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Albania – Yugoslavia Boundary

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INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARY STUDY

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ALBANIA – YUGOSLAVIA BOUNDARY

I. BOUNDARY BRIEF

The Albania–Yugoslavia boundary, about 291 miles in length, is demarcated by pillars. The entire boundary is comprised of about 220 miles on land and about 71 miles on water. Beginning in the Adriatic Sea from the mouth of the Boyana (Buene) River, the boundary follows the river northward, crosses Lake Scutari, and then follows the crest of mountains a distance of about 31 miles to its northernmost point. The boundary then trends southeastward and southward to the Greek tripoint in Lake Prespa.

II. PHYSIOGRAPHY

The Albania–Yugoslavia boundary, like other boundaries of the Balkan Peninsula, reflects the rugged and highly dissected topography characteristic of the European Alpine mountain system. The western margin of the Balkans curves southward in Yugoslavia and Albania as a nearly continuous folded mountain range known as the Dinaric Alps.

The chief physiographic feature of the boundary area is the tangled arrangement of mountain chains interspersed with areas of sunken plains. The lake basins of Scutari in the northwest (146 square miles, the largest lake in the Balkan Peninsula), and Ohrid (134 square miles) and Prespa (112 square miles) in the east, all of which form part of the boundary, are examples of sunken plains caused by cross-faulting and collapse. Another important feature is the rivers which, like the mountains, form boundaries. The Boyana (Buene) River is part of the boundary in the north; the Shkumbi river divides northern and southern Albania; farther south the Vjose river also divides southern Albania.

III. GEOPOLITICAL BACKGROUND

Geopolitical aspects of the boundary area are highly entangled. The Albanians, whose antecedents are said to be Illyrians, sheltered in their mountain fastness, preserved to a remarkable degree their Albanian identity and language despite successive invasions of Celts, Romans, Goths, Slavs, Bulgars, and Turks.

The Serbian state reached its zenith in 1364. Its boundaries extended from the Danube to the Corinthian Gulf and from the Adriatic to Thrace, thus encompassing the entire Albanian area. Twenty-five years later the defeat of the Serbs and their Balkan Allies at Kosovo marked the complete conquest of the Balkans by the Ottoman Turks.

A. Ottoman Period

While the Ottoman Empire was in ascendancy, a steady migration of varied peoples from Asian lands moved into the Balkans and to the outer frontiers of the Ottoman Empire. As the Empire declined, the migrations reversed direction. During five centuries of Ottoman rule the entire Balkans became an ethnographic puzzle. The population included Serbs and Albanians, Macedonians, Bulgars, Vlachs, Gypsies, Armenians, Russians, Jews, Circassians, and others.¹

Early in the 19th century the Serbs sought allies to aid their liberation. After having failed to enlist Austria, they suggested to Russia that an autonomous Serbia with an Adriatic outlet, under the tutelage of a Russian Grand Duke, would give Russia "a warm-water port."

The Turkish Sultan subsequently regarded the rebellion of 1804 as a direct challenge and sent forces into Serbia in 1806 to stem the revolt. He was defeated, however, and further entangled by rebellions in Albania, Greece, and other parts of the Balkans, and especially by Russian intervention in the Russo–Turkish War of 1806–12 and 1827–29.

The Treaty of Adrianople (Edirne) of 1829 enlarged Serbia by one-third. Although not confirmed until 1833, the new boundary extended to Aleksinats (Aleksinac) on the south to the Drin in the Albanian area, on the west, and eastward as far as the Timok River, boundaries which remained unaltered until the Treaty of Berlin of 1878. While not completely independent until the Treaty of Berlin, Serbia acquired internal autonomy.

Under the Ottoman Empire, supremacy over the Albanian area was maintained by a traditional policy of "divide and rule" and by encouragement of rivalry among petty military chiefs. Although Muslims were in the majority and were privileged, their status was based on creed. Albanian nationality was not recognized as such. In 1865, to stem rebellions and to prevent feudal chiefs from challenging the Sultan's authority, the area was divided into the Vilayets (or Provinces) of Scutari, Kosovo, Monastir, and Yanina. This broad area of the four Vilayets, which also included Serbs, Bulgars, Greeks, and others, later became part of the territorial claims of the Albanian nationalists. It also comprised lands which Serbia, other Balkan countries, and the Great Powers fought over in the Balkan Wars and World War I.

In 1875 a Serbian revolt in Bosnia spread through Herzegovina, and was subsequently supported by a declaration of war on Turkey by both northern neighbors of Albania, Montenegro and Serbia, on July 1, 1876.

Seeing that Serbs, Montenegrins, Greeks, and others asserted claims at their expense, the Albanians maintained their loyalty to the Turkish Sultan. The Treaty of San Stefano (March 13, 1878) among other matters proclaimed the complete independence of Montenegro, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Romania. As a result Albania lost Gusinye and Plava in the north to

¹ See International Boundary Study No. 79, Greece–Yugoslavia Boundary, April 30, 1968.

Montenegro and the district west of Lakes Okhrida and Prespa to Bulgaria. Bulgarian gains thus also conflicted with Serbian and Greek territorial aspirations.²

The Great Powers, especially Great Britain, fearing the alarming growth of Russian influence in the Balkans, forced Russia to reconsider "San Stefano." The ensuing Congress of Berlin in 1878 restored Macedonia and the district west of Lake Okhrida to Turkey, in effect returned to the Albanians, but nevertheless left lands to Montenegro and Serbia which Albanian nationalists claimed.

B. The Balkan Wars and World War I

Initially, Albanians, Serbs, and other Balkan peoples were elated at the promise of the Young Turk Reform Movement which was actively supported by Albanians, especially the Muslims. Later, non-Turks became disillusioned. The disillusionment subsequently changed to open rebellion throughout the south Slavic and Albanian boundary areas, as well as in the Balkans generally. On October 5, 1908, Bulgaria proclaimed independence. Two days later, Austria annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina, thereby thwarting nationalist aims of Serbs and other south Slavs toward Yugo-Slavian unity. In the boundary area itself insurrections broke out in 1909 and 1910 among Muslim Albanian tribes in the north and in the Kosovo district in the northeast. The following year rebellion spread to the Christian Albanians. Varied Albanian nationalist leaders met and issued a list of grievances and demands under the "Central Albanian Committee" on May 1, 1911. It called for recognition of Albanian nationality and "that Albania be once more united in a single vilayet," thereby conceding autonomy.

In the summer of 1912, secret treaties among the Balkan Allies committed them to drive Turkey out of the Balkans. These arrangements were made while Turkey was at war (1911–1912) with Italy (then a member of the Triple Alliance). Not only the boundary area, but all Albanian areas were included in the territory which the Balkan Allies expected to conquer from Turkey.

On October 8, 1912, Montenegro, declaring war on Turkey, crossed the Buene River to attack Scutari. The Montenegrin forces subsequently were joined by the Serbian army. The First Balkan War was in full force in the entire Albanian area, with the Greek army occupying much of the south, when an armistice was concluded on December 3 at the dictation of the Great Powers. Shortly after peace negotiations convened on December 16, Austria, rather than allow Albania to be partitioned between the Yugo-Slav States in the north and Greece in the south, thereby giving Serbia the vaunted outlet on the Adriatic, induced the Great Powers to recognize the principle of an autonomous Albania.

² See International Boundary Study–56, Bulgaria–Greece, 10/1/65, p. 4.

C. The Present Boundary

Under the Treaty of London, May 30, 1913, ending the First Balkan War, the settlement of the status of the new Albania and the definition of its boundaries were reserved for future decisions of the Great Powers, who were faced with unraveling the competing claims of the victorious Serbs, Montenegrins, Greeks, and Bulgars from that of the national rights of the Albanian people. Agreement, in principle, on the Albanian frontiers was reached by the Conference of Ambassadors in London during the summer of 1913. Two international commissions were assigned to delimit the boundaries on the ground. The North Albanian Frontier Commission completed its work in June 1914 (the South Albanian Frontier Commission completed its work on the boundary with Greece in December 1913).³ A definitive settlement and final demarcation of the boundary on the ground was delayed by World War I.

The Conference of Ambassadors on November 9, 1921, under the jurisdiction of the Paris Peace Conference, confirmed, with certain modifications, the boundary as determined by the Conference of Ambassadors in London in 1913. An International Boundary Commission, composed of France, Great Britain, and Italy, commenced demarcation in 1922, completing its work in 1925. The final instrument (l'Act final) of demarcation was signed by Great Britain, France, Italy, Greece, and Yugoslavia at Paris on July 30, 1926.

IV. ANALYSIS OF BOUNDARY ALIGNMENT

The present Albania–Yugoslavia boundary is described as follows:

"The northern and eastern frontier with Yugoslavia follows the Boyana (Buene) River from its mouth (latitude 41°52'N.; longitude 19°23'E.) to Gorice; thence north to the shore of Lake Scutari 7 miles west of Scutari town; thence along the middle line of the lake and up the Hot inlet to its head.

"Following the northeastward ridges of the Albanian Alps, the Grude tribe and part of Hoti are excluded, Kastrati and Kelmendi included; but the head of Vermosh valley is cut off, at its most northerly point, M.E. Zihoves (7,100 feet). North of Vermosh, the frontier turns south to the main ridge near Qafe e Valbones; thence northeast, excluding Gusinje and Plava; thence round the northern foothills of M. Kerrshi e Kocajt (7,840 feet) and southeast to Shishtevec on a western spur of the Sar Planina, crossing ridges and valleys, and even the White Drin, and dividing the Jakova district, leaving town and valley outside Albania and the mountain dependencies within.

"From Shistevec the frontier runs south nearly to, but excluding Debar (Diber); then follows the Korab and Mal i Deshatit ridge, parallel with the Sar Planina and

³ See International Boundary Study No. 113, Albania–Greece, 8/18/71.

traversed by streams descending from it. Near Debar the Black Drin enters Albania and joins the White Drin at Kukes. At Debar M. i Deshatit ends and the Radika river from east of it enters the Drin. The frontier then makes a westward circuit to exclude Debar, and follows the Drin for about 4 miles; then mounts southwest on the Jablanica ridge, which it follows southeast until, above Lin, it turns east to Lake Ochrida, and crosses it to its southeast shore, leaving the Sveti Naum Monastery⁴ in Yugoslavia.

"Turning east to Lake Prespa, and then south across its west arm, the Yugoslav frontier meets the Greek frontier of Albania within the lake."

The Albania–Yugoslavia tripoint with Greece in Lake Prespa is located southwest of Veliki Grad Island at about 40°51'N. latitude, 20°59' E. longitude.

V. SUMMARY

The Albania–Yugoslavia boundary, about 291 miles in length, is comprised of about 220 miles on land and about 71 miles on water. The entire boundary is demarcated by 176 numbered and intervisible boundary pillars and many other unnumbered markers. Although the potentiality for dispute persists due to the presence of about 800,000 Albanians in the vicinity of boundary areas, especially in the Kosovo District in Yugoslavia, there are no active disputes regarding the specific alignment of the boundary. The boundary should be shown on official maps as an established international boundary.

The boundary is a result of the Balkan Wars and World War I in which Great Power diplomacy was intimately involved. During World War II, when Italian forces occupied Albania, irredentist claims were revived by Italy. With the dismemberment of Yugoslavia by the Axis Powers in 1941, Kosovo and some parts of Montenegro and Macedonia were incorporated in Italian-controlled Albania. After World War II the pre-war frontier between Yugoslavia and Albania was restored by the Tito Government and confirmed by the 1947 peace treaty with Italy.

Location of the boundary pillars is shown on Sheets 1–11, 1:50,000, of the International Boundary Commission, 1922–1925. A reasonably accurate representation of the boundary on a medium scale is found on Army Map Service 1:250,000, Series 1501, Sheets NK 34–4, 5, 7, 8, and 11. A small-scale depiction of the boundary on a single sheet is found on Army Map Service 1:1,000,000 scale, Series 1301, Sheet NK–34.

⁴ The district of Vermosch near the northernmost part of the boundary and the area of the Monastery of St. Naum on the southeastern shore of Lake Ohrid, after years of dispute, were awarded to Yugoslavia in 1925.

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