

Peasant Movement for Land in the Prefecture of Elbasan (Albania) in the Early 20s - 30s of XX Century

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Abstract: The paper aims to present an aspect of local history of Elbasan region or neighborhood, in the '20s-30s of the twentieth century, peasant struggle for land, as one of the main directions of social conflict in this period, not only in the prefecture, but nationwide. This war not only aimed at resolving the land ownership right, but simultaneously improving the economic status of peasants, through easing the tax burden. To realize these goals in such a motion also included rural layers of Elbasan Prefecture, whose war took more the character of an economic war, given the difficult situation that characterize this layer and poor rural schools, especially the remote areas and state fiscal policy seriously. Through archival sources, in this article we try to analyze the reasons that prompted such a move, the development of its format, the connection with labor movements and their consequences in this region and beyond.

Keywords: peasant movements, social conflicts, fiscal policy, land ownership

Introduction

In the years '20 and '30 of the XX century, one of the directions of the social conflicts in Albania used to be the peasantry's struggle for land. This struggle aimed not only a fair solution of the land ownership, but at the same time it aimed the improvement of the economic situation of the peasantry, through easing the tax burden. The Elbasan Prefecture peasantry was also involved in this movement so as to realize these goals. The difficult situation that characterized the poor and the middle class peasantry, especially those living in the remote mountainous areas, the harsh exploitation by the beys (bejlers) and qehallars, the hard fiscal policy, the numerous taxes and obligations needed to be given to the governmental and religious institutions, the speculations of the tenth (dhjetar) and pawnbrokers, all of these lead to the increase of the revolt on the part of the peasants that had little or no land at all, and gave to their war the characteristics of an economic war. Meanwhile, in the plain and hilly areas, in which the powerful land owners applied their dictatorship supported by the legislation in power of A. Zogu's government, this movement was mostly focused on solving the issue of land ownership. During this time period, even in the prefecture of Elbasan, as throughout the country, the existence of an evident inequality in land, forests, pastures and livestock ownership relations is clearly evidenced. The powerful owners tried to justify the huge amount of the land they owned through heritage, hardwork, and skills. But the fact is that the extension and expansion of a majority of their properties came as a result of lootings, systematic abduction of middle class and poor villagers' land, by using a wide variety of tools and manners. Among the main methods used for the expropriation of peasants were: the harsh fiscal system and the numerous obligations, the fictitious sales of land, as well as the ongoing threats or even murders. The exploitation done through obligation, was one of the tools that made the peasantry to revolt in a spontaneous and unorganized manner, so as to protect their properties.

The types of the development of such a war were various, ranging from the simplest ones like sending letters and telegrams of protest, the development of anti-feudal and anti-government demonstrations, up to armed movement. In a series of documents of this time are shown cases of requests and protests by peasants coming from different regions, addressed to the center of the prefecture or even the Internal Affairs Ministry in Tirana, regarding the injustices that took place in the collection of taxes, or even regarding the peasantry's impossibility to pay them, etc. One form of resistance was also the development of bread demonstrations in famine periods, such as that of 1937, a drought year, when many villagers came down with bags in their hands and gathered in front of the City Hall to demonstratively demand bread.

Under the governance of Iliaz Bey Vrioni's cabinet, the large landowners who had achieved to re-obtain the land-patents that they had had before the revolution of June 1924, felt to be powerful, they increased the exploitation and the authority upon their farmers, especially in those areas that had been centers of resistance against the landowner's violence, for example, in Darsi, in Demir Pashe Bunati's properties and Pekishti (Dumre) in Shefqet Vërlaci's properties. Thus, through the entrepreneur Demir Pashe Bunati, they took from the villagers 3 groschs instead of the 2 (pennies) mexhits for the irrigation of one pend land of corn, while for the rice lands from 1/3 to 1/2 of the production even though the villagers fixed the irrigation channels themselves. In 1924, Shefqet Vërlaci took from the villagers the overdue

obligations they had since 1922 and fined with 3 Napoleon golds every peasant entering his forest. Hence, the Bey area was controlled really well since all of it was put under his dictatorship.

In the mountainous area, the principal direction of the war against the peasantry was led under the slogan of "cleansing of the Democrats", focusing on collecting weapons so as to secure peace in the country, on the one hand, and giving titles and ranks to sergeants such as Xhafarr Bali to be faithful in their service to the government.

In the years 1936-1938, the violence and terror over the peasantry deepened even more, by robbing their arable lands, pastures etc., by using force, the courts decisions or by fake land patent litigations. The owners robbed lands, water lines, pastures, forests, mills, houses or other inproductive land, and from each of them the landlord raised a rent in kind or in cash. Vërlaci together with his farmers organized extortion in the borderline between the villages of Bradashesh and Fikas, Dervish Bey with villagers in the meadows of Malasej in Dumre, in Sulovë, Darsi, Peqin etc. Land robbery by the elderlyhood "pleqësi" evidence was also done by the Peqin beys. They speculated not only to small and medium owners, but also to the claims of the large landowners. Thus, in the clashes about properties between Demir Pashe Bunati and Dervish bey Biçaku, in relation to some other villagers' properties, the village elders approved one side, that of Dervish Bey, and rejected the other party. In the plain areas, the Beys owned water lines, forests, and mills and tried to exploit as much as they could by giving them to the rich peasants at random venture, for example. Vërlaci gave a mill for 20 quarters of corn in Dumre and when it was not of interest to him, he gave it to someone else. As such, Bey used to give to some villagers the living tools so as these villagers could use them and in the same time to cast them into battle against the others. The villagers counterreacted in different forms to the violence exercised by the landowners, qehajais and Beys in the village. Documents of the time show that there had been organized numerous resistance movements by the peasants majority in areas around Elbasan, Krrabë in Dumre in Darsi etc, that rejected to pay the amount of obligation they had to pay. This resistance appeared in the form of opposition to fulfill the economic obligations that were not included in the contract. The biggest complaints of the field peasantry regarded the arable land, the pasture, the water turns, the water line (irrigation channel) which was always fixed free of charge by the villagers themselves whenever it didn't function properly, etc. Organized opposition by all farmers against the landowners, can be found in the villagers of Pekisht against Vërlaci and in Darsi, Peqin, against Demir Pasha, while other rural measures, stored their dissatisfaction undercover and had no courage, time and opportunity to express their revolt against the Beys.

Elbasan Prefecture informed the Ministry of Interior that the landowner Ibrahim Biçaku had evicted from his manors many poor farmers' families. The estate Bey of Cerrik Ibrahim Biçaku using his qehallars, and after having evicted from his soils 4 farmers' families of 40 members, whose houses he had also destroyed, was directly and indirectly attempting to evict the other farmers as well, some with intimidation and some through trial. *As known from this action, - emphasized the appeal of farmers in Elbasan – it is not only the farmers that are harmed but also the state budget, because the fields are left unplanted because the farmers are kept under intimidation.* Complaints of farmers in the villages Kurtej, Sallbegaj, Thanasej, directed to the Elbasan prefecture, against Demir Pashe Peqini's representative, who did not allow them to irrigate their lands using Shkumbini river water, were not the only ones which testified the antihuman treatment of poor peasants by the beys and agas, on the one hand, and by the inability of local and national structures to give the right solution to the problem. *"The only hope we have lies in agriculture – would they further emphasize in their complaint to this prefecture, - and if within a week we are not given the right to water, the seeds will remain without being planted and so our people living in these three villages will be in a difficult situation and will be left without bread, and in this case not only the people, but even the state budget will also not be able to benefit."* Mechanisms and other actions by the Beys and Pashas directed against the poor peasants multiplied day by day and despite complaints of poor villagers directed up to local government, they often fell on deaf ears and the responses were endlessly delayed, without ever even being given a solution to their problem.

Villagers' complaints against taxes comprised a different direction to the opposition of the villagers against not only the qehallars and Beys, but even against the local authority and the government. Resistances to paying tithing were individual or collective. In a letter of the tither Ali Bey Bunga, addressed to the Elbasan prefecture on October 7, 1930, it was proved that the villagers of Kuqan village, refused to pay tithing to him. One form of opposition to paying the tax of the tenth was the cutting or uprooting of fruit trees, especially the grape vine, for which the tax paid was greater than their own production, and as such, so as to escape the greed of the tithers, in areas such as Krrabë, Mokërr, Çermenikë, vineyards and fruit orchards disappeared. The conflict between Godolesh's villagers and a number of villages around Elbasan with the olive tithers dated back since 1927. Villagers had been jailed, but again they refused to yield to pay the obligation amount charged by the entrepreneur. Similarly, even the villagers coming from Dragostunja, Muriqan, Pajova, Bradashesh, Hotolisht, Garunja, Lazareni etc. showed strong resistance to tax payment.

Demir Pasha initially forced villagers of several villages in Peqin, to allow the passage of the irrigation channels needed for the mills operation on their land, without compensation and not long after that he, like all other feudals,

profiting unfairly and illegally, ordered them to pay a fee for irrigation that he himself appointed, 3:50 penny per mole and, similarly, villagers had to pay a tax up to 25% of for the fields sown with corn and rice. The poor peasants paid because of anxiety, because they were afraid and because noone heard their plight. The complaints of Peqini's underprefecture against Demir Pasha were addressed to the Ministry "... as the greed of these entrepreneurs is too great and increases year after year, to our visible harm, as this methodical robbery needs to be stoppenced and for all, and the water should be left free in favor of the farmers, as with these taxes we will never be able to lift our head and as our harvest is drying out, we pray to the Ministry, to have mercy on us and to take the needed decisions by ordering no payment for the corn and by setting a small fee that we can afford for the rice lands." The commission sent by the Ministry in the municipality of Darsi to review the problem decided the tax to be deducted from 22:50 % to 10%, but Demir Pasha's heirs ignored this decision and continued to collect the tax assigned from him. The government never solved this conflict. The committee's decision was never implemented by the entrepreneurs. They did not allow the villagers to water their lands and their obligation still remained 22.50% of their production. The water tax was a tax that had negative consequences on the peasants and favored the landowners. The state did not provide any significant income from this tax, but the consequences fell on the lowland peasantry and they were too damaging.

Another direction of the peasantry's objections was that towards xhelepi (the cattle payment), an objection that appeared with a large scale and often with severe forms. A part of the peasants, who were in great economic difficulty tried to avoid paying it by displacing their cattle or even themselves, or by hiding in remote areas for certain periods of time. Thus, farmers in the province of Shpati, had agreed among themselves to hide their cattle and to support each other. Tax collectors of this region testified thaty there were many hidden animals, which migrated from the lowlands to the mountainous areas and vice versa, and villagers managed to avoid the controls undertaken by the gendarmerie. In 1936, in the district of Shkodra, an operation was undertaken by the gendarmerie to force villagers to show their hidden animals. They used numerous beatings and tortures, to such an extent that a villager died due to the beatings in the village of Bresnik. The confrontation of the villagers directly with the state administration for rejecting xhelepi was greater than in the case of the tithing rejection. Conflicts and opposition were great, because farming was the second important tool for the peasantry's life. Its result was significantly lowering the tax level, somewhat minimizing the effects of this tax on the peasantry and putting in somehow serious trouble the financial institutions, as well as mitigation measures by the government to reduce this tax in 1934, up to 50%.

The peasant movement in the prefecture of Elbasan was developed alongside the labor movement. Again on the basis of these movements were the economic demands. But, the claims and controversies over the treatment of poor peasants and workers continued to fall on deaf ears and their exploitation exceed the unhuman limits. It should be mentioned here even the dissatisfaction caused by the foreign companies, which operated for a long time in this region, treating Albanian workers as vulnerable in all directions. However, it must be said that these moves failed to provoke revolt and strong social movements in this area, as happened in some other regions of the country. Given that most working class was compound of artisans and poor peasants, their economic situation was difficult because of the prevalence of seasonal characterized jobs, but also because of the exploitation they suffered by their owners, who either did not pay the worker according to the contract worker or left them unpaid for several days and weeks.

In the years 1931-1932, a strong wave of strikes, rallies and demonstrations against the government of Ahmet Zog, involved workers, artisans and peasants, who ran the slogan "we want bread, we want bread,". Such strikes were also made by the construction workers in Elbasan, as well as in Durres, Shkoder and other countries.

The severe economic crisis of the years 1929-1935, was preceded by a number of other factors such as: the intensification of the tax system in the years 1925-1928, the doubling of the tax burden on the population, the adamant overdue tax extraction tax since 1912, thus surpassing every potential limit for generating revenue from the peasant and urban population. Fisher, a wellknow researcher, would determine the economic situation in Albania, throughout its life as an independent state, as it had been in a permanent crisis and in desperate straits, which seemed eternal. The Albanian people, accustomed to misery and hardship, were stoicly facing this situation, while the beginning of the crisis and especially the crisis in 1931, tested to the maximum the patience of the population. The tax policy of the Albanian state on the peasantry played the role of a strong blow that infuriated and further deepened the development of a number of internal and external factors that influenced the creation of an extremely serious condition of the peasantry and in all branches of the economy. In the years of the economic crisis, debts started to increase considerably and ususy faced an unprecedented increase of up to 100%. Debts of the peasants only, roughly calculated, amounted to about 20 million gold francs, nearly equal to the state budget.

After years of economic crisis, in the years 1936-1938, there could be noticed a significant development of the Albanian economy compared to previous years. The number of the enterprises and the number of the employees increased, the light industry revived, etc. Yes, poverty was still largely present in the country, the food was insufficient and

sanitation lacked. All these were causes of the spread of infectious diseases in people and despite the government's remedial measures, the situation continued to remain heavy. *Many of the laws adopted by Zogu that served to give impetus to the economic development found no effect in society. Every time these codes faced difficulties in implementation, Zog tried to draft new laws to make them more acceptable and applicable. Such a thing could hardly build government trust through the law* - concludes Duka author.

Conclusions

It should be noted that the peasantry's movements in the Prefecture of Elbasan during this period were directed against the state administration and its fiscal policy, as well as against the rich land owners. However, in terms of the prevalence of small rural property in the prefecture, this movement could not extend to a larger degree, as was the case in some other prefectures of the country. Spontaneous opposition and protests in most cases had no success.

The peasantry's movement for land in the 20's-30's of the XX century generally took place within the existing legal framework. It failed to take the features of a fierce battle with a political character. (Such efforts were only recorded in the area of Gramshi in June 1924, when the peasantry of this area gathered in the war for the liberation of its zone and then coordinated the actions with the revolutionary forces and contributed to the victory of the revolution even in the region of Elbasan). Peasant movements in the region of Elbasan, indirectly, had links with the labor movement. This is because a large number of workers, especially working in foreign companies, came from the village, and their economic incomes were in the service of their families in the village.

A considerable part of the peasantry, nationwide, were farmers and farmers *çifçinj* (workers) in the state and private estates (*çiflig*). In 1930 *çifçinj* farmers accounted 17.3 thousand families or 12.4% of the agricultural population. Most of the agricultural population was compound by the small peasantry of the hilly or mountainous areas, which had very little land. This mass of the peasantry, which possessed an average of 0,54 ha of land per family had turned into half farmers, or half laborers or semi workers. To make a living, a part of this small peasantry received rented land from the landowners, while the rest were forced to send their labor hands to work in the city, or to emigrate abroad. The peasant farmer of the state or the landowners was obligated to pay as rent for the leased land, in most cases, a third of the agricultural products and livestock, and there were cases of even half of this product. What is more these farmers were also forced to perform various drudgery tasks. There were also many small farmers who had little land (*paraqendarë* villagers) who received additional land from the owner, more or less under the same conditions as the servitude (*çifçi*) farmer. There existed also the layer of the *paraqendarë* who were those farmers who lived on rent in the hacienda and practiced different professions such as smiths, masons, shoemakers, tailors, etc..

The resistance of the peasantry was important in several respects: in the political emancipation of the peasantry, in the increased cooperation to gather their efforts against the injustices that continued to be made against them, in setting some limits on state tax policy by the peasantry itself, in refraining the entrepreneurs' efforts in arbitrarily ripping off the peasantry. etc.

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