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The Political Dimensions of Serbian Administration toward Albanians in Kosovo, with Special Focus on the District of Gjilan (September 1913–June 1914): Between Pressure and Survival

Kosova'daki Arnavutlara Yönelik Sırp Yönetiminin Siyasal Boyutları: Eylül 1913–Haziran 1914 Döneminde Gilan Kazası Örneği

Abstract

The recognition by the Great Powers, through the Conference of Ambassadors in London (1912–1913), of the occupation and annexation of Kosovo and other Albanian-inhabited territories by the Kingdom of Serbia marked a turning point in the consolidation of Serbian state authority in the territories referred to as “New Serbia,” granting official Belgrade international legitimacy for the extension of its sovereignty over areas inhabited predominantly by Albanians. This study examines developments within this new juridical and political context, in which the Serbian state acquired broader opportunities to implement administrative, military, economic, social, property-related, and colonization policies toward the non-Serb population, particularly Albanians. The article analyzes the formulation and implementation of state policies aimed at demographic reconfiguration in Kosovo, with special focus on the District of Gjilan between September 1913 and June 1914. Drawing upon archival documents, diplomatic correspondence, official reports, demographic statistics, contemporary press materials, and relevant historiographical literature, the study assesses the consequences of these policies, which were reflected in political and economic pressure, demographic transformations, changes in the ethnic structure, and various forms of survival strategies among the Albanian population.

Keywords: Serbia, Gjilan, Albanians, ethnic cleansing, assimilation

Öz

1912–1913 Londra Büyükelçiler Konferansı sonrasında Kosova ile Arnavut nüfusun yoğun olarak yaşadığı diğer bölgelerin Sırbistan Krallığı tarafından ilbakinin uluslararası düzeyde tanınması, Sırp devlet otoritesinin “Yeni Sırbistan” olarak tanımlanan coğrafyada kurumsallaşması açısından önemli bir kırılma noktası oluşturmuştur. Bu süreç, Belgrad yönetimine Arnavut çoğunluğunun yaşadığı bölgelerde idarî, askerî, ekonomik ve demografik politikalarını daha kapsamlı biçimde uygulama imkânı sağlamıştır. Çalışma, Eylül 1913–Haziran 1914 döneminde özellikle Gilan Kazası'na

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odaklanarak Sırp yönetiminin Arnavut nüfusa yönelik uygulamalarını incelemektedir. Araştırma; arşiv belgeleri, diplomatik yazışmalar, resmî raporlar, nüfus istatistikleri, dönem basını ve ilgili tarih yazımı literatürüne dayanmaktadır. İnceleme sonucunda, uygulanan politikaların Arnavut nüfus üzerinde siyasal ve ekonomik baskıları artırdığı, demografik yapıyı etkilediği ve göç ile farklı hayatta kalma stratejilerini teşvik ettiği ortaya konulmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Sırbistan, Gılan, Arnavutlar, etnik temizlik, asimilasyon*

Introduction

For an extended period, the Kingdom of Serbia had developed and institutionalized a political and national platform rooted in inherited ideological traditions, structured coherently and articulated clearly within the state's territorial framework. This platform delineated in detail the strategic orientation and official stance of the Serbian state toward non-Serb populations. In this context, the Serbian myth of Kosovo was aimed at territorial expansion within the framework of political aspirations. Initially, this myth took root in Serbian culture and mentality, subsequently manifesting in journalism and folklore, and later penetrating the social sciences and Serbian historiography. Consequently, on the eve of the First Balkan War, Serbian propaganda concerning Kosovo and other regions was highly active in the Serbian press in Belgrade. It justified war preparations on the grounds of “rescuing” the Christian population in the European part of the Ottoman Empire (Avdiu, 2018).

One year prior to its occupation by the Kingdom of Serbia and the Kingdom of Montenegro, which were allies within the Balkan League, the Vilayet of Kosovo, as part of the Ottoman Empire, had a population exceeding 1,600,000 inhabitants, of whom approximately 959,000 were Muslims (McCarthy, 2015). With the outbreak of the First Balkan War in October 1912, the Ottoman Empire organized armed military resistance in the Vilayet of Kosovo against the advance of Serbian and Montenegrin forces. Armed resistance was also organized by Albanian volunteers. However, the resistance of the Ottoman Empire and the Albanians against the armies of the Balkan League proved insufficient. As a result, Kosovo and other regions were occupied by Serbian and Montenegrin forces during October–November 1912.

Consequently, of the approximately 44,000 km² of territorial and administrative space that the Vilayet of Kosovo possessed prior to the Congress of Berlin, following the decisions of the Conference of Ambassadors in London, its territory was recognized as belonging to the Kingdom of Serbia and the Kingdom of Montenegro. Thus, more than half of the territories inhabited by Albanians remained outside the borders of the newly established Albanian state (Shala, 2012).

From October 1912 to August 1913, the Kingdom of Serbia implemented various policies toward the civilian population in the occupied regions of the Vilayet of Kosovo and the Vilayet of Manastir. This approach is also reflected in the consular reports of foreign consuls accredited in Skopje, Mitrovica, Prizren, Manastir, and other cities (Destani & Elsie, n.d.). Therefore, the title of this research article has been formulated in accordance with the political and international legal developments of September 1913, when the Kingdom of Serbia made public the decision emerging

from the Conference of Ambassadors in London, which recognized its right to occupy and annex the territories of the former Kosovo Vilayet, as well as other Albanian-inhabited regions that had previously been under the administration of the Ottoman Empire.

The period under review, spanning an interval of nearly eleven months, is characterized by the systematic application of a broad range of measures and institutional mechanisms directed against both Muslim and Christian Albanian populations, especially in the District of Gjilan and in other Albanian-inhabited areas. The objective of the research presented in this study is to undertake a systematic analysis of these actions, which were aimed at the structural weakening of the Albanian population through processes associated with displacement, administrative pressure, and the reduction of its presence in specific territories and settlements.

This study seeks to provide a well-argued and documented analysis of several principal aspects of Serbian policy toward Albanians during this period, as well as its outcomes and consequences. The research is based on primary sources, including archival documents, contemporary press materials, and relevant historiographical literature, with the aim of offering an evidence-based interpretation and contributing to a deeper understanding of this important phase in the history of Albanians in the early twentieth century.

This study is systematically structured around a conceptual framework grounded in five principal research questions: Why was the administrative structure in the District of Gjilan concentrated in settlements and dominated by representatives of Serbian nationality? Why did the Albanian population oppose the Serbian annexation of Kosovo, and what measures did the Kingdom of Serbia undertake in response to this resistance? Why were the Albanian armed uprisings of 1913–1914 used as a justification for repressive measures against the Albanian population? Why did the economic, cultural, and educational policies contribute to the emigration of the population to the Ottoman Empire? Within this political discourse, what survival alternative was effectively imposed upon the Albanian population?

This article argues that the political discourse and policies of the Kingdom of Serbia were not confined to a single institutional segment but encompassed a broad array of state and societal actors and mechanisms. From the royal court, the parliament, and the government to local administrations at the level of counties, districts, and municipalities, as well as law-enforcement and security structures, a pronounced degree of institutional cohesion is evident. Along the same line operated segments of civil society, academic circles, and journalistic milieus, all contributing to the legitimization and promotion of state policy. Taken as a whole, an inter-institutional harmonization of stance and action can be observed, oriented toward the implementation and consolidation of a centralized state policy.

Sources and Methodology

This study examines the political, administrative, security, and socio-economic policies implemented by the Kingdom of Serbia in the District of Gjilan between the end of 1912 and the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. The research is based primarily on qualitative historical analysis and draws upon archival documents, diplomatic correspondence, official administrative reports, demographic statistics, contemporary press materials, and relevant historiographical literature.

The principal primary sources used in this study originate from the Archive of the Institute of History in Tirana and the State Agency of Archives of Kosovo. These collections include Austro-Hungarian diplomatic correspondence, Serbian administrative reports, military communications, and police documentation concerning political developments in Kosovo during 1912–1914. Austro-Hungarian diplomatic reports have been particularly valuable due to the detailed information they provide on local political conditions, administrative practices, violence, demographic movements, and the reactions of the Albanian population. At the same time, these sources have been approached critically, taking into account the broader geopolitical interests of Austria-Hungary in the Balkans.

The study also makes extensive use of Serbian official publications, statistical reports, and contemporary newspapers such as *Politika*, *Pijemont*, and *Pravda*. These materials provide insight into the political discourse of the Serbian state, official representations of the Albanian population, and the administrative policies implemented in the annexed territories. In parallel, Albanian newspapers and publications, including *Taraboshi*, *Shqypnia e Re*, *Liri e Shqipërisë*, and *Atdheu*, have been used to examine Albanian political reactions, public perceptions, and contemporary responses to Serbian rule in Kosovo.

Methodologically, the article combines historical analysis with comparative and interpretative approaches. Particular attention has been devoted to the comparative reading of Serbian, Austro-Hungarian, and Albanian sources in order to identify convergences, discrepancies, and political biases within the available documentation. Cross-referencing archival evidence with demographic statistics, diplomatic reports, and contemporary press materials has made it possible to reconstruct the broader political and social developments in the District of Gjilan during the period under examination.

The study further adopts a contextual approach toward administrative and political terminology used in contemporary sources. Expressions such as “New Serbia,” “liberated territories,” and “security measures” are analyzed within the political discourse of the period rather than treated as neutral descriptive categories. Chronologically, the research focuses on the period from the Serbian occupation of Gjilan in October 1912 to the outbreak of the First World War in

1914, a timeframe that corresponds with the consolidation of Serbian state administration in Kosovo following the Balkan Wars.

Finally, the study seeks to analyze the interaction between state-building policies, demographic change, local resistance, and international political developments without reducing these processes to exclusively national or retrospective interpretations.

Geographical and Demographic Characteristics and the Administrative Status of Gjilan

The Morava region extends east of the Kosovo Plain and north of the Karadak mountain range. It is divided into two parts: Morava e Poshtme (Lower Morava) and Morava e Epërme (Upper Morava). This geographical area derives its name from the hydronym Morava, which originates in the Karadak Mountains, specifically south of Vitia. The region encompasses the settlements of Karadak, parts of Gallap, Zhegoc, and Novobërda. Gjilan functioned as the principal administrative center of this area (Halimi, 1959; Statovci, 1974; Rexhepi, 1981; Selmani, 2017). In 1913–1914, the District of Gjilan comprised approximately 200 settlements (Vujičić, 1914), which today fall within the administrative territories of the Republic of Kosovo, including Prishtina, Gjilan, Vitia, Kamenica, Novobërda, and Ferizaj, as well as areas currently located within the Republic of Serbia, namely Presheva and Bujanovac.

On 24 October 1912, the Third Serbian Army occupied Gjilan (Selmani, 2009). On 15 October 1912, the war correspondent of the Belgrade newspaper *Politika* reported that the Serbian military commander had proclaimed that the Kingdom of Serbia had not entered the city as an occupying force but rather “to bring order and peace and to ensure the full well-being of every individual” (Svečanost u Gnjanu, 1912). Subsequent political and administrative developments, however, reflected a substantially different reality.

Immediately following the occupation of the city, the Serbian authorities undertook measures aimed at dismantling the administrative structures and institutions inherited from the Ottoman period. New legal regulations were introduced, while mechanisms of military, police, judicial, and financial administration directly connected to the relevant ministries in Belgrade were established (Akademia e Shkencave e Shqipërisë, 2007). After the annexation of Kosovo by Serbia and Montenegro received international recognition from the Great Powers, the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Kingdom of Serbia, on 31 August 1913, issued a special decree concerning the so-called “liberated territories,” reaffirming Gjilan’s administrative status as the center of the district bearing the same name within the Prishtina County, respectively the Kosovo County (State Agency of Archives of Kosovo, 1913a; Nova Srbija, 1913; Rushiti, 2004). The administrative-territorial District of Gjilan consisted of sixteen municipalities, while the seats of the municipal courts were designated as follows (Vujičić, 1914):

Table 1. Municipalities and Municipal Court Centers in the District of Gjilan (1913–1914) (Vujičić, 1914).

No.	Municipality	Municipal court
1.	Gjilan	Gjilan
2.	Vitia	Vitia
3.	Kamenica	Kamenica
4.	Bostan	Izvor
5.	Vaganesh	Strezofc
6.	Vërbovc	Zagragjë
7.	Kolloleq	Kolloleq
8.	Parallovë	Bresalc
9.	Partesh	Budrikë
10.	Pasjan	Pasjan
11.	Ranillug	Ranillug
12.	Rogaçica	Domorovc
13.	Ropotovë	Ropotovë
14.	Sllatinë	Sllatinë
15.	Tërpezë	Pozharan
16.	Shurdhan	Zhegër

According to the population census conducted on 16 April 1913 by the authorities of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Kingdom of Serbia, the table presents the total population of the District of Gjilan, including the number of male and female inhabitants. It also presents the total population of the town of Gjilan, including Albanians, Serbs, Turks, and other population groups, together with the average family size (Jagodić, 2013; Osmani, 2005):

Table 2. Population Structure of the District and Town of Gjilan According to the Serbian Census of 16 April 1913, based on Jagodić (2013) and Osmani (2005).

Dist./tow.	Inh.	M.	F.	Alb.	%	Ser.	%	Tur.	%	Oth.	%	Av. fa.
District of Gjilan	76,579	39,004	37,575	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
Gjilan	11,264	/	/	6,629	58.9	3,135	27.8	628	5.6	872	7.7	6.8

Meanwhile, another statistical report compiled on 21 May 1913 by the head of the Prishtina County, Dimitrije Kalajgjiq, and submitted to the Police Inspector at the Supreme Command, namely the Minister of Internal Affairs Milorad Vujičić, presents a different demographic overview

of the District of Gjilan based on religious and national affiliation (Jagodić, 2013). The table below presents the total population of the District of Gjilan disaggregated according to religious affiliation and ethnicity, including Muslims (Albanians, Turks, and Roma) and Orthodox Christians (Serbs and Roma), together with their respective percentages. It also includes the number and percentage of Catholics. Relevant demographic data concerning the town of Gjilan are likewise presented

Table 3. Religious and Ethnic Structure of the Population in the District and Town of Gjilan According to the Statistical Report of 21 May 1913, based on Jagodić (2013).

Dist./tow	Inh.	Musl.	%	Mus. Alb.	%	Mus. Tur.	%	Mus. Rom.	%
District of Gjilan	68,964	46,575	67.5	44,354	64.3	586	0.8	1,635	2.4
		Orth. Chr.	%	Orth. Ser.	%	Orth. Rom.	%	Catho.	%
		20,252	29.8	18,824	27.3	1,701	2.5	1,864	2.7
Gjilan	7,767	Musl.	%	Mus. Alb.	%	Mus. Tur.	%	Mus. Rom.	%
		5,211	67.1	/	/	3,771	48.6	1,440	18.5
		Orth. Chr	%	Orth. Ser	%	Orth. Rom.	%	/	/
		2,556	32.9	2,525	32.5	31	0.4	/	/

A comparative analysis of these data raises several historiographical and methodological issues. First, the evidence presented in the statistics of 21 May 1913 regarding the total population appears more consistent with the demographic circumstances that emerged in the aftermath of the First Balkan War. Second, in the Ottoman censuses of 1905–1907 and in other contemporary sources, the Muslim population of the District of Gjilan was identified predominantly with the Albanian population, without the distinction of separate ethnic categories such as “Turks” or “Roma,” as reflected in the Serbian statistical report. Third, a noticeable decrease in the percentage of Albanians and a considerable increase in the Serbian element can be observed, suggesting intervention in ethno-religious categorization. Fourth, compared to the census of 16 April 1913, the total population of the district appears reduced by 7,615 inhabitants. Fifth, the number of Catholics corresponds with the data provided by Augusto Stanieri, considering that this population was entirely Albanian and concentrated in the villages of Morava e Epërme (Upper Morava), such as Letnica, Binça, Stublla, Shoshare, Vërnez, and Kolc i Epërm (Upper Kole). Sixth, the tendency to classify a portion of the Muslim Albanian population as “Turkish,” as reflected in this statistical report, indicates attempts within official Serbian administrative practice to relativize or reinterpret the Albanian demographic character of Gjilan through administrative categorization. In contrast to this approach, certain Bulgarian researchers, two years later, while noting the increase of the Serbian element in the district, questioned its national affiliation, emphasizing linguistic differences

and ambiguities between the local population and the Serbs of Belgrade (Central State Historical Archive, 1916; Selmani, 1998; Prifti, 2014; Murzaku, 2017; Islami, 2020). The appointment of individuals of Serbian national affiliation to leading positions within the district and municipal administrations, as well as the granting of administrative status to settlements such as Kamenica, Vitia, Bostan, Kolloleq, Partesh, Parallovë, Pasjan, Ranillug, Ropotovë, Vaganesh, and Vërbovc—inhabited fully, predominantly, or partially by populations identified as Serbian—reflected the establishment of a new administrative and political framework within the District of Gjiłan.

A Serb from Gjiłan, Toma Popović, was appointed mayor of the town (Vesti iz Giljana, 1913; Giljanski događaji, 1913). Until September 1913, the commander of the town of Gjiłan was Major D. Sekulić (Jagodić, 2013). In September 1913, a reorganization of Serbian military forces in the occupied territories, including the District of Gjiłan, was undertaken. In Gjiłan, Colonel Stefan Milovanović was appointed commander of the infantry units, while Colonel Dušan Popović was designated Chief of the General Staff. Radosav Karamarković was appointed district commander of Gjiłan (Archive of the Institute of History, 1913k; Jagodić, 2013). By order of the Minister of War, Nedeljko Milić was appointed deputy district commander in Gjiłan (Razmeštaj oficira, 1913). In September 1913, by royal decree, postal and telegraph stations were established in Gjiłan. Stevan Piletić was appointed postman for Post Office No. 3, while the postman for Post Office No. 4 was appointed from Belgrade (Razveštaj poštara, 1913). By decision of the Ministry of Construction, Milan Jovanović was appointed head of the postal office in Gjiłan (Postavljenja u poštama, 1913).

On the basis of a new administrative division enacted on 14 March 1914, several districts were renamed. Among them, the County of Prishtina was redesignated as the County of Kosovo. The District of Gjiłan continued to comprise sixteen municipalities. According to this new administrative arrangement, the total population of the district was recorded as 78,284 inhabitants (Jagodić, 2013). This revised figure indicated an increase in the registered Serbian population within the District of Gjiłan.

Serbian Annexation and Albanian Resistance in Gjiłan: The Uprising of September 1913

The Serbian occupation brought about new circumstances in the relations between the Albanian population and the new authorities, as well as in interactions with the Serbian element in this region. The Albanians of Gjiłan and the surrounding areas experienced severe forms of violence, repression, and massacres during and after the Serbian occupation (Horvat, 1988; Ndreca, 2001; Bardhi, 2014; Sadiku, 2015; Schmitt & Frantz, 2020). Officials of the Serbian state declared that the Kingdom of Serbia would not comply with the decisions of the Conference of Ambassadors in London regarding the protection of minorities (Archive of the Institute of History, 1913c). However, the Albanian population did not accept Serbian rule and opposed the decisions

of the Conference of Ambassadors in London concerning the annexation of Albanian-inhabited territories to the Kingdom of Serbia. In early September 1913, after learning of the decision to annex Kosovo and other Albanian-inhabited regions to the Balkan monarchies, Albanian representatives addressed a memorandum from Kosovo to the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the six Great Powers. In this document, they called for reconsideration of the decisions adopted at the London Conference of Ambassadors and demanded the revision of what they regarded as national injustices affecting the Albanian population. They also protested against violence and repression under Serbian administration (Borbe s Arnautima, 1913; Nova Srbija, 1913; Memorandum i Kosoves, 1913; Verli, 2004). Nevertheless, these appeals did not produce any substantial change in international policy. As a consequence, armed resistance increasingly appeared to segments of the Albanian movement as the only remaining course of action against the annexation of territories by the Kingdoms of Serbia and Montenegro (Arnauti spremaju bunu?, 1913). In a report from the Austro-Hungarian consulate in Skopje, headed by Consul Maryan Heimroth (von Hessfeld), it was stated that “*only a few months of Serbian rule have sufficed to eradicate all illusions at their very foundation...*” (Archive of the Institute of History, 1913e).

In accordance with the circumstances of the period, the Serbian government promulgated a decree-law aimed at combating Albanian insurgent groups and individuals. The decree envisaged the forced expulsion of families associated with insurgent activity, as well as the removal of populations from settlements suspected of sheltering or supporting resistance groups. It also provided for the internment and forced relocation of Albanians to older regions of the Kingdom of Serbia, while the lands and houses of those interned or expelled were to be reassigned to Serbian settlers from both older and newly incorporated territories of the kingdom. Under this decree-law, penalties ranged from six to twenty years of imprisonment, including the possibility of execution. The gathering of more than five persons deemed dangerous or suspected of anti-state propaganda was prohibited, while military authorities were granted broad powers against accused individuals (Archive of the Institute of History, 1913i; Rushiti, 2016; Schmitt & Frantz, 2020).

By that time, a segment of the Albanian leadership in the District of Gjilan had emigrated either to the Ottoman Empire or to Albania. Others were kept under close surveillance and deprived of political activity, while another group was forced to surrender weapons during military control and disarmament campaigns. A smaller number engaged in clandestine activity and organized armed actions against military, police, and administrative structures associated with abuses against the Albanian population (Archive of the Institute of History, 1913g). The arrest and imprisonment in November 1912, near Skopje, of a considerable part of the Albanian political elite from Kosovo—including Hasan Prishtina, Nexhip Draga, Idriz Seferi, and others—had a significant impact on subsequent political developments. These figures, together with thousands

of other Albanians, were interned and imprisoned in Belgrade. By order of the Ministry of War, they were released in April 1913 (Martinović, 1978; Shala, 2006; Blaka & Ismaili, 2014). Following their release, networks of communication and coordination among Albanian political actors became fragmented and insecure. Existing channels of contact were weakened and, in some cases, completely interrupted due to prevailing political and security conditions in Kosovo. This situation significantly reduced organizational cohesion and limited collective political action. The subsequent fate of certain prominent figures from Gjilan and its surrounding areas, such as Bejtullah Bey, son of Hysen Pasha of Gjilan, remains unclear. Bejtullah Bey had participated in the Second Congress of Monastir (1–4 April 1910) and was among the leading figures of the District of Gjilan during the General Uprising of 1912 (Selmani, 1998). Contemporary sources likewise provide limited information regarding the later activities of comparable personalities. Some may have been politically marginalized or emigrated together with their families in subsequent years (Archive of the Institute of History, 1913j).

With the outbreak of the Albanian uprising of September 1913, which emerged in a climate marked by widespread dissatisfaction, violence, executions, and instability (Archive of the Institute of History, 1913c), tensions also intensified in the District of Gjilan. Serbian administrative authorities reported concerns that insurgent movements might emerge in the district as well (Jagodić, 2013). Consequently, Serbian military authorities maintained troop mobilization and movement toward the region under heightened security conditions. On 23 September 1913, according to information available to the Austro-Hungarian consulate in Mitrovica headed by Consul Josef Umlauf, an infantry company departed from Prishtina for Gjilan (Archive of the Institute of History, 1913d).

The Albanian uprising generated strong reactions among Serbian governmental and administrative authorities. Within Serbian political discourse, retaliatory measures against the Albanian population were openly discussed by certain administrative representatives. According to Austro-Hungarian diplomatic reports, the Prefect of Skopje publicly stated that “two trucks of dynamite that have just arrived are intended for this purpose.” In the same context, Serbian authorities were accused by diplomatic observers of encouraging broader unrest that could later serve as justification for harsh reprisals against the Albanian population (Archive of the Institute of History, 1913e).

Under these circumstances, the Serbian state used the Albanian uprising as grounds for broader military and security operations against the Albanian population, including in the District of Gjilan. Serbian military and paramilitary formations presented their actions as defensive measures against insurgent activity. During these operations, killings and massacres were reported in the District of Gjilan. According to information collected by the Austro-Hungarian General

Consulate in Skopje, headed by Consul Heinrich Jehlitschka, “between 21 and 23 October, 17 Muslims were killed and many women and girls were dishonored,” while reports also referred to unburied corpses in surrounding mountainous areas (Archive of the Institute of History, 1913g; Rushiti, 1986). Owing largely to concerns for personal safety, sections of the Muslim Albanian population reportedly avoided attending mosques for daily prayers. Serbian military and administrative authorities maintained close cooperation with segments of the local Serbian population in the District of Gjilan. Armed Serbian groups organized by governmental and military structures reportedly engaged in nighttime armed incidents that subsequently served as justification for retaliatory actions against Albanian civilians. Drawing upon reports and observations accumulated during nearly a year of Serbian rule, the Austro-Hungarian consulate in Skopje concluded in a report sent to Vienna on 24 October 1913 that many acts of violence were not isolated incidents committed spontaneously by soldiers but rather part of broader state-directed practices (Archive of the Institute of History, 1913g; Rushiti, 1986). According to Austro-Hungarian diplomatic assessments, the state program described under the slogan “Serbianization at any cost” was implemented through administrative and coercive measures directed against non-Serb populations. This policy aimed at transforming the ethnic and identitarian structure of the annexed territories through administrative, legal, military, and police mechanisms. Measures reportedly included the suppression of political resistance, the confiscation of land, the settlement of Serbian colonists, intervention in cultural and religious life, pressure regarding personal names, and restrictions affecting Muslim and Catholic communities and traditional forms of dress (Archive of the Institute of History, 1913g; Barbarizmat serbe në Kosovë, 1913; Rushiti, 1986). In his reports, Consul General H. Jehlitschka argued that policies associated with the slogan “Serbianization at any cost” were reflected in widespread practices of repression and coercion (Archive of the Institute of History, 1913g).

Within the broader political framework of the period, violent actions directed against towns and villages produced serious demographic and social consequences that contributed to changes in the ethnic and religious composition of the population. These acts were closely connected to broader state objectives concerning territorial control, colonization, and demographic transformation. The confiscation and transfer of properties belonging to displaced, emigrated, or killed inhabitants facilitated the expansion of state-controlled landholdings. In practice, confiscation, requisition, and the re-examination of property titles constituted important legal instruments in this process. In many cases, incomplete documentation or restrictive administrative practices created conditions for the delegitimization of local property claims and the transfer of land into state possession. These measures provided the material basis for intensified colonization policies directed toward the settlement of families of fallen soldiers and populations considered

politically and ethnically aligned with the Serbian state. Within this framework, plans were also developed for the establishment of an agitation center in Skopje to deepen colonization policies in the territory referred to as “New Serbia” (Archive of the Institute of History, 1913j). At the same time, segments of the Serbian public sphere with democratic and opposition-oriented views criticized conditions in the newly annexed territories and attributed responsibility primarily to the Serbian government and Prime Minister Nikola Pašić (*Anarhija u Novoj Srbiji*, 1913).

The implementation of this state strategy, justified by Serbian authorities through reference to Albanian armed movements, enabled military, police, and paramilitary structures to intensify operations and violent practices, including in regions where the uprising itself had limited resonance, such as the District of Gjilan (*Nji gazetë Serbishte mbi barbarizmat Sërbe*, 1913; Murzaku, 2017). In this context, on 5 November 1913, the British ambassador in Belgrade, Dayrell Crackanthorpe, informed Edward Grey in London that, following the suppression of Albanian armed groups, the campaign conducted by Serbian troops against the civilian population “has been characterized by the greatest ferocity and this beyond any doubt” (Duka, 2012). Diplomatic representatives of the Great Powers accredited to the Kingdom of Serbia thus possessed detailed information concerning violence against the Albanian population in the District of Gjilan and other annexed territories of Kosovo, and these developments were regularly communicated to their respective governments.

The massacre of Albanians in the village of Kabash in the District of Gjilan, the so-called “Nikolić scandal,” the pressure exerted against activists of the Albanian national movement, and policies directed toward the Serbianization of the Albanian population formed part of the broader state policies implemented in the District of Gjilan during the period from September to December 1913 (Rifati, 2020).

Spring 1914: Albanian Resistance and State Countermeasures

Under such difficult conditions, the overall situation of the Albanian population deteriorated further, prompting the organization of armed actions against the violence and coercive measures they faced. The initial focal point of this uprising was the village of Banja in the Malisheva region, where armed clashes occurred between Serbian military forces and Albanian insurgents (Rushiti, 1986). The uprising erupted during the final days of March 1914 and, involving approximately 3,000 insurgents, spread across much of Kosovo and neighboring regions. During this period, despite considerable obstacles, Idriz Seferi remained politically and militarily active (State Agency of Archives of Kosovo, 1914a; Dedićer & Antić, 1980; Akademia e Shkencave e Shqipërisë, 2007). In order to justify military operations against Albanian insurgent groups, sections of the Serbian press circulated reports claiming that approximately “10,000 well-armed Albanians equipped with machine guns” were active in Kosovo (*Arnauti počinju*, 1914).

In addition to infantry battalions and reserve units, which benefited from Russian military support, segments of the Serbian civilian population in the District of Gjilan were mobilized by military and administrative authorities for operational activities against Albanian insurgent groups. In Gjilan and its surrounding areas alone, approximately 170 Serbs were voluntarily recruited for these purposes (Archive of the Institute of History, 1914a). After being armed by the authorities, these recruited civilians participated in shooting exercises, indicating preparations for renewed military operations against Albanian armed groups and segments of the Albanian population (Archive of the Institute of History, 1914a).

Documents and contemporary press reports indicate that from December 1913 until the summer of 1914, Idriz Seferi remained actively involved in political and military developments in Kosovo. The newspaper *Taraboshi*, published in Shkodra, in an article entitled *Luftime n’Kaçanik* (“Fighting in Kaçanik”), reported that Albanian insurgents had once again risen in revolt against the occupying authorities and that Idriz Seferi had joined the armed resistance (*Luftime n’Kaçanik*, 1914). This information suggests that Idriz Seferi was among the principal leaders of Albanian armed groups operating in the District of Gjilan. These groups reportedly attacked a train passing through Kaçanik carrying a Serbian patrol, resulting in the death of a non-commissioned officer. The train was halted, after which military reinforcements were dispatched from Ferizaj. According to the same reports, the Police Inspector Mihailo Cerović, known for his role in Serbian security operations, was also present, and the attack appears to have been directed against him. Subsequently, Serbian military and police authorities in Kaçanik arrested seven Albanians and transferred them to Skopje. Given the strategic importance of the Kaçanik Gorge, Albanian insurgents under the leadership of Idriz Seferi attempted to obstruct Serbian military communications along the Skopje–Kaçanik–Ferizaj–Prishtina–Mitrovica route. Armed clashes between the opposing sides continued over a period of approximately two weeks. Serbian military and administrative authorities subsequently used these insurgent actions to justify broader repressive measures against the Albanian population in Kosovo, contributing to a further escalation of military and institutional repression (Archive of the Institute of History, 1914e; *Luftime n’Kaçanik*, 1914).

Economic and Educational Pressure as Mechanisms of Social Control and Suppression

The economic condition of the population, particularly that of the Albanian population, was significantly aggravated by practices of administrative corruption and by various forms of pressure aimed at appropriating property. These mechanisms of institutional exploitation further deteriorated the socio-economic position of Albanians in the District of Gjilan. In October 1913, Serbian military and administrative authorities undertook a campaign of compulsory military

recruitment among the Muslim population of the district. According to practices applied at the time, individuals included on the lists for “military service in time of war” could avoid mobilization through the payment of 200 dinars. However, this procedure was reportedly accompanied by an obligation of strict confidentiality, suggesting the existence of informal and potentially abusive practices within administrative structures (Archive of the Institute of History, 1913h).

The municipal budget depended largely on taxes collected by the administration. Direct taxes in the town included levies on the sale of large livestock, as well as taxes imposed on the sale of sheep, goats, and pigs. Consequently, revenues from direct taxation in the District of Gjilan demonstrated a rising trend. In addition, the Municipal Court of Gjilan issued a decision prohibiting the keeping of livestock within the town and announced that fines would be imposed on individuals who allowed poultry to roam freely in the streets. These measures were not well received by the urban population. The ratio between regular and extraordinary taxes in the town and rural areas of the District of Gjilan in 1914 was markedly disproportionate. In the town, regular taxes accounted for 14.69%, whereas in the villages they amounted to 85.31%. Extraordinary taxes stood at 9.50% for the town and 90.50% for the villages. Nevertheless, the actual rate of tax payment did not exceed 17%, reflecting both economic hardship and resistance to fiscal obligations (Jagodić, 2013).

An Ottoman secondary school had existed in Gjilan until the end of the Second Balkan War. It comprised three classes and enrolled 101 students (Murati, 2012; Jagodić, 2013). In the District of Gjilan, the Catholic schools in Stubëll and Letnicë retained their autonomous status, as they were financed and protected by Austria-Hungary (Jagodić, 2013). In addition to several Serbian schools opened prior to 1912, the Kingdom of Serbia established new primary schools in Gjilan and its surrounding areas, which continued to function until the eve of the Bulgarian occupation of the region (Rexhepi, 1999). There were cases in which Muslim children were compelled to enroll in Serbian state schools, while teachers employed during the Ottoman period were obliged to seek positions within the Serbian educational system (Jagodić, 2013). As a result, the Serbian primary school in the town of Gjilan was attended by 420 Serbian students and 120 “Muslim” students from the town. The number of “Muslim” pupils enrolling in and attending the Serbian urban school increased progressively over time (Giljanski događaji, 1913; Škola u Gnjilanu, 1913).

In order to implement its educational policy in the occupied territories, by October 1913 the Kingdom of Serbia had established four educational inspectorates, which functioned as administrative intermediaries between the Ministry of Education and educational institutions. At the same time, these bodies were entrusted with organizing cultural activities in the newly annexed territories. For the District of Gjilan, with its center in the town itself, Gjorgja Jovanović from Belgrade was appointed supervisory teacher. It was envisaged that the remaining supervisory positions in the schools would subsequently be filled (Školski nadzornici, 1913). In addition, efforts

were undertaken to strengthen the authority of Serbian ecclesiastical institutions in Gjilan. Plans were also made for the establishment of a public reading library and a bookstore, thereby reinforcing the broader cultural and institutional consolidation of Serbian state influence in the region (*Šta je novo u Giljanu?*, 1913).

Emigration as a Survival Strategy and the Risk of Ethnic Cleansing

The emigration of the Albanian population toward the Ottoman Empire began in October 1912 and intensified at the end of 1913 and during the spring of 1914. This movement encompassed nearly all settlements within the District of Gjilan. The year 1914 marked a new phase in the mass emigration of Albanians, particularly among the Muslim population, with the principal destinations being the Ottoman Empire, partly Albania, and in some instances other regions.

The causes of this mass emigration were closely linked to the repressive administrative, military, and civil policies implemented by Serbian authorities against the Albanian population, especially following the suppression of the uprisings of 1913 and March–April 1914. These policies were characterized by systematic mechanisms of control and subjugation that directly destabilized the socio-economic life of the Albanian population. Contributing factors included looting, the imposition of excessive taxes and fines, requisition and confiscation of property, and forced labor. Violations of religious freedom and family integrity were also documented, together with military interventions in homes and settlements and the systematic dismissal of complaints submitted by Albanians to governmental and administrative authorities. Within this broader framework, compulsory military conscription, physical and psychological abuse, torture, imprisonment, internment, the burning of homes under administrative or security pretexts, and killings and massacres formed part of the broader system of repression. The absence of effective investigation or punishment of perpetrators further reinforced an atmosphere of institutional impunity. Under these circumstances, emigration increasingly emerged as a survival strategy for segments of the Albanian population seeking to escape repression, forced assimilation, and the risk of execution (Rifati, 2019).

Even within segments of the Serbian press with comparatively moderate positions, concerns were expressed regarding the deterioration of personal security and property protection in Gjilan and its surrounding areas (*Šta je novo u Giljanu?*, 1913). Although more nationalist-oriented outlets contested such assessments, similar conclusions were presented by the Austro-Hungarian Consul General in Skopje, H. Jehlitschka. According to his report addressed to the Austro-Hungarian Foreign Minister Leopold Berchtold, “particularly concerning the Muslims (Albanians and others)...there is virtually no security left, neither for property, personal freedom, freedom of conscience, nor for life itself” (Archive of the Institute of History, 1913g).

Although the Kingdom of Serbia officially declared that measures were being undertaken to curb emigration, such rhetoric largely functioned as a means of presenting a favorable image to the international community. In practice, under certain political and administrative circumstances, state structures not only tolerated but also facilitated the displacement of the Albanian population. In this context, on 21 March 1914, thirty-one Albanian families from the village of Buzovik in the District of Gjilan submitted a formal request to Serbian administrative authorities seeking permission to emigrate to the Ottoman Empire, reflecting the pressures accompanying this process (Rushiti, 1986; Jagodić, 2013). Similar requests were submitted by Albanian families from the villages of Binçë and Budrikë. The approval of these requests by the competent office of the Ministry of the Interior of the Kingdom of Serbia contributed to the institutionalization of Albanian emigration (Rushiti, 1986; Osmani, 2004).

The emigration of the Albanian population also encouraged initiatives by Serbian governmental and administrative authorities in Kosovo to acquire Albanian property at substantially undervalued prices by exploiting the insecurity and political pressures faced by the local population. In the District of Gjilan, where emigration had assumed considerable proportions, two of the principal actors associated with these initiatives were Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Nikola Pašić and the head of Ferizaj, Marko Sinadinović. In June 1914, discussions were reportedly conducted concerning the “purchase of several villages” in the District of Gjilan, although the specific settlements were not identified in the available documentation. These discussions concerned villages whose inhabitants had expressed willingness to emigrate. The initiative, however, was not fully realized due to difficulties related to securing labor for the cultivation of the acquired lands. Nevertheless, ideas concerning the purchase or appropriation of villages remained present within administrative discourse and practice (Jagodić, 2013).

In the District of Gjilan, where substantial numbers of Muslim Albanians emigrated to the Ottoman Empire, the long-term consequence posed a serious risk of demographic transformation and depopulation of Albanian inhabitants, despite official declarations intended to limit the phenomenon. Albanian leaders, including Idriz Seferi, Mehmet Agë Doda from Presheva, Ahmet Bej Çerkezi, Said Aga, Hoxhë Myslim Efendi, and Shukri Efendi from Gjilan, formally protested these developments. Through Police Inspector Mihailo Cerović, they submitted a letter to Crown Prince Alexander Karađorđević describing the conditions and grievances of the Albanian population (Archive of the Institute of History, 1914g).

According to a report sent by the Austro-Hungarian diplomatic representative in Skopje, H. Jehlitschka, to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Vienna on 2 May 1914, Idriz Seferi and other local leaders from Gjilan and Presheva attempted to prevent the mass emigration of Albanians from these regions. Nevertheless, the same report emphasized that these efforts remained largely

unsuccessful, as they “strive in vain to halt the mass exodus of the population” (Archive of the Institute of History, 1914g). Idriz Seferi repeatedly communicated the complaints of the Albanian population to military and administrative authorities, requesting an end to the pressures that contributed to repression and emigration (Archive of the Institute of History, 1914g). According to official Serbian statistics, between September 1913 and March 1914, 108,457 Muslims from the territories referred to as “New Serbia” emigrated to the Ottoman Empire, including inhabitants from the District of Gjilan. From November 1912 to March 1914, the total number of emigrants reportedly reached 239,807 Muslims, excluding children under six years of age (Dedijer & Antić, 1980). Given that the emigration of the Albanian population possessed clear political implications that the Serbian state sought to channel and exploit in Kosovo, legislative initiatives were undertaken in the spring of 1914 with the aim of colonizing these territories through Serbian settlement policies (Obradović, 2005). However, the political tensions arising from the Sarajevo assassination and the outbreak of the First World War limited the immediate implementation of these measures, although the broader policy orientation itself was not abandoned.

Conclusion

An analysis of the policies and measures implemented by the civil and military administration in the District of Gjilan demonstrates that these actions were not isolated or incidental practices but rather components of a broader political and administrative framework developed by the Serbian state. In the short term, these policies contributed to the creation of conditions marked by administrative, political, and security pressures that weakened the position of the Albanian population and encouraged displacement. In the longer term, these measures were associated with broader objectives related to demographic transformation, colonization, and the consolidation of Serbian state control in Gjilan and its surrounding areas.

The appointment of administrative officials of Serbian national affiliation, originating either from various parts of the Kingdom of Serbia or from the region itself, together with the designation of municipal centers in settlements inhabited fully or partially by a Serbian population, reflected a policy that largely excluded Albanians from administrative and institutional structures. This approach was grounded in the perception of segments of the Albanian population as politically unreliable or potentially hostile to the Serbian state, thereby contributing to the reinforcement of ethnic divisions and the discriminatory character of administrative governance.

In the absence of effective institutional mechanisms for political representation and lacking substantial international support, segments of the Albanian population organized armed resistance and local insurgent actions. Although these movements were frequently fragmented, localized, and limited in coordination, they represented a continuation of Albanian opposition to Serbian rule and reflected broader efforts to defend local political, cultural, and communal interests. Despite being

suppressed by Serbian military and police structures, these actions demonstrated the persistence of resistance against the incorporation of Albanian-inhabited territories into the Kingdom of Serbia.

The emigration of a considerable part of the Albanian population to the Ottoman Empire should be understood within the broader context of systematic political pressure, economic insecurity, and the absence of legal and physical protection. Under these circumstances, emigration emerged for many families as a strategy of survival aimed at preserving communal, religious, and national identity while avoiding repression, forced assimilation, and insecurity. In this context, the outbreak of the First World War partially interrupted the further implementation of Serbian state policies toward the Albanian population of the region and created a new political and military situation that altered the trajectory of developments in Kosovo. Taken as a whole, the developments in the District of Gjilan during the period 1912–1914 illustrate the broader confrontation between the centralizing and homogenizing objectives of the Serbian state and the efforts of the local Albanian population to preserve its social structure, communal identity, and demographic continuity through resistance, adaptation, and migration.

Author Contributions

Fitim Rifati contributed to the conception of the study, archival research, methodological design, analysis and interpretation of the findings, drafting of the manuscript, and revision of the final text. The author approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

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