

PART I
BETWEEN REGIONAL SELF-WILL
AND IMPERIAL RULE



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Excerpt
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I

The Space and Time of Albanian History



What Does Albania Mean?

The history of the modern Albanian state begins with a hurried and premature declaration of independence on November 28, 1912, in Vlorë/Gr. Aulon/It. Valona, a coastal town in southern central Albania. Prior to that date, Albanians had never lived in a common national state. Albanian history does not, of course, begin in 1912. The Albanians are one of the oldest autochthonous ethnic groups in the Balkans, and in Europe in general. This dichotomy between the relatively recent construction of the Albanian state and sociocultural traditions that date back to antiquity will do much to shape the structure of this story.

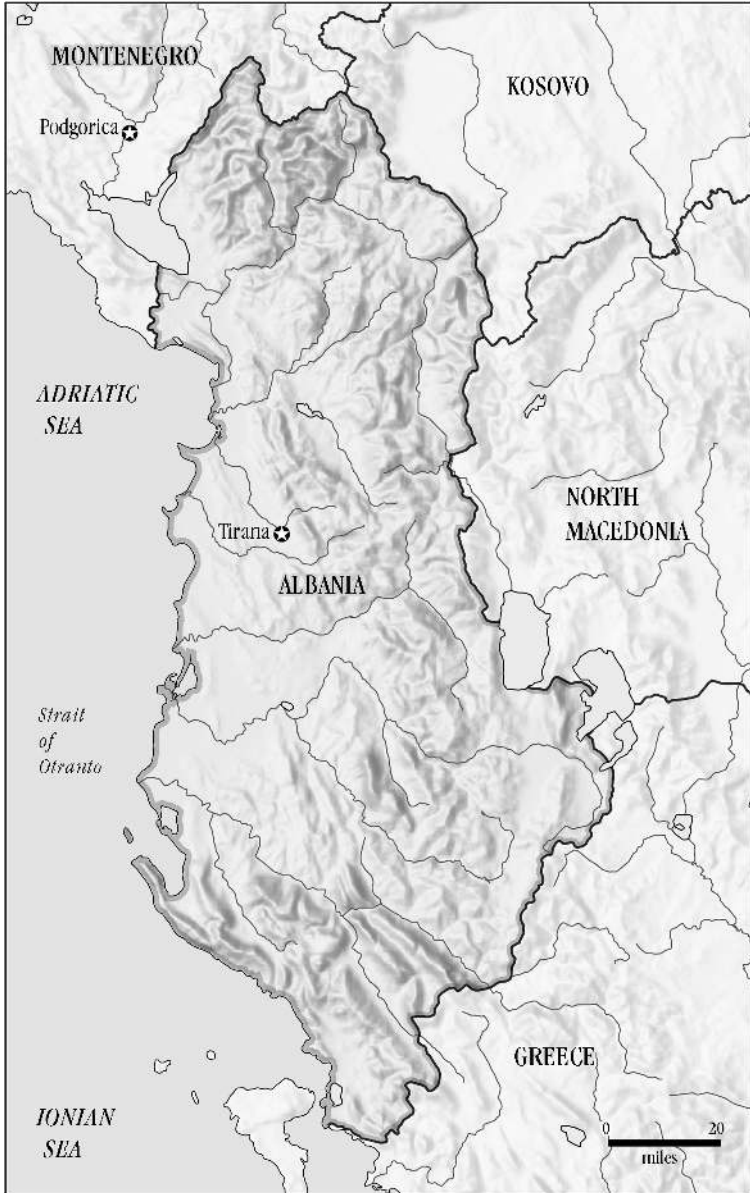
Albania, the key term of our book, has a unique history. It is not only the name of a modern European state but also denotes a historical region in the southwest of the Balkan peninsula. Only very rarely mentioned in antiquity, in the context of *Albanian mountains* or *Albanopolis*, the term *Albania* reappears around AD 1100 in various forms: *Arbanon* in Greek, *Raban* in Old Serbian, *Albanum* in Latin. Spatially, it encompassed what corresponds roughly to modern central Albania, or generally the hinterland of the present-day capital Tirana, and was designated as a short-lived principality at the edge of the Byzantine empire. In the late medieval period,

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spatial Albania shifted northward and southward, or to be more precise: Italian and Greek sources began to use the term to describe an area that stretched from present-day Montenegro (Bay of Kotor) to modern southwestern Greece (Gulf of Ambracia). This extension can be explained by its use in Venetian administrative language and by the movement of Albanian warriors and herdsmen into Epirus, an area that today is divided between Albania and Greece. When Venice, the leading trading republic in the eastern Mediterranean, established its rule in the coastal towns of modern north Albania and Montenegro between 1392 and 1423, it called its southern Adriatic urban districts Albania. Further south, in present-day southern Albania and northwest Greece, the formation of short-lived Albanian lordships around 1400 increased the political visibility of the Albanian element in a multi-ethnic society, and as in the north, *Albania* was used to designate new political power structures.

The term *Albania*, therefore, refers less to a rigid space than to a fluid area. It is mentioned in medieval sources, which were usually produced by non-Albanian observers, primarily when the Albanians became visible as political actors, or in the case of Greece, as migrants. This does not mean that Albanians had not settled in areas that were only later called Albania by external observers; nor does it mean that the emergence of the spatial term *Albania* occurred only in regions with a traditional Albanian population. To illustrate the latter point, one need only to bear in mind the waves of Albanian migration to Greece from the thirteenth century onward. *Albania* as a spatial term mirrors the dynamics of migrations that characterize Albanian history from antiquity to the present day.

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MAP 1.1 Relief map of Albania

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So which areas did Albania actually encompass? Until the nineteenth century, the most concise answer was provided by members of the Catholic elite, writing in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Based on ancient geography and early modern spatial knowledge, this Albania stretched from the coastal area of Venetian Albania (present-day Montenegro) to the area opposite the island of Corfu. In the east, this Catholic version bordered with *Serbia*. In territorial terms, this Serbia described by the church corresponds roughly to present-day Kosovo. Most Catholics in Kosovo were not ethnic Serbs but Albanians, and this ecclesiastical definition of Serbia does not refer to the ethnic situation in Kosovo, but rather to the tradition of the medieval Serbian State that was conquered by the Ottomans in 1459. Serbia therefore conveyed the memory of a bygone Balkan state rather than the reality of early modern Kosovo with its substantial Albanian population. This example of Catholic space construction demonstrates that while clear borders were drawn, these borders included an ethnically mixed population. To the east, the north and the south, the Albanian world did not end abruptly; rather, it merged into multilingual environments. In the south, Albanian was spoken along with Greek and Aromanian (a Balkan Romance language), to the north Albanians coexisted with Slavic speakers in Montenegro, to the northeast with Serbs and Aromanians and to the southeast with Macedo-Bulgarians and Aromanians.

The Ottomans who ruled over the southwestern Balkans between the late fourteenth century and the first Balkan war of 1912 had perhaps the most appropriate spatial concept for these fluid boundaries. They coined

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the term *Arnavutluk*, which literally means an area full of Albanians or a region where the Albanian ethnic element is dominant among many other ethnic groups. The second advantage to the term *Arnavutluk* is that semantically it is not related to any kind of institutionalized power. In terms of space and delimitations, its vagueness precisely fits the premodern sociocultural patterns of open and overlapping spaces. Until 1912, an exact and unequivocal spatial demarcation of Albania simply did not exist. The term *Albania* designated a territory with a high density of speakers of the Albanian language in the southwestern Balkans. But there have always been many Albanian speakers outside this core territory. Conversely, inside Albania, many speakers of languages other than Albanian, such as Greek, Aromanian and various South Slavic varieties, could be found.

When attempting to assess the historical importance of Albanian speakers in the eastern Mediterranean, which is the goal of this book, Albania is, in many ways, a misleading concept, before and even, to a certain extent, after 1912. It conveys the idea of a closed national space in which Albanian history has played out. This might be true for approximately 60 percent of the Albanians in the twentieth century, or those Albanians who, after 1912, found themselves within the borders of the modern national state. The idea of one Albanian nation in its ethnically homogenous national state completely isolated from its neighbors was conceived of by the official historiography of communist Albania (1945–1991), which projected an ultranationalist state ideology and the concept of a people under permanent siege since time immemorial. This concept excluded all those Albanians, at least 40 percent, who in 1912 were

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placed against their will under Serbian or Greek rule and remained therefore outside the communist project of state and nation building.

The communist concept of national history is based on statehood on the territory of modern Albania, and less on ethnicity. It is, therefore, not particularly useful for a full understanding of the dynamics of an ethnic group whose history is predominantly marked by integration into large empires (Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman) and by different types of middle- and large-scale migration under the umbrella of these empires. It effectively excludes those Albanians who until 1912 shared this historical experience with the Albanians of the modern Albanian state.

Before 1912 Albanian history encompassed all those areas where speakers of the Albanian language could be found. Because of the intense migration movements that characterize Albanian history, this space includes the southwestern Balkans: not only present-day Albania, Kosovo, parts of Montenegro, present-day southern Serbia, the west and north of the Republic of North Macedonia, but also central and southern Greece, where Albanians, still referred to as *Arvanites* to this day, settled beginning at the end of the thirteenth century. This space includes the southern Italian regions of Sicily, Calabria and Apulia, where Albanians sought shelter from the Ottoman onslaught in the fifteenth century and where their descendants, known as *Arbëresh*, enjoy the status of an officially recognized minority in Italy to this day. It also includes those parts of the Balkans where Albanians moved during the Ottoman period (from the late fourteenth century to 1912) including central Serbia, Bulgaria, Thrace and most notably the imperial capital

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Istanbul. In the nineteenth century, Albanian traders and workmen migrated to present-day southern Romania and to Egypt (both formally part of the Ottoman empire), and in a later phase they discovered North America and Western Europe as new destinations for employment migration. In 1900, most cultural and economic centers of the Albanians could be found outside of the historical region of Albania. Istanbul, Alexandria, Athens, Sofia, Bucharest, Vienna, Brussels and Boston in the United States were central locations where the intellectual leaders of the Albanian national movement met and published.

It is clear that a concise history of Albania must essentially consist of two parts: a history of the Albanians in the context of empires and their history in the context of the modern national state since 1912. While the first part of this book spatially encompasses almost the entire Balkan peninsula and parts of the eastern Mediterranean, the second half is generally restricted to a more limited, but clearly defined space. While the first part concentrates on speakers of the Albanian language in various spatial and sociocultural contexts, the latter focuses on the citizens of a national state.

Language and the Question of Origins

Language plays a crucial role in defining the Albanians. It is only through the Albanian language and its speakers that Albanian history prior to 1912 can be written. Since the beginnings of a broad Albanian national movement in the latter third of the nineteenth century, Albanian national activists have highlighted language as the essential marker of identity and as an object of pride. Even

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today, books claiming that the Albanian language is the oldest in the world or at least the oldest of all Indo-European languages have the potential to become best-sellers in Albanian communities. It is clear that Albanian nationalism compensates for the lack of a long-established state with the apparent agelessness of the Albanian language. What to outside observers might appear as an odd insistence on the age of the language can be better understood when bearing in mind that most nationalisms in Eastern Europe and elsewhere legitimize their political and territorial claims by referring to national statehood stretching back into a medieval or, ideally, into an ancient past. Since the nineteenth century people without traditions of state institutions have been labeled as people without a history.

In this vein, modern Greek and Serbian nationalists denied the Albanians the right or the capacity to build a state and justified their own repeated plans, nurtured during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to partition Albanian inhabited lands. A second argument in support of territorial claims is autochthony, often related to chronological priority, or the argument that this is our land, we were here first and have been here since time immemorial. In this line of reasoning, the target peoples are latecomers without any historical rights. Serbian nationalists advance this argument and claim that the Albanians immigrated to Kosovo as late as the seventeenth century. To counter this view, Albanian nationalist thinkers insist that the Albanian language predates any Slavic language and is at least as old as Greek. The Albanian argument justifies modern Albanian territorial claims to areas where they