise interethnic tensions for their own territorial, political and military claims

¹⁰¹ Zaugg, *Albanische Muslime*, 91. Note for the German liaison staff, representative of the Republican Fascist Party in Albania, name unreadable, 7/14/1944, BArchF, RH 31-XVI/7, 128.

¹⁰² Reports by Marco de Ferrari, USSME, I3/b14/f2; D'Ulivo; Fabbri; Sacchelli; Santi; De Vita, undated, USSME, I3/b13/f1, 2.

¹⁰³ Comment beside picture of Emilio Gamucci, zone of Cermenica, USSME, I3, b14.

¹⁰⁴ Report by sottotenente Emilio Moncalvo, 9/21/1943, USSME, I3/b13/ 1.

¹⁰⁵ Kühmel, *Deutschland und Albanien*, 60-61. Zaugg, *Albanische Muslime*, 177-180.

in the region are well documented and can be made comprehensible today. However, as shown in this paper, not only German and Italian authorities instrumentalised local conflicts for their own purpose, but local players exploited the occupying forces for their own intentions, too. In this way it becomes clear that local elites were not only passive pawns, but played an active role during the occupation.

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