

## Insights on the national and religious war character of Gjergj Kastrioti-Skanderbeg

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### Abstract

Regarding the anti-Ottoman war of Gjergj Kastrioti Skanderbeg, various scientific circles but also theological ones have often laid the dilemma as to what character was this war - religious or national one. Based on relevant sources, this paper concludes that the anti-Ottoman war of Gjergj Kastrioti Skanderbeg proved to be a successful combination of national and religious elements due to the support of Papacy but also due to Christian religious affiliation of Albanians. Albanians belonged to two Christian religions, namely Orthodoxy and Catholicism, and therefore Skanderbeg maneuvered successfully on the religious aspect by overcoming distinctions between these two religions; thus maintaining the internal unity as opposed to external dissention of these religions, he granted to the war a national character as well. At this time, the orthodox Byzantium was almost entirely defeated causing the Catholic Church to take over the role of organizing the defense. For the organization of a successful defense, Papacy supported the Albanian resistance led by Skanderbeg, but it also tried to benefit in terms of religious aspect, seeking unification of Orthodoxy with Catholicism. Under these circumstances, Albanian territories, just where Orthodoxy and Catholicism met, were found in a position that required cautious handling to avoid eventual dissention within the Christianity and at the same time to organize an effective anti-Ottoman resistance. Hence, Gjergj Kastrioti Skanderbeg became the main mastermind of inter-Albanian Christian religious tolerance maintaining the same position both versus Catholicism and Orthodoxy thus giving rise to a powerful Albanian inter-religious unity in favor of the defense from Ottomans and successfully intertwining the national war with the religious one.

**Keywords:** national, religious, war, Gjergj Kastrioti Skanderbeg.

### Introduction

Under unfavorable military and political circumstances for the Balkans and Europe, Papacy which necessarily granted to the anti-Ottoman war also a religious character, was considered a decisive factor of the anti-Ottoman war. Actually, Catholic Church-led attempts were made with regard to organization of crusades that would be a "spiritus movens" of a wide anti-Ottoman movement. In the context of defending the unoccupied part of the Balkans, Albanians became an important factor of cooperation with Western trends which had assumed the organization of the anti-Ottoman defense. In these anti-Ottoman trends, the Catholic Church played undoubtedly the greatest role, namely popes who held the lead of this institution with a great military, political and moral power of the time and even Albanians became no doubt, the support factor of such a policy.<sup>1</sup> Evidently, under circumstances of the time, the anti-

<sup>1</sup> During the war of Skanderbeg against Ottomans, five popes succeeded the throne of the Holy

Ottoman war of Albanians could not circumvent the religious connotation; this aspect of Albanian resistance is elaborated by both Albania's and foreign historiography and accordingly, there were two diametrically opposite schools of thought. One of them was represented mainly by scholars whose profession, in addition to history, was also the Christian theology while the other school of thought was represented by mainly historians of the period of Monism and Atheism in Albania (Barleti, 1962; Gegaj, 2003; Fishta, 1930; Frasheri, 2002; Drancolli, 2001). The first emphasized the role and importance played by the Papacy in assisting and organizing the anti-Ottoman Albanian resistance; while the second minimized or denied this role. There were also balancing assessments recalling elements of either group. Viewed from these perspectives, it remained unclear whether the real meaning of the war fought by Gjergj Kastrioti Skanderbeg was religious or national one. Taken as a whole, the Albanian resistance under Skanderbeg's leadership started initially with an unexpected uprising in a neglected country and therefore European states paid no attention to the importance of Albanian war (Frasheri, 2002, 3001). But later, based on a mutual interest, regular diplomatic relations were launched between Skanderbeg and European states, first and foremost with Vatican. As to the Papacy, Skanderbeg maintained throughout his long military and diplomatic career cooperation relations at different levels of support and understanding with five Popes: Eugene IV, Nicholas V, Kalistine III, Pius II and Paul II (Hadri, 1987, 117). Actually, Skanderbeg's policy from the beginning to its end became subject to the need for the country's freedom and liberation of Albania.<sup>2</sup> Such an idea allowed him to take advantage of the opportunity offered by the religious meaning of the war channeling it in the so-called crusades against the Islamic Crescent; besides, he had also accepted the title "Athleta Christi" granted by Kaliste III. Moreover, around his famous helmet, were inscribed Latin initials, otherwise Catholic ones, whose meaning was: Jesus of Nazareth blesses Skanderbeg, the Prince of Mat, King of Albania, Terror of the Ottomans, King of Epirus. In religious orientation within Orthodox or Catholic Christianity, Skanderbeg was oriented towards Papacy not only because of weakening of orthodoxy but also because of the fact that the time for Gj. K. Skanderbeg's actions, more specifically the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, was precisely the time of increased role and importance of Catholicism in Europe; Catholicism had taken its roots well earlier in Albania but now it sought to further strengthen its impact there and even at the expense of orthodoxy. High Albanian nobility along the Adriatic coast had always been mostly catholic. Even those few noblemen from Albanian northern areas identified with Orthodoxy, after the decline of the Serbian Empire had been long ago converted into Catholicism being incorporated with the majority as it was the case in 1369, when Balshaj family accepted Catholicism by renouncing Orthodoxy and adapting themselves, in a confessional manner, to the Albanian social environment (Malltezi, 1988, 49). Conversion into Catholicism had strongly started since the advent

See: Eugene IV, Nicholas V, Kalisti III, Pius II and Pauli II, for more information, see: (Hadri, 1987, Gj.K.Skenderbeu dhe epoka e tij në historiografine shqiptare).

<sup>2</sup> Skanderbeg successfully combined the religious war with the defensive one for his own state; therefore estblishing of contacts with papacy was a necessary act. Once Pope Nicholas the Fifth (1447-1455) took office of pope, appointed on 20 June 1447 Antonio de Oliveto as apostolic nuncio in the territories of Albania and Slavonia. This is the first official act whereby the papacy entered into relations with Skanderbeg; (Pandzic, 1969, 181).

of Anjouins in 1272 and constituted a response against the orthodox penetration from Serbia. The dominant influence of Orthodoxy in Kruja had been removed away precisely with the arrival of Anjouin (Šufflay, 1926, 154), but its role had not been fully eliminated from these areas. Actually, the beginnings of strengthening and weakening of Orthodoxy in Albanian northern areas were connected with the establishment of the Serbian Autocephalous Church in 1219. This process had gained momentum in Zeta, respectively in Dukla during 13<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, breaking the Catholic continuity along the coast that linked Dalmatino-Croatian Catholic dioceses with Albanian ones and transforming northern Albanians into an Orthodoxy-surrounded island of Catholicism. This continuity had existed long ago to the effect that predecessors of nemanjidas themselves who currently represented Serbian state orthodoxy, according to the priest from Dioklea had once been baptized by Catholic priests (Šufflay, 1926, 1). Papacy, wanted to maintain and continue its influence within these spaces endeavored to attract Albanian noble families. In papal Bulls issued since 1319 on the occasion of organizing anti-Serbian uprising, Albanian noblemen of the respective families of Muzakaj, Matrangaj, Arianiti, Blinishti, Jonima are called “dilecti filii” and “viri catolici”.<sup>3</sup> The period including 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries mark the period of increased importance and role of Catholicism as the dominant political, religious and military force. Such trends were reflected also in the Albanian territories claiming to have vested a religious character to the war fought by Skanderbeg as the war of catholic Christianity against the Ottoman Crescent. However, in the internal plan, Skanderbeg carefully maneuvered between Catholicism and Orthodoxy while respecting both religions because his warriors belonged to both confessions.

Having property in the areas under the influence of religions, Kastrioti family were open to both of them but Skanderbeg was oriented towards Catholicism in which he saw the possibility of greater assistance and wider identification with the West. The father of our hero of heroes, Gjon Kastrioti maintained relations with the Orthodox Hilandar monastery in Athos. Through an act of donation written according to Byzantine year in 6934 that corresponds nearly to the year 1426 according to the Christian era, Gjon together with his sons Stanisha, Reposh, Konstantin and Gjergj donated to the holy monastery the village of Radostusha along with the Church of St. Mary Immaculate in that village as well as the village of Trebisht. The second act bears no selling date. Via this act, the abbot of the monastery, Athanasius, acting on behalf of the council of monks, sold to Gjon and his three (not four) sons the tower of St. George with some properties of this tower (Frasheri, 2002, 89). This tower is still called among circles of the monastery as the “Albanian tower”. Following recent research it is explained that Reposh was there as a military guard with some Albanians rather than as a monk, as it was believed so far. In my opinion, the anti-Ottoman war idea of Papacy was associated with the idea of controlling the orthodox church, and therefore the idea of Unia was more acceptable even for Papacy and more feasible through Skanderbeg, who as noted above, had a family history with orthodoxy, but there were also southern and southeastern provinces, which continued to be under the influence of eastern church. As to Skanderbeg, the idea of Islam, accepted while

<sup>3</sup> Acta et diplomata res Albaniae mediae aetatis illustrantia I, annos 344-1343, Vindobonae MCMXI-II-MCMXVIII, f.194, doc.648, Avenione, 17. iunii 1319, doc. 649, Avenione 17. iunii 1319, f.196.

he was at the royal court of the sultan had already ended when he abandoned this court and embarked on the liberation war. War of Skanderbeg, from the religious aspect of Papacy, appears as a war against Islam, but also as a war for control or submission of orthodoxy by papacy. In fact, the Catholic League in Albania was part of a larger papal project having acted even before the emergence of the Ottoman danger. In 1379, the Albanian feudal nobleman Karl Topia was a member of the Catholic League of the Hungarian King Ludovik, acting against the Venetians, but also against Byzantine. Upon such an organization from Kruje, through Croatia, Slavonia, Hungary and until to Poland, it was set up the western political and religious line, which in the 15th century performed the role of military line against the Ottomans (Šufflay, 1926, 18). Skanderbeg therefore appeared also as a political follower to this line, but now under new circumstances of the emergence of Ottoman danger. The Holy See used the aim of the anti-Ottoman war as a strengthening opportunity along the shores of the eastern Adriatic. Hence, we understand that the Christians' military offensive had the support of Papacy in two directions, namely the anti-Ottoman aspect and strengthening of Catholicism, and Skanderbeg grasped this very well. He supported the Papacy because of the assistance he needed from outside, but he also tolerated the orthodoxy because of the internal unity, and so his role appears very delicate even in terms of the diplomatic and religious aspect. But, properly understanding these vulnerable circumstances of religious strife and attempts for stabilization of the papal authority after the blows it had sustained from the ideas of the Renaissance and rising western nationalism to secede from Rome, it follows that the war of Skanderbeg, albeit apparently a religious one, was essentially well beyond such a religious war at least in Albania where Orthodoxy and Catholicism clashed. This war in Albania was beyond regional and beyond tribal line in the meaning of feudal nobility. It is evident that on the external aspect, Skanderbeg was connected with Catholicism thereby formally granting also a religious coloration, but on the internal aspect, his war appears to be beyond religious war, as a reference relying on the idea of being Albanian. Rome and Kruje had actually different visions against the Ottoman invasion and therefore, the war character of Skanderbeg could not have been merely religious although at first sight it may be viewed as such. The primary goal of Skanderbeg was the liberation of Albania and ensuring its independence from whatever foreign power, even if it were a Christian one. Moreover, his army had pressing needs for food, armaments and ducats. By contrast, Rome aimed not only at doing away with the Ottoman threat from all over the European continent, but as noted above, it also coveted the jurisdiction of the exhausted Patriarchate of Constantinople in the East. Hence the fundamental principle of Skanderbeg Related with the Papacy was the political interest and by no means merely the religious one. The religious element was approaching rather than determining. This is proved by the war Skanderbeg fought against the Christian Venice, who, upon his selfish activity endangered the interest of the Albanian State and Christian interest as well, especially in the battle for the town of Deja (Gegaj, 2003, 137).

## Conclusions

Worth mentioning from this war is also an interesting notice which probably expresses more strongly Skanderbeg's attitude in terms of the ratio between religious and national aspect. In the conflict with Venice, when Skanderbeg noted that his fighters were less committed in fighting against the Christians than against the Ottomans, fearing that they would not demonstrate their usual bravery, he stated that they had to separate religion from enemies already based on their unfair claims. They should not be fought as Christians but as usurpers. This was to justify the Christian bloodshed in Italy when Skanderbeg went to help Ferdinand of Naples against Italian princes (Frasheri, 2005, 103). Hence, in the context of war not solely against the Ottomans, Skanderbeg was always led first by the national and political concept and then by the religious one. This finding may probably sound like a romantic national description of a part of our history, but we base such a finding on his own activity in the field and on the already known response that Skanderbeg sent to prince of Tarent, Johannes Antonius de Ursinis, on 31 October 1460, in which he emphasizes as an identifying element of his own people, the Epirote ethnonym, namely Albanians and by no means only as Christians, by stating: "the situation changed and if our chronicles do not lie, we are called Epirote and you should be aware that in other times, our ancestors passed where you are today and fought heavy wars with the Romanians and we know that in most cases they acquitted themselves with honor rather than with disgrace." Ottoman chronicles helped in featuring religious concept of Skanderbeg's war in historiography as they called Christians generally and Albanians particularly as infidels which means outside the Islam belief and which in its opposite meaning meant pious Christians. We notice this in a letter that the Sultan Mehmet II Fatih from Elbasani sent to his son, Crown Prince Bayezid, in which among others, he stressed out: "When you receive this important letter, you will get to know that some Albanian infidels – may God wipe them out – had erupted in riots and rebellion. But, there are also Turkish chroniclers, who point out that Skanderbeg's cooperation with Papacy was entirely linked with the hope to find ways for realizing his own goal, namely taking over the principality of Kruje. In view of the above, it can be concluded that Gjergj Kastrioti Skanderbeg, leading a wise national policy, used religion, among others, also as a tool for winning and maintaining independence by placing the religious context at the service of state interest. At domestic level, he became the ideator of the phenomenon called the Albanian inter-religious Tolerance versus the difficult terrain inflicted by clashing of these two religions in just Albanian territories. Based on these facts, it can be ultimately concluded that precisely the liberation element of war fought by Skanderbeg was and remained always present as an inspiration motive on the difficult path of struggle for independence by helping but at the same time exceeding the meaning of religious war thereby making Skanderbeg and his war accepted and respected even after en masse acceptance of Islam from Albanians. Had the meaning of war been otherwise, Skanderbeg's magnificence and role would have been diminished upon acceptance of Islam among Albanians, but as it is commonly known, such a thing never happened. Skanderbeg and his war remained an inspiration and respected ideal to all Albanians regardless of which

religion, province or district they belonged.

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