

Introduction

At the time the treatise *The Truth on Albania and the Albanians* was written, Albania was a virtual *terra incognita*. Historian Edward Gibbon had described the country as a land within sight of Italy and less known than the interior of America. Of all the peoples of the Balkans, the Albanians were the last to be touched by the spirit of romantic nationalism and to strive for consolidation as a people and for statehood. The Greeks, the Bulgarians, the Serbs and the Romanians had all found their place in Europe by the second half of the nineteenth century, and yet the Albanians still languished in ambivalent obscurity as the silent subjects of a stagnating Ottoman Empire, unable to defend their interests and to make their wishes heard.

The author of this treatise was among the first Albanian intellectuals of the period to endeavour to make his country and his countrymen known to the outside world. Pashko Vasa (1825-1892), also known as *Wassa Effendi*, or *Vaso Pasha*, was a statesman, poet, novelist and patriot born in Shkodra. From 1842 to 1847 he worked as a secretary for the British consulate in that northern Albanian town where he had an opportunity to perfect his knowledge of a number of foreign languages: Italian, French, Turkish and Greek. He also knew some English and Serbo-Croatian, and in later years learned Arabic. In 1847, full of idealism and courage, he set off for Italy on the eve of the turbulent events that were to take place there and elsewhere in the Europe of 1848. As an Ottoman citizen, however, he was soon expelled to Constantinople. Here, after an initial period of poverty and hardship, he obtained a position at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, whence he was seconded to London for a time, to the Imperial Ottoman Embassy to the Court of St James's. He later served the Sublime Porte in various positions of authority.

In 1863, thanks to his knowledge of Serbo-Croatian, as he tells us, he was appointed to serve as secretary and interpreter to Ahmed Jevdet Pasha, Ottoman statesman and historian, on a fact-finding mission to Bosnia and Hercegovina which lasted for twenty months, from the spring of 1863 to October 1864. The events of this mission were recorded in his book *La Bosnie et l'Herzégovine pendant la mission de Djevdet Efendi*, Constantinople 1865 (Bosnia and Hercegovina during the mission of Jevdet Efendi). About 1867 we also find him in Aleppo. A few years later he published another now rare work of historical interest, *Esquisse historique sur le Monténégro d'après les traditions de l'Albanie*, Constantinople 1872 (Historical sketch of Montenegro according to the traditions of Albania).

Despite his functions on behalf of the Porte, Pashko Vasa never forgot his Albanian homeland. In the autumn of 1877 he became a founding member of the *Komitet qendror për mbrojtjen e të drejtave të kombësisë shqiptare* (Central committee for the defence of the rights of the Albanian people) in Constantinople. Through his contacts there, he also participated in the organization of the League of Prizren in 1878. He was no doubt the author of the Memorandum on Albanian Autonomy submitted to the British Embassy in Constantinople. Together with other nationalist figures on the Bosphorus, such as hodja Hasan Tahsini, Jani Vreto and Sami bey Frashëri, he played his part in the creation of an alphabet for Albanian and in this connection published a 16-page brochure entitled *L'alphabet latin appliqué à la langue albanaise*, Constantinople 1878 (The Latin alphabet applied to the Albanian language), in support of an alphabet of purely Latin characters. He was also a member of the *Shoqëri e të shtypuri shkronja shqip* (Society for the publication of Albanian writing), founded in Constantinople on 12 October 1879 to promote the printing and distribution of Albanian-language books. For his functions on

behalf of the Porte, he acquired the title of Pasha and on 18 July 1883 became Governor General of the Lebanon, a post reserved by international treaty to a Catholic of Ottoman nationality, and a position he apparently held, true to the traditions of the Lebanon then and now, in an atmosphere of Levantine corruption and family intrigue. There he spent the last years of his life and died in Beirut after a long illness on 29 June 1892. In 1978, the centenary of the League of Prizren, his remains were transferred from the Lebanon back to a modest grave in Shkodra.

Pashko Vasa was also the author of a number of literary works of note. The first of these is a volume of Italian verse entitled *Rose e spine*, Constantinople 1873 (Roses and thorns). The second, *Bardha de Témal, scènes de la vie albanaise*, Paris 1890 (Bardha of Temal, scenes from Albanian life), is a French-language novel which Pashko Vasa published in Paris under the pseudonym of Albanus Albano. Though not written in Albanian, *Bardha of Temal* is one of the earliest novels written and published by an Albanian and is certainly the oldest such novel with an Albanian theme. Though most of Pashko Vasa's publications were in French and Italian, it is one poem, the most influential and perhaps the most popular ever written in Albanian, which assured him a deserved place in Albanian literary history, the famous *O moj Shqypni* (Oh Albania, poor Albania). This stirring appeal for a national awakening is thought to have been written some time around 1878, the dramatic year of the League of Prizren. Often quoted from this work is the stanza:

*Çonju, shqyphtar, prej gjumit çonju,
Të gjith si vllazën n'nji bes shtrëngonju,
E mos shikjoni kish e xhamija,
Feja e shqyptarit asht shqypтариja!*

Awaken, Albanian, wake from your slumber,
Let us all, as brothers, swear a common oath
And not look to church or mosque,
The faith of the Albanian is Albanianism!

To make the Albanian language better known abroad and to give other Europeans an opportunity to learn it, he published a *Grammaire albanaise à l'usage de ceux qui désirent apprendre cette langue sans l'aide d'un maître*, Ludgate Hill 1887 (Albanian grammar for those wishing to learn this language without the aid of a teacher), one of the rare Albanian grammars of the period.

Though a loyal civil servant of the Ottoman Empire, Pashko Vasa also devoted his energies as a polyglot writer to the Albanian national movement. Aware of the importance of Europe in Albania's struggle for recognition, he published *The truth on Albania and the Albanians, historical and critical study*, London 1879, with other versions appearing that year in French, German, Albanian, Turkish and Greek. In this treatise designed primarily to inform the European reader about his people, he offers, among other things, an account of Albanian history from the ancient Pelasgians and Illyrians up to his time, a reflection admittedly more of period beliefs than a work of scholarly reliability. Fascinating, nonetheless, are his ideas on ways and means of promoting the advancement of his nation. Far from appealing for Albanian independence or even autonomy within the Empire, Pashko Vasa proposed simply the unification of all Albanian-speaking territory within one vilayet and a certain degree of local government. The possibility of a sovereign Albanian state was still inconceivable in 1879. He

never lived to read Sami bey Frashëri's treatise 'Albania - what was it, what is it and what will become of it?' printed twenty years later, in which the ideal of full Albanian independence had finally ripened.

Twelve decades have passed since the publication of *The Truth on Albania and the Albanians*, a treatise now so rare that not even the most extensive Albanological book collections, such as that of the Albanian National Library in Tirana, have a copy of it. Its republication is therefore more than welcome. In looking back on these twelve decades of Albanian history, one is occasionally surprised that some things have not changed that much. Despite their consolidation as a nation and despite State independence in 1912, the Albanians remain in many respects the little known and little understood people they were at the time of Pashko Vasa, a nation of people still to unable to defend their interests and to make their wishes heard.

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