

Kosovo and the Bar Tragedy of March 1945

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Historical Background

Kosovo was part of the Ottoman Empire for about five centuries, and it was in the Ottoman period that it first became primarily Albanian from a demographic perspective. By the end of the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century, at any rate, it had a clear majority Albanian population.

The Ottoman Empire collapsed during the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913 and the situation in the southern Balkans changed radically at that time. In the midst of a plethora of warring factions, Albania declared its independence in November 1912 and, although its borders were not specifically defined, it was recognized as an independent nation at the Conference of London in the summer of 1913. Kosovo, for its part, was invaded and occupied by Serbian forces in October 1912 and was then attached to Serbia. For the Serbian minority living in Kosovo for centuries it was the long hoped-for liberation from the Ottoman yoke, but for the majority Albanian community the situation became much worse than it had been under the Turks. After a period under direct military rule, Kosovo was absorbed by Serbia and became part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (*Kraljevina Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca*), later to be known as the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (*Kraljevina Jugoslavija*). The absorption was never approved by the people of Kosovo, in their majority, whose wishes were not consulted. As the name of the new country implied, it was designed as an independent country for the southern Slavs, and the Albanians, as non-Slavs, were very soon deprived of equal rights. Albanian-language schooling and education, always the prime concern of Albanian nationalists, remained as illegal under Serbian rule as it had been under Turkish rule, and political representation of the Albanians in the parliament and government in Belgrade was minimal. As a result of their inferior status, the Kosovo Albanians were by no means enthusiastic supporters of royal Yugoslavia, nor were they made to feel particularly welcome in that multi-ethnic country. Official policy was for their colonization and assimilation.

Kosovo in the Second World War

In April 1941, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was invaded and conquered by the German Reich and the other Axis powers (Italy, Hungary and Bulgaria). Meeting in Vienna on 21 April 1941, the Italian and German foreign ministers agreed that most of the Albanian-inhabited parts of Kosovo should be put under Italian control and be united with Albania. Germany took over direct administration of the Mitrovica and Vushtrria region with its economically important Trepça mines, and Bulgaria received a strip of southeastern Kosovo, including Kaçanik and the area east of Gjilan. At that time, the German division commander, General Eberhardt, met in Mitrovica with Albanian leaders, among whom was Xhafer Deva (1904-1978), to formalize the Albanian takeover of local government and to discuss the return (i.e. expulsion) of the many Serbian and Montenegrin colonists who had been settled in Kosovo. In May 1941, Montenegrin

colonists who had received homesteads in and around Peja were driven out of Kosovo by local Albanians. On 29 June 1941, Benito Mussolini proclaimed "Greater Albania," and most of Kosovo, under Italian occupation, was united with Albania proper. Accordingly, in July 1941, most of Kosovo was placed under a new civilian administration as part of the Kingdom of Albania. From late 1941 to early 1943, it was thus governed from Tirana by a "minister for the liberated areas," with Italian troops ensuring defence and public order.

Although many Kosovo Albanian leaders were opposed to Axis rule, the population was complacent. For most of the Albanians, the Italian and German occupation were, after all, much better than Serbian rule. The Italians, for instance, allowed and promoted Albanian-language education, which had been strictly banned under the old Yugoslav administration, and opened 173 new elementary schools throughout Kosovo and western Macedonia. The use of Albanian was permitted in all walks of life for the first time in the history of Kosovo.

The Kosovo Serbs, the only element of the population that had really opposed the Axis occupation, were put in a difficult position. More Serbian and Montenegrin settlers, who had been sent to colonize Kosovo in the past two decades, were driven out of the country by the local Albanians. Indeed, thousands of Serb and Montenegrin families were forced to flee for their lives, and many were deported to forced labour camps or to work in the Trepça mines. About 70,000 refugees from Kosovo had been registered in Belgrade by April 1942. It is significant that, as a rule, the Albanians drove out only the new settlers and colonists who had earlier taken their land, and, generally, did not attack the traditional Serbian communities of Kosovo whom they regarded as their neighbours.

Kosovo was put under German occupation after the capitulation of Italy on 8 September 1943, a year that saw the further rise of resistance movements, in particular the Chetnik movement of Colonel Draža Mihailović (1893-1946), the Albanian *Balli Kombëtar* (National Front), and the Yugoslav communist partisans. Among the other Kosovo Albanian political movements of the period were: *Lëvizja Irredentiste* (The Irredentist Movement), *Lidhja e Dytë e Prizrenit* (The Second League of Prizren), *Besa Kombtare* (The National Alliance), and *Organizata Nacional-Demokratike Shqiptare* (The Albanian National Democratic Organisation). Although they represented different parts of the political spectrum and, to an extent, different elements of Kosovar society, most of these movements, like most Kosovo Albanians in general, were more concerned about the spectre of a return to Serbian rule than they were about the Italian and German occupation. In the words of Tirana historian Uran Butka:

“In this situation, nationalist forces in Kosovo did not generally take part in the war against the Germans because they valued the fact the latter had recognized the independence of Albania, its neutrality in the war and the unification of Kosovo with Albania to create a national state for the Albanians. The Germans had recognised Albanian national symbols in Kosovo and in other Albanian regions, where local institutions and Albanian schools had been created, too, and where there was full freedom of movement with the motherland. For the nationalists, the Germans were only there temporarily, only passing through the country. They were unable to put up resistance to a world power like Germany and at the same time defend themselves against the Serbs. Their aim was to protect and administer the newly unified country, the national state of the Albanians, by struggling to free

themselves once and for all from the thirty years of Slav occupation. For the nationalists, the main danger came from the Slavs, i.e. the Serbs.”¹

To overcome the expected nationalist resistance in Kosovo, in March 1944 and again on 26 August 1944, Tito appealed to the communist-dominated National Liberation Army of Albania to enter Kosovo in order to fight the enemy and (Kosovo Albanian) reaction. They did so in September and October 1944. Adem Demaçi (b. 1935) recalled many years later:

“This was a great trick on Tito’s part. After the victory over fascism, the Yugoslavs were expecting a general uprising in Kosovo which they could perhaps not quell until it was completely liberated. The uprising would not be easy to put down, in particular in Drenica. Another major problem for the Yugoslavs was that they would be discredited in world opinion if they intervened militarily in Kosovo in an armed struggle against the Albanian rebels. At this delicate moment for them, Enver Hoxha paid a great service to Tito. He seconded Albanian partisan brigades to Kosovo who played a role in calming tensions there. From the moment they arrived, word spread throughout Kosovo: “Put your weapons down, brothers. We will not fight one another, brother against brother.” Despite the way this event was interpreted in subsequent Albanian historiography, highly politicized as it was, it constituted a major blow to Kosovo. The Yugoslavs had no difficulty putting the Albanians in the role they wanted them to be in, because events in Albania itself had been changing to their benefit since 1943, after the Mukje Agreement.”²

At the same time, German troops, withdrawing from Greece, began pushing northwards through Kosovo on their retreat. By the end of November 1944, with the combined Soviet and Bulgarian advance, all of Kosovo had fallen into the hands of the victorious Albanian and Yugoslav partisans, and was returned to Serbian rule.

The Fate of Kosovo at the End of the Second World War

Around December 1944, after the communist takeover, steps were taken to begin forcefully mobilizing Kosovo Albanians of arm-bearing age into the Yugoslav Army. Some 30,000 to 50,000 men were conscripted to be deployed to the front "for the needs of the Yugoslav armed forces in Serbia, Vojvodina, Bosnia, Herzegovina, Croatia and Slovenia." This was done not only to strengthen the ranks for the Yugoslav Army and the war effort, but also, and in particular, to overcome any potential anti-communist resistance in Kosovo by getting as many young men as possible out of the country.

Thousands of men, mobilised into the Sixth Kosovar Brigade, were sent northwards on 2 January 1945 to advance on Vršac in Syrmia (Srem). There they were divided up among Yugoslav brigades, but soon found themselves being treated not as fellow soldiers, but as prisoners-of-war. For the most part, the Albanians refused to be disarmed, and many groups of them rose in revolt. Kosovar partisan leader Fadil Hoxha (1916-2001) was swiftly despatched to Vršac to quell the unrest and, in a capacity as an *ad hoc* military judge, had 11 of the men shot.

¹ Uran Butka, *Masakra e Tivarit* (Tirana 2011), p. 20-21.

² Adem Demaçi, published in the newspaper *Ndryshe*, 25 May 2007.

The Seventh Brigade under Shaban Polluzha (1871-1945) set off for Syrmia on 21 January 1945. Polluzha was initially associated with *Balli Kombëtar* and had set up a band of volunteers in 1943 to fight the Chetniks. He later joined the partisans, believing their promise that Kosovo would be given self-determination and would thus be reunited with Albania after the war. He was very hesitant to leave Kosovo unprotected, but agreed to depart, stating, however, that he would return in a moment's notice if a single Albanian were killed in his native Drenica. As it turned out, on his way to Podujeva, news reached him of the massacre in Drenica that was carried out by the Serbian 27th Brigade and he accordingly hastened back with his 5,000 men. The uprising against communist forces in the Drenica region held out for about two months, and Shaban Polluzha was killed in Tërstenik on 21 February 1945.

Another revolt of Albanians who refused to leave Kosovo broke out under Adem Voca in Mitrovica. About 2,000 men were shot while it was being put down, and Voca himself was killed on 11 February 1945.

The remains of the Seventh Brigade set off anew for Syrmia. An Albanian commander, Shaban Haxhia, who was a witness to the events, reported as follows:

“When we crossed the border into Serbia, we were locked in train carriages for forty-eight hours. We did not know where we were or what was going on. We were like prisoners-of-war...We spent two day and two nights without bread or any food at all. It was like a slow death. Finally, we reached Banat and were given over to Serbian officers. We then understood what our situation was. We were dispersed among Serbian units and many of our men fell victim to typhoid fever. Our Albanian officers were taken away from us and returned to Kosovo... The surviving men finally returned to Kosovo without their army. We were distraught more than anything at questions asked of us about where we had left the rest of the boys.”³

A new recruitment campaign of Kosovo Albanians began in March 1945. However, as the decimation of the Seventh Brigade had become widely known in Kosovo, the new recruits adamantly refused to go north. In order to overcome resistance, the men were now told that they were to be sent to Albania because Enver Hoxha (1908-1985) had called them. Many of them, ever ready to “come to Albania’s rescue”, reported more or less willingly with their weapons, though most were conscripted by force. When they reached the military barracks in Prizren, they were all disarmed and found themselves made prisoners there. In all, about 7,700 men were mustered in Prizren. They were forced to sleep on the cold cement floors and tuberculosis broke out among them at the time. This was the starting point of the saga which became known as the Bar Tragedy.

The Bar Tragedy of March 1945

In March 1945, thousands of Albanians were thus gathered, mostly forcefully, in Prizren. They were informed that they were being mobilised to continue the fight against the retreating Germans in Croatia and Slovenia on the "Adriatic Front." The conscripts

³ Shaban Haxhia, quoted in *Monografia*, vol. 9-10 (Prishtina 1980), p. 505.

were divided into three convoys or echelons of about 2,500 men each and set off for the coast through the isolated and inhospitable mountains of northern Albania.

The first echelon, about 2,600 men, left Prizren on 24 March 1945 in groups of 100. It got to Shkodra on 27 March and reached Bar (Antivari) on the Montenegrin coast on 29 March. Conditions during the forced march were appalling, and an estimated 400 men perished en route. Azem Hajdini-Xani (d. 2009), who survived the ordeal, recalled the following in his memoirs:

"According to what we heard, some Albanians had been liquidated near Suhareka... A further number of men were liquidated near Kukës, at which time their bodies were thrown into a ravine... During the exhausting march, the Albanian soldiers experienced terrible treatment and there were appalling murders. For instance, at a creek some fifteen kilometres from Kukës, three Albanian soldiers, who had been tied up, had their ears cut off because they had protested about their mistreatment... It was known that men were being shot and killed en route, especially at night. The victims were simply heaved into the rocky abysses. The Albanian soldiers had no way of putting up any resistance because they had been disarmed in Prizren by the military units to which they had reported... What the Albanian recruits suffered on this forced march was a crime against humanity, against freedom, against human dignity and against peace...

The Serbian, Montenegrin and Macedonian henchman had planned from the start to create pretexts at every water point to get rid of the Albanian soldiers, who were dying of thirst. This was particularly evident on the march between Kukës and Puka where the echelon stopped at a water point, apparently for a rest. Since the Albanian soldiers were worn down, both from the march and from thirst, one of them, Nazif Plaka from Brod near Ferizaj, and one companion, went over to the officer who was sitting at the fountain and asked for permission for the other soldiers to drink from the fountain. The officer allowed the two of them to drink but, at the same time, gave a signal to the guards to shoot them in the back. They died on the spot with their heads in the water. After this, the Albanian column continued its march and arrived at Fushë Arrëz where the men spent the night outside in the open. The next day, they passed through Puka and continued on to Shkodra where they arrived on 27 March 1945 at 16:00 hours and were put up in the military barracks there."⁴

From Shkodra, the echelon carried on to the Montenegrin port of Bar where they arrived on 30 March 1945. The atmosphere in the town was hostile to the extreme. Many Montenegrin colonists who had been driven out of the Peja region in Kosovo had taken shelter and settled in Bar. The arrival of masses of starving and defenceless Kosovo Albanian conscripts in the town gave them an opportunity to take revenge for what they had suffered. In addition, most Montenegrins by this time regarded the Kosovo Albanians as pro-German or at least anti-communist.

In Bar, the men of the first echelon were divided into three groups. The first group of some 1,200 men was put on a ferry for Trogir in Croatia the next morning for deployment to the Adriatic Front. Some 65 of these men later drowned on an April night while crossing over to Čiovo Island on an overloaded barge. At the break of dawn, the

⁴ Azem Hajdini-Xani, quoted by Butka, *op. cit.* p. 123-125.

channel separating Trogir and Čiovo was seen filled with the white felt caps of the Albanians, floating in the water. A second group of some 400-500 men remained in Bar and was ordered to the old military barracks that were situated some 200-300 metres northeast of the Tobacco Monopoly building in the town. There, they found themselves surrounded and virtually under siege. The third group of some 450-500 men was sent to a meadow near Old Bar (*Stari Bar*), allegedly for delousing. They, too, were soon surrounded by the locals, but were saved by the presence of American military observers who happened to be in the vicinity.⁵ Many of these men were returned to the military barracks; others were despatched to Trogir.

The second echelon of Kosovar Albanians, about 2,370 men, left Prizren on 26 March 1945. The men reached Shkodra on 30 March. About 700-800 of them had been killed or perished underway, of whom 126 men in Fushë Arrëz.

The entry into Shkodra of the hapless convoy of the conscripts who had survived the trek through the mountains is recorded by Zef Pllumi (1924-2007), a Catholic writer from the town who was twenty-one at the time and had just joined the Franciscan Order. In one of the many moving episodes of his 730-page memoirs, he recalled the following:

“I am not sure of the month, whether it was March or later, but it was sometime between winter and spring when a group of us students studying for the priesthood visited the Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel at the foot of the fortress to pray for salvation. [...] At the turn in the road we saw an endless stream of soldiers coming towards us. It was a winding road and at each of its turns there were men in that uniform we so hated. We were petrified. We scrambled up onto the rocks, as if for a rest, and waited to see what new tragedy would befall Shkodra with the arrival of a new brigade of partisans. When they got closer and marched past us, we could see more clearly who they were. Only the commanders leading the column of men in lines of four were armed. All the rest of the young men were thin and weakened. No bellies, sunburnt and with protruding cheekbones, weary and exhausted, with buttonless, tattered uniforms, and no weapons. They advanced slowly, plodding forth with great difficulty in rows of four. We were horrified. What could this army be? They hardly had energy to stand on their feet. At a certain distance on both sides of the column, there were armed guards shouting at them: “Get a move on, hurry up!” One of the men, at death’s door, had the courage to speak to us: “For the love of God, give me something to eat. Have you got any bread?”

How terrible it was. We did not have any bread to give him. Our rations were 300 grams a day and we were hungry ourselves. The whole population was starving. What were we to do? “For the love of God, give me something to eat.” We could now hear all of them begging as they passed. Our ears rang with their pleas like the echo of a hammer pounding nails into a coffin.

“Where are you from?”

“From Kosovo. We’ve been marching non-stop for a week now and have had nothing to eat. We’ve come over the mountains...”

⁵ Azem Hajdini-Xani, quoted by Butka, *op. cit.* p. 133.

“Were you with Xhafer Deva’s men?’ we asked.

“No, no, we are simply poor wretches.”

I remembered seeing the defeated army of Royal Yugoslavia entering Shkodra in April 1941, exhausted, starving and in rags. There is nothing sadder than seeing a defeated army in tatters. But this was worse. There was no comparison. It was an endless line of skeletons of young men from Kosovo, all in captivity and marching towards an unknown fate.

When they had passed, we clambered back down to the road. From there we could still see the long line of poor men who had crossed the Buna Bridge. They plodded slowly and ponderously. They must have thought they were crossing the Bridge of Sirat between the world of the living and the afterlife. But was this mythology or reality?

A few days later, word spread in Shkodra that somewhere near Ulqin (Ulcinj), the partisans had killed all of the young men from Kosovo. Oh Lord, tell me what sins these men had committed that they deserved such punishment!"⁶

The survivors of the second echelon arrived in Bar at dawn on 31 March 1945. It was then that the actual Bar Massacre took place. There were now about 2,000-2,500 men in the courtyard of the Tobacco Monopoly building and a further 1,000 outside. In the hostile atmosphere that reigned in the town, they were set upon by the men of the Tenth Montenegrin Brigade and by Montenegrin civilians, and about 450 of them were killed. Azem Hajdini-Xani, who was present, describes what happened initially:

"When we arrived in Bar, sometime between 12:00 and 13:00 hours, you could sense throughout the town that the army and civilian population were mobilising and taking to arms. And they were coming in our direction. We now understood the plot and realised that we were in a trap. Our very souls were now to be the targets of rifles and machine-guns that were waiting at every street corner, in windows, on roofs, and in the surrounding hills and woods. I had the impression that not even a bird could soar and escape the ambush. The criminals knew very well that we were dying of thirst and would want to drink so, in order to create an incident, they stopped the column on the road right beside the water fountain. It was a clear provocation, an attempt to incite some of us to leave the column and hasten over to the fountain. The pretext would be used to liquidate all of us. But it did not happen. Every one of us was aware that the scene had been staged in advance. Jahir Murtezi and Ramadan Mihaliqi, led by Sylë Ali Morina, discussed what should be done. They then rose to their feet and went over to the officer who was blocking off the water fountain with his men to ask for permission for the Albanian soldiers to drink. When they made their request, the officer reacted in fury and began to shout and insult them: “*Šiptarsku vam majku, crknite svi do jednoga!*”⁷ He then ordered his men to open fire, and Sylë’s two comrades, Jahir Murtezi and Ramadan Mihaliqi, were killed. Sylë himself, who was more nimble,

⁶ Zef Pllumi, *Rrno vetëm për me tregue*, Tirana 2006 (now available in an English translation as *Live to Tell: a True Story of Religious Persecution in Communist Albania*, Lincoln 2008).

⁷ “Fuck your Albanian mothers. May you all die!”

managed to get back into the column under the volley of arms. The Serbian and Montenegrin soldiers now claimed that Sylë Ali Morina, while running back into the column, had seized the weapon of a Montenegrin soldier and had killed another. Several officers and soldiers advanced on the column, found him and set upon him, shooting him repeatedly with their automatic rifles and stabbing him with their bayonets, as one would kill a savage beast. The rest of us froze. We just stood there on the road, not daring to move or speak. We were petrified and then saw the rifle barrels and bayonets turned towards us. We did not know what would happen. A moment later, the Serbian and Montenegrin forces withdrew to about 50 metres from the column, taking up protected positions among the rocks, behind walls and even behind one another. A little later, three high-ranking officers from the military command, including Major Svjeta Timitijević and Commander Vladimir Rolović, came forth with other officers and men. We were relieved to see them, hoping that someone of responsibility would finally stop the killings and barbaric conduct. Our hopes were in vain, however, when one of the officers began offending and threatening us, with words like: “*Šiptarsku vam majku... Sve ćemo vas ubiti. Nećete odavde izvući ni živu glavu.*”⁸

There was complete silence for a time. Then, one of the young Albanians, Imer Sinani from Koshica, after whispering to his mates, went forward and appealed to the officer to stop the killings, mistreatment and barbaric conduct towards the hapless Albanians. But before he could approach, Serbian and Montenegrin soldiers set at him with their arms and bayonets and tore him to shreds, like a head of cabbage. We were all in a state of shock. The criminals then took four Albanians from the column and ordered them to drag the bodies and the separated limbs off the road and throw them into the ditch that was 5-6 metres away.”⁹

Another eye-witness and survivor of the massacre in Bar was Ymer Sherifi of Krajkova:

"It was my fate, Ymer Sherifi of Krajkova, to be one of the hundred men selected. They tied us up with ropes. Beating us with iron bars and stabbing us with their bayonets, they forced us into a corner between two houses, about 50-60 metres from the column. From the beatings, some men had their heads split in two and their brains were splattered on the ground. When the beating and stabbing stopped, they pointed their automatic rifles at us. No one moved at all, so as not to give any sign of life. It was a narrow alley where they shot at us, and the bodies of the dead and wounded collapsed upon one another. Some men survived, being at the bottom of the heap. But the henchmen they then threw bombs and grenades at us, and when they exploded, body parts flew through the air. I received 16 wounds, of which eight to my head. Those who survived under the weight of the bodies clambered up to the surface, but they were shot then by the Serbs and Montenegrins...

Finally, the mass attack against the Albanians took place at the depot, in the courtyard, on the fields and in town to annihilate all of them. Night fell. Before the bodies were collected, I managed, using all the strength I still had, to extract myself from the pile, crawling so that no one would see me, and joined some

⁸ “Fuck your Albanian mothers. We are going to kill all of you. No one will survive.”

⁹ Azem Hajdini-Xani, quoted by Butka, *op. cit.* p. 165-168.

others survivors on the beach. The next day, I was sent to hospital at Miločer, but they would not admit me because they considered me to be an enemy. I was then sent to the hospital at Melina where I was admitted, because I pretended that I had been wounded in battle with the Germans. They operated on me three times and removed the bullets and shrapnel, but I still have three pieces of metal in my head today."¹⁰

Azem Hajdini-Xani reports that a group of Croatian officers arrived on the scene and took the Tenth Brigade to task for the massacre.

"A short while thereafter, a group of officers arrived that we had never seen before. They began talking to the men who had carried out the massacre, and there was a lot of noise and arguments. We could not tell what they were saying but from the gestures, we could see that they were shocked at what had happened."¹¹

A jeep of American military observers also arrived on the scene, but they were told that they area was unsafe and were sent off in the direction of Ulcinj. Photographers are also said to have been present in the wake of the bloody event. About 430 of the victims were buried at the Muslim cemetery in Bar and the bodies of the rest were thrown into the sea, three kilometres off the coast of Bar.

The third echelon of about 2,700 men left Prizren on 27 March 1945. These men and boys were Albanians, but mostly from Macedonia - from Gostivar, Tetova (Tetovo), Kumanova (Kumanovo) and Kërçova (Kičevo). They were accompanied by the 27th Serb Brigade and 2,626 of them reached Shkodra alive, although most of them were marching barefoot and typhoid fever had spread among them.

While they were crossing the Buna (Boyana) river on 1 April 1945, one Slavic guard drowned. The other guards, thinking he had been deliberately killed, opened fire on the Albanian conscripts and killed about 20 of them. The rest were rounded up by the *Sigurimi* (Albanian State Security) and expedited to Yugoslavia, evidence of the collusion of the Albanian communist authorities. The vast majority of the men reached Bar on 2 April 1945 at about 17:00 hours. This echelon then continued northwards and the conscripts were locked in a storehouse at the military barracks in Old Dubrovnik. The building had been used for storing chemicals and on 18 April 1945, when the Albanian conscripts made an open fire to warm themselves, there was an explosion with a deadly cloud of gas that resulted in the deaths of between 650 and 800 men.

Summary and Conclusion

The three echelons of Kosovo Albanian conscripts that left Prizren for the Adriatic coast from 24-27 March 1945, ostensibly to join the fight against the retreating Germans, made up a total of approximately 7,700 men. Between 600 and 900 of them died on Albanian territory on their forced march to Shkodra. Historian Uran Butka, who has analysed the figures given by various sources comes to the conclusion that of the 7,700 men, 2,355 perished, 1,560 of whom in Bar alone.

¹⁰ Statement of Ymer Sherifi, quoted by Butka, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

¹¹ Azem Hajdini-Xani, submission to the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, 9 November 1966, quoted by Butka, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

Other echelons were sent from Kosovo to the Adriatic coast in April 1945, a total of over 5,300 men. These conscripts set off from Prizren on 19, 20 and 24 April 1945 and took the same route via Kukës, Puka and Shkodra to Bar. Only about 188 of the men perished on the way and the remainder of these forces was sent on to Trieste. Thus, in all, about 13,000 Albanian conscripts were forcefully deported from Kosovo and Macedonia and sent unarmed to the Adriatic Front in March and April 1945. Yugoslav military statistics record that 2,543 of them died, but the real figure is perhaps somewhat higher.

It is evident that in the following years neither the Yugoslav communists under Tito, nor the Albanian communists of Enver Hoxha's new regime in Tirana, who collaborated actively with the Yugoslavs in the early post-war period, were interested in making the crimes committed against the hapless Kosovar conscripts known, and the affair was more or less hushed up. It must also be noted in this connection at any rate that many other massacres, on an even more horrific scale, took place in Yugoslavia in the 1944-1945 period such that the tragic events of Bar paled in comparison even without military or political censorship. In communist Yugoslavia in later years, public discourse of the Bar tragedy remained taboo for two main reasons. Firstly, it opened old wounds between communists and non-communists, and, secondly, it threatened to destabilize the often tenuous ethnic relations between the Kosovo Albanians and the Montenegrins who lived in close contact to one another in southern Yugoslavia. In Albania, the Stalinist regime of Enver Hoxha passed the events over in rigorous silence in order to avoid any suspicion of its involvement - and involvement there was.

The first notable public information on the Bar Massacre appeared in the Kosovo Albanian press in the 1990s after the fall of communism. This was followed up by a number of monographs, among which were Haki Bajrami's *Tragjedia e Tivarit: çka i parapriu tragjedisë, qëllimet dhe pasojat* (The Tragedy of Bar: What Preceded the Tragedy, Objectives and Consequences), Prishtina 1993; and Muhamet Pirraku's *Kalvari i shqiptarësisë së Kosovës: Tivari 1945* (The Calvary of the Albanians of Kosovo: Bar 1945), Prishtina 1993. Much first-hand material was subsequently published by an eyewitness, Azem Hajdini-Xani, in his 500-page book *Masakra e Tivarit: memoare* (The Bar Tragedy: Memoirs), Prishtina 1998. Most recently, historian Uran Butka highlighted the involvement of the Albanian State in the tragedy, in his book *Masakra e Tivarit dhe përgjegjësia e shtetit shqiptar* (The Bar Massacre and the Responsibility of the Albanian State), Tirana 2011.

Now, after over half a century, the tragic events of one of the most shocking massacres in twentieth-century Albanian history can be recalled dispassionately, and laid to rest.

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ABSTRACT

Communist partisan forces took Kosovo in December 1944 and returned it to Serbian rule, after a brief interlude under Italian and German occupation. Soon thereafter, great numbers of Kosovo Albanians of men and boys were forcefully mobilized into the Yugoslav Army, not only to strengthen its ranks, but in particular, to overcome any potential anti-communist resistance in Kosovo by getting as many young men as possible out of the country. In late March 1945, about 7,700 men were mustered in Prizren and sent off to the coast in unarmed echelons of about 2,000 each, ostensibly to fight the retreating Germans. They soon discovered that they were not soldiers, but prisoners. Of these men, 2,355 perished at the hands of their communist officers and guards, 1,560 in Bar (Antivari) alone. This paper tells of the massacres and of the tragedy that set the pace for post-war ethnic relations in Kosovo.

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