

**İSA BOLETİNİ (1864-1916):
AN OTTOMAN ALBANIAN FIGURE OF TWISTS AND TURNS**

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BY

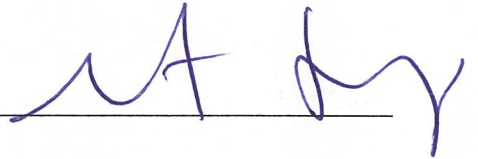
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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Beria', with a stylized flourish at the end.

ABSTRACT

İSA BOLETİNİ (1864-1916): AN OTTOMAN ALBANIAN FIGURE OF TWISTS AND TURNS

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İsa Boletini is one of the Ottoman imperial figures with multiple identities and loyalties at the turn of the twentieth century. He was born in the village Boletin from Mitroviçe during the transformation of the last Ottoman land in the Balkans to become an independent state of Albania. He was one of the local figures who felt the foreign pressure in the region by the Great Powers and tackled them in his own ways which resulted in diplomatic crises between the Ottoman and Russian Empires. As a local power magnet, he was invited to the Palace to serve as a personal guard, tüfenkçi, to the Sultan Abdülhamid II. Given privileges and concessions, he returned to his hometown where he became a gendarme of the Sultan and continued to exercise his authority within the limits. However, with the success of the 1908 Revolution by the Young Turks, the new regime targeted him and aimed to diminish the symbolism he carried as an old ally of the Sultan. Yet, in the tumultuous environment of the Balkans, perpetuating further violence turned the region into a more vulnerable land in the eyes of the Great Powers. This thesis aims to show the parallelism between the fluctuating events of the nineteenth century Balkans and İsa Boletini's multiple identities, in the light of the "Imperial Biography" approach, by making use of Ottoman archival material which was not yet incorporated into the study of his life.

Keywords: İsa Boletini, Biography, Nationalism, Abdülhamid II, Kosovo

ÖZ

İSA BOLETİNİ (1864-1916): DÖNÜŞÜMLER VE DEĞİŞİMLERİN OSMANLI ARNAVUT FİĞÜRÜ

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İsa Boletini, yirminci yüzyıl dönümünde, sahip olduğu birden çok kimlik ve sadakat kaynağıyla Osmanlı imparatorluk figürlerinden birisidir. Mitroviçe'nin Boletin köyünde doğmuş ve Balkanlardaki son Osmanlı toprağı olan Arnavutluk'un bağımsız bir devlete dönüşüm serüveninin bir parçası olmuştur. Yerel figürlerden biri olarak bölgedeki dış baskıları derinden hissetmiş, kendi tarzında çözümler bulmaya çalışmış ve nihayetinde Rus ve Osmanlı İmparatorlukları arasında diplomatik bir krize yola açmıştır. Mahalli bir güç odağı konumunda olan İsa, Saray'da Sultan Abdülhamid'in özel muhafız birliğinde tüfenkçi olarak hizmet etmek üzere İstanbul'a davet edilmiştir. Kendisine tanınan imtiyazlar ve bahşedilen hediyelerle memleketine dönmüş, sağlamlaşan yetkilerini sınırlar dahilinde sonuna kadar kullanmış ve bölgede adeta Sultan'ın jandarması konumuna erişmiştir. Fakat, başarıyla sonuçlanan 1908 Jön Türk İhtilali sonucunda yeni rejim kendisini hedef almış ve padişahın eski ortağı imajıyla taşıdığı sembolik değeri yıkmaya çalışmıştır. Şiddet olaylarının yükselmesiyle istikrarını kaybeden bölge Büyük Güçlerin ilgisini daha da arttırmış ve savunmasız bir hale gelmiştir. Bu çalışma, daha önce kullanılmamış Osmanlı arşiv belgeleri ışığında, on dokuzuncu yüzyıl sonunda Balkanlarda deneyimlenen çalkantılı olaylar ile İsa Boletini'nin çoklu kimlikleri arasındaki paralelliği "imparatorluk biyografisi" yaklaşımını kullanarak göstermeyi hedefliyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İsa Boletini, Biyografi, Milliyetçilik, II. Abdülhamid, Kosova

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ABBREVIATIONS USED IN FOOTNOTES

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1. İsa Boletini (1864-1916)

The Boletini family was operating within a society composed of a unique tribal structure with a self-administrative system organized upon a common culture, ancestry, and social links in today's Kosovo region. The Boletinis belonged to the *Shala* tribe as one of the powerful tribes in the region which appeared around the year of 1430.¹ A strong consciousness of common blood ties and regional responsibilities related to the protection of lands and privileges were the primary concerns of the people in the region. The land was a sacred genesis to be protected from any internal and external threats; therefore, the defense was almost an instinct. That being the case, it was claimed that the Boletinis were among the crucial collaborators of the Ottoman Empire upon a shared goal of the land protection in the Northern parts of Kosovo due to the natural isolation of the mountainous terrain.² Consequently, these lands "featured a fluid and autonomous social milieu"³, were nominally under the state control, and enjoyed relative autonomy. In other words, the state apparatuses were welcome as long as they were in line with the tribal concerns.

Despite the various titles and surnames, I came across such as Bolatin, Poletin, Polimnac, Poltinac, Poletenacik, Polti, Bolistinac, Beletinatz, and Polsentisbac, hereafter İsa's name will be mentioned as İsa Boletini because it is the way he wanted to be addressed according to his seal: Ibn Adem İsa Abduhu Boletini.⁴ As a member

¹ Robert Elsie, *The tribes of Albania: History, Society and Culture*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), p. 118.

² Tafil Boletini, *Pranë Isa Boletinit*, (ed.) Merenglen Verli, (Tetovë: Ndërmarrja Gazetare-Botuese Album, 1996), p. 29.

³ Paolo Maggiolini, "Understanding Life in the Ottoman-Montenegrin Borderlands of Northern Albania during the *Tanzimat* Era: Catholic Mirdite Tribes, Missionaries and Ottoman Officials", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 50, 2014 pp.208-232, p. 221

⁴ Y.EE. / 15 - 209, 1325, 01.07, (M-20-02-1907). Son of Adem, Slave of Allah İsa Boletini

of the Boletini family, İsa Boletini was born on the 15th of January 1864, as the second son of Adem in the borderline village of Boletin near Mitroviçe. This city was not simply a frontier zone due to the complex and multidimensional conflicts between different groups of people. Born in a region full of conflicts, İsa was a reactionary activist figure who pursued solutions mostly involving brute force and had his way of doing things.⁵ His life has coincided with the formation of new nation-states which were calving from the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans. This has threatened the security of the *sacred* lands of these tribes and the protection was the utmost goal to be achieved. Built-in this condition, the League of Prizren (1878) was an important cornerstone that demonstrated the common nuisance in the region.

The Ottoman authorities, on the other hand, have followed divergent and to some extent paradoxical strategies to calm the region including the exercise of brute force upon the local people as well as the collaboration proposals. İsa was one of the figures who experienced both strategies several times during his life. For example, his first involvement in armed conflicts took place in the Battle of Slivova (1881) against the Ottoman authorities when he was only seventeen years old.⁶ Whereas, as the natural consequence of the Ottoman authorities' inclination to delegate gendarmerie responsibilities to the local figures in the region, İsa's elder brother Ahmet Boletini was proposed to seek a collaboration to suppress the concerning activities of the Bulgarian guerillas, the Montenegrin and Serbian claims on the Kosovar lands with the involvement of another Albanian figure, the Field Marshal Recep Paşa (1842-1908), in 1886.⁷ Operating through the loosening and tightening; conflicting and collaborating; twisting and turning contingencies, the relationship between the Boletinis and the Sublime Porte has always been fluid and fluctuating. In 1894, when İsa became the head of the Boletini family and acquired a great extent

⁵ İsa Blumi, *Reinstating the Ottomans: Alternative Balkan Modernities, 1800-1912*, (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 145.

⁶ Robert Elsie, *Historical Dictionary of Kosova*, (Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 2004), p. 29-30.

⁷ Abdulnasır Yiner, "Müşir Recep Paşanın Askeri ve Siyasi Hayatı", (Ph.D. diss., İstanbul Üniversitesi, 2006)

of authority after the death of his brother Ahmet, he inherited the traditional yet compelling positioning of the Boletinis towards the Sublime Porte.

Due to the tenacious circumstances in the Kosovo region at the turn of the twentieth century, the Sublime Porte has anticipated the fact that the reform programs with centralization politics were going to strengthen the ties between the Balkans and İstanbul. In theory, the durable and powerful ties were going to help to protect the region from the intense foreign pressure of the time. Hence, in the same year when İsa became the head of the family, Hafız Mehmed Paşa (1844-1903) was appointed as the governor of Kosovo to suppress the revolts resulting from both internal and external pressures. Within such a context, İsa has encountered several problems that required certain abilities to maneuver between multiple concerns. For instance, first time under his authority, Hafız Mehmed Paşa asked him to surrender due to his resistance against the increased taxes and burned his *kule* in 1895.⁸ Hence, especially in the last years of the nineteenth century, İsa has turned into one of the most influential activist figures with guerilla tactics to protect the region from the Great Powers' and the neighboring states ambitious involvements and to oppose the new regulations of the Sublime Porte which were against local peoples' interests. Growing out of the ultimate upset in the balance of power in the region, his reactionary activism was degraded in either national uprising or banditry acts from the statist perspectives.

In 1901, after a couple of years of armed conflicts between the Ottoman forces and the local powers in the region, the connection between İsa and the Ottoman authorities has entered into a new phase with the involvement of another Albanian figure in the region, the commander of the Eighteenth Infantry Division based in Mitroviçe, Şemsi Paşa (1846-1908). With his pro-collaborative approach, İsa was introduced to the Yıldız palace as a possible ally to protect the region. Yet, the inter-imperial diplomatic crisis between the Russians and the Ottomans led the Yıldız to

⁸ Kule is a specific type of construction that aimed maximum protection from armed conflicts. See, Ayda Arel, "Prygos'tan Burgaz'a: Osmanlı Dünyasında Sivil Amaçlı Kuleler I: Erken Dönem ve Öncüller", *Bir Alleme-i Cihan: Stefanos Yerasimos*, 2nd vol., (İstanbul: Kitap Yayınevi, 2012), pp. 15-71.

secure İsa as a valuable collaborator-to-be. Therefore, in 1902, he arrived at İstanbul upon the request of the Sultan Abdülhamid II. He has served as a *tüfenkçi*, a personal guard of the Sultan, for four years and upon the defeat of the Russian Empire against the Japanese, he returned to Mitroviçe in 1906.

Between the years of 1906 and 1908, he fulfilled gendarmery duties following his tribal concerns. He tried to follow a careful balance between the Yıldız and Mitroviçe in accordance with his multiple responsibilities and agendas. After the Revolution of 1908 and the dethronement of the Sultan in 1909, İsa became the initial target of the new Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) regime. During the years of 1909 and 1911, again, he became “the bandit” for the Ottoman authorities and compelled to search solutions and cooperation among the other ambitious figures in the region such as Montenegro. Escaping from the bear and falling to the lion, İsa found himself as a pion to be manipulated to capture the western parts of Kosovo. This eventually created a shared concern by the CUP and İsa which forced them to start a reluctant cooperation process during the year of 1911. Yet, it was too late to harvest the fruits of this collaboration due to the Balkan Wars (1912-1913) and WWI (1914-1918).

From the Balkan Wars until his murder in 1916, İsa has continued to search solutions for the unsteady circumstances surrounding all the Albanian lands. After he participated in the declaration of independence in 1912, he became one of the stable companions of İsmail Kemal Bey for his search of the Great Power’s support to consolidate the independence. This cadre of political elites as well as activists has traveled to Italy and England to conduct political negotiations with the representatives of other Balkan states where İsa was labeled as “the Robin Hood of Albanians”.⁹ In 1914, he was in the group of guards to protect the Prince Wilhelm of Wied who was assigned as the sovereign of the Principality of Albania. Yet, it did not help to stabilize Albanian lands. İsa has continued to be in contact with other Great Powers and with the guidance of France, in 1916, he arrived in Montenegro and was assassinated on the 24th of January in Podgorica.

⁹ Fatmira Musaj, *İsa Boletini*, (Tiran: 1987); 2nd ed. (Tiran: 2000), p. 171-172.

As can be seen from his simplified and shortened biographical information, İsa Boletini's life is full of turning points and actors, twisted and turned by the contingencies of the time, and complex to fit in a linear narrative. That being the case, how does the literature portray him?

1.2. Literature Review

The defeat and eventual fall of the two giant multi-ethnic empires of Europe, that of the Ottomans and the Habsburgs after the Great War, raised dust mostly in the Balkans. Authorities of the new nation-states deliberately rushed in to write official histories of their states to complete their nation-building processes. In general, the Balkan historiographers tended to interpret "the Ottoman period as x centuries of darkness for nation y"¹⁰, as an anti-Ottoman political tool, based on the dichotomy of the colonizer and the colonized which is by no means unique for the Balkans, but *de facto* in all post-imperial stories. Hence, this tendency has produced similar formulas for political strategies for Bosnian, Serbian, Albanian, Greek, Bulgarian, and even Turkish national narratives. Master narratives of these states "document and praise retrospectively the 'heroic efforts' which had led to the formation of new nation-states that succeeded an 'outdated' Ottoman system of rule"¹¹, inspiring similar discourses of "rebirth" by their intellectuals "(Alb. Rilindja; Bulg. Vŭzrazhdane; Cze. Obrození; Croat. Preporod)". They focused on the discoveries of a forgotten and pre-existing "innate identity". Generating such a discourse reproduced both the intellectuals and the masses, which became national commodities eventually.¹²

Nationalist discourse conceptualized the Ottoman period is conceptualized "as an era of oppression, humiliation, and resistance". Nevertheless, this designation of the

¹⁰ Frederick F. Anscombe, "Introduction", *The Ottoman Balkans, 1750-1830*, ed. Frederick F. Anscombe, (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2005), p. 2.

¹¹ Hannes Grandits et al. "Introduction: Social (dis-)integration and the national turn in the late- and post-Ottoman Balkans: Towards an analytical framework", *Conflicting Loyalties in the Balkans: the Great Powers, the Ottoman Empire and Nation Building*, (London, I.B.Tauris, 2011), p. 5.

¹² Jane C. Sugarman, "Imagining the Homeland: Poetry, Songs, and the Discourses of Albanian Nationalism", *Ethnomusicology* Vol.3, No. 3 (Autumn, 1999), p. 421.

Ottoman era does not necessarily put it into the same category with modern colonial historiographies such as the European colonization of African lands. Rather, theoretically, the national revival narratives of the Balkan states can be categorized into post-colonial studies. Partha Chatterjee has stated that post-colonial features of history begin by praising the ancient past, then is interrupted with a “dark middle period of foreign domination”, followed by a “national revival” which overcomes despotic foreign oppression.¹³ Hence, the nation-state formation in the Balkans was not the result of “bourgeois aspirations for social and political aspirations”, rather it stemmed from the Ottoman state’s inabilities in several fields that brought “relevant elites to the front” where nation-states were to be built before the nation itself.¹⁴

Albania makes no exception within this context of the Balkans. İsa Boletini was among those praised heroes, a freedom fighter and a guerrilla, who participated in battles for the sake of an independent Albania and sought out to prove that a strong national consciousness existed. He was an inspiring figure who “defended the national values with pride”, stood loyal to fighting traditions, tried his best to search for solutions, and even asked for help from other contemporary European states to achieve victory over the “invaders”.¹⁵ Furthermore, it is well-known that he had served in the palace of Sultan Abdülhamid II, as the head of the Albanian guards (*tüfenkciler*) for four years (1902-1906) in İstanbul and “acquired the title of bey”. Although he was close to the Sultan as a collaborator, he is remembered as a freedom fighter, and not as a royalist.¹⁶ Hence, it can be inferred that İsa had multiple loyalties simultaneously, and

¹³ Nikolay Antov, “Emergence and Historical Development of Muslim Communities in the Ottoman Balkans: Historical and Historiographical Remarks”, *Beyond Mosque, Church, and State: Alternative Narratives of the Nation in the Balkans*, (ed) Theodora Dragostinova and Yana Hashamova, (Budapest & New York: CEU Press, 2016), p. 33.

¹⁴ Suraiya Faroqhi & Fikret Adanır, *The Ottomans and the Balkans: A Discussion of Historiography*, (Leiden: Brill, 2002). p. 41.

¹⁵ Tahir Abdyli, *İsa Boletini: Tribun Popullor*, (Prishtinë: Enti i Teksteve dhe i Mjeteve Mësimore i Kosovës, 1997), p.5-6.

¹⁶ Robert Elsie, *A Biographical Dictionary of Albanian History*, (NY: I.B. Tauris, 2012), p. 46.

as such, experienced “the Ottoman Empire as a life course”¹⁷ which was a natural result of him being an imperial figure.

Broadly speaking, Albanian historiography after the 1960s revealed two conflicting points of view that have dominated academia when considering Albanian nationalism and its independence movement: 1- The dominant paradigm of the Ottoman invasion which aims to carve the history of Albania out of its broader context, 2- The challenging paradigm of the Albanian history as being part of the Ottoman world. They need to be contextualized both at horizontal and vertical levels since it has been produced by several actors from diverse locations. To begin with, systematic produce of the grand national narrative in Albanian has started as a sub-unit under the Tiran University through the establishment of the Institute of History and Linguistics (Instituti i Historisë dhe i Gjuhësisë) upon the order of the Communist regime in 1957.¹⁸ Through years, the institute has crystalized and transformed into the Institute of History (Instituti i Historisë) in 1972. The institute members such as Kristo Frashëri¹⁹, Ahmet Kondo²⁰, and Fatmira Musaj²¹ can be the representative historians of the first paradigm. The “institute” historians constructed the modern historiographical tradition of Albanians which mostly stems from the Marxist-Leninist theory of history where it is in opposition to the Ottoman Empire. Especially after the Second World War, among these historians, there was a deliberate rush “to adapt their national history to the Marxist version of events only to succumb to the attraction of nationalism, often at the orders of their leaders. The interpretations produced under these circumstances were awkward, to say the least”²². The real

¹⁷ Abdulhamit Kirmızı, “Experiencing the Ottoman Empire as a Life Course Ferid Pasha, Governor and Grandvizier (1851 –1914)”, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 40, 2014, p. 42.

¹⁸ Bülent Bilmez, “Arnavutluk Tarih Ders Kitaplarında Osmanlı / Türk İmgesi”, *Osmanlı Araştırmaları / The Journal of Ottoman Studies*, XLIX (2017), p. 349.

¹⁹ Kristo Frashëri, *Historie d’Albanie*, (Tiranë: 1964).

²⁰ Ahmet Kondo, *Flamuri i Arbërit: çështja kombëtare*, (Tiranë: 1967).

²¹ Fatmira Musaj, *Isa Boletini*, (Tiran: 1987); 2nd ed. (Tiranë: 2004).

²² Kemal H. Karpat, “The Balkan National States and Nationalism: Image and Reality”, *Islamic Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 2/3, (Summer/Autumn 1997), p. 331.

problem was, and to some extent still is, the absence or the selective use of the primary sources, and the lack of an analysis scraped from any ideological orientation.²³ This dominant and nationalist paradigm had representatives outside of the Albanian lands who may be called as the “diaspora” historians. This second group can be represented by Stavro Skëndi (1905-1989) and his nationalist approach, which refers to Albanian Independence as one “stamped by awakening”²⁴ and enhanced the primordial, always present, meta-historical, and myth-based national sentiments.

Yet, the second paradigm of Albanian history as a part of the broader Ottoman context was realized firstly by the Albanians born in Yugoslavian lands such as today’s Kosovo and Macedonia. Contrary to the works produced within the first paradigm, where it is not possible to see much dialogue between multiple sources and narratives, the second paradigm revealed more cultural studies and is eager to understand Albanian history concerning its broader context, which was transcribed by the Ottomans. Hasan Kaleshi (1922-1976)²⁵ was an Albanian professor, born in Macedonia, who paved the way for new interpretations through the use of Ottoman archival material, which can be attributed to the relative freedom of expression that existed in Yugoslavian authorities when compared to the Hoxha regime. Therefore, “Yugoslavian” historians were more aware of the Ottoman context, challenged and questioned the “institute” and “diaspora” historians who have represented the Ottoman period as centuries of darkness.

Even though the “Yugoslavian” historians were aware of the broader context, the second paradigm can truly be represented by the historians who fully wanted to incorporate the Albanian historiography into more extensive narratives such as the

²³ Nathalie Clayer, *Arnavut Milliyetçiliğinin Kökenleri: Avrupa’da Çoğunluğu Müslüman Bir Ulusun Doğuşu*, trans. Ali Berktaş, (İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2013), p.3-4.

²⁴ Nathalie Clayer, *Arnavut Milliyetçiliğinin Kökenleri*, p. 4.

²⁵ Hasan Kaleshi, “Le Role Chemseddin Sami Dans La Formation De Deux Langues Littéraires: Turc et Albanais”, *Balkanica I*, (Beograd, 1970), pp. 195-216. This article demonstrates Kaleshi’s effort to reconstruct national figures in accordance with their multiple identities.

Ottoman, the Balkans and the world. One of the earliest studies was George W. Gawrych's doctoral dissertation²⁶ where he focused on the events between 1908-1913 in Albania, relying on the Ottoman archives. Gawrych's "heavy empiricism"²⁷ proves that Albanians were part of the mosaic structure of the Empire. They were incorporated well into the system, so he focused on the overarching archival material. However, his failure to consult Albanian sources left him with more "conventional references"²⁸ that are insufficient and limited when cultivating the complexity of the matter. Yet, Nathalie Clayer focuses on the "roots" in order to understand Albanian nationalism and its movement of Independence.²⁹ She puts emphasis on more Albanian newspapers that reveal multiple and intertwined Albanian identity forms, and the dynamics and contingencies of the late nineteenth century that were forcing them to do so. Moreover, in recent years, Isa Blumi³⁰ challenges the reductionist interpretations of the history of Albanian people. As a prolific historian, he sheds the light on the complexities of the Empire and emphasizes the multidimensional shifts with their consequences on the people beyond the nationalistic narratives. Among the Turkish historians who studied the prominent Albanian figures as "Ottomans", Bülent Bilmez³¹ and Abdulhamit Kırmızı³²

²⁶ George Walter Gawrych, "Ottoman Administration and the Albanians, 1908-1913", (PhD. diss., The University of Michigan, 1980).

²⁷ Isa Blumi. Review of *Aux origins du nationalisme albanais: La naissance d'une nation majoritairement musulmane en Europe* by Nathalie Clayer and review of *The Crescent and the Eagle: Ottoman rule, Islam and the Albanians, 1874-1913* by George W. Gawrych, *American Historical Review*, (April, 2008), pp. 610-612.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 610.

²⁹ Nathalie Clayer, *Arnavut Milliyetçiliğinin Kökenleri: Avrupa'da Çoğunluğu Müslüman Bir Ulusun Doğuşu*, trans. Ali Berkay, İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2013.

³⁰ Isa Blumi, *Reinstating the Ottomans: Alternative Balkan Modernities, 1800-1912*, (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

³¹ Bülent Bilmez, "Mythologization of an Ottoman Intellectual in the Modern Turkish and Socialist Albanian Historiographies based on 'selective perception': Sami Frashëri or Şemseddin Sami Bey", *Balkanologie. Revue d'études pluridisciplinaires* VII, sayı 2 (2003) p. 19- 46.

³² Abdulhamit Kırmızı, *Avlonyalı Ferit Paşa: Bir Ömür Devlet*, (İstanbul: Klasik Yayınları, 2014), Abdulhamit Kırmızı, "Experiencing the Ottoman Empire as a Life Course Ferid Pasha, Governor and Grandvizier (1851-1914)", *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 40. 2014, pp. 42- 66; Abdulhamit Kırmızı, "Avlonyalı Mustafapaşazade Mehmed Süreyya Bey", in *Osmanlı Sonrası Arnavutluk (1912-1920)*, *Avlonyalı Süreyya Bey* (İstanbul: Klasik, 2009), pp. 19-73.

demonstrated the fluidity of the multiple identities, agendas, and concerns in respect to their *non-national* coexistence.

To sum up, Albanian historiography has been evolving between two conflicting paradigms of isolation and incorporation. Among the historians, there are four different groups: institute and diaspora historians who kept a deliberate, and occasionally obligatory, distance toward the imperial context whereas Yugoslavian historians and contemporary “incorporationists” who challenge the first group with deconstruction and reconstruction of the nationalist narratives.

Flourishing from such dichotomic paradigms, Isa Boletini as a nationalist figure has a special place in Albanian historiography since he was right next to Ismail Kemal Bey while rising the Albanian flag in Vlorë in 1912.³³ The first extended biographical study on him was published in 1972, although prepared in 1961, by Skënder Luarasi.³⁴ Mostly relying on the memoirs of Isa’s contemporaries, it leaves a remarkable gap for interpretation, overestimation, and a figure formation as imagined. The interesting point about this biography is the reluctant attitude of Enver Hoxha to print the book. It was the Prime Minister Mehmet Shehu who found an opportunity to order the biography to be published more than ten years with a crucial detail: the book was published in Prishtinë.³⁵ The reason might be the conflicting communist strategies of Hoxha and Tito regimes as well as the internal dynamics of the Hoxha regime which did not favor such a book to be published. Moreover, the articles and books on the national awakening and independence have touched upon Isa’s figure; yet few were targeting him directly.³⁶ Hence, in 1985, among the institute historians, Fatmira

³³ Stavro Skëndi. *The Albanian National Awakening 1878-1912*, (Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 152.

³⁴ Skënder Luarasi. *Isa Boletini: Jetëshkrim i shkurtër*, (Prishtinë: Rilindja, 1972).

³⁵ Ferdinand Dervishi, “Isa Boletini: ‘Unë jam mirë kur asht mirë Shqipnia!’” *Ars Albanica Portal Kulturor*, <http://www.arsalbanica.mk/isa-boletini-une-jam-mire-kur-asht-mire-shqipnia/> (accessed November, 2019).

³⁶ Pajzait Nushi, “Isa Boletini dhe roli i tij në luftën e popullit shqiptar për çlirimin shoqëror e nacional”, *Perparimi*, (Pristinë, Shpuza, 1974); Emine Arifi-Bakalli, *Isa Boletini dhe Koha e Tij*, (Pristinë, 1998).

Musaj collected relevant data on him and aimed to add the archival material as a new dimension in her dissertation. Becoming a book in 1987³⁷, Musaj relied on the primary sources of Albanian, British, Australian, French, Italian, Bulgarian, and Kosovar national archives, as well as newspapers published from Serbian, American, and German printing houses. The Ottoman archives, however, were excluded, although it is possible to come across certain Turkish memoirs including those by such familiar names, such as Fevzi Çakmak, Lütfi Simavi, and Süleyman Külçe.³⁸

Although Musaj's academic work is a satisfactory summary of previous studies, there is one important source that has helped me to have a deeper understanding of İsa's personality: a memoir of İsa's nephew, Tafil Boletini (1888-1970) who was raised by his uncle and accompanied his journey throughout his life, hence his book being named *Pranë Isa Boletinit* (Near İsa Boletini)³⁹. The problem with this book is the fact that it was "edited" by one of the presidents of the Institute of History, Prof. Marenglen Verli, and printed some twenty-six years after Tafil's death in 1996. Hence, the legitimacy of the book leaves some questions, especially when it comes to the tenacious denial of the famous claim of İsa's enduring intention to rescue Sultan Abdülhamid II. Had this truly been the case despite the Ottoman archival material? Or was it just a natural result of the censorship politics of the successor states of the Yugoslavian regime? Even if it seems difficult to answer this question, the archival material shows the complexity of the matter, and such a disputed situation cannot be answered easily as in the case of the Albanian literature review.

Lastly, İsa Blumi is among the historians who claimed that İsa Boletini was mythicized and transformed into an icon in the post-WWI era. Blumi considers İsa as an

³⁷ Fatmira Musaj, *İsa Boletini (1864-1916)*, 2nd ed. (Tiranë: Akademia e Shkencave e Shqipërisë, 2004).

³⁸ In the entire literature on İsa Boletini, Fatmira Musaj's book is the most inclusive academic work I have encountered with. The names are taken from her book's bibliography. See: Fatmira Musaj, *İsa Boletini (1864-1916)*, 2nd ed. (Tiranë: Akademia e Shkencave e Shqipërisë, 2004).

³⁹ Tafil Boletini. *Pranë Isa Boletinit*, (ed.) Merenglen Verli, (Tetovë: Ndërmarrja Gazetare-Botuese Album, 1996).

ambitious political entrepreneur who found the opportunities to attach himself in regional power politics.

He emphasizes the relationship between the transformation of the village Boletin, its rise in importance among the Great Powers, and İsa's involvement in these regional matters. The most crucial argument is the fact that "the resistance" of İsa against the new borders and border politics "cannot be interpreted as being driven by collective 'nationalist' sentiments".⁴⁰ Therefore, Blumi argued that İsa Boletini's activism was more complex than to be depicted as one of the founding fathers of the Albanian nation.

In order to clarify İsa Boletini's attachment to the local contingencies of the time, a relevant Balkan context should be provided.

1.3. The Balkans in the Context of the Long Nineteenth Century

In terms of political units, and contrary to some common belief, this study views the nineteenth century as an age of empire rather than an age of nations and nation-states.⁴¹ An empire as a political structure leaves more room for multiple identity descriptions than nation-states' thoroughly thought and learned strict identities. During this century, without including those living in areas difficult to reach geographically, the majority of the "national" populations were "paying tribute to a higher authority"⁴².

Apart from social life and individual experience, states were in contact more than ever, which led to the birth of international relations, "that sets aside dynastic considerations and obey an abstract concept of *raison d'état*"⁴³ as known in modern

⁴⁰ İsa Blumi, "A Post- Ottoman Icon: İsa Boletini and Redefining the Balkans", *Reinstating the Ottomans: Alternative Balkan Modernities, 1800-1912*, (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 143-148.

⁴¹ Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Patrick Camiller, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014), p.392.

⁴² Ibid. p.393.

⁴³ Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Patrick Camiller, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 394.

society. Meanwhile, the capacity and influence of those nations playing in the international arena were quite asymmetrical in terms of provoking peoples' feelings and causing insecurity, vagueness, and shakiness. On this asymmetrical ground; people living in a disadvantage, vulnerable, and relatively poor countries felt the need "to defend themselves against further incursions of the major European powers, or to build a new regime/state that could defend the interests of its citizens effectively"⁴⁴. The greediness and appetite of the major European powers led so-called nationalistic conflicts in such lands out of a desperate urge to unite and defend the lands against the *other*. Therefore, the century ended with "the most destructive and bloody confrontation in human history to that date", almost "creating a hell on earth" by the start of World War I (1914-1918).⁴⁵

At any rate, the Ottoman Empire was one of many chess pieces on a slippery chessboard and experienced this novelty as much as its counterparts. The nineteenth century, in terms of "the longest century of the empire"⁴⁶, had started with the *Zeitgeist* of the period which focused on a belief in humanity and a change for betterment. This belief was reflected in the political realm in terms of the re-organizational reforms they had inspired in the *Tanzimat* period of beginning in 1839.

However, the nineteenth century is also infamous for its years of military defeats, fiscal crises, and social transformations. The echoes of such a deep shift may have been felt the most in the Balkans, as the region was seen as if it were a prize to be won by the other world powers, such as Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires, as well as newly established states such as Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Montenegro. In the asymmetrical balance of power, the Balkans were among the most vulnerable and exposed lands. Indeed, the *Eastern Question* had reached its peak and "revolved around how to eliminate the power vacuum in Eastern Europe, (and) the Balkans, ...

⁴⁴ Engin Deniz Akarlı, "Introduction to the "New Imperialist Era", (Lecture Notes, Brown University, October 2009)

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ İlber Ortaylı, *İmparatorluğun En Uzun Yüzyılı*, 21st ed. (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2005)

emerged with the decline of the Ottoman Empire”⁴⁷. Yet; complex, overlapping, and clashing identities and loyalties in the region had a direct effect on tensions between the people.⁴⁸

One of the most difficult lands to be controlled was the region inhabited by Albanians,⁴⁹ where the “competing” or “overlapping loyalties” paved the way for convoluted and defensive nationalist movements between Ottoman Albanians whose identities were “by no means mutually exclusive”.⁵⁰ Local elites were perfectly aware of the political realm and did not see any harm in taking opportunities for political involvement with the Porte. Moreover, they were conscious enough to realize that ““their’ respective regions could coexist with close ties to the Ottoman center.”⁵¹

However, this did not urge the Albanians to examine their relationship with the Sublime Porte, even after feeling the pressure of other international treaties of the nineteenth century. The treaties of San Stefano and Berlin both allocated Albanian lands to other states, and on the 29th of November 1879, according to the report sent to the Porte by Mehmet Esat Safvet Paşa, the lands mostly inhabited by Albanians, which are today’s northern regions of Kosovo, Shkodër, and Macedonia, were assigned to newly emerging states such as Serbian, Bulgarian, and Montenegrin kingdoms.⁵² The inability of the Porte to assert a claim on the region wafted it in a

⁴⁷ Kahraman Şakul, “Eastern Question” in *Encyclopedia of the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Gabor Agoston, et al. (NY: Infobase Publishing, 2009), p. 191-192.

⁴⁸ Barbara Jelavich, *History of the Balkans: Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, Volume 1, (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 47.

⁴⁹ Ibid. p.361

⁵⁰ Hannes Grandits et al. “Introduction: Social (dis-)integration and the national turn in the late- and post-Ottoman Balkans: Towards an analytical framework”, *Conflicting Loyalties in the Balkans: the Great Powers, the Ottoman Empire and Nation Building*, (London, I.B.Tauris, 2011), p. 1-12.

⁵¹ Adanır, Fikret, and Suraiya N. Faroqhi, eds. *The Ottomans and the Balkans: A Discussion of Historiography* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), p.5.

⁵² İhsan Burak Birecikli, “Arnavutlar ve Arnavutluk Sorunu, 1908-1914”, (PhD diss., Gazi Üniversitesi, 2010), p.97.

hopelessly distanced attitude towards the region. The cost of such an attitude came at a high price and shook local perceptions more than ever. Therefore, the inability of the Ottoman Empire to stake a claim to Albanian lands and other states had a great impact on the emergence of the Albanian national movement⁵³, which can be categorized as “defensive nationalism”⁵⁴.

1.4. Methodologies to Deconstruct the Myth of İsa Boletini

1.4.1. İsa Boletini as an Imperial Figure

It is important to note that Turkey, although major, is not the only heir of the Ottoman legacy and that the empire itself was a larger and quite different political entity with different imperial concerns.⁵⁵ The Ottoman Empire was one of the multi-ethnic empires whose elites too had multiple loyalties, concerns, and responsibilities entangled with contingent dynamics of the day. Depending on multiple and changing realities, these elites tried hard to cope with personal concerns as well as imperial ones in the dazzling modernization processes of the nineteenth century. Therefore, imperial figures can offer us both an individual experience on how the empire was understood, and a general picture of the common practices of multiple loyalties in mosaic empires.

In this sense, İsa was at the edge of being part of an “imperial elite”⁵⁶ in the vilayet of Kosovo during a crucial period that saw the transformation of one of the last pieces of Ottoman lands in the Balkans into the independent state of Albania. It is doubtful that he perfectly fits into the group of imperial elites, who were mostly high- ranking

⁵³ Abdulhamit Kırmızı, “Halep-Kosova Hattı, 1909: Arnavutluk’ta Meşrutiyete Karşı Bir İsyan Teşebbüsü”, *Divan*, Cilt 14, Sayı 25 (2009/1), p. 97.

⁵⁴ Nicola Guy, *The Birth of Albania: Ethnic Nationalism, the Great Powers of World War I and the Emergence of Albanian Independence*, (NY: I.B. Tauris, 2012), p. 9.

⁵⁵ Engin Deniz Akarlı, “The Problems of External Pressures, Power Struggles, and Budgetary Deficits in Ottoman Politics Under Abdulhamid II (1876-1909): Origins and Solutions”, (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1976), p. 4.

⁵⁶ Tim Buchen & Malte Rolf. “Introduction”, *Elites and their Imperial Biographies*, p.32-35. The standpoint of the book about co-existence of multiple loyalties helped me a lot throughout my study to have a better understanding of İsa’s role as an agent in the structure.

state officials, yet he certainly was close enough to the sultan, not only as his eyes and ears in the region but also as a guard in the palace. This position had one clear advantage: he came from the heart of the Vilayet of Kosovo and mostly was aware of the local context contrary to the high-ranked officials. This knowledge could have enabled him eventually to pursue make multiple concerns as an agent in the grand imperial structure.

İsa was one of the Albanians that experienced enormously different governing practices of Ottoman authorities, in both the government of Sultan Abdülhamid II and the CUP regime. Therefore, he is a unique figure that has contributed to the understanding of the loosening and tightening links between the center and the periphery. In other words, he could have had different loyalties depending on the period that is presented by national concerns and narratives of the time. Even if he had pure national awareness, he had an imperial loyalty as well. As Kırmızı fairly points out, “national awareness and imperial loyalty” were not necessarily in opposition; they existed in “symbiotic interconnection”⁵⁷. Furthermore, the way that İsa positioned himself in front of these dynamic circumstances and how he made sense of them can reveal “the link between empire ... and personal agendas and visions, professional activities, and individual experiences”⁵⁸. In contrast to the fact that national narratives often tend to *swallow* the individual, the approach of “imperial biography” mentioned above would help to furnish new perspectives when studying multi-ethnic empires, and, focusing on co-existence relating to multiple possibilities to “rescue the individual from grand structures”⁵⁹.

⁵⁷ Abdulhamit Kırmızı, Review of *Eliten im Vielvölkerreich: imperiale Biographien in Russland und Österreich Ungarn (1850-1918)* by Tim Buchen & Malte Rolf, *Divan*, Cilt 20 sayı 39 (2015/2), p. 141-169.

⁵⁸ Tim Buchen & Malte Rolf. *Elites and their Imperial Biographies*, p. 33.

⁵⁹ Abdulhamit Kırmızı, “Experiencing the Ottoman Empire as a Life Course Ferid Pasha, Governor and Grandvizier (1851 –1914)”, p. 42.

Far from being in contradiction, multiple loyalties could even “feed on one another”⁶⁰. It is often said that Albanian history as part of the Ottoman history is a fertile area of study when examining the plurality of the identities, especially ethnic awareness, religious differences, and imperial attachment. Hence, İsa is among these prototypes, yet still possesses personal visions and orientation.

Moreover, not only does İsa represent an imperial agent, but he also epitomizes an example of old, conservative, and an *alaylı* (rankers) elite group contrary to a new, liberal, and *mektepli* (officers with modern education), such as the Young Turks. The fact of the matter is that the majority of Kosovar Albanians, both Christian and Muslim, were more sentimentalized with the absolutist regime of the sultan, which granted them more privileges when compared to the Southerner Albanians (i.e.a. Tosks) and keen on using Islamic discourse to emphasize the mutual dependence between the Porte and Albanians.⁶¹ Yet, İsa’s standpoint should not be attributed to the fact that he was a Geg, i.e.a. Northerner. There were certainly people who were the representatives of the new phenomenon of *mekteplis*, contrary to the association of their families with the Sultan’s regime.⁶² Modernization, education, lobbying activities, clubs, and personality stepped in and the human factor should always be kept in mind as a crucial variable. Yet, the general framework of the empire must also be taken into consideration, as empires were significantly different political units containing more “possibilities and opportunities”⁶³, and allowed transitive concerns that could not fit into one category as is the case of modern nation-states. The empire was a foreign country, as in the famous saying, where things were done differently.

⁶⁰ Abdulhamit Kırmızı, Review of *Eliten im Vielvölkerreich: imperiale Biographien in Russland und Österreich- Ungarn* (1850-1918) by Tim Buchen & Malte Rolf, *Divan*, Cilt 20 sayı 39 (2015/2), p. 143.

⁶¹ Y. PRK. MYD, 2/1, 3-4, 1298.04.05, (M-07-03-1881)

⁶² Draga family was one of them, see Y. PRK. ASK, 3/17, 1296.09.28, (M-15-09-1879). Later on, Necip Draga was going to be one of the most important rivals of İsa and an influential representative of the CUP in Kosovo region, see Süleyman Külçe, *Firzovik Toplantısı ve Meşrutiyet*, (İstanbul: Kitabevi, 2013)

⁶³ Tim Buchen & Malte Rolf, *Elites and their Imperial Biographies*, p. 34.

1.4.2. İsa Boletini as a Local “Power Magnet”

Apart from being an imperial figure, İsa stands closer to the category of “locally influential personages and power magnets from different regions such as the Balkans, Arab provinces, and Anatolia.” These people had certain responsibilities to share the burden of protection of the region and had self-contained administrative functions to a certain extent. However, they were incorporated into the central management politics and “operated from [within] the Ottoman political framework”. These figures had to meet certain conditions: 1. Proper economic power, 2. Armed forces, 3. A sound connection with other local chiefs and the ability to influence them, 4. Good contacts with more powerful figures in the area and İstanbul.⁶⁴

İsa fulfills the first three requirements and meets the fourth one with his journey to İstanbul. He came from a known family with proper economic power. The members of his tribe and neighboring tribes were almost always ready to fight for him. Also, in the northern region of Albania, people were allowed to carry guns. The strong tribal connections fostered his positioning and gave him the chance to say the last word. In Mitroviçe, he firmed relationships with higher-ranking officials such as Şemsi Paşa. Finally, he returned from İstanbul to Mitroviçe stronger due to the given privileges strengthening all mentioned conditions including having direct communication with the sultan.

Therefore, considering these conditions as a means of autonomy or worse, as requirements for national independence seem illogical. In an anachronistic path, İsa’s local power operating through the Ottoman mechanisms cannot be attributed to the clichéd narrative of struggle or resistance. Snatching “local power magnets” away from their broader Ottoman context brings not only deceptive conclusions but also alienates the narrative from the others such as the Balkan experience of the Ottoman Empire.

⁶⁴ Engin Deniz Akarlı. “Provincial Power Magnets in Ottoman Bilad As-Sham and Egypt, 1740-1840”, *La Vie Sociale Dans Les Provinces Arabes A L’époque Ottomane*, Tunisia: Zaghouan, 1988, p. 42-44.

1.5. Contributions

Therefore, it is possible to assume that İsa Boletini was an Ottoman imperial figure with multiple loyalties, experiencing numerous complex sequences of events leading towards some twists and turns in his life which are not fully represented in the national narratives. His dedication to fighting for the cause of Albanian lands does not *necessarily* mean that he “hated” the Ottoman Empire.

When we look at the literature written about him, we do not see a focus on possible turns that marked his life. Rather, the explanations are based on anachronistic nation-state perspectives where turning points start generally with his fights against the CUP administration. Additionally, either Albanian literature confuses entirely different units of administration, as a naïve claim, or intentionally marks all units as Turks and represents a contrary Albanian, as İsa’s objectives were completely different when the sultan was ruling and when the CUP took control. Therefore, this study also attempts to challenge Albanian literature to be cautious about the uniqueness of units of analysis and not to degrade the discrepancies of diverse authorities.

Then one should ask how these alternative turns could have possibly happened? Not only lacking a focus on the turns, but most of the primary sources about him also lack an important dynamic: the Ottoman archives. Despite the focus on Boletini, did the nationalist history narratives ignore the Ottoman archives deliberately? If so, why? Do the archives contradict and challenge an available narrative about Boletini? Do the archives help to construct a persona who favored the sultan’s regime, but challenged the CUP regime? If so, does this observation undermine the existing literature that claims Boletini always remained been a fighter dedicated to the salvation of an independent Albania?

The subject matter of this thesis is significant because it provides some perspectives for the disengagement process of Albanian lands from the Ottoman world through the experience of a local imperial figure. If the Ottoman archives were to be added as a new variable for the arguments on Boletini, the updated portrait of him could

offer insights on the multiple identities and loyalties of nationalized figures. Lived in interesting times of colossal transformations, İsa Boletini serves as a perfect model to understand the complexities of an imperial figure who has experienced twists and turns of the contingencies of the centuries, regional contexts, local pursuits within political clashes of the Great Powers. Moreover, since İsa has encountered with divergent Ottoman authorities, his portrayal can facilitate to understand the breaking points between the regime of Sultan Abdulhamit II and the CUP governance and the further repercussions in the Balkans as a result. Last but not least, theoretically, deconstruction of the mythicized narratives on İsa Boletini could help to raise consciousness on the relevance of the nationalistic policies for the state formation process.

1.6. Sources

The trigger questions of this thesis mentioned above study and analyze the primary sources that exist in the Cumhurbaşkanlığı Osmanlı Arşivi concerning the Albanian independence movement and its importance within the Ottoman Empire. Additionally, establishing multiple connections with the Ottoman historiography as well as the international context of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries could bring a balanced portrait of a guerrilla while witnessing the “transformation of Europe’s last formal Empire into numerous nation-states”⁶⁵. Moreover, a balanced portrait with all the complexities of a “man of his time” can reflect the context and help us to have a better understanding of the milieu. His life embodies the struggles and sufferings of the late nineteenth-century Ottoman Balkans and portrays the fluid identities of the time.

Hence, this study aims to adopt an Ottoman perspective for the sake of a broader structural context, to add a new dimension to the existing literature on İsa Boletini despite bringing more light on one of the most well-known figures of Kosovo-Albanian historiography. I think there is not a bold line separating Albanian history from the Ottoman one; hence both have a shared, complex, tangled, and intertwined

⁶⁵ Emiddio Pietro Licursi, “Empire of Nations: The Consolidation of Albanian and Turkish National Identities in the Late Ottoman Empire, 1878 – 1913”, (BA thesis, Columbia University, 2011), pp.7.

history. Therefore, this study intends not only to eliminate the deficiency of Ottoman archival material relating to İsa Boletini but to also expand our understanding of late Ottoman history in the context of nationalist movements.

1.7. Outline of Chapters

In the first chapter of the thesis, the general tendencies of the existing literature to portray İsa as a nationalist figure is examined. What the objectives were for such a construction, in which ways it happened, and is İsa constructed as a typical Balkan freedom fighter are the questions of the chapter. This chapter will help to understand the main deficiencies for both İsa and Albanian master narrative.

The second chapter details İsa's place within the Hamidian regime, specifically the years between 1902 and 1908. In order to provide the context that İsa was in, the chapter includes some of the crucial policies of Abdülhamid II, the relative stability that he had brought, his characteristics, and his special interest in the Albanians. Moreover, the function and quality of his guards, the *tüfenkciler*, their importance to the Gëgs, their broader context, and the Ottoman administration of the time are discussed in this chapter. Furthermore, this chapter also focuses on the human subject of the matter with all complexities and contingencies, including İsa's attachment to the Sultan, the weight of the *Halife*, the figure of the *Father*, and finally how northern tribes were traumatized by the loss of their *father* figure.

The third chapter highlights the toxic and complex relationship between the CUP regime and İsa starting from 1908 till 1912. It starts with the general attitude of the CUP regime towards the evolving events of the time. Furthermore, this chapter includes an investigation into the importance of northern tribes, specifically Kosovo, for the CUP as well as the place of Albanian CUP members, the *Young Albanians*, for their political agendas. The support of the *Young Albanians* for the new regime was quite irritating for the northern tribes, and İsa became one of the archenemies of the regime as well as the *Young Albanians*. The fragile connections between *Young Albanians* and the manipulative CUP regime eventually led Albanians to have

“shattered dreams”⁶⁶, and to win tribes’ hearts by having İsa as a symbol of independence as a last-minute development rather than a planned and programmed political agenda. Thus, in this chapter, the role of the CUP in the transformation of Albanian lands, from being an Ottoman district to becoming an independent state through the relationship between the Porte and İsa Boletini is revealed.

Although this work focuses on İsa Boletini as a nationalized tribal leader, who had multiple identities and intends to eliminate the deficiency of Ottoman archival material, in its effort to offer a perspective for late nineteenth-century history and the Ottomans in it remains as the main goal. Albanian nationalism and independence movements are the means to better understand the Ottoman history and the rising trends of the time. In addition to that, for the greater good, revisiting these fossilized nationalist assumptions and providing “convincing evidence”⁶⁷ to undermine their validity arches over this work. Finally, this study intends neither to “steal” a national hero nor to degrade İsa’s effort for better circumstances. Rather, it acknowledges the possibility of *non-national* narratives to read İsa’s effort. It is my personal belief that bringing different variables into the equation, such as social networks, human factors, personality, contingencies in the international arena, and culture, demonstrates the complexities of the situation. I hope this composite system of multiple nets paves the way for a deepened narrative of independence which aims to be broken away from traditional national Albanian historiography. I believe only then, Albanian historical narratives about Ottoman dominance can “make sense”.

⁶⁶ Bedros Der Matossian, *Shattered Dreams of Revolution: From Liberty to Violence in the Late Ottoman Empire*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

⁶⁷ Theodora Dragostinova, and Yana Hashamova. *Beyond Mosque, Church, and State: Alternative Narratives of the Nation in the Balkans*. (Central European University Press, 2016), p. 6.

CHAPTER 2

İSA IN ALBANIAN LITERATURE

Getting its history wrong is part of being a nation.
-Ernest Gellner⁶⁸

2.1. Nationalization of İsa Boletini

To begin with, it needs to be crystal clear whenever the terms nation and nationalism are mentioned. This study relies on the definition of a nation from the “social construction” point of view as a result of the modernist analysis of nationalism. Thus, “nations are recent and novel products of modernity”; hence, “nationalism created and continues to create nations, rather than the opposite”, and nations are “social constructs and cultural artifacts deliberately engineered by elites”⁶⁹. Despite the extensive efforts to conjoin nationalist discourses with “historical facts”, these discourses eventually elude time and transform into legendary forms without a realistic connection to historical data. Therefore, broadly speaking, the construction of national narratives and heroes are *not* “primordial” but “romantically rooted in a mythical past”⁷⁰. Moreover, it is also important to pay attention to different types of nationalism that prevailed in different periods. Before World War I, national movements were directed against “multinational or supranational empires” such as the Habsburg and Ottoman empires and stamped with “separatist” aspirations.⁷¹

Miroslav Hroch’s explanation of the evolution of nationalism in Europe is prominent. He claims that nationalism is *not* an “atemporal phenomenon, unconstrained by time

⁶⁸ Eric Hobsbawm. *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 12

⁶⁹ Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memoirs of the Nation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 92-93.

⁷⁰ Jane C. Sugarman, “Imagining the Homeland: Poetry, Songs, and the Discourses of Albanian Nationalism”, *Ethnomusicology* Vol.3, No. 3 (Autumn, 1999), p. 445.

⁷¹ Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, p. 139.

or space”, rather, it requires a particular form of “consciousness” through means of capitalism, print culture, communication, and education⁷². This consciousness eventually leads towards “an awareness of belonging to a nation” as a result of collaborated efforts and systematic decisions of people under “specific historical circumstances”.⁷³ When it comes to the Balkan experience of nationalism, Robert Kaplan stands out as a distinguished name for haunting the “ghosts” of the region which means that people who have contributed to the independence movements were mythicized by the systematic nation-building processes way after they are gone. In other words, national characters become “national” with the constructed narratives.⁷⁴

Investigation of archival documents makes it clear that people from the provinces (*vilayets*) of Kosovo, Yannina, and Manastır have experienced the so-called national movements in a different way than what the Albanian national narratives suggest. Northern Albanians stressed from within the framework of Islamic discourses that only the unification of all these vilayets under qualified governors and with an *ultimate* and *strengthened* union with the Sublime Porte could protect their lands.⁷⁵ What is more interesting was the threatening undertone towards the Ottoman authorities holding that the Albanian lands had to be protected to assure the empire’s existence; they were the guarantee of the empire. After the Balkan Wars, it would become clear that many Albanians had predicted the future quite accurately. Therefore, it was not a separatist attempt to detach the Northern Kosovo region from the Ottoman sovereignty but to strengthen it as an assurance for the security.

⁷² For the role of education on the Albanian national identity, see Isa Blumi, “Role of the Education in the Formation of Albanian Identity and Myth,” *Albanian Identities Myth and History*, (ed.) Bernd J. Fischer and Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers (London: Hurst & Company, 2002).

⁷³ Miroslav Hroch, *European Nations*, (trans.) Karolina Graham, (NY: Verso, 2015), p. 609-611.

⁷⁴ Robert Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History*, (NY: Picador, 2005).

⁷⁵ Y. PRK. AZJ, 1/25, 1291.09.10, (M-21-10-1874). In the details of these documents, Albanians did not only demand new political structure but also “making compromises” such as they were guarantying the application of reforms as well as compulsory military service. In other words, they were trying to turn the subject into a win-win situation.

It is a widely accepted supposition throughout the Balkans that the “unseen oppression” of the Ottomans created a shift in the course of the Balkan civilizations in a direction running against the region’s traditions and acting “as a potential impediment to its ‘natural’ development and overall progress”.⁷⁶ Holding on this perspective, Albania has traditionally been regarded as one of the “hotbeds” of “nationalist agitation and tension” due to its population’s religious and cultural diversity.⁷⁷ For monolithic Albanian national narrative, the classical, or banal, “x centuries of darkness for nation y”⁷⁸ approach can be comprehended from the very first sentence of many history books as follows: “Albania was one of the first Balkan countries to be invaded by the Ottomans.”⁷⁹ Moreover, it is a well-known perspective for the majority of Albanians that the mal-functioning of the Albanian economy and social problems have resulted from Islamization under the Ottomans. Concisely put, Ottoman dominance made them “miss” the Westernization, which is considered equal to the ultimate good. The problem here is not only Islamophobia or Turcophobia but also the self-orientalism, which can be detected between the lines as a chronic disease.⁸⁰

One of the visible examples to see the reflection of Turcophobia in the Albanian literature can be the prominent Albanian historian Skëndi’s preference to address the Ottomans as “Turks”. It stands as a deliberate choice to emphasize the ethnic-racial difference and to create the perception of atemporal and transcendent hostility of the Albanian versus the Turk, or to detach Albanians from the Ottoman context. This

⁷⁶ Nikolay Antov, “Emergence and Historical Development of Muslim Communities in the Ottoman Balkans: Historical and Historiographical”, *Beyond Mosque, Church, and State: Alternative Narratives of the Nation in the Balkans*, (Budapest & New York: CEU Press, 2016), p. 31.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 6.

⁷⁸ Frederick F. Anscombe, “Introduction”, *The Ottoman Balkans, 1750-1830*, (ed) Frederick F. Anscombe, (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2006), p.2.

⁷⁹ Stavro Skendi, *The Albanian National Awakening 1878-1912*, p.1.

⁸⁰ Hasip Saygılı, “20’nci Yüzyılın Başından Bugüne Kosova Arnavutlarında Osmanlı ve Türkiye Algısı”, *Osmanlı’nın Son 40 Yılında Rumeli Türkleri ve Müslümanları 1878-1918*, (İlgi Kültür Sanat, 2019), p. 224-5.

position helps to legitimize independence and to ground it on a strong claim. However, there were several factions, groups, communities, and parties beyond ethnicity (such as the Committee of Union and Progress or CUP) that shaped Albanians' Ottoman experience. Also, the notions of "Turk", "Islam", and "Ottoman" are used interchangeably as a tool to orientalize the monolithic Ottoman narrative and avoid all possible nuances.⁸¹

Any contradictory narrative of history is considered as a malevolent act of hatred. Albanian nationalists hold that such narratives are produced systematically to undermine Albanian history. Serbian and Turkish narratives fall under this category without further explanation. For example, İsa's several attempts to rescue the sultan is considered Serbian propaganda because Serbians *hated* him and his dominance in the Serbian lands. Hence, they wanted to degrade his noble national character into a wicked collaborator of the sultan.⁸² It creates regular counter-attacks, to some extent, very absurd. For instance, Millosh Kopili, who killed the sultan in the battle of Kosovo, is claimed to be an Albanian.⁸³ The approach is anachronistic in the sense that it applies "Serbian-ness" or "Albanian-ness" to a period where these terms did *not* exist. Moreover, the glorious Albanian resistance is portrayed in a transcendent sequence of events, and Albanian lands are presented in a monolithic unity whereas, it was never the case due to the regional, cultural, and political differences. Therefore, such a background nourishes the dominant nationalist paradigm and historical narratives.

In general, one of the reference points of this type of nationalistic approach through the prism of Orientalism in the construction of national heroes with a systematic effort to demonstrate "virtuous behavior that has been passed down through

⁸¹ Bülent Bilmez, "Arnavutluk Tarih Ders Kitaplarında Osmanlı / Türk İmgesi", *Osmanlı Araştırmaları / The Journal of Ottoman Studies*, XLIX (2017), p. 357.

⁸² Fatmira Musaj, *İsa Boletini*, p. 23.

⁸³ Bülent Bilmez, *ibid.*, p. 363.

generations”⁸⁴. Usually, with a “simplified version” of İsa’s life and “furnishing” him with the qualities of common virtuous men of Albania, such as boldness, tenacity, fearlessness, and being a man of his word, misses the twists and turns of his life. Eventually, this hero construction system “robs” the uniqueness of İsa’s life as well as squeezes him into a box that leaves his many individual characteristics out. It does not only degrade İsa’s life but also this deliberate trimming of certain periods such as his years at İstanbul and sources such as Ottoman archives portrait İsa Boletini as among those heroes necessary to construct a consistent History about a collective and dignified fight against the *invader*. By the same token, the representation of İsa is perfectly consistent with the representation of the independence narrative. In other words, İsa is valuable because he could be used to serve a *noble* purpose represented by the national historical narratives. If this is the case, how does this stereotypical and *de facto* approach portray İsa?

2.1.1. The Albanian Invention of İsa as a Founding Father

One of the chronic problems about the Albanian historiography lies in its Orientalist approach towards inclusive Ottoman narratives. While spending tremendous effort to take a break from it, any attempt falls into bizarre tautologies. Yet the other problem is the effort to carve out prominent Ottoman imperial figures of their broader context through selective perceptions and use of sources. For instance, certain figures of independence with imperial identities and connections are represented as fierce fighters involved in the Albanian nation-building process at the expense of their multiple loyalties. İsmail Kemal Bey, Sami Frashëri,⁸⁵ and İsa Boletini are cases in point.

The invention of historical continuity either by “semi-fiction” or “forgery” stands as a pillar for the formation of nation-states.⁸⁶ Nationalism as an ideology was employed

⁸⁴ Michał Burczak, “The Creation of an Enduring Legend of the National Hero: A Comparison of Tadeusz Kościuszko and George Washington”, *The Polish Review*, Vol. 59, No. 3, 2014, p. 26.

⁸⁵ Bülent Bilmez, “Mythologization of an Ottoman Intellectual in the Modern Turkish and Socialist Albanian Historiographies based on ‘selective perception’: Sami Frashëri or Şemseddin Sami Bey”, *Balkanologie. Revue d’études pluridisciplinaires* VII, sayı 2 (2003): pp. 19- 46.

⁸⁶ Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memoirs of the Nation*, p. 96.

to justify the political agenda of the day, yet it was not the cause of events; rather the result in most cases.⁸⁷ Starting from the years of Albanian independence, Islamophobic and Turcophobic narratives used to be the main basis for new regimes to empower their existence, even though the type of regimes varies from kingdom to communism. Suffering from the “territorial aspirations” of all its neighbors, Albania was traumatized and was to turn toward an extreme “isolationist policy” under the upcoming communist regime in terms of historiography. Historiographical isolation is important because it enables historians not to enter dialogues with other sources which may provide different and conflicting perspectives.⁸⁸ Especially after World War II, nationalism became an intimate feature of the leftist regimes, as it was the case under the Hoxha regime.⁸⁹ Academia backed up the nationalization of certain figures, which was one of the main goals of the regime. Hence, the effort to nationalize İsa accelerated through the 1970s and peaked in the 1990s.

It is not a fortuity to have such a picture because the efforts coincided with Kosovar struggle for independency under the “strident Serbian nationalism”⁹⁰ of the Yugoslavian regime practiced in the Balkans, especially in Kosovo. Therefore, the political agenda of the time has influenced academia to prove the solid and everlasting connection between Kosovar and Albanian lands. Portraying İsa Boletini dedicated and nationalized independency fighter is one of the examples of such an attempt since he has always been fighting for one specific goal in his mind: unification of all lands inhabited by Albanians with full independence.⁹¹ Therefore, it was an exception for the isolationist regime to have some connection with Kosovo, mostly inhabited by Albanians, contrary to the communist perception of anti-national

⁸⁷ Barbara Jelavic, *History of the Balkans I*, p.178.

⁸⁸ Theodora Dragostinova and Yana Hashamova, *Beyond Mosque, Church, and State*, p. 8.

⁸⁹ Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, p. 148.

⁹⁰ James Summers, “Kosovo: From Yugoslav Province to Disputed Independence”, *Kosovo: A Precedent?*, ed. James Summers (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2011), pp. 1-51.

⁹¹ Robert Elsie, *Historical Dictionary of Albania*, (Lanham & Toronto & Plymouth: The Scarecrow Press, 2010), p.56-57.

universalism. Then, indeed the Hoxha regime affected by historical traumas beyond communism and practiced nationalism genuinely.⁹²

In addition to that, the nation-building process is in a dialectical relation between history and people. Hence, local figures such as İsa and local uprisings can be carved out of their certain particularities; engineered and maintained in accordance with the national concerns. In this context, *embracing* İsa serves another, and more important, cultural and consolidative purpose: unification of the North and the South; the Geg and the Tosk.⁹³ Yet, the latter has always instrumentalized Kosovar uprisings as the means of independence and has colored them with nationalist shades. The effort can be noticed right away when Albanian narratives on independence are examined starting from the newspapers of the time, memoirs, and documents. İsmail Kemal Bey and Sami Frashëri stand as prominent and active “architects” of this instrumentalization project.⁹⁴ Specifically, Sami Frashëri romanticizes the pre-modern Ottoman period as opposed to the modern one through the image of savage but noble, traditional, and untouched northern Albanians.⁹⁵ The folkloric symbolism has been cultivated notably in the Kosovar lands.

As Hobsbawm claims, “we should be beware of too much reliance on the literate”, meaning the “intelligentsia’s linguistic and folkloric pursuits led directly to the development of nationalist aspirations, and that their literary activities became inseparable from the formulation of political strategies”.⁹⁶ It is perfectly applicable to

⁹² Tchavdar Marinov and Alexander Vezekov, “Communism and Nationalism In The Balkans: Marriage Of Convenience Or Mutual Attraction?”, *Entangled Histories of the Balkans*, (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 469- 556.

⁹³ Nathalie Clayer, *Arnavut Milliyetçiliğinin Kökenleri*, p. 547.

⁹⁴ Nathalie Clayer, *Arnavut Milliyetçiliğinin Kökenleri*, p. 534.

⁹⁵ Bülent Bilmez, “Mythologization of an Ottoman Intellectual in the Modern Turkish and Socialist Albanian Historiographies based on ‘selective perception’: Sami Frashëri or Şemseddin Sami Bey”

⁹⁶ Jane C. Sugarman, “Imagining the Homeland: Poetry, Songs, and the Discourses of Albanian Nationalism”, p. 419-20.

İsa's case since he was not a *Rilindja*⁹⁷ figure who systematically produced nationalist discourses such as Thimi Mitko, Vasa Paşa, and İsmail Kemal Bey. Upcoming academics and intellectuals have depended on the same path and ensured the reproduction of the same discourse up until today. Henceforth, as Appadurai has asserted, the conjectural "links" between nations and people are not "primordial", but they have emerged from "specific, historically situated play of public and group opinions about the past"⁹⁸. In that sense, İsa constitutes one of the examples of an Albanian invention as a founding figure who makes a journey leading to a solid nation-state.

2.2. The Main Tendencies for Inventing İsa

2.2.1. Setting the pre- İsa Era

The nineteenth-century was feverish all around the world. The *zeitgeist* of the century has been stamped with rebellions, social movements, wars that were ringing the bells for an upcoming world war all over the world. European Revolutions of 1848 were shaking the entire continent; the unstable aftershocks of the revolution in France, aches of the new regimes after unification in Italy and Germany, the attempts of Austria to strangle the Hungarian nationalist movements that have just begun to wiggle alongside with the liberal demands of the growing middle-upper class, and Irish separatist movements for the British, independency movements in Latin America, the Civil War in the United States, and finally the inclusion of China and Japan for the industrialized trade wars as well as the Sino-Japanese War were some of the events in the global picture.⁹⁹ All big powers were trying to expand their spheres of influence upon every possible corner of the world. In return, the Ottoman Empire did not have many options but only to protect its orbit as much as possible. Within this multi-layered and multi-sided game board on a trembling table, the

⁹⁷ Rilindja is defined as the Albanian National Awakening or the Albanian Renaissance which refers to the cultural, social, political movements leading towards an independent Albania throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Jane C. Sugarman, p. 421.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 445.

⁹⁹ Fahir Armaoğlu, *19. Yüzyıl Siyasi Tarihi: 1789-1914*, (İstanbul: Timaş Yayınları, 2017).

Balkans and especially lands inhabited by Albanians were vulnerable in the eyes of the big powers. Yet, while setting the pre- İsa era, the national narrative degrades this shakiness into some colonial aspirations.

Within such a context, İsa Boletini was among many other “simple, smart, and very brave” Albanians who have been raised by their mothers with a specific emphasis on “the love of Albania”.¹⁰⁰ To begin with, to prove İsa’s rebellious and indomitable character, the story generally starts with the Boletini family’s challenging character against the authorities during the 1850s. The determinism is either attributed to the Boletini family or portrayed as a very important characteristic of the Albanian nation.¹⁰¹ To be more precise, social mobility in the Kosovo region during the Tanzimat era that aimed at “holding the empire” intact “under highly adverse circumstances”¹⁰² is stamped with nationalist urges. Yet, the echoes of the reforms have mostly heard not only in the Balkans but also in the Arab provinces such as Iraq and Syria due to the centralization policies, new regulations on lands, increased taxes, and updated adjustments about jurisprudence.¹⁰³ For instance, many tribal leaders, who were local power holders, refused to pay taxes and resisted the reforms.¹⁰⁴ Similarly, with a vivid religious plurality, Syrian lands experienced capricious relationships due to the resentments Tanzimat reforms brought in. Specifically, Islamic discourse was a flourishing base to express Muslim resentments.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰ Fatmira Musaj, *İsa Boletini*, p. 16

¹⁰¹ Fatmira Musaj and Tafil Boletini argue that it was specifically the Boletini family whose tradition has always favored taking actions against the state. Whereas Luarasi, Skendi, and Abdyli attribute this quality to all Albanian nation. However, I have encountered with the tendency for the latter in Albanian literature more often.

¹⁰² Barbara Jelavic, “The Ottoman Empire to 1876: the Reforms”, p. 99.

¹⁰³ Halil İnalcık, *Devlet-i Aliyye*, IV. Cilt, p. 149.

¹⁰⁴ Gökhan Çetinsaya, “Ottoman Administration of Iraq, 1890-1908”, (Ph.D. diss., Manchester University, 1994), p. 63-112.

¹⁰⁵ Ş. Tufan Buzpınar, “Abdulhamid II, Islam and the Arabs: The Case of Syria and The Hijaz (1878-1882)”, (Ph.D. diss., Manchester University, 1991), p. 121-144.

In other words, the overall change in the regulations has upset the delicate system of governing which varied region to region according to the needs. It was such a variation that in some cases such as Bosnia, the display of reforms has been postponed due to delicacy and fragility of the matter.¹⁰⁶ Notably, in the conservative parts of Kosovo, middle class and emerging bourgeois families, both Christian and Muslim, resented the new regulations a great deal and severely opposed them. Although Sultan Abdülhamid II was dedicated to change, many “citizens continued to have a vested interest in the maintenance of conditions as they were”¹⁰⁷.

The Porte was sure that unless the autonomous northern terrain was brought under government control, Russia or Austria-Hungary would be able to separate it from the empire.¹⁰⁸ Therefore, the region was under international attention and political results would have arisen. However, efforts to reform the region were mainly dependent on the success of the implementors who were Albanians, too. The uniformity was the key and it was to be accomplished by religious education as can be seen in one of the documents issued in 1865 about the appointment of three scholars to “diminish the ignorance of people and allocate and rehabilitate the distorted customs and discipline the fundamentals of the faith”¹⁰⁹.

It was not only the Kosovar lands that encountered reactionary uprisings. Niş in 1841, Bosna in 1849, and Vidin in 1850 in the north witnessed similar rebellions and disturbance because of the inadequacy of the efforts made to apply the reforms in the region.¹¹⁰ Additionally, after some twenty years, “the inconsistent and contradictory policies” of the empire resulting from the delicate administrative problems felt in the Balkans and led to organized peasantry revolts. Taxation worked

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 203.

¹⁰⁷ Barbara Jelavic, “The Ottoman Empire to 1876: the Reforms”, p. 100.

¹⁰⁸ Isa Blumi, “An Honorable Break from Besa: Reorienting Violence in the Late Ottoman Mediterranean”, *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, 18 (2014), p.1-19.

¹⁰⁹ MVL., 1011/20., 1281.12.19, (M-15-05-1865).

¹¹⁰ Halil İnalçık, “Rumeli’de Reaya İsyanları”, *Devlet-i Aliyye*, IV. Cilt, p.163-172.

as a trigger. “Like a forest fire, the flame of rebellion spread in the Danubian provinces” faster than it could be expected, led to a chain of violent crisis, and caused the European reaction that created “the political crisis in İstanbul to the level of chaos”. From this chaotic milieu, Serbia and Montenegro were going to be the firsts who declared a war of independence.¹¹¹ With firm steps, the Eastern Rumelia was approaching a series of events of tremendous crisis that will be addressed in the Berlin Congress. All these revolts portray the background of Congress with vivid colors.¹¹²

Hence, the turbulent environment in the Balkans starting from the Tanzimat Era cannot be degraded into a simple explanation of mal-functioning of the empire but all other possible complexities should be taken into consideration as the leading cornerstones of dynamic imperial policies. Also, contrary to the Tanzimat literature that considered reforms to be modern and liberating, Albanian literature emphasized the despotism and absolutism of the sultan in contrast to the very *Gülhane* Edict itself. This is in contradiction with the positivist Albanian historical paradigm, which tends to praise any step towards modernization.

Hence, the beginning of İsa’s story may call for revisions in the literature, rethinking the effort to portray decreasing allegiance of people to the Ottoman authorities in the context of “colossal operations of social engineering” and to establish standard orders “to prevent collapse”¹¹³ rather than acknowledging these reactionary movements as national ascriptions. As a result, the fluctuating dynamics of the Tanzimat Era were not taking into consideration that İsa was born in. Yet, it should be noted that all these adverse developments in the region were going to lead these

¹¹¹ Akarlı, “The Problems of External Pressures”, p. 26.

¹¹² Yasamee, “The Ottoman Empire and the European Great Powers, 1884-1887”, p. 141-190.

¹¹³ Şükrü İlicak, “A Radical Rethinking of Empire: Ottoman State and Society during the Greek War of Independence (1821-1826)”, p. 1.

“brave people”¹¹⁴ to have different reactions. One of the best examples where these different reactions can be observed was the League of Prizren, beyond any doubt.

2.2.2. The League of Prizren for the Myth of İsa

Another brick to put for İsa as a national figure is his link to the Prizren League even though he was just fourteen years old when it was conducted. Therefore, the story is related to his family rather than himself. Yet, when the documents about the League were examined, some familiar surnames such as Draga family¹¹⁵ can be detected, but the surname of Boletini does not appear as claimed.¹¹⁶

The wriggles starting from 1878 about Albanian concerns for the future of the lands they inhabited have created a colorful, multi-dimensioned, and diverse inclination for possible solutions. Usually, this pluralism is wanted to be degraded to some familiar dichotomies such as educated vs. ignorant, patriot vs. traitor, pious vs. secular, etc. For the Albanian national narrative, the League of Prizren¹¹⁷ (1878) is considered as an origin where Albanians felt the urge to examine their relationship with the Sublime Port after feeling the pressure of the international treaties of San Stefano and Berlin, which were signed after the terrible defeat in the war with Russia and allocated Albanian lands to its neighboring states. The years of 1878-79 were hectic by all means. On the 29th of November 1879, according to the report sent to the Port by Mehmet Esat Safvet Paşa, Serbia claimed to annex the region of Kosovo, Montenegro the region of Shkoder, Greece Epirus and Thessaly, and Bulgarians whole region of Macedonia.¹¹⁸ The inability of the Porte obliged itself in a hopelessly distanced attitude towards the region. The cost of such an attitude proved high and shook the

¹¹⁴ *Kavm-i şeci* was one of the terms to use to describe Albanian people. Hasip Saygılı, *ibid.* p. 219.

¹¹⁵ Y. PRK. ASK, 3/17, 28.09.1296, (M-15.09.1879)

¹¹⁶ Fatmira Musaj claims that İsa’s family was one of the prominent families. p.19.

¹¹⁷ Arben Salihu, “Prizren is today city southern part of the Republic of Kosovo”, “The Albanian Prizren League Factor and Beyond: Distinct Developments Exposed by the Western Sources”, *Iliria International Review*, Vol 9, No.2 (2019), pp. 303-323.

¹¹⁸ İhsan Burak Birecikli, “Arnavutlar ve Arnavutluk Sorunu, 1908-1914”, p. 97.

local allegiances more than ever. Therefore, the failure of the Ottoman Empire to stake a claim on the assignment of Albanian lands to other states had a great impact on the emergence of the Albanian national movement.¹¹⁹ Therefore, it was a “necessity” rather than a “choice” to form the League.

The works on these developments, in general, do not reflect on “discrepancies.” Rather they designate the League as a very nationalistic act in character indicating that Albanians did not want to be dragged along by the falling state of Turks. These works assert as well that finally, the Albanians had begun to “wake up” from their sleep of ignorance.¹²⁰ A close look at the eighty delegates who attended the League, representing four vilayets suggests a more complicated picture. The majority of the delegates were conservative “Muslim religious leaders, notables, and clan chiefs”¹²¹ who had “tacit support of the Ottoman authorities.”¹²² They aimed at forming a political mechanism based upon mutual interest, namely “to prevent the further partition of the Albanian territory”¹²³ and “to defend all Muslim lands, including Bosnia” in the slippery slope of the Balkans. Under these circumstances, the Boletini family has been involved with the dynamism in the region. Their *kula* was one of the centers for gatherings and nightlong discussions.¹²⁴ The effort was spent against the oppression of the neighbors as well as the Ottomans. The Boletinis were portrayed as solid freedom fighters against the Ottomans even if it contradicts the general tendency of the League. Meanwhile, İsa was only fourteen years old when the choppy winds were blustering upon the Balkans, especially upon the disputed borders such as his hometown, Mitroviçe. Not surprisingly, the complexity of discrepancies in the

¹¹⁹ Abdulhamit Kırmızı, “Halep-Kosova Hattı, 1909: Arnavutluk’ta Meşrutiyete Karşı Bir İsyan Teşebbüsü”

¹²⁰ Stavro Skendi, *Albanian National Awakening*

¹²¹ Barbara Jelavic, “The Ottoman Empire to 1876: the Reforms”, p. 101.

¹²² Robert Elsie, *Historical Dictionary of Albania*, p. 148.

¹²³ Arben Salihu, “The Albanian Prizren League Factor and Beyond: Distinct Developments Exposed by the Western Sources”, pp. 304.

¹²⁴ Fatmira Musaj, *İsa Boletini*, p. 19.

League was not considered and once again Boletini family wanted to be shown as eternal independence fighters whereas Kosovar delegates were under the “sacred” influence of *baba mbret*, Sultan Abdülhamid II, who was balancing the scales against “invading states” as well as preventing this organization from “transforming into a political movement that would remove the Ottoman Empire’s sovereignty”¹²⁵.

Another neglected fact about the League is its multi-ethnic character, although it represented pure Albanian. There have been migration movements towards Kosovar lands due to the chaotic nature of the social life, political realm, and economic conditions resulted from the Russian influence in the Balkans and Caucasian lands. In other words, the conditions were leaving no choice for people but to migrate. Sounding familiar from the twenty-first century, movement of people created diversities as in the case of Kosovo¹²⁶.

One of the great examples of this diversity can be seen in the structure of the League itself. Bosnian immigrants were actively involved and helped to outweigh Northern Kosovar demands over the Southern Albanian nationalist tendency of autonomy. The League has turned into an Islamic unity backed by Sultan Abdülhamid II; hence, the “Muslim Ottoman composition” of the League decided to channelize its effort to defend all Muslim lands, including Bosnia.¹²⁷ Therefore, this proves the fact that the League was composite in structure in terms of ethnicity and political demands. In this context, if the League had any relevance to İsa and his family, it has to be questioned whether the Boletini family’s impulsion was nationalistic or closer to the general tendency of Kosovar chiefs to protect the Albanian lands under the Ottoman administration.

¹²⁵ Nuray Bozbora, “The Policy of Sultan Abdulhamid II Regarding the Prizren League”, *Turkish Review of Balkan Studies*, Annual 11 (2006), p. 45-67.

¹²⁶ For Circassian immigrants, A. MKT. MHM 314/100: It is an interesting document about how voluntarily local people were helping these immigrants in terms of money and clothing, and Ottoman authorities wanted this example of solidarity to be published in *Takvim-i Vekayi* in 1864.; and for Bosnians, İ. ŞD, 106/6321: Their number was enough to constitute a *mahalle* so that they asked to change its name from Gazi İsa Bey Mahallesi into Saray Mahallesi.

¹²⁷ Barbara Jelavic, *History of Balkans I*, p. 364.

2.2.3. Avoiding the Hamidian Era and Focusing on the CUP Era

The last important tendency to “invent” İsa is a deliberate focus on the turbulent environment of the CUP years and their extensive armed operations in the region rather than the relatively peaceful period of Sultan Abdülhamid II. This problematic approach, the anachronistic narrative about Sultan Abdülhamid II and the CUP, is in accordance with the clichéd Western paradigms about the despotic image of the Sultan. Mostly, despotism is engraved in the region through taxation and military service. However, there is not any complete narrative for the reign of the sultan but it is mentioned in the context of the first enterprises of the “awakening” period. Consequently, by necessity, the sultan’s reign as a despotic centralization and modernization period had to be mentioned in the context of the birth of national consciousness. Then the sophisticated hues of the period are avoided for the sake of the Albanian grand narrative.

Interestingly, however, İsa’s nationalization starts with the terrorization activities of the CUP regime. Despite the striking differences in the political agendas of the Hamidian and CUP regimes, they were put in the same pot under the title of Turk. The Albanian nationalist literature either disregards the nuances in order to skip the relationship between the sultan and İsa or it closes the doors tightly not to allow any alternative narrative. Meanwhile, the CUP’s evolution and ethnically mixed structure are by-passed and the attention is paid to the title “Turk” as a reference to the ethnicity, unfortunately. Despite the fact that one of the three founders of the club was an Albanian, the evolution of independence narratives and the main figures are carved out of their context.¹²⁸

All in all, Albanian historiography constitutes a good example of the nation as a social construction. The events are mostly narrated anachronistically and linearly. The most crucial event, the independence, and the figures who contributed to it are shown as unique and independent variables. Therefore, it is important to realize that the

¹²⁸ Nader Sohrabi, *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 54. He was İbrahim Temo.

Albanian historiography does not contextualize independence as a process of dissociation from an empire in the fluctuating conditions of the Balkans and the nineteenth century. Since the categories of analysis are strict and impermeable, it does not allow historians to work on imperial figures who had multiple and flowing identities as in the case of İsa. In other words, the imperial narratives cannot be forced into national aspirations. This eventually leads to nationalist ambitions within the framework of “weird” stories, succeeded by the consolidation of heroic figures. Despite the availability of the various sources, the deliberate selection of some of them to construct narratives might serve to the consolidating purposes of the states.

It should be kept in mind that the grand narratives about the glorious year of 1912 were written as part of the communist regime’s projects under the comforting shadows of Islamophobia, Turkophobia, and Orientalism during the 1950s. Additionally, the categories of analysis for certain terms are selective as well, as in the case of modernism. As it was demonstrated, the Tanzimat period as an immense modernization project cultivated as the background of İsa’s story is represented as a period of oppression. Under the communist regime, where the oppressions are applicable for the sake of the progress, this constitutes a contradiction. Lastly, incorporating local incidents into the grand narrative of “split” such as the League of Prizren stands as one of the instrumentalizations of projects despite its peculiarities. Therefore, it would not be an exaggeration to claim that the Albanian nation-state was to be built during the 1950s, rather than the symbolic year of 1912. İsa Boletini is one of the nationalized figures of this state-building process.

CHAPTER 3

İSA AND THE SULTAN ABDÜLHAMİD II

3.1. Abdülhamid and İsa as Controversial Figures

Şimâli Arnavutluk ki gegadırlar çok mutaassıp, Müslümandırlar. Besa verdiler mi sözlerinden dönmezler idi. Ben onlara, onlar bana besa vermişler idi.
-Sultan Abdülhamid II¹²⁹

The reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II was a natural and inevitable reflection of the nineteenth century's international system which was forcing the Ottomans to prioritize strategies regarding "the integrity of the Ottoman Empire, but conducted a policy that contributed to its dismemberment".¹³⁰ İsa Boletini represents an ineluctable local "power magnet"¹³¹ from one of the boiling lands of the Balkans, Kosovo. The chronicle problems during the Sultan's reign have made the destinies of these two men encounter. Surprisingly enough, both were unexpectedly acquired power due to the loss of previous power holders and became the *heads* of their particular vicinities. The suspicious death of his uncle and mental breakdown of his brother brought Abdülhamid II to the throne. Whereas, in parallel with the sultan, İsa became a clan chief after the loss of his brother.¹³² Out of the blue, these two men were meant to have authority and leadership by faith.

The literature tends to evaluate the sultan's reign in accordance with his personality, both physical and spiritual because he spent a lot of effort to "make himself as omniscient a ruler as he was omnipotent"¹³³ and "this period was distinguished by

¹²⁹ Atıf Hüseyin Bey, *Sultan II. Abdülhamid'in Sürgün Günleri: Hususi Doktoru Atıf Hüseyin Bey'in Hatıratı*, (ed.) M. Metin Hülagü (İstanbul: Pan Yayıncılık, 2007), p. 254-5.

¹³⁰ Engin Deniz Akarlı, "The Problems of External Pressures, Power Struggles, and Budgetary Deficits in Ottoman Politics Under Abdulhamid II (1876-1909): Origins and Solutions", (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1976), p.103.

¹³¹ Engin Deniz Akarlı, "Provincial Power Magnets in Ottoman Bilad As-Sham and Egypt 1740-1840", *La Vie Sociale Dans Les Provinces Arabes A L'époque Ottomane*, (Tunisia: Zaghouan, 1988), p. 41-56.

¹³² Fatmira Musaj, *İsa Boletini 1864-1916*, 8 (Tirane: 8 Nentori, 1987), p. 21.

¹³³ Akarlı, "The Problems of External Pressures", p. 104.

the sultan's reconcentration of power in his hands".¹³⁴ His centralization policies were concerning his personality, applied through decentralizing measures in a contradictory way, and by-passed the Sublime Porte and pushed it into "subservience" most of the time to prevent "his ministers from monopolizing knowledge and knowing how to run the government".¹³⁵

Abdülhamid II's reign is conceptualized between "tautological" dichotomies of "anti-Western" and "despot" vs. "Islamicist, traditionalist, and conservative." He has carried a sincere faith in the necessity of fully-fledged reform programs in all aspects to maintain the empire. Yet, he has abstained from disturbing fragile local realities. Paradoxically, he had to exercise policies back and forth and aimed to consolidate reforms through maintaining the status quo. In other words, he was reluctant to disturb the status quo because it must be consolidated to have successful results from the reform programs to keep the empire intact. The complicated characteristic of his regime is represented as an evil axis surrounding the Balkans and it brought the collapse of the Hamidian regime as the Young Turk discourse claims.¹³⁶ Especially, administrative problems were the driven forces behind most of the accusations such as "overstaffing (underemployment), undereducation, disproportionate and irregular compensation, corruption, bribery, and, the most serious of all, adherence to patrimonial norms".¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Carter V. Findley, "The Reign of Abdülhamid", *Turkey, Islam, Nationalism, and Modernity*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 133.

¹³⁵ Akarlı, "The Problems of External Pressures" p.103, and M. Şükrü Hanioğlu, "The Twilight of the Tanzimat and the Hamidian Regime", *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), p.123. Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, (NY: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 178-179. Stanford J. Shaw & Ezel Kural Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, Volume III, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 212.

¹³⁶ Resneli Niyazi, "Mukaddime", *Hürriyet Kahramanı Resneli Niyazi Hatıratı*, (İstanbul: Panama, 2017), p.9-15.

¹³⁷ Nader Sohrabi, *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran*, p.47.

However, he and his reign were too complex to fit in such dichotomies.¹³⁸ The sultan himself can fairly be regarded as “an anti-Western modernist, a conservative ruler with reformist bent, or an Islamicist who emphasized secular-technical education”¹³⁹ that gave birth to the Young Turk regime that put an end to his thirty-three years of administration.¹⁴⁰

On the other hand, as in the case of Abdülhamid, İsa is placed in dichotomous narratives of the Albanian literature and the Young Turk propaganda as well. For the former, he was a brave freedom fighter and an example of a life dedicated to Albanian independence.¹⁴¹ Every important phase of his life was carefully adapted to the national grand narrative, whereas the Young Turks considered him as a vestige of the sultan’s regime. His commitment was perceived derogatorily in the framework of personal interests granted by Abdülhamid himself. He had to be eliminated.

In fact, the claims attributed to İsa were condemned by the Albanian narratives and accused to cast aspersions to distort his rebellious character, because he refused any possibility of cooperation with Turks as a *true* Albanian.¹⁴² Then, was İsa a nationalist freedom fighter, or an opportunist representative of the Sultan in the region? Above dichotomies, he can be regarded as a freedom fighter against malevolent intentions of any power as an *Ottoman* and one of the representatives of the Sultan to keep the region intact for the common good. The point that failed to be noticed is the fact that the Albanian “freedom fighters” snatched from the imperial Ottoman context. As a

¹³⁸ Kemal Karpat, “Making of a Modern Muslim Ruler Abdulhamid II”, *The Politicization of Islam: Reconstructing Identity, State, Faith, and Community in the Late Ottoman State*, (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2001), p. 155-182.

¹³⁹ Akarlı, “The Problems of External Pressures”, p. 2

¹⁴⁰ Atif Hüseyin Bey, p. 105. Sultan personally used to believe that the students have studied in local Schools were better educated compare to those studied in Europe. He was specifically finding Paris as a *dégénéré* city for students.

¹⁴¹ Robert Elsie, *A Biographical Dictionary of Albanian History*, (NY: I.B. Tauris, 2012), p. 46.

¹⁴² Tahir Abdyli, *İsa Boletini: Tribun Popullor*, (Prishtinë: Enti i Teksteve dhe i Mjeteve Mësimore i Kosovës, 1997), p. 5-6.

result, any analysis will be drawn about the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II and İsa Boletin requires a more flexible approach beyond restricting ideologies.

It can be argued that one of the most important reasons to have contested narratives about the Sultan and İsa was the perils, hazards, and challenges brought by the nineteenth-century politics which were forcing them to maneuver in a confined space. Therefore, both Abdülhamid and İsa's lives were affected, twisted, and turned by the composite and inseparable policies of the time.

3.2. The First Impressions of İsa

Towards the end of the 1880s, there was already a turbulent environment in Albanian lands thanks to both local and international pressure. As for the local pressure, means of centralization politics such as population census to detect the amount of the tax and the number of potential soldiers were disturbing some Albanians.¹⁴³ "The twin scourges of an increasingly efficient state"¹⁴⁴, taxation and military recruitment, have been by-passed by the Kosovar Albanians for many years. Not only this but also, they were conditioned that these reforms were going to benefit the Christians more than the Muslims. The situation was a novelty to the region that even the idea upset most of conservative Kosovars.¹⁴⁵

The years of 1885-1886 were stormy as well due to the coup reached by the Bulgarian revolutionaries, the Greek opposition to it, and finally the Macedonian question. In this chaotic region, disobedience and infraction were upsetting the balance and a lot

¹⁴³ Miranda Vickers, *Between Serb and Albanian: A History of Kosovo*, (NY: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 191.

¹⁴⁴ Howard Eissenstat, "Modernization, Imperial Nationalism, and the Ethnicization of Confessional Identity in the Late Ottoman Empire", *Nationalizing Empires*, (ed.) Stefen Berger & Alexei Miller, (Budapest, Central European University Press, 2015), p. 456.

¹⁴⁵ Feroz Ahmad, "The Albanians", *The Young Turks and the Ottoman Nationalities: Armenians, Greeks, Albanians, Jews, and Arabs, 1908–1918*, (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2014), pp.56. For example, they were resented to the fact that census takers were asking the names of women as well. It was considered as an assault on their honor and a necessary condition for insurrection. Hakan Özdemir, "İhtilâlci Muhalefetin Doğuşu ve Gelişimi", *Abdülhamid'i Deviren Kurşun: İsyan, Suikast, İhtilâl*, (İstanbul: Timaş Yayınları, 2014), p.76.

of figures were arrested, exiled, and killed.¹⁴⁶ Muslim Albanians resented to the situation while witnessing the loss of their privileges compare to their Christian neighbors.

In any case, the reform programs both imposed by the Ottomans and the Great Powers had to be exercised for the greater good. Hence, during these upheavals, İsa's name entered into the official records. In 1895, İsa and his friends were engaged with banditry and killings of Christians in the Mitroviçe region, therefore the necessary measures needed to be taken to capture them to assure peace for the people of the region. The governor of Kosovo at that time, Hafiz Mehmed Paşa was appointed to stabilize the turbulence and spent a great deal of effort to capture İsa. He was known in the region as a strict and fair administrator.¹⁴⁷ Hence, in 1895, he was sure that İsa was nothing more than "a bandit and a murderer" to be captured.¹⁴⁸ Consequently, the first impression of İsa echoed in the Yıldız palace as a bandit who upsets the tranquility in the region, therefore, he had to be eliminated.

At the turn of the twentieth century, when the international pressure was felt more in the region, his name became more familiar in İstanbul. At the time the Kosovar lands were experiencing continuous threats related to the reform program prepared by the Great Powers which needed to be carried out. Even though the Ottoman authorities intended to postpone the applications of the reform package to preserve the status quo in the region, there have been legitimate requests such as opening a consulate. The Russian Empire was one of them.

¹⁴⁶ F.A.K. Yasamee, "The Ottoman Empire and the European Great Powers", (PhD Diss. University of London, 1984), p. 141-190.

¹⁴⁷ Tafil Boletini, *Pranë Isa Boletinit*, (ed.) Merenglen Verli, (Tetovë: Ndërmarrja Gazetare-Botuese Album, 1996), p. 23. Y.MTV 231/119, 1320.03.19, (M-26-06-1902).

¹⁴⁸ Y. PRK.A. 10/ 15, 1312.12.14 (M-8-06-1895).

3.2.1. Russian Claims for the Necessity of a Consulate

As a form of foreign penetration, the opening of the Russian Consulate in Mitroviçe created a tremendous impact in the region. After the Berlin Congress, “which was not technically but nominally end of the empire”¹⁴⁹, the population distribution in northern *sanjaks* of Kosovo gained specific attention under the threat of partitioning of lands as well as other states’ claims “to protect” the right of minorities in the region. Mitroviçe was one of the *kazas* that Serbs had a claim on with Russia’s reinforcement. Their population was never below 30% in the region¹⁵⁰, hence, it was not a coincidence for the Russian side to get involved in Mitroviçe. In addition to that, Mitroviçe’s location was strategically important because it was very close to the border with Serbia and it had a connection with the railway network, therefore it was considered as “the core” of Kosovo region.¹⁵¹

To begin with, opening a Russian consulate in the region was a disputed issue between Muslim Albanians.¹⁵² Because of that, in 1902, the Ottoman authorities in the region were asking if there was any chance to convince Russian authorities to withdraw the idea of the consulate and constantly warning the Port about the inconveniences of a possible Russian Consulate in Mitroviçe: First, Mitroviçe was a small place for a consulate, and there was not any consulate of any other state; hence it could have triggered other states to open consulates likewise. Second, in Skopje and Shkodra, there were already Russian Consulates. Third, and the most important,

¹⁴⁹ Hanioglu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, p. 121.

¹⁵⁰ Y. PRK. UM, 1/99 for the year of 1880, Y. PRK. UM, 32/17 for the year of 1895, Y. PRK. DH, 11/46_1, 2 for the year of 1900 with an interesting detail that grouping was confused with nationalities and religions. For example, there are separate columns for Muslims, Greeks, Bulgarians Catholics, Latins, Protestants, and Jews. Hence, this clearly represents how the Ottoman authorities were trying to adopt the novelty of “nationness” as well as keep up with religion-based classifications.

¹⁵¹ Hasip Saglı, “Sultan İkinci Abdülhamid’in Meşruiyet Krizi: 1903’te Mitroviçe’de İlk Rus Konsolosu Grigori Şerbina’nın Öldürülmesi”, *Osmanlı’nın Son 40 Yılında Rumeli Türkleri ve Müslümanları 1878-1918*, (İlgi Kültür Sanat, 2019), p. 33.

¹⁵² Saygılı claims that Catholic Albanians were also against the idea of Consulate. p. 34.

even the rumor had created severe reactions among Albanians so much so that a further crisis seemed unmanageable.¹⁵³

3.2.2. İsa's Involvement with the Case

İsa was one of the names that were associated with these reactions due to his severe opposition with an Islamic discourse against Russian domination in the region, contrary to Albanian literature where his efforts were considered purely nationalistic. In September 1902, İsa was sure that the opening of the Russian Consulate was about to upset the balance of power in the region and strengthen Serbian claims. The idea of the consulate was "contrary to the advantage of the Muslims" in the region, and İsa with his tribe, as well as tribes from Peja and Novi Pazar gave *besa* to hinder if such an action happens, yet there were not any physical activities such as gathering people to oppose or to call for it.¹⁵⁴

İsa has continued to occupy the telegram traffic between Yıldız palace and Kosovo because of the tension resulted from the news of a possible Russian Consulate in his hometown. Meanwhile, Russian authorities in the region have been watching the course of events and interfering with the local homicides of the Orthodox Albanians as the ultimate protectorate. With the massacres they have conducted in Mitroviçe, İsa and his bandit friends were frightening and terrifying the Christian people.¹⁵⁵ The reason was the clandestine armament of the Christians in the region by the Serbian state, and ultimately by Russia.¹⁵⁶ İsa was one of the repetitive names mentioned as a murderer and the Russian Embassy was asking if it was possible to deploy more soldiers to the region.¹⁵⁷ Since then, the Ottoman authorities considered moving İsa away from the region because his action was in contradiction with the grand

¹⁵³ Hasip Sagılı, *Ibid.* p. 35.

¹⁵⁴ BEO 1929 / 144657, 1320.07.02 (05-10-1902)

¹⁵⁵ DH.ŞFR. 268 / 58-0, 1319.07.15 (28.10.1901)

¹⁵⁶ Tafil Boletini, *Pranë Isa Boletinit*, (ed.) Merenglen Verli, (Tetovë: Ndërmarrja Gazetare-Botuese Album, 1996), p. 34.

¹⁵⁷ DH.ŞFR. 271/ 16 – 0, 1317.09.17 (19.01.1900)

Hamidian policy to assure maximum tranquility in the region with the minimum loss possible and not to upset Russia. Furthermore, even though İsa was resisting against the authorities by retreating in his kule, eventually he was going to be captured. Yet, such a harmful action would be in contradiction with the Hamidian policy towards Albanians. The Sultan considered him as a potential force to collaborate rather than an alienated enemy.¹⁵⁸ Moreover, his nephew, Tafil Boletini depicts the situation vividly: “At that time, propaganda was spread as if it would be easier for the government to attack Boletin rather than going to war with Russia but the Sultan did not want to attack Boletin. When the people heard this, they played down their guns.”¹⁵⁹ This also shows that the situation was beyond İsa yet embodied in his character. Abdülhamid was aware that it was a delicate matter and needed special attention.

After the Hafız Mehmed Paşa, it was Şemsi Paşa, the commander of the 18th regiment in Mitroviçe who was authorized to create order and stability. Regarding the consulate issue, Şemsi Paşa shared İsa’s ideas and tried to convince the sultan to withdraw the permission.¹⁶⁰ This is an important point because it made İsa trust Şemsi Paşa and his “appropriate” logic. During his term, another issue happened to confront İsa and the Ottoman authorities. His friend, Akif Bey from Novi Pazar, as another powerful figure in the region, has been creating disorder and instability. However, Şemsi Paşa managed to capture him and he was about to be sent to İstanbul. This created an agitation among others because the intention was clear: these local power magnets had to be eliminated. Moreover, there have been a lot of intelligence services warning the authorities that İsa was gathering his forces to march towards Novi Pazar to ask Akif’s release.¹⁶¹ Şemsi Paşa was offering two options to the Yıldız: either there should be more soldiers to fight back or, a more

¹⁵⁸ Tahsin Paşa, *Yıldız Hatıraları*, (ed.) Ahmet Zeki İzgöer, (İstanbul, İz Yayınları, 2019), p. 399.

¹⁵⁹ Tafil Boletini, *Pranë Isa Boletinit*, p. 35.

¹⁶⁰ Güler Yarcı, “Kosova’nın Hüzünlü Yüzü: Paylaşılamayan Şehir ‘Mitroviçe’”, *Bozkırdan Batı’ya: Prof. Dr. Hüseyin Salman’a Armağan*, (ed.) Güler Yarcı, (İstanbul: Epsilon, 2017), p. 401.

¹⁶¹ DH.ŞFR. 281/ 54 – 0, 58-0, 1318.01.19, (19.05.1900)

suitable alternative to the Hamidian policy, to release Akif Bey and have an agreement with İsa.¹⁶² The situation is represented as a turning point for İsa as he asserted himself to the Ottoman authorities as a powerful national figure.¹⁶³ It is confused with the policy aiming not to create further agitation in the region.

Şemsi Paşa's suggestion was not a coincidence. As a half Albanian, he knew these people and could predict further violence, if the authorities do not come to an agreement. This attitude of his as an arbiter was going to continue as it has been claimed that İsa was a blood-brother of him¹⁶⁴, or "a close friend from a very honored family from Sarajevo."¹⁶⁵ As one of the powerful and trusted Paşas of the Sultan Hamid, he made sure of İsa's transportation to İstanbul. In addition to that, the beginning of the twentieth century was the years of incorporation of influential Albanian figures as the trusted and skillful servants such as Ferit Paşa of Vlorë, who would become the longest-serving Grand Vizier of the sultan.¹⁶⁶ İsa's involvement can also be considered as a part of the trend of the time.

After some three months, the Russian Consulate issue in Mitroviçe has made the Ottoman authorities and İsa to experience the most tumultuous sequence of events until the CUP regime. İsa has turned into a political crisis between two empires beyond his previous reputation of banditry. He acquired a political color and left no choice for the Russians to give an ultimatum that they were going to cut their relationship with the Empire by all means if he was not deported from the region. Even though the Ottoman authorities have managed to stall the Russians off, and gained one year to manage İsa's deportation, the last ultimatum triggered one of the turning points of İsa's life: the road to İstanbul.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶² DH.ŞFR. 281/ 125 – 0, 1318.01.25, (24.05.1900)

¹⁶³ Fatmira Musaj, *İsa Boletini*, p. 38.

¹⁶⁴ Hasip Saygılı, *Osmanlı'nın Son 40 Yılında Rumeli Türkleri ve Müslümanları 1878-1918*, p. 40.

¹⁶⁵ Tafil Boletini, *Pranë Isa Boletinit*, p. 37.

¹⁶⁶ Abdulhamit Kırmızı, "Experiencing the Ottoman Empire as a Life Course: Ferid Pasha, Governor and Grandvizier (1851 –1914)", *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, (2014, 40), p. 42–66.

¹⁶⁷ Y. A. HUS. 434/12-3, 1320.06.03, (07.09.1902)

3.2.3. İsa Goes to İstanbul

However, İsa was not sure about the intention of the authorities. The governor of Kosovo, Reşad Paşa, was letting the Yıldız know that it was difficult to convince him; he has been raising difficulties and worrying about his journey¹⁶⁸. Was this a plot? Were they going to eliminate him when he arrives in İstanbul? Well, İsa was not a “doubting Thomas” and sensed that there could be further plans for him. He was not wrong because first, his exile to Konya was considered as a solution.¹⁶⁹ However, such a solution might not work and create further repercussions in the region. There seemed to be the only solution to convince him: a direct order from the sultan to İsa to come to İstanbul. The telegram was mentioning the delicacy and the complexity of the consulate issue and his journey to İstanbul was going to prevent the conflict with Russia. İsa was going to be safe and his life was under the assurance of the sultan.¹⁷⁰

The sultan’s way of addressing himself to İsa has created a persuasive atmosphere. It was partially the success of Şemsi Paşa as well. There could be two supporting reasons: shared disturbance about the consulate issue and patrimonial policy of the sultan. I believe that they have met on a common ground where İsa was not alone about feeling disturbed by the Russian enterprises in the region as equally as Abdülhamid. Hence, the sultan has played the role of a father, as a known policy towards Albanians and wanted to “rescue” his son from this complex situation without any harm. Furthermore, far from punishment, İsa was given gifts and grants that assured his authority in the region. Therefore, Abdülhamid chooses to consolidate İsa’s regional power rather than diminish it. His authority was colored with the Hamidian shades because the contrary did not seem possible. The Sultan

¹⁶⁸ Y.MTV. 235/ 67 - 0, 1320.07.12, (M-15-10-1902)

¹⁶⁹ BEO, 1944/ 145768 – 0, 1320.07.01, (M-4-11-1902)

¹⁷⁰ Tahsin Paşa, *Yıldız Hatıraları*, p. 399. Tafil Boletini, *Pranë Isa Boletinit*, p. 48.

Abdülhamid II “had to win the goodwill of the provincial notables and tribal leaders by giving them positions of responsibility”.¹⁷¹

Yet, İsa had conditions and the negotiations have continued throughout October of 1902. He was getting opinions of other tribal leaders in the region and finally, he made up his mind to take the order upon three conditions: the Russian consul would not come to Mitroviçe after he leaves, he was going to be able to keep guns and have friends with him in İstanbul, and he was going to stay *only* in İstanbul.¹⁷² Finally, Şemsi Paşa has completed his duty and feeling relieved, sent a telegram to Yıldız that İsa’s departure was assured. In any case of cession, he was going to exercise brute force.¹⁷³

On the 4th day of the holy month of Ramadan in 1902, with a hundred lira for the traveling expenses¹⁷⁴, İsa departed with his two friends from Mitroviçe to Selanik, then İstanbul.¹⁷⁵ One of the aides-de-camp of the sultan (Yaver-i Şehriyârî), Yakovalı Rıza Bey,¹⁷⁶ escorted İsa during his journey.¹⁷⁷ They could have a common mindset since then, because almost at the same period, during the year of 1910, İsa’s name

¹⁷¹ Kemal Karpat, *The Politicization of Islam: Reconstructing Identity, State, Faith, and Community in the Late Ottoman State*, p.175.

¹⁷² Tafil Boletini, *Pranë Isa Boletinit*, p. 52.

¹⁷³ Y.A.HUS. 436/ 27, 1320.07.19, (M-22-10-1902)

¹⁷⁴ BEO. 2448/ 183574, 1322.09.07, (M-15-11-1904)

¹⁷⁵ Y.PRK.ASK. 187/ 77 – 0, 1320.09.04, (M-05-12-1902)

¹⁷⁶ Yakovalı Rıza Bey was to serve as a major in 1909 in Halep and plot a revolt against the Young Turks’ Constitutional regime with the Kosovar notables. See, Abdulhamit Kırmızı, “Halep-Kosova Hattı, 1909: Arnavutluk’ta Meşrutiyete Karşı Bir İsyan Teşebbüsü”, *Dîvân Disiplinlerarası Çalışmalar Dergisi*, (2009/ 26), pp.1-34. Apart from that Rıza Bey was brought to the Yıldız Palace upon the dispute he had with Bayram Curri. This should have an impact on İsa’s decision. Rıza Bey was among people who experienced the Palace atmosphere, hence the surrounding aura of the sultan which led him to plot a counter revolution against the CUP. See, Örikağasızâde Hasan Sırrı, *Sultan Abdülhamit Devri Hatıraları ve Saray İdaresi*, (ed) Ali Adem Yörük, İstanbul: Dergah Yayınları, 2007, p. 101-103.

¹⁷⁷ DH.MKT. 1038/ 19, 1323.11.08, (M-04-01-1906)

was mentioned in the telegrams as a wicked figure who was plotting scenarios to rescue Abdülhamid from Selanik where he was exiled to by the CUP regime.¹⁷⁸

The measures were taken in Selanik as well to assure that his travel was safe and sound and any possible escape was prevented.¹⁷⁹ On the very same day, he was rewarded with the license to operate the millstone mine in his village, Boletin.¹⁸⁰ Apart from that, he was also given a share from the revenue of the stone quarry in the region that belonged to the state treasury in return for the protection he will be going to provide for the Christians in various villages for the upcoming years.¹⁸¹ Moreover, the state officials were going to appeal neither to his family nor his property for the existing debt he had for the tithe.¹⁸² Furthermore, he was going to return when the dust settles with the Russians. From the very beginning, the authorities were aware that this could only be a temporary solution. They were investigating the Russian reports full of complaints to find a solution for İsa to return.¹⁸³ Finally, he was going to be getting paid regularly for the services he provides in the Yıldız.

Yet, Albanian literature demonstrates this major development as an act of personal enterprise “to convince” the sultan to withdraw the permission for the consulate.¹⁸⁴ Well, the possibility of İsa and Abdülhamid to discuss such an important issue as if they were counterparts seems unlikely even though it can be considered as a successful attempt to demonstrate İsa and Abdülhamid on the same ground as equals for the Albanian literature. The empire was experiencing several similar problems and

¹⁷⁸ HR.SYS. 133/ 22 – 0, 1328.07.05, (M-13-07-1910)

¹⁷⁹ BEO 1934/ 145035-0, 1320.07.11, (M-14-10-1902)

¹⁸⁰ BEO 2530/ 189723, 1323.01.13, (M-20-03-1905)

¹⁸¹ TFR.I.KV. 75/ 7458-0, 1322.08.17, (M-27-10-1904)

¹⁸² TFR.I.KV. 26/ 2532-0, 1321.06.25, (M-21-7-1903)

¹⁸³ Y.A.HUS. 500/80, 1323.01.14, (M-21-03-1905)

¹⁸⁴ Fatmira Musaj, *İsa Boletini*, p. 44-45.

the Sultan could not have time to discuss and “to be convinced” by these local figures whereas also the budget could not carry such a burden to transport them to İstanbul. Additionally, as it was mentioned before, Tafil claims that it was upon his condition that İsa took the order. Then why would he need to negotiate with the Sultan again? The contradicting nature of the literature demonstrates the fact that the narratives were depended on the selective use of the materials as long as they were in line with the grand narrative.

Meanwhile, the consulate issue was assigned to a relative of İsa, Demo. To kill the Russian Consul, under the leadership of Demo, a secret society was formed with the involvement of the people from several villages of Mitroviçe. Intelligence was provided by the Russian authorities and according to that two people were assigned to kill the consul.¹⁸⁵ The burden of the Ottoman officials in the region has been ever-increasing related to the issue, and even they were traumatized with the Russian complaints: they use to think that one single complaint was powerful enough to remove their titles.¹⁸⁶ Almost all demands were trying to be met by the Ottomans because the Hamidian policy put faith in the fact that tranquility was going to stabilize the region eventually; hence the compromises were considered inevitably useful.

Apart from that, the Sultan used to favor the cooperation with the possible “power magnets” rather than further agitation, and incorporation of them into the system with relative prosperity; so that he eliminates the threats. The story of İsa represents a good example to see the reflection of the grand state policies upon the region and how they can trigger turns and twists in peoples’ life. It perfectly fits in the imperial framework and provides a vivid example of a transformation story of “a bandit” to “a bey”. But, why did not the Sultan withdraw the permission since it had created a great deal of disturbance among Kosovar Albanians? The answer requires some inquiry about the Hamidian experience of the nineteenth century.

¹⁸⁵ BEO 1999/ 149859-0, 1320.11.16, (M-14-02-1903)

¹⁸⁶ Hasip Saygılı, *Osmanlı’nın Son 40 Yılında Rumeli Türkleri ve Müslümanları 1878-1918*, p. 46.

3.3. Hamidian Experience of the Nineteenth Century

The Ottomans and the Sultan Abdülhamid II used to consider themselves as equal participants of the political games of the time and demand to be accepted as an equal member of the international community. Whereas, especially Europeans considered them as an anomaly and a master who should have been a butler. In other words, the Ottoman Empire was among the Great Powers, however; the ability to exercise power was quite asymmetrical.¹⁸⁷ Hence, through intensive symbolism invented in this time supporting peaceful approaches, the Sultan has endeavored to cope with the pressure and aimed to ensure Ottoman acceptance in the game.¹⁸⁸ The image-making and the obsession of the consolidation of it will be more apparent in the case of Tüfenkçiler.

As Akarlı pointed out, there were “three principal problem areas” that marked the Sultan Hamid’s reign: 1. the perpetual “foreign pressure”, 2. the failure to conduct “organizational basis for conflict-resolution”, and 3. the incompetence of the government “to extract financial resources”.¹⁸⁹ All these problems were vivid in Kosovar lands but the most crucial problem was the foreign pressure felt from both British and Russian Empires regarding the Balkan lands right after the Sultan’s succession who has witnessed his government reduced to “nothing more than a puppet of British policy”.¹⁹⁰

The handing over large territories in the Balkans to Russia and its “would-be protectorates” was just the beginning of the upcoming disintegration of the territories. The British have already re-calculated its old policy to assure the Ottoman Empire’s integrity and found it less plausible according to the existing circumstances.

¹⁸⁷ İlber Ortaylı, “19. Yüzyıl Dünyası ve Osmanlı”, *Üç Kıtada Osmanlılar*, (İstanbul: Timaş Yayınları, 2007), p. 301.

¹⁸⁸ Selim Deringil, *İktidarın Sembolleri ve İdeoloji: İkinci Abdülhamid Dönemi (1876-1909)*, (İstanbul, DK, 2014), p. 186.

¹⁸⁹ Akarlı, “The Problems of External Pressures”, p. 5.

¹⁹⁰ Akarlı, “The Problems of External Pressures”, p. 6.

For sure, there was a more reasonable option to get the maximum benefit possible: the collapse of the Empire. Particularly, in the Balkans, Britain “assumed the role of agent provocateur”.¹⁹¹ Being abandoned and targeted by the British, the Ottomans had no choice but to keep on the right side of Russians. Abdülhamid summarized his perspective in a quite frank way to his doctor and it explains why he had traumas about the British Empire rather than Russian as one would expect because of the destructive war¹⁹²:

I am always afraid of the British. Nothing happens to them, yet they hurt everyone. It is a reckless, arrogant, and obstinate nation. I am afraid that they can do a lot of evil things. The Russians can be managed but the British are unreliable.¹⁹³

After the dethronement of the Sultan, it was not a coincidence that İsa and İsmail Kemal Bey went to Britain to bargain about the security and independence of the Albanian lands.¹⁹⁴ Clear as a day to the political operators of the time, English support had to be secured at any price.

Abdülhamid was in a disadvantaged position to operate among the Great Powers, yet he tried very hard. “Intensified hostility and rigid alliances among the major powers had begun to undermine Ottoman diplomatic maneuverability” to a great extent.¹⁹⁵ Since the foreign pressure was the most important problem in the Balkans, inabilities brought by the foreign pressure including the repercussions left from the Russian-Turkish were presented with only one possible choice for the Ottomans: to hope to see an ultimate peace in the Balkans and eventual serenity that will protect the peninsula from further quakes. It could only be possible by the assurance of

¹⁹¹ Feroze A. K. Yasamee, “The Ottoman Empire and the European Great Powers, (1884-1887), p. 143.

¹⁹² Atif Hüseyin Bey, *Sultan II. Abdülhamid’in Sürgün Günleri*: The perception of the sultan can be seen between the lines clearly. It was somewhere between admiring British power to direct international politics and resenting the incapability of the Ottomans in front of them.

¹⁹³ Ibid., p. 283.

¹⁹⁴ Fatmira Musaj, *İsa Boletini*, p.145.

¹⁹⁵ Akarlı, “The Problems of External Pressures”, p. 129.

“independence from the foreign intervention which was never readily available to the Ottomans of the nineteenth century”. Akarlı describes the situation as a scene where the Ottomans were trying to wrest *the peace* out of several lions.

The sultan himself believed that “the Ottoman State needed nothing more badly than peace to recuperate”, hence, “small sacrifices were necessary to save our large State from violent concussions”. Such a perspective can be grasped from his advice to the next successors as follows:

Wars that end in victory will exhaust the nation as much as the wars that end in defeat. “Honor and glory” are things that can be tolerated by fully prosperous countries whose present and future are assured. There is nothing more comical as well as tragic than the claims and pursuit of “honor and glory” by a people who wander among ruins in hunger and destitution.¹⁹⁶

What is also striking about this advice is emphasizing the prosperity as an ultimate basis for an intact state with a bright future. Well, eventually, “honor and glory” were not going to feed people but make them experience somehow “the little match girl” syndrome where the matches do not help her hunger. Likewise, Abdülhamid wished that his ancestors would more be engaged in commerce rather than belligerence.¹⁹⁷ Consequently, compromises were inevitable for the greater good. In addition to that, at the turn of the twentieth century, his compromises to preserve the stand-still clause has left its place to the management of the state with the minimum loss possible. Therefore, losses were inevitable, too. Indeed, things were becoming worse for the Sultan Hamid by time and the bell was tolling for him.

The Young Turks holding the bell, believed that these given concessions for the sake of the ultimate peace have painted the empire into a corner and convinced the upcoming CUP regime that terror and violence were necessary measures to stop giving compromises for the survival and safety of the empire, not the peace policy. Albanians of the Kosovo region were bitterly resented to this tragic situation to see

¹⁹⁶ Akarlı, “The Problems of External Pressures”, p. 72-73.

¹⁹⁷ Atıf Hüseyin Bey, p. 248.

their *baba mbret* being bound hand and foot. The political consequences forced the sultan to risk his public image and reputation, particularly in the Balkans.

Under these severe circumstances, solutions were possible as long as the external pressure was held. A variety of tactics were carried out, yet; they were palliatives rather than remedies most of the time.¹⁹⁸ The sultan as “a shrewd tactician”¹⁹⁹ was aware of his restricted position and a confrontation with a Great Power was the last thing he would wish. However, he also avoided confronting the local notables as in the case of İsa. Such a delicate balance required sophisticated regional policies. İsa’s return to Mitroviçe was a result of Russia being defeated by Japan. In addition to that, İsa’s invitation was not a random maneuver against the Russian pressure because a couple of options were considered to meet the request about his removal. First, they could destroy his kule and kill him, but it did not seem appealing enough since the region was inhabited by other clans and further violence could be inevitable. Second, he could be sent to exile to Konya and further steps were taken according to the present circumstances. And third, he could be convinced to cooperate with the sultan and serve in the Palace until Russia is convinced about İsa’s presence in the region.

All in all, the cooperation between the sultan and İsa was inevitable due to foreign pressure put. The sultan was *not* in a position to counter any Russian demand as he did not intend to terrorize the region at the expense of these demands. This can be one of the answers to the question about the sultan’s inability to meet with Albanian requests. There is another policy carried out for İsa while keeping Russians content.

3.3.1. Absorption of Potentially Dangerous “Power Magnets” into His Management

The Sultan Abdülhamid followed cautious and moderate policies towards the *villains of the piece*²⁰⁰ to keep them intact with the system rather than further alienation,

¹⁹⁸ Feroze A. K. Yasamee, “The Ottoman Empire and the European Great Powers, (1884-1887)”, p. 326.

¹⁹⁹ Hanioglu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, p. 129.

²⁰⁰ “Çıban başı”, Gökhan Çetinsaya, “Abdülhamid Rejiminin Kilit Taşı: Merkezîyetçilik”, *Sultan II. Abdülhamid Dönemi*, (ed) Mehmet Bulut et al, (İstanbul: İZÜ Yayınları, 2019) p. 15-32.

especially at the end of the nineteenth century. Tahsin Paşa summarizes this policy as “idare-i maslahat”, management for the public good, or in other words, acting in a manner that will satisfy all sides in order not to cause further unpleasantness and discomfort. The favorable thing to do was to make sure that an issue is dealt with before it became a serious problem.²⁰¹ It had required multiple conflict resolution politics such as postponement, clash of multiple camps, or favoring the lesser evil. Indeed, Abdülhamid was a practical man. His persuasion power came from his practical knowledge and experience.²⁰²

Not only in the Balkans but also the other regions such as Yemen and Eastern Anatolia, he made sure that the loyalty of local powers was assured by delegating them “many administrative functions”²⁰³ even though it could be regarded as a detrimental decentralization politics upsetting the balance between provinces. Not only he tied the chiefs or prominent figures to himself with various favors and gifts, but also, in a very Hamidian way, he made sure of the education of these peoples’ kids in special schools reserved to them. In addition to that, the connection exceeded a mutual benefit and evolved into personal friendships which made sure of the attendant support and standing by the state with various services throughout his reign.

For sure it was creating a delicate and “uneasy symbiosis” between the center and the provinces. However, from the provincial perspective, it was a win-win situation because the threats of foreign powers were “an equal danger to the provincial masters”, they were going to dispossess their existing authority and relocate power to new “proper” people. As a result, these provincial power magnets did not have many alternatives but to cooperate with the state since they did not have any chance to survive on their own.²⁰⁴ With this in mind, the sultan was aware that such a policy

²⁰¹ Gökhan Çetinsaya, “Abdülhamid Rejiminin Kilit Taşı: Merkeziyetçilik”, p. 18.

²⁰² Tahsin Paşa, *Yıldız Hatıraları*, p. 38.

²⁰³ Akarlı, “The Problems of External Pressures”, p. 63.

²⁰⁴ Akarlı, “The Problems of External Pressures”, p. 78.

was one of the sources of criticism of the Young Turks and he defended himself by pointing the delicate local circumstances such as blood-feud in these regions and possible instrumentalization of them by the foreign powers for the sake of disengagement. He was eager to see an alternative and a better solution by the new regime, if possible.

Even though “idare-i maslahat” was one of the accusations of the Young Turks, interestingly, it was applied to those who were abroad despite the cost is brought to the already suffering budget. For example, in 1897, Ahmet Celalettin Paşa was charged with the mission to bargain with the Young Turks in Paris to return to the homeland and serve the state.²⁰⁵ Abdülhamid sincerely believed that enrolment of these people as state officials was going to strengthen the sense of belonging among these people to the state. For sure, it was going to secure his position because, at the end of the day, he made it clear that *he* was the state. Hence, İsa needed to experience the state for a loyal connection. The physical closeness that Tüfenkçi was going to assure seemed perfect.

3.4. İsa in İstanbul as a Tüfenkçi: A Pair of Sharp Eyes at Every Corner

Immediately upon his departure, the house he was going to stay was arranged. It was located in Beşiktaş at Serencebey Yokuşu (figure 3), 20 minutes walking distance to the Yıldız Palace, rented from another Tüfenkçi, Osman Ağa. Within a couple of months, the upholstery of the house such as the carpets, sofa, and curtains, was renewed.²⁰⁶ When his house was ready, he asked permission from authorities for his uncle Ahmet to come to İstanbul as well.²⁰⁷ This may counterpart the arguments of Albanian literature claiming that İsa was kept by force in İstanbul. The famous saying of “Boletin is better than İstanbul”²⁰⁸ is associated with him and used at any possible

²⁰⁵ Hakan Özdemir, *Abdülhamid’i Deviren Kurşun*, p. 49.

²⁰⁶ HH.İ. 167/ 5, 1321.08.27, (M-18-11-1903), HH.İ. 168/ 62, 1321.12.11, (M-28-02-1904)

²⁰⁷ Y.MTV. 247/ 106, 1321.04.12, (M-8-07-1903)

²⁰⁸ Tafil Boletini, *Pranë Isa Boletinit*, p. 52.

source. Well, Boletin could be better than İstanbul but this cannot be interpreted within nationalist discourse because first, it applies the fact that İstanbul was also fine, and second, it was kind of an attachment to the hometown glory rather than Albanian-ness. Endangering İsa's reputation of invincibility to some extent, it was considered less evil to make such a claim rather than accepting the fact that İsa was content to be in İstanbul, providing services at the Yıldız as a Tüfenkçi. What was the essence of this position?

One of the most important organizations of the Hamidian regime was the special guards dedicated to the protection of the Yıldız palace and the sultan himself; they were charged with observation, tracing, surveillance, disquisition, and guarding in particular. Constituted of Albanians, Arabs, Bosnians, Circassians, and Turks, these special forces were called "tüfenkçiler" or "silahşorler"²⁰⁹, knights skilled in the use of arms. When it was organized first, it was composed of only Albanians, then, other Muslim elements were also involved. It can be considered one of the representative organizations of the Hamidian policy that aimed loyalty, unity, consolidation, and incorporation "polyethnic brotherhood of Muslims"²¹⁰, although the sultan was accused of "buying these hearts with money, grants, and comfort"²¹¹. However, I do not find this Young Turk perspective convenient for the fact that the sultan did not consider such a policy pejorative since he has chosen conferment over punishment quite often as in the case of İsa.

There was an attentive and detailed selection mechanism for these guards and the most important part for the sultan was pledging *besa* with the supervision of the Muftis.²¹² However, sometimes some of them were able to enroll in without passing through this selection process as in the case of İsa. As it has shown he was convinced

²⁰⁹ İsmail Müştak Mayakon, *Yıldızda Neler Gördüm?*, p. 145.

²¹⁰ Hanioglu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, p. 130.

²¹¹ Mayakon, *ibid.*, p. 146.

²¹² Mayakon, *Ibid.*, p. 154.

to join by the sultan²¹³ and the intermediary person was Şemsi Paşa who was beloved to both Abdülhamid and İsa.

With a paramount appearance, they used to wear their ethnic and local clothes. The most prominent features of the Albanian clothing were feathered but a modest shirt, salta, a white headwear, qylaf, and purple trousers, potur.²¹⁴ In addition to that, they could not speak in Turkish. Beyond any standardization policy or modification, these were crucial symbols to consolidate a sense of valuableness as the way they were.

Tüfenkçiler was such a force that felt but not seen and came across without a search. Hence, they were considered as “a pair of sharp eyes” at every possible corner.²¹⁵ Mayakon claims that this organization was going to be referred to as “Yıldız’s Guild of Janissaries” since he thinks they have experienced similar erosions by time in terms of lack of discipline and obedience. Excessive self-esteem was considered one of the reasons. Lack of proper schooling turned them into ignorant people, which did not leave any room to argue over a problem with them.²¹⁶ Disobedience was almost a symbol of courage and boldness. The members of this organization were independent and not bound by any military standardization. Somehow, they use to by-pass military ranks and treat high-rank officials informally and impertinently. They were considered as “the most horrible” part of the Yıldız by the other Palace officers.²¹⁷ Moreover, the scope of their duty was in a wide range that sometimes spilled over the Palace; for instance, dispatching soldiers, inquiry of a burglar, and investigation of a house to assist the officers were some of these out of Palace duties.²¹⁸

²¹³ Tahsin Paşa, *Yıldız Hatıraları*, p. 399.

²¹⁴ Selim Deringil, *İktidarın Sembolleri ve İdeoloji*, pp. 35 and Mayakon, *Yıldızda Neler Gördüm?*, p.152.

²¹⁵ Mayakon, *ibid.*, p. 151-157.

²¹⁶ Örikağasızâde Hasan Sırrı, “Saray İdaresinin İç Yüzü”, *Sultan Abdülhamit Devri Hatıraları ve Saray İdaresi*, (ed) Ali Adem Yörük, (İstanbul: Dergah Yayınları, 2007), p. 162-163

²¹⁷ Örikağasızâde Hasan Sırrı, *Sultan Abdülhamit Devri Hatıraları ve Saray İdaresi*, p. 162-163.

²¹⁸ Mayakon, *ibid.*, p. 154-155.

Tüfenkçiler was responsible for the protection of the sultan, by all means, starting from the entrance of the palace to the bedchamber's door. Tahir Paşa was responsible of them as the "tüfenkçibaşı" even if it was in contradiction with the nature of this organization to have a superior because in the time of crisis resulted from these musketeers, he was not able to bring them into line and punish them if necessary. Tahsin Paşa's observations confirm Mayakon and Örikağasıade Hasan Bey and claim that the members of this special organization eventually have evolved towards "spoiled" and "undisciplined" group of people. The source of insolence used to come from the direct and personal link they had with the Sultan Hamid. Psychological direct links to him somehow made them interpret the nature of the organization "above law" and exempt from the sanctions. It can be argued that all these privileges and exemptions have made the members of this organization feel "unique", if not "spoiled".

Albanians used to dominate this organization in terms of number and power of influence. According to the grand Hamidian policy, Albanians were one of the cornerstones and the sultan had a special trust for them which was resulting from their bravery and loyalty. The majority of them enjoyed a lot of privileges, blessings, and even personal compliments of the sultan. İsa was one of them. For instance, İsa has made a present of tobacco, almost 2 kg, to the sultan in return of his compliments.²¹⁹ Abdülhamid used to enjoy coffee and tobacco a lot, almost as an addict.²²⁰ Hence, he was pleased with the gift. Also, from my personal experience, this is still a tradition in Albania among elderlies who insist and offer their tobacco even if you have your own.

Upon the nonconflicting observations of Palace memoirs, the majority of officers considered this organization as among the many ironies of the Hamidian regime. They had the same question in mind: How did the sultan entrust his life in the hands

²¹⁹ Y. PRK.AZJ. 53/ 6, 1325.08.08, (M-16-09-1907)

²²⁰ Tahsin Paşa, *Yıldız Hatıraları*, p. 243.

of these unreliable people who were inclined to terrorize things as a way of solution? I can argue that the symbolism attached to this group was more important for the Empire.

3.4.1. Symbolisms embedded in Tüfenkçiler

“Government cannot exist without rituals and symbols, because both are crucial to exercising power”.²²¹ Within this context, Tüfenkçiler has served to several symbolic purposes. First, since they were considered almost “above law”, they were a threatening force for the people both in and out of the Palace.²²² Second, it is important to comprehend the significance and centralization of the Yıldız at that time. “The Sultan’s neopatrimonialism entailed concentrating administrative power in the Palace and reinstituting loyalty to the person of the sultan rather than to the office. The rationalization drive continued unabated, but now the sultan aimed to become the sole patron of the new administrative machinery”.²²³

The State has been run by the Yıldız and the Bâb-ı âli as a bureaucratic wing has been squeezed by its authority. In the decision-making process of the sultan, the “informal parliament”²²⁴ as a council of advisers functioned actively as a counterpoise power to Bâb-ı âli. Therefore, İsa’s presence as a Tüfenkçi at the Yıldız was not a coincidence; he was right at the center of the Empire. In addition to that, it was also empowering the group of Albanians both in practice and theory which was inducing absolute loyalty in return during the times of turbulence in Albanian lands. Therefore, the Yıldız meant the Ottoman Empire and the Ottoman Empire was under the protection of Albanians.

²²¹ Bedross Der Matossian, *Shattered Dreams of Revolution: From Liberty to Violence in the Late Ottoman Empire*, (California: Stanford University Press, 2014), p. 40.

²²² İsmail Müştak Mayakon, *Yıldızda Neler Gördüm?*, p. 155.

²²³ Nader Sohrabi, *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran*, p. 46.

²²⁴ Gökhan Çetinsaya, “Abdülhamid Rejiminin Kilit Taşı: Merkeziyetçilik”, *Sultan II. Abdülhamid Dönemi*, (ed.) Mehmet Bulut et al, İstanbul: İZÜ Yayınları, 2019, p. 21.

Third, Abdülhamid was not a visible sultan contrary to the Ottoman tradition. He preferred to retreat in the Yıldız palace and became a legend. The way he communicated with the outside world and people conducted through symbols.²²⁵ Tüfenkçiler with their ostentatious presence served as an important symbol and carried a message: insurance of the sultan's holiness.²²⁶

And fourth, they were serving a greater purpose in the eyes of Abdülhamid: Albanians were considered as the fortress and assurance of Hamidian policies in the Balkans. The sultan was even sure about the fact that any oppositional movement was not going to pass the Albanian filter. Moreover, it was sort of a centralization policy because these personal guards used to keep in touch with their relatives back and Abdülhamid has believed these connections were consolidating the loyalty of the locals. Well, it was vice versa. Local people used to abuse these links and create a lot of difficulties for vilayet administrations. Further, it was going to be clear that this powerful fortress attracted other power groups such as the Young Turks, and "brave and loyal Albanians" were going to play a crucial role in the dethronement of the sultan. In the end, the Sultan Hamid has experienced a great deal of disappointment and witnessed the failure of Albanian policy.²²⁷

Fifth, this mechanism has worked as a part of an idiosyncratic centralization policy of the sultan. Centralization did not necessarily mean standardization, despotism, tyranny, or violence. Abdülhamid was aware of the fact that in the areas such as northern Kosovo, tribal leaders had to be convinced with good manners. He even sometimes played the role of a good cup against the local officials. These locals were going to experience such despotic centralization policies with the next regime.

²²⁵ Selim Deringil, *İktidarın Sembolleri ve İdeoloji*, p. 28.

²²⁶ Ibid., p. 33.

²²⁷ Tahsin Paşa, *Yıldız Hatıraları*, p. 55-56, p. 157-159.

At last, it could be claimed that Tüfenkçiler could have only one proper chance to truly defend the sultan during the turbulent events of the 1908 Revolution; yet, the Sultan Hamid did not allow any bullet to increase the tension.²²⁸ This could also support the claim of the symbolic quality of this organization that was attributed by the sultan himself.

3.5. Consolidation of the Royal Image of *Baba Mbret*

Tahsin Paşa assures that anyone who enters the sphere of influence of the Sultan Hamid used to be impressed by his encompassing and authoritarian charisma.²²⁹ Some of the great examples can be his Young Turk doctor, Atıf Hüseyin Bey, who took care of him after his dethronement both in Selanik and İstanbul and Fethi Bey (Okyar) as “an army officer who stayed with Abdülhamid during the first three months of his exile in Salonica”.²³⁰ It is fascinating to watch their journey through diaries, to witness how they develop affection towards Abdülhamid, and how the perspective of the roots of evilness leaves its place to a valued friendship. Physical closeness to him was a crucial magnet that attracted people towards him. I believe İsa can be considered one of those who could not escape from his powerful aura. Although emotions are not taken into consideration in history writing most of the time, it is important to emphasize the psychology, personal ties, and affection since history as a discipline deals with *humans* at the end of the day.

For the Albanian policy, Abdülhamid patrimonial role was a crucial component and consolidating support to exercise the power of Caliphate, or, maybe, on the contrary, it was the Caliphate that enabled the patrimonial policies as an embracing power for both Muslim and non-Muslim elements.²³¹ For instance, to solve the eternal blood

²²⁸ Hakan Özdemir, *Abdülhamid’i Deviren Kurşun*, p. 261.

²²⁹ Tahsin Paşa, *ibid.*, p. 38.

²³⁰ Kemal Karpaz, *The Politicization of Islam: Reconstructing Identity, State, Faith, and Community in the Late Ottoman State*, p. 175-174.

²³¹ Kemal Karpaz, *The Politicization of Islam: Reconstructing Identity, State, Faith, and Community in the Late Ottoman State*, pp. 81.

feud issue at the Kosovo region, he initiated special commissions—the Commission of Advice²³²— and has carried the role of an arbiter father smartly. This can also be claimed to be a part of his greater peace policy of stabilization and tranquility in the Balkans because Abdülhamid has interpreted sources of local destabilizations as a hole on the wall that was taking the attention of the foreign powers. It needed to be repaired before they break-in.

All in all, typical to the nineteenth-century yet unpleasant for the local figures as well as the Ottoman authorities, the Russian Consulate issue in Mitroviçe caused a sequence of events for İsa. After all, these three intertwined policies of the Hamidian regime, 1. The peace policy to counter the foreign pressure, 2. Consolidation of the fatherly image of *baba mbret*²³³, 3. Enrolment of potentially dangerous “power magnets” into his management, reflected themselves upon two turning points in İsa’s life: 1. İsa’s positioning for the disputed issue of the Russian Consulate in Mitroviçe, 2. İsa’s assignment as a tüfenkçi.

His services were going to continue and even intensify with his return to Mitroviçe. His positioning as the voice of the sultan in the famous Firzovik Meeting, which made the 1908 revolution possible, is a clear example of how İsa personally attached to the sultan beyond interest centered explanations and shows how he was *not* an opportunist.

3.6. İsa Returns to Mitroviçe

The defeat of Russians by Japan and the Russian Revolution of 1905 was “contingent developments”²³⁴ for the Ottoman Empire. It was hoped that these unexpected developments could put the Russians of the track in the Balkans.²³⁵ It seemed the

²³² Y.MTV 231/119, 1320.03.19, (M-26-06-1902)

²³³ Stavro Skëndi, *The Albanian National Awakening: 1878-1912*, p. 341, trans. *father king*

²³⁴ Nader Sohrabi, *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran*, p. 29.

²³⁵ Sina Akşin, *Jön Türkler ve İttihat ve Terakki*, (İstanbul: İmge Kitabevi, 2017), p. 48.

right moment to send İsa back as it was promised. However, the Russian authorities in the region were disturbed by this decision, and İsa continued to be a political problem between two empires.²³⁶ The Ottomans were assuring the Russian authorities about the certain treatment of İsa. He was going to be reprimanded and advised when necessary.²³⁷

In February 1906, İsa returned to Mitroviçe and was warmly welcomed by the people.²³⁸ Because of his experience in İstanbul and the given privileges, he emerged as a more powerful, credible, and influential figure. Related to his activities in the region, there are three main points to be mentioned.

To begin with, İsa served as a *deruhdeci* whose responsibility was to assure the protection in the region. In the long run, he transformed into “the sultan’s surrogate policeman” in Kosovo. Several times, he was involved in both local and foreign conflicts. For instance, while exercising authority and dominance in his vicinity, he was prioritizing the safety of the local figures at the expense of the Ottoman security forces. His assistance to the absconding of a troubled figure was an alarming event for the Ottoman authorities. They ordered a detailed investigation to confirm the allegation, yet a link could not be found.²³⁹ Due to these actions, with the involvement of Şemsi Paşa, İsa was invited to Selanik where he was advised and exhorted about his methods. Şemsi Paşa tried to remind him of the fact that he was a trusted and authorized ally in the region and his disposition should be following the Empire’s rules and priorities.²⁴⁰

²³⁶ BEO / 2839 – 212912, 1324.04.07, (M-31-05-1906)

²³⁷ BEO / 2839 – 212921, 1324.04.07, (M-30-05-1906)

²³⁸ Tafil Boletini, *Pranë Isa Boletinit*, p. 9.

²³⁹ BEO. 3133/ 234942, 1325.07.19, (M-28-08-1907)

²⁴⁰ TFR.I.A. 37/ 3643, 1326.01.27, (M-01-03-1908)

Moreover, as it can be observed in the Russian consulate issue, any foreign enterprise continued to be a source of turmoil in the region. A couple of months before the 1908 Revolution, the railway route in Mitroviçe was scheduled to be expended. The Austrian authorities were in charge of the construction. However, some rumors were reported that any activities carried by the Austrians were going to face the resistance of İsa and his men.²⁴¹ He nourished the sensitivity and “allergy” towards foreign enterprises even if it was going to be beneficial for the region. İsa had a negative perception of these external powers and eventually, he proved himself right when the Balkan Wars broke out.

Besides, he had direct telegram access to the Yıldız palace and the sultan himself. It gave him the ability to avoid any interference of vilayet authorities. İsa was integrated into the famous Hamidian espionage system as well. In 1907, when Selanik had already turned into one of the centers of the CUP, the propaganda against the sultan took his attention. One of the reporters of *Asır* newspaper, İsmail Hakkı Efendi, was spreading disrespectful rumors about the Caliph. As his first and foremost holy duty, İsa asked for permission to silence him. He concluded the *journal* that he prepared for the sultan with an emphasis on his devotion: a dedicated servant to his highness.²⁴²

Thirdly, on the other hand, all these privileges made him a potential threat which caused the Ottoman authorities to constantly keep İsa under surveillance. He was not always on the same page with the imperial concerns. According to Tahsin Paşa’s observations whom İsa has been in contact with, given benefits and concessions have turned him into an unnecessary “spoiled figure”. He questioned the given privileges to İsa and failed to understand the sultan’s decisions: What was the reason to turn a bandit into a “feudal lord”?²⁴³ However, the Firzovik Meeting, which was a critical

²⁴¹ Y.PRK.AZJ. 54/ 12, 03.09. 1326.03.09, (M-11-04-1908)

²⁴² Y.EE. 15/ 209, 1325.01.09, (M-20-02-1907)

²⁴³ Tahsin Paşa, *Yıldız Hatıraları*, p.398-399.

turning point for the empire, disclosed the intentions of the sultan and his relation with İsa.

3.7. The Firzovik Meeting as a Turning Point for İsa, Abdülhamid, and the Empire

In 1908, the Firzovik Meeting can be claimed to be an unexpected opportunity for the CUP to declare the constitution. Şemsi Paşa gathered several Albanians intending to capture Resneli Niyazi Bey. On the other hand, the CUP had different plans. After assassinating Şemsi Paşa, they channelized this massive gathering into a popular demand for the constitution.²⁴⁴ It was the moment of fortune for the CUP and the moment of calamity for the sultan.

During this critical meeting, İsa was commissioned to solve the matter in favor of the Palace. He was trying to convince the people about the sultan's deep understanding of politics as well as his importance as the trustee of the Prophet within an Islamic discourse.²⁴⁵ İsa sent telegrams to the Yıldız several times to inform the sultan about the latest news and assure him that there were no actions to deny his authority. But after the assassination of Şemsi Paşa, the sultan considered the possibility of these telegrams being a political game of the CUP.²⁴⁶ Nonetheless, İsa was not trying to deceive the sultan; his observations were correct. The discourse employed by the CUP authorities during the meeting never targeted the sultan himself but rather his close circle of bureaucrats.²⁴⁷ They portrayed the declaration of the constitution as a necessary action *to rescue* the beloved sultan from these bottom feeder bureaucrats.

In addition to that, the constitutionalism was represented following the Islamic principle of the council (*şûrâ*) and rendered as a tool to empower the empire. It “was couched in the language of religion and tradition” which “left the door open to”

²⁴⁴ Hakan Özdemir, *Abdülhamid'i Deviren Kurşun*, p. 283.

²⁴⁵ Süleyman Külçe, *Firzovik Toplantısı ve Meşrutiyet*, (İstanbul: Kitabevi, 2013), p. 82.

²⁴⁶ Hakan Özdemir, *Abdülhamid'i Deviren Kurşun*, p. 284.

²⁴⁷ Sina Akşin, *Jön Türkler ve İttihat ve Terakki*, p. 23.

variety of interpretations and assured allegiances of different groups.²⁴⁸ With the legitimacy provided by the local religious figures, the discourse turned into complete Islamic propaganda. Anyone who follows the Kur'ân, follows the constitution.²⁴⁹ Therefore, any opposition could be judged as an act of infidelity. The CUP secured the legitimacy of the meeting and Albanians were ready to give consent. The portrait of the sultan "as a quintessential traditionalist, an archrival of progress, and enemy of science" was going to be consolidated almost one year after the Firzovik incident.²⁵⁰

Yet, İsa was not alone and had the support of almost all other prominent tribal chiefs such as İpekli Hacı Zeko, and Zeynel Bey. The league of Kosovar chiefs managed to hold the propaganda until İsa's unexpected departure due to the death of his daughter.²⁵¹ He planned to return after the funeral. This could be one of the reasons why the sultan waited two days to reply to the telegrams that were demanding the constitution.²⁵² It was exactly that moment when the prominent CUP members such as Necip Draga and Galip Bey stepped in and turned the meeting into a CUP propaganda. Tafil Boletini claims that due to personal grievances towards İsa²⁵³ and expected gains from the upcoming regime, Necip Draga affected the course of the meeting vigorously.²⁵⁴ Hence, in historical narratives, there have always been some personal interests involved in political propagandas and divine ideals.

²⁴⁸ Nader Sohrabi, *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran*, p. 26.

²⁴⁹ Hakan Özdemir, *ibid.*, p. 220.

²⁵⁰ Nader Sohrabi, *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran*, p. 62.

²⁵¹ George W. Gawrych, "Ottoman Administration and the Albanians, 1908-1913", (Ph.D. diss., The University of Michigan, 1980), p. 165.

²⁵² Süleyman Külçe, *Firzovik Toplantısı ve Meşrutiyet*, p. 89.

²⁵³ Coming from the same region with İsa, Necip Draga wanted to be the person in charge around Mitroviçe. He even plotted a scenario to capture İsa's nephew and son on their way back to Mitroviçe from their school in İstanbul. It eventually failed. See Tafil Boletini, *Pranë Isa Boletinit*, p. 10.

²⁵⁴ Tafil Boletini, *Pranë Isa Boletinit*, p. 10.

On the contrary, the Albanian literature supplies a couple of secondary sources claiming that İsa supported the CUP while distorting its contents. For example, Musaj relies on Tahsin Paşa's memoir about the Firzovik Meeting and claims that İsa was portrayed as a figure who had chosen the wrong path and that he was supporting the revolution.²⁵⁵ In fact, Tahsin Paşa narrates that İsa Boletini was sending telegrams to assure the situation was under control. It was under control until his unexpected departure. Then the meeting has changed its color towards more pro-revolutionary aspirations. Were the sentences lost in translation, or was it an intentional distortion?

To conclude İsa's experience of the Hamidian regime, first of all, he had a fluctuating image during the sultan's reign. Already being a contested figure, he was loyal to the sultan and bared local loyalties as well. His reputation vacillated among these multiple loyalties. Secondly, suffering under the intense foreign pressure, İsa was among similar Balkan figures who wanted to keep things as they were. Resulting from his enterprises, İsa became a political crisis between the Ottoman and Austrian authorities. The Sultan Abdülhamid II wanted to protect him as much as the Empire from the further harms of the external pressure. In other words, he chose to get the best out of the situation.

Thirdly, befitting in the Hamidian policies of peace and incorporation, he served as a personal guard to the sultan. İsa was impressed by this prestigious and sacred duty. His service at the Palace has made him experience the imperial aura. The personality cult of the sultan made him promote personal ties with him contrary to the claim of exile by the Albanian literature.²⁵⁶

Fourthly, acquiring grants and benefits, he returned to Mitroviçe as an authorized security force. However, his fluctuating loyalties continued to occupy his agenda. It has created discomfort and concerns for the local Ottoman authorities several times. Yet, he was a dedicated servant to the sultan and did his utmost to prove his loyalty

²⁵⁵ Fatmira Musaj, İsa Boletini, pp. 54-55.

²⁵⁶ Fatmira Musaj, Ibid. p. 48.

during the Firzovik Meeting of 1908, even though his efforts failed. He was going to try “other tactics” to fulfill his duty to the sultan under the CUP administration. From then on, he hardly came to terms with the CUP under the foreign pressure. İsa was going to experience a more turbulent and toxic environment under the CUP regime.

Therefore, İsa Boletini fits in the general Albanian policy formulated by the sultan based on “bestowing favors, positions, and privileges on Muslim Albanians who became the linchpin of his regime in the turbulent region of Rumeli”.²⁵⁷ Its general tendency to create these “neo-patrimonial, clientelist policies”²⁵⁸ was considered backward to be implemented in a modernized state as the CUP claimed. The sultan was dethroned. Then, what was the positioning of the CUP towards İsa?

²⁵⁷ George W. Gawrych, “Ottoman Administration and the Albanians, 1908-1913”, (Ph.D. diss., The University of Michigan, 1980), p. 64.

²⁵⁸ Nader Sohrabi, *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran*, p. 34.

CHAPTER 4

İSA AND THE COMMITTEE OF UNION AND PROGRESS

4.1. The Committee of Union and Progress

“İsa Bolatin, Şale kabilesinden pespaye bir adamdır ki asil olmadığı için Arnavudlar nezdinde hiçbir zaman bir baş gibi telakki edilmez. Abdülhamid’den 60 lira maaş alan, meşrutiyetten sonra bu maaşı kesilen İsa Bolatin’in en birinci arzusu eski devrinin iadesi ve Abdülhamid’in tekrar tahtına geçmesidir.”²⁵⁹

Parallel to the dichotomic narratives about the reign of the Sultan Abdülhamid II, the literature on the period of the Committee of Union and Progress, from here on the CUP, is controversial as well. Were they the ultimately responsible figures that brought the end of the empire, or the successful modernizers disrupted by the WWI?²⁶⁰ Exceeding controversies, they were among the modernizers of the nineteenth century who could not prevent the fall of the empire.

4.1.1. The Ideology and the Composite Structure

Nevertheless, their concern was not liberty but to prevent the fall of the empire. Their discourse on liberty and justice was abstract and served as a source of attraction to assure the loyalty of different elements in the party.²⁶¹ Their program was far from being social engineering to lead the crowds. One of the most influential terms was *the state*, hence its preservation was the main concern. Since the core of the party was occupied by the military members, taking *action* immediately was the first thing to do rather than analyzing the structural problems of the empire and preparing formulas. Far from being radicals, they were eager to maintain the empire so much

²⁵⁹ Arnavudluk ve İttihad-ı Terakki Son Fesadın Hakikati, Tanin, 17.09. 1912, p.1.

²⁶⁰ Bedross Der Matossian, *Shattered Dreams of Revolution: From Liberty to Violence in the Late Ottoman Empire*, p. 2.

²⁶¹ Şerif Mardin, *Jön Türklerin Siyasi Fikirleri 1895-1908*, (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2008), p. 305.

so that it made them “bureaucratic conservatives” more than the sultan.²⁶² Yet, they were careful not to attack the sultan’s powerful image immediately. The constitution was “due to the sultan’s benevolence that the Chamber of Deputies is summoned”.²⁶³ Therefore, they wanted to take advantage of the comforting legitimacy of the sultan at the first stage.

None of the Young Turks have produced a deep theory, a unique political formula, or a fully-fledged ideology. Yet, they shared some common goals such as positivism and realism. But the glue keeping the various factions clinched was the opposition against the sultan. The idea of a constitutional regime which meets everyone’s priorities was “multivocal, and ‘multivocality spelled ambiguity’”.²⁶⁴ Therefore, technically, it was already not possible to have a common agenda backed by an ideological background. Yet, the members have shared some priorities as Hanioglu summarizes parallel to Mardin’s observations:

The Young Turk ideology was originally "scientific," materialist, social Darwinist, elitist, and vehemently anti-religious; it did not favor the representative government. However, in a short period members of the intelligentsia came to understand how difficult it was to achieve the changes needed to establish their ideal "scientific" administration. They readily recognized the necessity of allying themselves with various groups opposed to the regime of Abdulhamid II. By achieving this, the Young Turk movement transformed itself from a mere "amusement of Medical Academy children," according to Murad Bey's characterization, into a serious political opposition movement. However, the original Young Turk *Weltanschauung* lost its purity during this process.²⁶⁵

Despite their uniqueness and local peculiarities, the CUP and the Revolution of 1908 constitute similarities with other movements of the time such as the Russian

²⁶² Şerif Mardin, *Jön Türklerin Siyasi Fikirleri 1895-1908*, p. 310.

²⁶³ Nader Sohrabi, *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran*, p. 137.

²⁶⁴ Bedross Der Matossian, *Shattered Dreams of Revolution: From Liberty to Violence in the Late Ottoman Empire*, p. 3.

²⁶⁵ M. Şükrü Hanioglu, *The Young Turks in Opposition*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 32.

Revolution of 1905, Mexico in 1910, and China in 1911.²⁶⁶ One of the most striking “success” of the CUP is its capacity to channelize its patchwork nature with a large spectrum of members driven by various arguments, local problems, and grievances “into a single stream and transform(ed) into abstractions acceptable to all”²⁶⁷. In other words, various members of the party “shared a common enemy, but not a common agenda”.²⁶⁸ Similarly, the reason why the members were called Young Turks was due to the trend of the time which liberal and Jacobin movements were stamped with the name “young”. For example, the organization established by Mazzini as *Young Italy* used to have similar inclinations as Young Turks in order to “save” the state. Moreover, the CUP used to follow a similar organizational strategy to the revolutionary *Carbonari* organization.²⁶⁹ With this in mind, the CUP and the Young Turks should be analyzed concerning the similar movements to have more accurate definitions than Turkish national narrative provides.

The situation can be imagined in a very Zolain way where the members were pointing fingers at Abdülhamid with a conjugated motto: “J’accuse!”, even if he unwillingly inherited most of the structural problems from the previous reigns. Moreover, these young and educated military class was a paradox for the sultan. Because of the foreign threats, the military had to be up-to-date and modernized as possible; yet, this produced a class of young and knowledgeable officers far from the inspections of the Yıldız palace. The Hamidian regime trusted the skills and education of these young soldiers and sent them to the boiling lands of the Balkans deliberately.²⁷⁰ There, they were able to gather and discuss the mal-functioning policies of the sultan specifically during the Macedonian crisis of 1905-1908.²⁷¹ The other way around, these soldiers fed on the tumultuous events of the Macedonian crisis.

²⁶⁶ Nader Sohrabi, *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran*, p. 73.

²⁶⁷ Nader Sohrabi, *ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁶⁸ M. Şükrü Hanioğlu, *The Young Turks in Opposition*, p. 144.

²⁶⁹ Sina Akşin, *Jön Türkler ve İttihat ve Terakki*, p. 35.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

²⁷¹ Şerif Mardin, *Jön Türklerin Siyasi Fikirleri 1895-1908*, p. 70-71.

The CUP and the Revolution of 1908 were relevant to the nineteenth century's flowing events. The late Ottoman period was a fertile land for a revolution in terms of the centralizing and rationalizing reforms starting from the Tanzimat era.²⁷² The power vacuum resulting from the discontent brought by these reforms united different concerns against the state. Most of the time, these were local contingencies far from nationalist aspirations.

One of the striking facts about the CUP is its relation to the Hamidian school system. The majority of the members studied at these modernized schools, constituted a middle-class segment composed of "mid-ranking and bureaucratic elements with a modernist orientation"²⁷³, and came from the provincial regions including the Balkans. They were utterly feeling alienated due to the different values and classes they faced in these schools. As Ibrahim Temo narrates, some "battles" used to burst between the representatives of these classes such as "İstanbullu" as a reference to the high class and "taşralı" as to the lower class. The leaders of the latter were the ones who established the CUP.²⁷⁴

As the famous saying of Trotsky for 1905 and 1917 Russian Revolutions, the Ottoman experience of the constitutional period under the CUP regime till the end of the empire can be considered as "a dress rehearsal" for the Republican era.²⁷⁵ Yet, the CUP regime was not the ultimate liberal political unit which is in contradiction with their main goal: opposing the sultan's despotic absolutism. However, they have successfully relied on "a scientific doctrine of the state" through a "rational administrative" mechanism which was not the case in the Hamidian regime.²⁷⁶ They

²⁷² Nader Sohrabi, *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran*, p. 31.

²⁷³ Nader Sohrabi, *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran*, p. 34.

²⁷⁴ Şerif Mardin, *Jön Türklerin Siyasi Fikirleri 1895-1908*, p. 73.

²⁷⁵ Nader Sohrabi, *ibid.*, p. 10.

²⁷⁶ Nader Sohrabi, *Ibid.*, p. 16.

have experienced a constitutional romanticism because it was the solution to everything.²⁷⁷

As in the case of any living entity, the CUP has experienced transformations too. Their inclusive nature has yielded towards a more radical and exclusivist type of party.²⁷⁸ Hence, the CUP's character was not static, on the contrary, it was fluctuating. Their aim to have rationalized and centralized governing policies "turn(ed) the state into a streamlined instrument of social intervention and military efficiency" in a hostile way that was not welcomed by the local figures.²⁷⁹ This was one of the reasons why their policies were unsteady in several regions.

The fact that their "well-intended" policies have resulted in brutal military interventions; the local figures were bitterly resented to the extent of abandoning their loyalties. The situation was taking the attention of foreign authorities in the region. According to one of the British officials in the region, if the Young Turks could change their policies towards the Albanians and show a goodwill gesture, it would transform the course of events: "the Albanians might become its staunchest supporters... Their loyalty is unquestioned; they demand only the right to develop within the limits of the Ottoman Empire".²⁸⁰ However, it was not an easy task because they lacked the most important source, the legitimacy in the eyes of people: the caliphate. They were not able to lay a legitimate ground through proper justification. This remained as a chronicle problem through their reign.²⁸¹ What the Young Turks could not calculate right was their choice to create new power magnets such as Hasan Prishtina and Necip Draga while underestimating the challenging capacities of the old ones. It is natural to see the new elites after the revolutions, but in the CUP's case, it

²⁷⁷ İlber Ortaylı, *Batılılaşma Yolunda*, p. 55-61.

²⁷⁸ M. Şükrü Hanioğlu, *The Young Turks in Opposition*, p. 151.

²⁷⁹ Nader Sohrabi, *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran*, p. 34.

²⁸⁰ Nicola Guy, *The Birth of Albania: Ethnic Nationalism, the Great Powers of World War I and the Emergence of Albanian Independence*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), p. 38.

²⁸¹ Nader Sohrabi, *ibid.*, p. 24.

was a fatal miscalculation not to involve previous local power magnets in their cause as in the case of İsa Boletini. The CUP was “especially disgruntled by the neo-patrimonial, clientelist policies of the Hamidian regime, which, it felt, had blocked its upward mobility”²⁸². Hence, the relationship between İsa and the CUP regime should be analyzed in the context of failed calculations.

4.2. The Failed Calculations of the CUP

The CUP was very much concerned about the privileged local clans in the Kosovo region who have not been fulfilling duties such as tax payment or military recruitment. Through the local members of the Party, they challenged these people even if it was not solving the matters but causing further terrorizations. Not being able to reveal a common political, economic, ideological, and social program in accordance with the needs of these people, the turmoil environment caused a clash of interests among the local figures. Moreover, brutally suppressing the revolts that were resulting from the dissatisfaction of the local people led to possible collaborations between Albanians and other contested lands, such as Montenegro and Serbia, at the expense of the Empire. “As far as İsa Boletini was concerned, the events surrounding the Young Turk revolution would displace him from one of the concentric circles of power in the region, thrusting him into a global arena that he would ultimately prove incapable of controlling.”²⁸³

Contrary to the Hamidian regime where these lands were “vulnerable to external interests”²⁸⁴ and too valuable to be alienated from the center. Therefore, the brute force should be minimally involved, yet it was the first choice of the CUP regime. This sudden shift in the policy created a shock among the tribal leaders. İsa represents

²⁸² Nader Sohrabi, *Ibid.*, p. 34.

²⁸³ İsa Blumi, “Impacts of the Balkan Wars: the Uncharted Paths from Empire to Nation-State”, *War and Nationalism: The Balkan Wars, 1912–1913, and Their Sociopolitical Implications*, eds. M. Hakan Yavuz & İsa Blumi, (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2013), p. 535.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 539.

this shock. The noxious interrelation between them gives insights about the policies that brought the ultimate rupture of the Balkans from the rest of the Ottoman lands. To begin with, from İsa's perspective, the abrupt event of the Revolution resulted in the sultans' disadvantage with whom İsa was collaborating. These people were infidels and the "Jews of Selanik".²⁸⁵ From the CUP's side, he was one of the "bought" people and wretched representatives of the sultan. Therefore, the first impressions were not positive and promising for both sides. İsa was aware of the fact that the Hamidian regime used to "respect" his power and let him exercise it up to a certain extent. This was particularly in contradiction with the statist and centralized policies of the CUP. Apart from that, his granted privileges by the sultan was threatened since the CUP was diminishing leftovers of the previous reign. They were attacking him from all aspects and trying to take away his given privileges. An attempt to take the millstone back is an important example because it had a symbolic meaning that was reminding the sultan. In 1909, İsa was informed that the millstone was not under his responsibility anymore due to some of his "bad behaviors". İsa opposed the situation severely and focused on the unlawfulness of the action and asked if there was a court decision. The situation deteriorated further and the CUP authorities had to step back.²⁸⁶ This case also exemplifies the arbitrary decision-making system. The legitimacy problem of the CUP in the eyes of people can be also detected from the discourse considering the fact that the decision they take could be acceptable only if it is carried through justifiable and valid mechanisms such as the courts.

Apart from that, another deficiency of the regime was the failure to manage the different concerns and priorities of various factions. The term loyalty is a contested word driven by several factors. As it was seen during the Hamidian regime, İsa's fluctuating loyalties and interests could find a place to maneuver. Yet, the CUP sought a standardized loyalty in accordance with the party program, excluding all different loyalties of İsa, and pushing him further. Trying to escape from modern measures,

²⁸⁵ Tafil Boletini, *Pranë Isa Boletinit*, p. 10.

²⁸⁶ DH. MKT. 2740/5, 1327.01.25, (M-16-2-1909)

alienation of these local figures was going to cost a lot to the empire. The means of alienation used to come from the terrorization activities in the region.

Even though the inhabitants of the Balkan region were familiar with “coercive violence”, the “systematic”, “pervasive” terrorization programs of the CUP was relatively novel to the region. Violence played a crucial role in İsa and was employed as a means of nationalization by the upcoming Albanian state. On the eve of the Balkan Wars, the Kosovo region transformed into “a violent conflict zone”.²⁸⁷

4.3. 1909-1912: Years of Terrorization

A couple of months after the revolution, in November 1908, the first conflict took place between the forces of “executioner” Cevat Paşa and İsa as a former ally of the sultan.²⁸⁸ The CUP failed to understand the symbolic importance of this encounter. The destructive measures were taken and eventually, İsa’s kule was torn down. It was the battle where people realized “the true face” of the new regime.²⁸⁹ Was it a success or an event that created further repercussions among the other local figures? The CUP’s measures were backfiring and consolidating the illegitimate image of these military men.²⁹⁰ Yet, the tension deteriorated between 1909 and 1910.

The Kosovar Albanians were a hard case. Three problems were inherited and remained unsolved: taxation, military recruitment, and acquiring guns. In 1909, the Ottoman authorities planned military operation to collect guns and taxes, and to recruit soldiers.²⁹¹ Within this context, İsa remained as one of the mischief-makers. During times of conflict, he used to retreat to his kule and leave the commanders

²⁸⁷ İpek Yosmaoğlu & Frederick White, *Blood Ties: Religion, Violence, and the Politics of Nationhood in Ottoman Macedonia, 1878-1908*, (NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), p. 1.

²⁸⁸ Avlonyalı Süreyya Bey, *Osmanlı Sonrası Arnavutluk (1912-1920)*, (ed.) Abdulhamit Kırmızı, (İstanbul: Klasik Yayınları, 2009), p. 99.

²⁸⁹ Fatmira Musaj, *İsa Boletini*, p. 61.

²⁹⁰ İsa Blumi, “Impacts of the Balkan Wars: the Uncharted Paths from Empire to Nation-State”, p. 537.

²⁹¹ Noel Malcolm, *Kosovo: A Short History*, (NY: New York University Press, 1998), p. 298.

helpless. Therefore, the CUP decided to destroy the kule-system, and “this broader goal threatened other Kosovar chiefs, including Bayram Curri and İdris Sefer, who joined İsa Boletin in his revolt against the CUP”.²⁹² This was particularly avoided during the Hamidian regime since terrorization was going to unite the chiefs and lead towards further problems. Random and harsh punishments alienated the Kosovar Albanians from the CUP where the measures were taken to assure obedience.

In the winter of 1909, the CUP authorities made their plans to capture İsa because he already proved himself as a challenging figure right after the revolution. He was openly conducting actions against the CUP branches in İpek.²⁹³ He was expected to raise difficulties during the springtime and it was the right time to approach him under the severe winter conditions.²⁹⁴ The Porte was advising and putting pressure on the local forces to capture İsa as soon as possible. Even though the plan has failed in terms of İsa, deploying soldiers in the region has pacified the gatherings and dispersed the crowds. After a couple of months, Mahmud Şevket Paşa, the lieutenant inspector of Rumeli (Rumeli Müfettişi Vekili) assured the Porte with a confident attitude that due to measures taken the region was under control and to capture of “the bandit” İsa Boletini was going to be successful as well.²⁹⁵ Due to İsa’s symbolic meaning, after one week, they attempted to exterminate him “to be a lesson” for others.²⁹⁶ Despite the damage they caused, they could not succeed to capture him.

Interestingly, an alternative solution was planned: to convince him to come to İstanbul and from there, to exile him to Anatolia.²⁹⁷ When they realized that they had been dragging the region into chaos, they aimed to exile him with a deceptive

²⁹² George W. Gawrych, “Ottoman Administration and the Albanians, 1908-1913”, p. 271-7.

²⁹³ DH. MKT. 2718/ 52, 1327.01.02, (M-24-1-1909)

²⁹⁴ DH. MKT. 271/ 30, 1326.12.29, (M-22-1-1909)

²⁹⁵ DH. MKT. 2768/ 23, 1327.02.22, (M-15-03-1909)

²⁹⁶ BEO. 3517/ 263747, 1327.02.29, (M-22-03-1909)

²⁹⁷ BEO. 3629/ 272142, 1327.02.29, (M-22-03-1909)

approach. The fact that a similar procedure was followed in the Hamidian regime, the CUP wanted to try as well. Yet, this time, İsa did not have any reason to trust these people.

In 1910, new taxes were imposed and two thousand armed Albanians gathered in Prishtina to protest. İsa was involved in this revolt as the chief of his tribe.²⁹⁸ When the revolt was suppressed, İsa and many other clan chiefs were forced to take shelter in Montenegro. Montenegro manipulated the situation due to their annexation plans for the part of Kosovo.²⁹⁹ The Porte was aware of the situation and looking for any opportunity to capture İsa.³⁰⁰ However, when these “refugees” realized the true intentions of the Montenegrin King, they wanted to return to their hometowns.³⁰¹ The archival documents show that İsa asked for amnesty and it was granted by the Ottoman authorities. The Kosovar authorities were advised to treat him well.³⁰² Moreover, İsa was paid from his share of the stone quarry that was granted by the sultan.³⁰³ Eventually, in 1912, both sides came to terms after realizing the bigger threat of foreign intervention.

Despite the chaotic and rough relationship, independence was out of context. In 1912, İsa clearly expressed his ideas on a redundant interference of the CUP regime in the region. However, what they were asking was not the autonomy or independence but to feel unrestricted.³⁰⁴ This clearly shows that the concerns had nothing to do with nationalist aspirations. The Kosovar Albanians were “concerned

²⁹⁸ Noel Malcolm, *Kosovo: A Short History*, p. 299.

²⁹⁹ Sina Akşin, *Jön Türkler ve İttihat ve Terakki*, p. 187.

³⁰⁰ HR. SYS. 133/34, 1328.10.5, (M-10-10-1910)

³⁰¹ Tafil Boletini, *Pranë Isa Boletinit*, p. 45.

³⁰² BEO. 3875/ 290604, 1329.04.02, (M-02-04-1911)

³⁰³ BEO. 4016/ 301138, 1330.03.26, (M-15-03-1912)

³⁰⁴ İhsan Burak Birecikli, “Arnavutlar ve Arnavutluk Sorunu, 1908-1914”, p. 319.

with regional matters, such as the maintenance of their prerevolutionary privileges” and “they wanted as little administrative control over themselves as possible”.³⁰⁵

In the end, the local revolts occupied the CUP agenda to a great extent. Brutal yet powerful responses “contributed to spreading violence and ultimately to political confusion for all the inhabitants of the Western Balkans”.³⁰⁶ This fact particularly applied to Mitroviçe and İsa out of the stubbornness of both sides. Eventually, all these insurgencies and the countermeasures against them, “caused a shift in the balance of power that led to the swift capture of Kosovo by Serbian and Montenegrin troops in late 1912 and the brutal, final annexation of more than half of the Albanian-Ottoman lands to various Slav states”.³⁰⁷ If there was no common goal, the security of the lands was the ultimate aim which both sides failed to understand. The CUP could easily secure the situation opportunistically through the armed local figures, yet they chose to exercise force on the local figures. It complicated the events at the expense of the land losses.³⁰⁸ As a result, the colossal terrorization program of the CUP compelled the moment of “loose-loose” by both the local and state figures.

Contrary to the archival documents, the Albanian literature claims that at the beginning, the CUP regime approached İsa to declare his loyalty in return for rewards and privileges. Yet, İsa refused them as a well-known figure of the national movement.³⁰⁹ The violence and terrorization started after this refusal as an alternative approach. The flow was just the contrary and the CUP realized the importance of these local figures at the break-out of the Balkan Wars, but it was too late.

³⁰⁵ George W. Gawrych, “Ottoman Administration and the Albanians, 1908-1913”, p. 361.

³⁰⁶ İsa Blumi, “Impacts of the Balkan Wars: the Uncharted Paths from Empire to Nation-State”, p. 537.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 538.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 537.

³⁰⁹ Fatmira Musaj, *İsa Boletini*, p. 59.

4.4. To Rescue a Sultan

The most exciting claim about İsa can be his intention to “rescue” the sultan from Selanik. Imagining a large group of armed forces composed of local figures marching towards the south and confronting the CUP forces there would have been one of the most interesting events of the time. With a little chance, capturing the sultan could be an astonishing turning point not only for the empire but also for world politics. How could it be? Which city would they prefer to bring the sultan to? Could it be İşkodra as a conservative far city from the CUP centers of Selanik and Üsküp? How would Abdülhamid feel? Could he trust his old friend? How would the attitudes of the Great Powers be in front of such a situation? Would they be content to see divided claims on the empire? But, most importantly, would Abdülhamid accept such a plan which was going to create more turbulence for the Empire? If they could succeed in their plans, how would the literature represent İsa Boletini? A religious fanatic? The sultan’s servant? How about the fluctuating and overlapping identities of İsa? Unfortunately, we will never be able to learn the answers of these questions but perhaps about the literature part, the overlapping and complex identities of İsa were going to be excluded by both the Albanian and Turkish literature and he was going to be represented in another dichotomy of the contrary camps: The sultan’s dedicated master vs. ignorant and fanatic tribal chief.

Not only once but twice brought to the agenda, the situation became a concern for Rifat Paşa, the minister of foreign affairs, in 1910. The Albanians were planning to throne Abdülhamid through an Albanian revolution.³¹⁰ It could be a bluff to threaten the CUP about their immense interference in the region. However, the second time, it sounded more serious in 1912 due to the organized and worrisome armed forces of Albanians.³¹¹ The Grand Vizier Ahmet Muhtar Paşa expressed his ideas to the Kosovar authorities about the futility and insignificance of the matter; hence there was no need to be concerned.

³¹⁰ HR.SYS. 133/22, 1328-07-05, (M-13-07-1910),

³¹¹ BEO. 4113/308453, (1330-12-06), (M-16-11-1912)

Well, if the situation was not concerning related to İsa, surely, it was alarming despite the deepness of similar movements on the ground. Only after twelve days, the famous declaration of independence was going to take place in Vlore, the Balkan Wars were going to broke out, and the last blow for the fall of the empire was going to take place in the Balkan lands. Maybe, it should have been taken as a serious concern that shows the different agendas of the local figures and turbulent environment on the ground.

Not only the archival materials but there are also some claims on İsa's plans to rescue the sultan by his "comrades" of the time. As Hasan Prishtina provides insights about the different privileges during the "declaration" of independence, İsa and Riza Bey were eager to rescue the sultan.

According to Hasan Prishtina's memorandum, İsa Boletini and Riza Gjakova (Yakova) intended to move towards Selanik to rescue the sultan. Riza Bey had already planned the release of the sultan and he informed the notables in the Kosovo region.³¹² Therefore, the idea was not unique to İsa but shared by others during the year of 1910. Yet, İsa was not able to counter the CUP forces. However, in 1912, Hasan Bey among others resented to this idea and it created a split in forces.

However, Hasan Prishtina was in contact with the CUP authorities and tried to convince them about the insignificance of the matter. The defense of these people was for the sake of the "Albanian-ness":

The two of them had nothing else on the mind at that time than getting Sultan Hamid out of prison. You could not talk to them about independence, not even say anything about autonomy. This was a red flag for Riza bey and İsa Boletini. I held the view that, although the two of them ought to have been punished, they should be punished by the Albanians and not with the involvement of others.³¹³

³¹² Abdulhamit Kırmızı, "Halep-Kosova Hattı, 1909: Arnavutluk'ta Meşrutiyete Karşı Bir İsyan Teşebbüsü"

³¹³ Robert Elsie and Bejtullah Destani (ed), "Memorandum by Hasan Bey Prishtina", *Kosovo: A Documentary History*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), p. 68-84.

The situation can be one of the reasons to bring the sultan from Selanik back to İstanbul. Therefore, the attempt was a clear example of peoples' multiple allegiances, loyalties, and identities in the region. It was the same time when İsa was on his way towards the South to search for solutions to secure the homeland just like many Albanians. Rescuing the sultan was considered one of the solutions. Hence, his attempt should be considered within the context of seeking solutions rather than a nationalistic approach.

All in all, the vague and unsteady structure of the CUP regime preferred to alienate İsa Boletini because he was a symbol of the Hamidian regime who cannot be trusted. Yet, the foreign threat of the time led both the CUP and İsa to start a reluctant process of cooperation. However, it was too late to harvest the fruits of this collaboration due to the Balkan Wars.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

In the long and tumultuous environment of the nineteenth century, İsa Boletini has been part of the Ottoman milieu as an imperial figure. He was born in a family that had positioned themselves as both state collaborators as well as opponents depending on the local concerns. Operating through capricious ties with İstanbul, he constituted an exemplary figure with co-existing multiple identities and loyalties related to the changing circumstances of the time. While national narratives tend to portray local concerns as acts of independence, this thesis attempted to demonstrate how important contingencies were for İsa Boletini. Therefore, İsa Boletini can be represented as an activist always in search of solutions, Albanian national figure, a loyal servant of the sultan, and an ignored leftover in the eyes of the CUP. But reducing his fluctuating and multiple identities and loyalties into *only* a freedom fighter is what this thesis aimed to challenge.

The fluctuating policies of the time with multiple actors with local and foreign affiliations opened a space for İsa Boletini to attach himself to the policymaking systems which he was operating in. Growing in an almost autonomous region, the North of Kosovo, it was a life-changing moment for him to come to İstanbul from one of the smallest corners of the empire, Mitroviçe. The experience he had at the Yıldız palace with the Sultan Abdülhamid II reflects the imperial concerns related to the importance of the local figures. These local power-holders as potential collaborators of the state were valuable to be alienated since the Balkans were under the attention of the Great Powers.

Furthermore, despite the discrepancies and pluralism of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) regime as the successors of the Sultan Abdülhamid II, İsa did not fit in the wide spectrum of this organization. First, the relative autonomy in his region was the initial target of the regime to be eliminated in terms of tax payments and military recruitments. Second, İsa was empowered directly by the sultan which marked him

as a static opponent of the regime. From İsa's perspective, the CUP had the problem of legitimacy whereas the sultan was credible enough to "trust".

In addition to that, İsa's complexities and multiple identities became more apparent when he tried to balance his local concerns with the imperial ones. His loyalty to his clan and effort to exercise power at the expense of the Ottoman authorities were some of the cases that revealed his uniqueness. A similar observation can be made for his experience of the reluctant rapprochement process with the CUP regime. Although he is represented as an arch-enemy of the regime by the majority of historians, this study demonstrated an alternative perspective in light of the Ottoman archival material.

Moreover, in this study, İsa Boletini's figure was extended in three dimensions. Firstly, he was incorporated within the Ottoman context through the Ottoman archival material. Secondly, his multiple identities and loyalties were explained by the biographical methodology of the imperial figure. Thirdly, his activism has been kept as a unique characteristic that differs from the intellectual figures of national independence. The dialogue this thesis attempted to create between these dimensions complicates the simplistic nationalist depictions, claims, and suppositions. Therefore, the general aim of the thesis was to question the Albanian nation-building process through the complicated figure of İsa Boletini. For me, studying nationalism seems like a lifelong engagement with an ambitious dedication that exceeds this thesis. However, the relevance of *making/creating* nationalist heroes for nationalist discourses should be obvious. Hence, in this study, I tackled the question of *why* the Ottoman sources were neglected up to a certain extent. In order to counter the answers, I have tried to incorporate the archival documents and the information they provide to the existing literature and demonstrated the contradictions between the literature and the sources.

İsa Boletini as an active agent placed in the imperial structure represents a unique figure with a lot of complications that were similarly experienced by the other local figures. In other words, he had both unique and similar struggles compare to other

agencies in the empire. Moreover, a further comparative study on the experiences of a similar local power-holders from a different region of the empire can reveal the fact that the actions of such people cannot be attributed to *only* their ethnic origins and patriotisms.

Despite the general tendency to portray İsa Boletini's activism as "simple acts of Albanian patriotism"³¹⁴, the multiple identities and loyalties he carried challenge the existing literature on him. Although this study does not claim to fulfill all the missing gaps, on some level, it completes his complicated figure and provides a different but essential perspective. It shows that imperial figures tend to have a complex set of identities which requires them to be studied carefully. Also, the well-known figures of independence should be analyzed within the major contexts of the time. In light of this, the more imperial figures are studied the more realistic narratives are constructed. Eventually, it will give insights about how the empires as major structures were understood from the perspectives of the agencies operating within them. Such a methodology eases the deconstruction and reconstruction processes of the nationalistic narratives. Ultimately this picture enables me to ask fresh questions about the relationship between nationalism and historiography, puzzling out which may well be a lifelong preoccupation.

All in all, this thesis will be valuable only if it inspires the need to rewrite İsa Boletini's biography with the use of Ottoman sources as well. It demonstrates how using Ottoman sources with the hope to understand Boletini's era and the Ottoman imperial context in all their complications should attract our attention to his multiple and fluctuating identities. It would then be possible to capture the complexities with twists and turns of the man and his era.

³¹⁴ İsa Blumi, *Reinstating the Ottomans: Alternative Balkan Modernities, 1800-1912*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 144.

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APPENDICES

A. İsa Boletini and his men, 1912³¹⁵



³¹⁵ Robert Elsie, Texts and Documents of Albanian History, excerpted from http://www.albanianhistory.net/1898_Oestreich/index.htm

B. The kule of İsa Boletini in Mitroviçe ³¹⁶



³¹⁶ Robert Elsie, Texts and Documents of Albanian History, excerpted from http://www.albanianhistory.net/1898_Oestreich/index.htm

C. Mitroviçe Train Station ³¹⁷



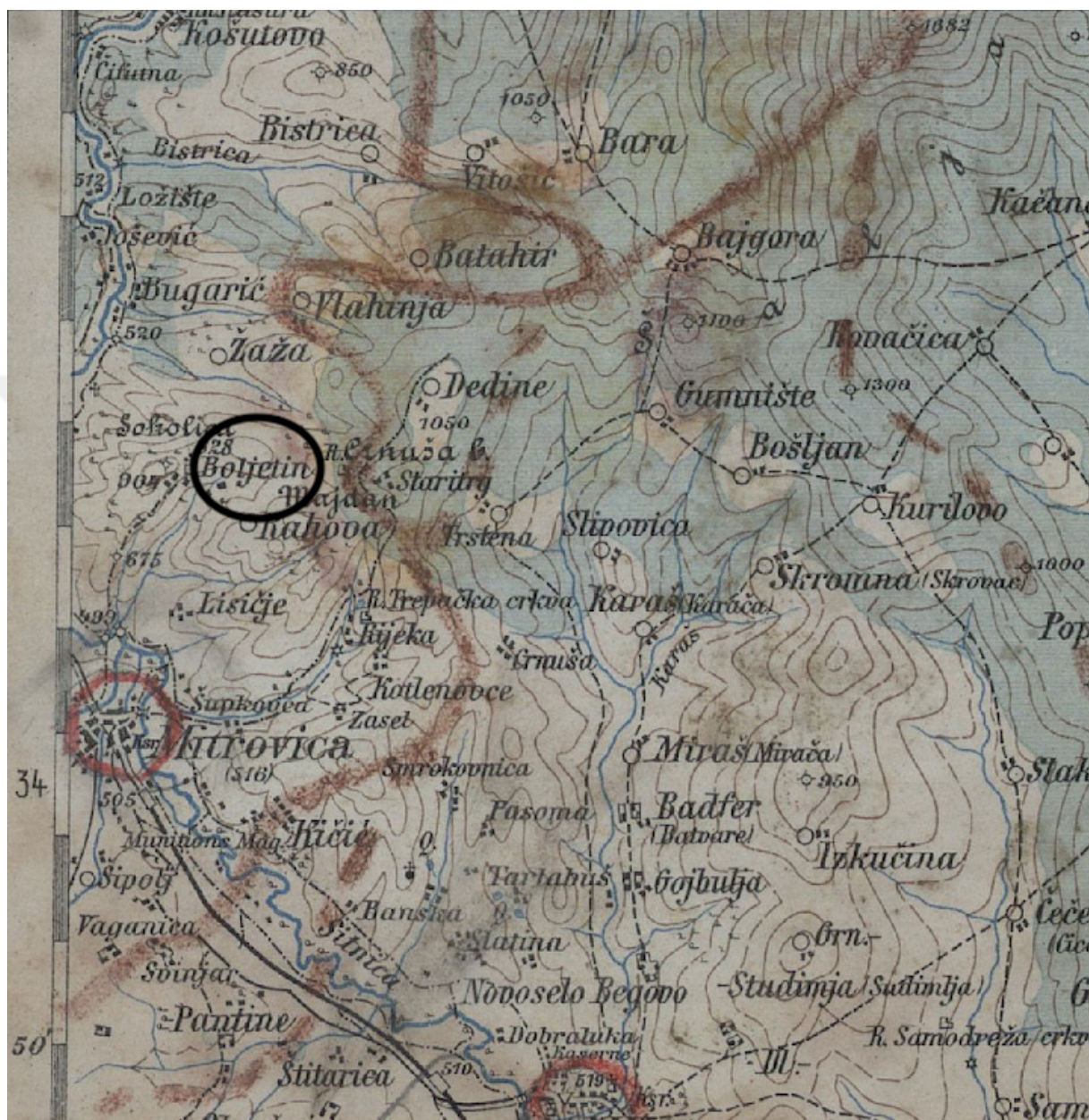
³¹⁷ İ.Ü. Nadir Eserler Kütüphanesi 90635/17



³¹⁸ Y.EE. 15/ 209-001, 1325.01.09, (M-20-02-1907)

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Map 1.1. Mitrovica and the village Boletín³¹⁹



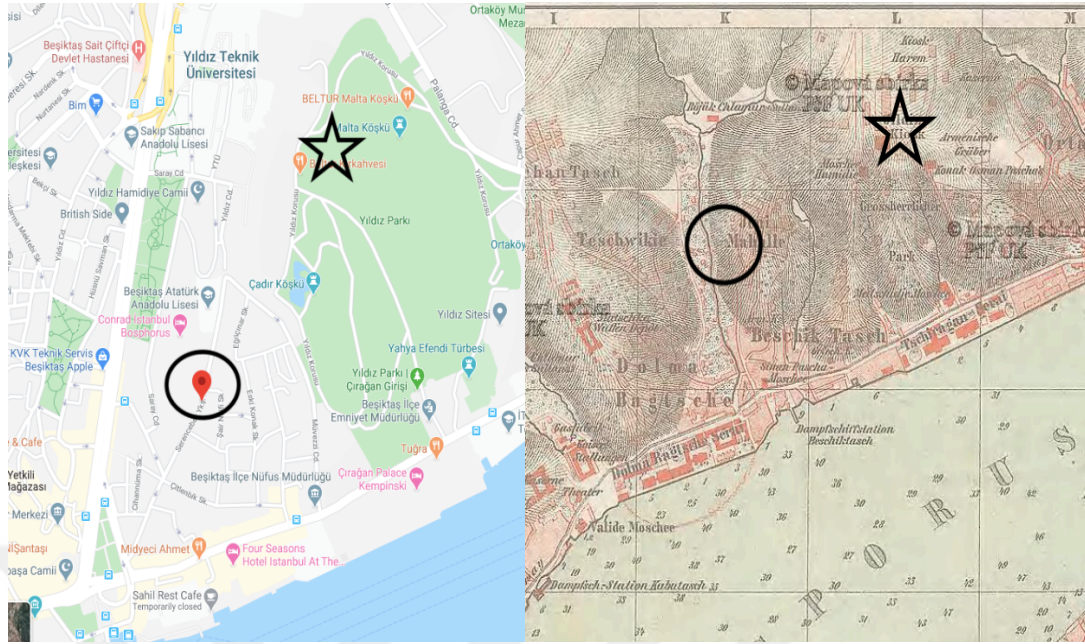
³¹⁹ HRT.h. / 1348.

Map 1.2. Map of modern-day Kosovo by Ismail Gagic³²⁰



³²⁰ Robert Elsie and Bejtullah Destani (ed), *Kosovo: A Documentary History from the Balkan Wars to World War II*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), p. XXV

Map 1.3. Beşiktaş, Serencebey Yokuşu and the Yıldız Palace.³²¹



³²¹ Old Maps Online, Konstantinopel, Istanbul (Turecko) 1890-1910