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Double struggle, no income:  
Ottoman borderlands in Northern Albania

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## DOUBLE STRUGGLE, NO INCOME: OTTOMAN BORDERLANDS IN NORTHERN ALBANIA

### *Introduction*

If we speak about Ottoman borderlands we must be aware that many different kinds did exist. Borderlands may have possessed the character of a blurred and transitional zone between areas under cultivation and desert lands under Bedouin control. In the nineteenth century Ottoman authorities attempted to extend their control into these areas which had sometimes not been exposed to direct Ottoman administration for centuries.<sup>1</sup> We may find on the other hand rather clear-cut military borders such as in the Balkans between the Austrian and Ottoman empires.

A peculiar case is the Montenegrin-Ottoman borderland. We are confronted here with a border within the Ottoman Empire. Montenegro – at that time much smaller than in its present-day size – had been able to reach the status of a *de facto* independent entity in the eighteenth century under the leadership of princely bishops, the *vladika* (Ottoman: *ladika*). Montenegro had two Ottoman borders – one looking towards Herzegovina, the other towards Northern Albania. The main thrust of Montenegro's expansionism was to the south since only here could it hope to attain direct access to the Mediterranean (in the north the coast was inaccessible to the Montenegrins due to the Austrian presence beginning in the early nineteenth century). In the rest of the article only the Montenegrin–Ottoman border in Northern Albania will be dealt with.

Military campaigns in the 1830s had returned the North Albanian lowlands including its main urban center Shkodra (Shkodër) to Ottoman control. Montenegro, however, the mountainous region to the north of Albania, was never to lose again the quasi-independent status it had attained in the preceding decades and, even more, was now a constant threat to the adjacent lands under Ottoman rule. Montenegro finally gained international recognition as an independent state with the Treaty of Berlin in 1878.

Ottoman authorities traditionally relied on the tribally organized population in the regions adjacent to the mountain principality to counter Montenegrin inroads and attempts to enlarge its territory to the detriment of the Ottomans. The Ottoman authorities realized fully that a “benign” policy of cooptation towards the tribal population in the border region was necessary to avoid their breaking away. On the

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Eugene L. Rogan, *Frontiers of the State in the Late Ottoman Empire: Transjordan, 1850-1921* (Cambridge, 1999).

other hand, the local population understood that the constant pushing and pulling from both sides increased their bargaining power. Ottoman policy until 1878 clung to the official position that Montenegro was part of the Ottoman Empire. All measures and actions taken by the local officials stood under the premise of not damaging Ottoman claims on Montenegro in the framework of international law. Ottoman authorities in both Istanbul and Shkodra in Northern Albania thus had to master two tasks of very different natures, to uphold the fiction of Ottoman sovereignty over Montenegro and to maximize the returns of a traditional cooptation policy under the conditions of protracted low-scale warfare.

From the 1850s onward the situation was further complicated as the Tanzimat ideology had a decisive influence on the perception and comportment of the central and local Ottoman authorities. Now, they were determined to install direct control and full-fledged administrative apparatus in the virtually autonomous mountain regions of Northern Albania (Ottoman: *Kiğalık*). Ottoman policy in the borderlands to Montenegro was thus stuck in a dilemma between the exigency of *realpolitik* and the ambitious Tanzimat reform policy. Only secure borders of the Montenegrin mountain principality could procure the necessary conditions in order to break the resistance of the Catholic tribes of the Albanian highlands, in most cases, against their incorporation into the Ottoman administrative and fiscal regime. Paradoxically, in order to attain this aim, Ottoman authorities had to recur once again to their probed policy of cooptation, refraining from enforced taxation and conscription.

### *The Ottoman Conflict with Montenegro and the International Setting*

In the negotiations leading to the Treaty of Paris in 1856 the Ottoman Empire could once more defend its claims to the mountain principality. Ottoman sovereignty over Montenegro was formally confirmed by the European powers. The prelude to this confirmation was a sudden attack against Russia by Buol-Schauenstein, one of the two Austrian delegates to the conference. He reproached Russia for striving to achieve a similar position of dominance in Montenegro as it had already attained in the two Danubian principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia. Orloff and Brunnow, Russia's delegates to the conference defended Russia by saying "that the Russian government would entertain with Montenegro relations that were simply fed by the Montenegrin sympathies for Russia and by the benevolent feelings of Russia towards these mountain people." Ali Paşa, the principal Ottoman representative, felt himself obliged to stress that the Sublime Porte regarded Montenegro as an integral part of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>2</sup>

Russia held a traditionally strong position in Montenegro going back to the eighteenth century as the Montenegrins saw themselves ethnically and religiously as one with the Russians. Ottoman authorities were well aware of these close ties between

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<sup>2</sup> Protocol of the sessions on 25 and 26 March 1856; reproduced in I. Testa, *Recueil des traités de la Porte ottomane avec les puissances étrangères depuis le premier traité conclu, en 1536, entre Suléyman I et François I jusqu'à nos jours*, 11 vols. (Paris, 1864-1911), here vol. 5, pp. 88ff.

Russia and Montenegro.<sup>3</sup> French influence on Montenegro became strong from the late 1850s onward after Russia had been unable to defend Montenegrin interests at the Paris conference in 1856. Furthermore, in 1851 the russophile Petar II Njegoš (d. 1851) was followed by Prince Danilo (r. 1851-1860) who had received a West European education and enjoyed close contacts with the enormously active and increasingly anti-Ottoman minded French consul in Shkodra, Hyacinthe Hecquard.<sup>4</sup> Russia was able to regain, to a certain extent, its former influence in Montenegro in the 1860s but had lost the dominant position it had enjoyed in the earlier decades of the nineteenth century.

The maneuverability of Ottoman policy towards Montenegro was severely hampered by the European powers. When Ottoman armies thrust forward successfully into the Montenegrin heartland in 1852, the European powers forced a halt to the Ottoman military advance and made the Ottomans consent to the so-called “Leiningen convention” of 1853, abrogating Ottoman territorial gains. When, however, a military campaign of the Ottoman army against Montenegro ended unsuccessfully in 1858 the European powers forced upon the Ottoman Empire the installation of a delimitation commission that would determine the exact borderline between Montenegro and the Ottoman Empire – with territorial gains to Montenegro being included. France and Russia, with the support of Austria and Prussia, maintained that most of Montenegro was not fit for agriculture; the Montenegrins thus were obliged to make their living by robbery. Extending the borders of Montenegro by including fertile plains – so they argued – would mollify the aggressive comportment the Montenegrins had shown during the preceding decades.<sup>5</sup>

On the whole, we can observe an ever widening gap between the formal sovereignty the Ottoman Empire exerted over the mountain principality and Montenegro’s way to a centralized and viable state. Besides insisting on the diplomatic plane that Montenegro still formed a part of the Ottoman Empire the pre-eminent aim of Ottoman policy was rather down-to-earth: to prevent a Montenegrin break-through to the Mediterranean Sea at the port-town of Spić and to avoid any development that would lead to European intervention and official recognition of Montenegro’s sovereignty.

The frustration of the Ottoman political and administrative body with this state of affairs was succinctly expressed by Ahmed Cevdet Efendi (1823-1895) who had been

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<sup>3</sup> Başbakanlık Arşivi İstanbul (henceforth, BBA) İrade Dahiliye 20618, leff 1, *talimâtname* issued by the Sublime Porte to the incoming *mutasarrıf* of Shkodra, Âgâh Paşa, approved by *irâde* on 3 Ş 1271/20 April 1855, accusing the Russians “to stretch out its hands with the excuse of being of the same confession and nationality” (*ittihād-ı mezheb ve milliyet bahânesiyle cebel-i mezkûre el atarak*). Similar formulations may be found in BBA İrade Meclis-i Mahsus 1016, *talimâtname* for the incoming *mutasarrıf* of Shkodra, Râşid Paşa, approved by *irâde* on 21 R 1278/26 October 1861 (“*ehâlî-i mezbûre [Montenegrins] kavmiyyeten ve mezheben Rusyalular ile mücânîs bulunduklarından*”).

<sup>4</sup> Hyacinthe Hecquard is also the author of *Histoire et description de la Haute Albanie ou Guégarie* (Paris, 1858), an important book which is still indispensable.

<sup>5</sup> See BBA İrade Meclis-i Mahsûs 1016, *talimâtname* for the incoming *mutasarrıf* of Shkodra, Râşid Paşa (1861).

sent as a special commissioner to Shkodra in 1861.<sup>6</sup> After his return to Istanbul he gave a detailed report on the conditions in the region and described Montenegro's privileged position in the following words:

If one would give me Bosnia and the same privileges that Montenegro enjoys I could conquer the whole of Europe. The Montenegrins can strike wherever they want, and retreat behind their frontiers if a counter force threatens them. It is impossible to encircle the Montenegrins completely with a military cordon. As long as the Montenegrins can come over, strike the villages they want to attack and we cannot enter their territories and punish them, we will not save our country from their evil doings.<sup>7</sup>

Unsurprisingly, local Ottoman authorities had difficulties in finding the appropriate stance towards Montenegro. They had to be constantly admonished by the central authorities in Istanbul to prevent any breach of the diplomatic *status quo*; e.g. in 1845 the Porte cautioned local authorities to note explicitly in the travel documents of Montenegrins their Ottoman citizenship. Ottoman authorities in the region had carelessly accepted the self-description of Montenegrins as Russian citizens.<sup>8</sup>

One way to compensate for the helplessness experienced in the face of the Montenegrin question was to discredit the Montenegrins morally and to reduce them to a pack of mere scoundrels. The official Ottoman terminology named the Montenegrins *usât* (rebels),<sup>9</sup> but mostly preferred the term *eşkiyâ* (bandits),<sup>10</sup> thus trying to cover up the extent of independence Montenegro had already gained. Especially, the widespread practice to cut off the enemies' heads and to plant them on sticks before one's own home was found to be abhorrent by the Ottoman administrative elite. Ahmed Cevdet during his mission to Shkodra in 1861 had tried to persuade the tribal leaders on the

<sup>6</sup> On this important statesman and historian, see Yusuf Halaçoğlu and M. Akif Aydın, "Cevdet Paşa," *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslam Ansiklopedisi*, vol. 7 (Istanbul, 1993), pp. 443-50.

<sup>7</sup> Ahmed Cevdet, *Tezâkir*, 4 vols. ed. Cavid Baysun (Ankara, 1986-1991), here vol. 2, *tezkire* no. 18 (1986), p. 190: "*Karadağlılar hâiz oldukları imtiyâz ile bana Bosna eyâleti verilse bütün Avrupa'yı istilâ ederdim. Çünkü benim hudûduma kimse tecâvüz edemeyecek ben ise her hangi gün ister isem çıkıp istediğim yeri vururum ve önüme bir kuvve-i gaalibe çıkarsa geri gelir ve hudûdumun dâhiline sığırım. Biz Karadağ'ın etrâfını dâiren mâ-dâr ordular ile ihâte edemeyiz. Karadağlılar çıkıp istedikleri karyeleri vurduka biz içeriye girip de te'dib edemez isek hiç bir vaktide anların şerr ü mazarratından memleketimizi kurtaramayız.*"

<sup>8</sup> BBA Bâb-ı Âlî Evrak Odası: Sadâret Mektûbî Kalemi 27/59 (1845).

<sup>9</sup> See for example BBA BEO A.MKT 188/44, Osmân Mazhar on two Russian officers being active in Montenegro (1849): "*Ladika ile ba'de'l-mükâleme rüesâ ve sergerdegân-ı usâtı cem ile*"; BBA İrade Dahiliye 16273, Osmân Mazhar, opening a letter from 1852 with the phrase: "*Karadağ'ın reîs-i usâtı bulunan Danilo Zeko*"; for examples from the eighteenth century, see Hamid Hadžibegić, "Odnos Crne Gore prema Osmanskoj državi polovicom 18. vijeka," *Prilozi za orijentalnu filologiju i istoriju jugoslovenskih narodna pod turskom vladavinom* (Sarajevo) 3/4 (1953/1954): 485-508, here 497 and 500.

<sup>10</sup> BBA İrade Dahiliye 20618: The *talimât-nâme* for the incoming *mutasarrıf* of Shkodra, Âgâh Paşa, from 1855 uses the term *eşkiyâ-yı cebeliyye* almost as a synonym for the Montenegrins.

Ottoman side to refrain from such practices, also by pointing to possible dangers of infection from the dead corpses.<sup>11</sup> The incoming *mutasarrıf* of Shkodra, Râşid Paşa, was admonished in 1861 that “to retaliate such a comportment on the same level would mean to show the same level of inhumanity and would not correspond to the obligations of the *sharia* and the sublime compassion of the Ottoman state.”<sup>12</sup> The intention of the argument here is evident: Ottoman rules of conduct are rooted in a highly developed civilization and state. On the other hand, European powers support for the sake of their egoistic motives barbaric mountain tribes.

### *Ottoman Policy in the Ottoman-Montenegrin Borderlands*

From the instructions (*talimâtname*) given to the incoming governors of Shkodra, Āgâh Abdülazîz Paşa in 1855,<sup>13</sup> Menemenli Mustafâ Tevfîk Paşa in 1856<sup>14</sup> and Mehmed Râşid Pasha in 1861<sup>15</sup> it is clear to what extent Ottoman policy in the province of Shkodra was determined by the question of Montenegro. The strategic importance of Northern Albania in the defense against Montenegro was stressed again and again. The necessity to station sufficient forces in the border regions adjacent to Montenegro was clearly understood by the Ottoman state but could not be realized due to military involvements in other parts of the empire.

Besides these realistic assessments one finds almost utopian policy aims. For example, Ottoman authorities, central and local, obviously did believe – and not only feigned to believe – that the Montenegrin *vladika* might consider to join again the Ottoman realm. In 1844 the *vladika* assured the Ottoman governor in Shkodra, Osmân

<sup>11</sup> A. Cevdet, *Vesikalar*, document no. 20, 190, in a report to the Sublime Porte after his return to Istanbul on 7 B 1278/9 January 1862.

<sup>12</sup> BBA İrade Meclis-i Mahsûs 1016 (1861): “*Ancak bu dağlular [Montenegrins] hakikaten vahşî ve gaddâr ve insâniyyet ve medeniyyetden bi-behre olduklarından düşmanlarının rü’ûs-i maktûasını güyâ eser-i galebe olmak üzere gezdirmek misillü daha nice dürlü behâyime bile yakışmayacak evzâ-i kerîheye cür’et etmekte olduklarından beri taraftan bu şeylere aynıyle mukâbele anlar gibi insâniyyetsizlik sıfat-ı mezmûmesini ihtiyâra mütevakkıf olub buña ise ne şer-i şerifiñ ve ne merhamet-i seniyyeniñ bir vechile rızâsı olmadığından.*”

<sup>13</sup> BBA İrade Dahiliye 20618; leff 1. Āgâh Abdülazîz Paşa obviously died several months later at the end of 1855. On his person, see Sinan Kunalalp, *Son Dönem Osmanlı Erkân ve Ricali (1839-1922). Prosopografik Rehber* (Istanbul, 1999), p. 54.

<sup>14</sup> BBA İrade Dahiliye 23192, leff 1, approved by the Sultan on 23 Z 1272/25 August 1856. On the advice of the Porte to entrust the respective governor in Shkodra with military powers his predecessor Mustafâ Atâllâh was removed from office and Menemenli Mustafâ Tevfîk Paşa (?-1879), *ferik* of the Rumelian army, was appointed. On his person, see S. Kunalalp, *Prosopografik Rehber*, p. 111; Mehmed Süreyyâ, *Sicill-i Otmânî yahud tedkire-i meşâhir-i otmânîyye*, 4 vols. (Istanbul, 1308-1315/1890/91-1897/98), here vol. 3, p. 413.

<sup>15</sup> BBA İrade Meclis-i Mahsûs 1016; leff 1. Under the governorship of Râşid Paşa (1824-1876) from October 1861 to April 1862 civil and military functions were again separated. Mehmed Râşid was later a successful *vâlî* in Syria (1866-1871) and even advanced to the office of Minister of Foreign Affairs; see M. Süreyyâ, *Sicill*, vol. 2, pp. 356f; S. Kunalalp, *Prosopografik Rehber*, p. 100.

Mazhar,<sup>16</sup> that he was loyal to the Ottoman Empire.<sup>17</sup> In the same year obviously Ottoman authorities showed themselves convinced that it was possible to redirect the loyalty of the Montenegrin princely bishop towards the Ottoman state.<sup>18</sup>

The maximalistic approach, that is, to absorb the Montenegrin principality completely into the Ottoman state, can be found once again a decade later in the instructions for Āgāh Abdūlazīz Paşa. The Porte urged the incoming governor to follow a double-tracked policy. On the one hand, Āgāh Abdūlazīz should treat the people on the Ottoman side of the border in the best way possible in order to present to the pro-Montenegrin parts of the borderland population or even to the Montenegrins themselves the picture of an ideal Ottoman commonwealth that would entice them to shift their allegiance to the Ottoman side.<sup>19</sup> The other part of the strategy – a clear specimen of an Ottoman policy of divide and rule – was to sow discord amongst the Montenegrins themselves and their various leaderships. Secret Ottoman investigations had come to the conclusion that part of the Montenegrin tribal elite was not content with the leadership of Danilo. These opponents should be drawn to the Ottoman side. The Ottomans were indeed able to win over Montenegrins of minor stature. The venture, however, to drive a wedge between the Montenegrin leadership at a time as late as the 1850s was completely unrealistic.

Five years later, in 1861, the instructions for Mehmed Rāşid Paşa reflect a more sober approach. The *talīmānāme* states that principally the most effective way to quell the unrest in the border regions would be to advance into the interior of the mountain principality and to strike the Montenegrins decisively. But because of the international political situation such an option was not be available. The only feasible alternative was to contain Montenegro by an effective system of border control and fortifications.<sup>20</sup> One major component of this policy of containment was the attempt to install an

<sup>16</sup> Osmān Mazhar Paşa Skopljak (?-1861) served as governor of Shkodra from 1841 to 1854, see M. Süreyyā, *Sicill*, vol. 3, 448; for slightly differing dates (1843-1854), see Thomas Schebe, *Verwaltungsreformen der frühen Tanzimatzeit: Gesetze, Maßnahmen, Auswirkungen. Von der Verkündigung des Ediktes von Gülhane 1839 bis zum Ausbruch des Krimkrieges 1853* (Frankfurt am Main, 1991), p. 395.

<sup>17</sup> BBA Bâb-ı Âlî Evrak Odası: Sadâret Mektûbî Kalemî 12/85, Osmān Mazhar on 15 CA 1260/2 June 1844; see also from the same document class no. 12/86 for identical date and almost identical contents.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, BBA BEO Bâb-ı Âlî Evrak Odası: Sadâret Mektûbî Kalemî 14/90, report by Osmān Mazhar on 23 B 1260/8 August 1844 about the prospects to regain the loyalty of the Montenegrin princely bishop towards the Ottoman Empire.

<sup>19</sup> BBA İrade Dahiliye 20618, leff 1, *talīmānāme* for Āgāh Pasha (1855): “*Şimdiki hâlde devlet-i aliyyece lâzım olan bir taraftan bunlarıñ ara sıra vukû’ a gelmekde bulunan harekât-ı tecävüziyeleriniñ men’ ve def’i ve diğ er taraftan tedâbir-i hakîmâne ile cânib-i saltanat-ı seniyyeye celb ve imâleleri icrâ ve el-hâsıl usât-ı merkûme bunlarıñ saâdet-hâllerine gıpta ile kendü usûl-ı idârelerinden teneffür etmesiyle hâsıl olabileceğinden ve bunlar bir güne muâmele-i cebriyye vukû’ a gelmeksizñ kendü idâre-i ahyâriyyeleriyle taht-ı tâbi’iyyet-i saltanat-ı seniyyeye girmek emel ve arzûsını izhâr eyledikleri hâlde.*”

<sup>20</sup> BBA İrade Meclis-i Mahsûs 1016; leff 1 (1861).

effective blockade on Montenegro leading to a shortage of grain and other important food stuff in the area.<sup>21</sup>

The Montenegrin-Ottoman border seemed to be a clear-cut one: the Montenegrins being a Slavic-speaking population of Greek Orthodox confession versus the Albanian-speaking Muslim and Catholic population. Ottoman authorities naturally relied on the tribally-organized Albanian population of Muslims or Catholics in the borderlands to repulse Montenegrin attacks on Ottoman territories. The “natural” border would thus be found when Montenegro would have incorporated the few tribes remaining on the Ottoman side of the border which were of Greek Orthodox denomination and spoke South Slavic.

But things were more complicated. Particularly disputed between the Montenegrins and the Ottomans were areas with a population professing various confessions (Muslim, Orthodox, Catholic) and being of Albanian and Montenegrin descent, such as the tribes of Vasojevići (Ottoman: *Vasovik*) or the Kuči (Ottoman: *Koç*). The Kuči, for example, were a young tribal unit that had come into existence during the fifteenth century and were comprised of Albanian and Montenegrin elements, including Greek Orthodox Christians, Muslims and Catholics. These tribal conglomerates repeatedly shifted their allegiance. When interrogated by the governor of Shkodra, Mustafâ Atâllâh, in 1856 about the cause for their recent inclinations towards Montenegro, the leaders of the Kuči answered that they would repeatedly and habitually shift their allegiances, but now – after they had been presented with gifts and honorary clothes – they would return under the sultan’s protection.<sup>22</sup> What Cemal Kafadar has said about the Ottoman-Byzantine borderlands of the thirteenth century, “that the sociocultural formations on both sides developed their traditions during many centuries of close contact and intensive exchange, [...] does not preclude the role of violence,”<sup>23</sup> holds also some truth for the Montenegrin-Ottoman borderlands in the nineteenth century.

Ottoman day-to-day policy on the ground towards Montenegro and the population in the borderlands between the province of Shkodra and Montenegro was to a large extent determined by the traditional interplay of cooptation and confrontation. In order to describe the aim of drawing the population back to the Ottoman side, terms were used such as *istimâlet* (a gaining goodwill, a coaxing),<sup>24</sup> *dehâlet* (a taking refuge),<sup>25</sup> or

<sup>21</sup> On earlier attempts in this vein see BBA BEO A.MKT 8 / 23, Osmân Mazhar to the Porte (1843); also, see H. Hecquard, *Histoire*, p. 83.

<sup>22</sup> BBA Bab-ı Âlî Evrak Odası: Sadâret – Mektûbî, Umûm Vilâyât 195/31. On the volatility of Kuči allegiance also, see H. Hecquard, *Histoire*, p. 90.

<sup>23</sup> Cemal Kafadar, *Between Two Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State* (Berkeley, 1995), p. 81.

<sup>24</sup> For two examples, see BBA Bâb-ı Âlî Odası Sadâret Mektûbî Kalemî 12/86: Osmân Mazhar on 15 CA 1260/2 June 1844: “*Karadağ ladikasınıñ temîn ve istimâleti zımnında*”; BBA İrade Şûrâ-ı Devlet 1218: *arz tezkiresi* on 8 March 1873: The members of the newly founded council of the Mirdita are not pursuing a regular occupation. They will receive a salary in order to draw them even more to the side of the government (“*cânib-i hükûmete bir kat daha celb ve imâleleri*”).

more specifically *tebā'iyet* (being the subject of a sovereign or state; allegiance, submission).<sup>26</sup> However, the population in the borderland region understood that the interest shown and the benefits offered by both sides meant an increase in their bargaining power – and they took profit from it. In the instructions for Menemenli Mustafā Tevfik Paşa from 1856, the Porte clearly utters its suspicion that border warfare was not only in the interest of the Montenegrins, but also of the notables on the Ottoman side in order to make themselves irreplaceable.<sup>27</sup>

In sum, Ottoman authorities oscillated between fairly unrealistic attempts to win back Montenegro or at least parts of the Montenegrin population to the Ottoman state and a kind of minimalistic day-to-day policy of cooptation.

### *The Instrument of the Besa*

One major tool of the Ottoman policy of cooptation was the *besa* (Albanian, meaning agreement or compact). The *besa* was a key instrument of Albanian society to solve and prevent conflicts and to create mutual social obligations. The *besa* served often to abrogate current cases of blood revenge for a limited period of time and for precisely designated places and ways. Economic considerations (bringing in the harvest, trading) must have been predominant in granting safe-conducts that were effectuated by the *besa*.<sup>28</sup> That cases of vendetta could be suspended for a certain period<sup>29</sup> with the instrument of the *besa* was essential for the up-keep of social and economic life.<sup>30</sup> The *besa* was also used as an instrument of collective oath within a tribal group or in the military units of a *bayrak*.<sup>31</sup>

Cases of vendetta could come to an end when both sides could agree upon the fact that parity had been reached in death toll or if simply one of the two revenge-taking parties died out. Peace agreements could also be bargained with the help of persons who were befriended to both parties or who enjoyed authority and prestige such as

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, BBA BEO A.MKT 12/86, report by Osmān Mazhar (1844): The Montenegrin princely bishop has promised that “*bir hakīm beseler ile kemā kān raiyyeti kabūl etmek üzere dehālet ve istīmāna rāzī olarak İşkodraya varub....*”

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, BBA Īrade Dahiliye 16273, Osmān Mazhar to the Porte (1852): The Montenegrin princely bishop Danilo is agitating amongst the population on Ottoman territory, “*ve o sırada reāyā-yı devlet-i aliyeyi dahi safī ve cellī haberler irsāliyle kendüsine tebaiyyete terğīb etmekde....*”

<sup>27</sup> BBA Īrade Dahiliye 23192, leff 1 (1856).

<sup>28</sup> H. Hecquard, *Histoire*, p. 334; Mark Krasnići, “O ‘besi’. Prilog proučavanju običajnog prava kod Šiptara,” *Zbornik za narodni život i obiçaje Južnih Slavena* (Zagreb) 48 (1962): 271-280, here 272f.

<sup>29</sup> Ludwig von Thallóczy, “Kanuni i Lekës,” in *Illyrisch-albanische Forschungen*, vol. 1. ed. Ludwig von Thallóczy (München, 1916), pp. 409-462, here pp. 424f, describes, how such a suspension of vendettas could be agreed upon.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Bartl, *Albanien. Vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart* (Regensburg, 1995), p. 59.

<sup>31</sup> On the case of the Mirdita, see Pal Doçi, “Të dhëna rreth vetëqeverisjes dokesore të Mirditës në fund të shek. XIX dhe në fillim të shek. XX,” *Studime Historike* (Tirana) 3 (1974): 101-122, here 107.

Catholic priests. Decrees of the sultan would abrogate all current cases of blood revenge but these truces were the ones most likely to be broken. Amicable settlement of vendettas always implied the concession of the blood-seeking party to deliver the conflict to oblivion. A series of vendettas in the princely dynasty of the Mirdita and the Gjonmarkaj could only be brought to a halt at a moment when both sides, having lost an equal number of men, declared their willingness to “forget.”<sup>32</sup>

The *besa* was also frequently employed in political affairs. On a journey of a mixed Ottoman-European commission into the Mirdita in the year 1855 an agreement with the leadership of the Mirdite tribal conglomeration was sealed with an oath of all Mirdite *bayrakdârs* and *kocabaşıs* present. The Ottoman special commissioner Mehmed Tevfik<sup>33</sup> reported in detail how the *besa* was forced upon the leaders of the Mirdita.<sup>34</sup>

Correspondence between various Ottoman authorities and military commanders again and again stress the importance of the *besa* for keeping the Ottoman-Montenegrin borderlands quiet and the population loyal to the Ottoman state.<sup>35</sup> In July 1856 the governor of Shkodra, Mustafâ Atâllâh,<sup>36</sup> reported to the Porte about Montenegrin preparations for war and underlined his own endeavors to keep the *besa* between the population of the *sancak* of Shkodra and the Montenegrins intact.<sup>37</sup> Until this time several fights had taken place in the vicinity of Podgorica and Špuz, but not to the extent to endanger the *besa*. The instructions given in August 1856 to Menemenli Mustafâ Tevfik Paşa once again underlined that the maintenance of the *bgsa* was of highest priority.<sup>38</sup> The reasons for this defensive and measured attitude were made clear in the instructions: The Montenegrin leadership would use any incident as a pretext for military aggression and the Albanian notables on the Ottoman side would contribute to such a drive towards war since that would render their services indispensable. When the

<sup>32</sup> H. Hecquard, *Histoire*, p. 241: “le nombre de morts étant égal de chaque côté, l’oubli du passé a été juré...”; also, see pp. 245 and 381.

<sup>33</sup> An identification of this person was not possible.

<sup>34</sup> BBA İrade Hariciye 5862, leff 10, special commissioner Mehmed Tevfik on 29 R 1271/19 January 1855: “*beynlerinde cārî olan bese dahi icrâ etdirilmiş ise de buralar halkınıñ cümlesi beyni kalın ademler olduğu vechile.*”

<sup>35</sup> BBA Bâb-ı Âlî Evrak Odası Sadâret Evrakı: Sadâret – Mektûbî, Mühimme 02-A/63, Osmân Mazhar, *mutasarrıf* of Shkodra, reports on 10 B 1263/24 June 1847, on the attempts of the Montenegrin princely bishop to bring the people in the borderlands on his side with the means of collective oaths (“*âyinlerince yemin ederek tarafına çevirmek hayluca sa’y etmiş*”); also, see BBA Bâb-ı Âlî Evrak Odası Sadâret Evrakı: Sadâret – Mektûbî, Umûm Vilâyât 318/99, report by Abdî Paşa, *mutasarrıf* of Shkodra, on 17 ZA 1274/29 June 1858 in the same vein (“*ehâlî ve dağlular beyninde bir beseniñ akdi hayli müşkilâtı dâfi olacağı*”).

<sup>36</sup> Governor of Shkodra 1855-1856. For information on him (?-1861), see S. Kunalp, *Prosopografik Rehber*, p. 67; M. Süreyyâ, *Sicill*, vol. 3, p. 481.

<sup>37</sup> BBA İrade Dahiliye 23032, leff 14: Mustafâ Atâllâh, *mutasarrıf* of Shkodra, to the Sublime Porte on 6 ZA 1272/9 July 1856: “*İşkodra sancağı ehâlisıyla Karadağlı arasında münakid olan beseniñ devâm ve istikrarı mukaddem ve muahhar vâkı olan emr ü fermân-ı hidvîleri iktizâ-yı alıyyesinden olmasıyla ol vechile bese-i mezkûrlara bekâsı emrinde şimdîye kadar ez her cihet ihtimâm ve dikkat olunmuş.*”

<sup>38</sup> BBA İrade Dahiliye 23192, leff 1 (1856).

*besa* had been broken by the Montenegrins with an attack on the *nāhiye* of the Kući the council of Shkodra had forced the preceding governor to retort with military actions. The present Ottoman policy, however, would be to fend off Montenegrin inroads into Ottoman territory, but not to provoke clashes with Montenegro and under no circumstances to undertake large-scale military activities. Only with the maintenance of the *besa* would it be possible to carry on with the internal reforms.<sup>39</sup>

Two years later in 1858, the Sublime Porte admonished the governor Abdī Paşa<sup>40</sup> – taking the imminent arrival of the mixed Ottoman-European delimitation commission into consideration – to avoid any kind of confrontation with Montenegro and to prefer the way of amicable arrangements. Abdī Pasha, confronted with the restlessness of the Montenegrins, confirmed that a *besa* might stabilize the situation until the Ottoman-Montenegrin borderlines would be finally fixed. If a proposal for a *besa* would be made by the Montenegrin side the Ottoman authorities would not prevent it from being accepted by the local Albanian population.<sup>41</sup> It is evident that Ottoman interest in the *besa* was immense; however, all truces were negotiated amongst the local population, the state officially not being involved as an interested party.

The Montenegrin side also used the *besa* as an instrument for handling internal and external relations. In article 26 of the “General Land Code” (*Opšti Zemaljski Zakonik*) from 1855 which attempted to break up Montenegro’s tribal society, the break of a *besa* concluded with the Ottoman side was interdicted under the threat of punishment.<sup>42</sup>

### *A Blunt Weapon: Taxes*

From the 1850s onwards the implementation of the Ottoman measures for reform and centralization in the province of Shkodra was seen as an urgent necessity. In a memorandum written in 1851 the commander of the Rumelian Army, Ömer Lütfi

<sup>39</sup> BBA İrade Dahiliye 23192, leff 1 (1856): “İslāhāt-ı dāhiliyyenin icrāsına haylūlet eyleyeceğine binā’en mukaddem yapılmış olan besenin berü tarafdan bozulmasına ve temāmī-i muhāfazasıyla yalñuz Karadağ eşkiyāsı dağları dāiresini tecāvüz ile berü tarafa isāl-ı hasār ederler ise men’iyle iktifā olunub ilerüye gidilmemesine dikkat olunmak lâzımdır.”

<sup>40</sup> Abdī Paşa Çerkes Paşa (?-1880), *mutasarrıf* and military commander of Shkodra (1857-1861), reinstated as *mutasarrıf* (1862-1863). On him, see S. Kunalp, *Prosopografik Rehber*, p. 51; M. Süreyyā, *Sicill*, vol. 3, p. 413.

<sup>41</sup> BBA Bâb-ı âlî Evrak Odası Sadâret Evrakı: Sadâret – Mektûbî, Umûm Vilâyât 318/99: Abdī Paşa, *mutasarrıf* of Shkodra on 17 ZA 1274/23 June 1858.

<sup>42</sup> Grégoire Aristarchi, *Législation Ottomane ou Recueil des lois, règlements, ordonnances, traités, capitulations et autres documents officiels de l’Empire Ottoman par Aristarchi Bey (Grégoire), publiée par Demétrius Nicolâides* (Istanbul, 1873-1888), here vol. 2, p. 121: “En temps de paix ou des *bessa* (trêve) avec les parties de la Turquie confinant avec notre pays, les *tchéta*, les *brigandages*, les *vols* et toutes *malversations* sont *défendus*; dans ce cas, le *butin* sera rendu à qu’il appartenait, et le *coupable* sera *puni*.” – On the attempt to break up Montenegro’s tribal structure, see Gaspar Heer, *Territorialentwicklung und Grenzfragen von Montenegro in der Zeit seiner Staatswerdung (1830-1887)* (Bern, 1981), pp. 79-84.

Paşa,<sup>43</sup> put down his thoughts on how to carry through the Tanzimat in Northern Albania.<sup>44</sup> Shkodra should not be an exception amongst the empire's provinces and should profit from the blessings of the Tanzimat. But for this aim the population of Northern Albania would have to undergo a wholesome *terbiye* (chastisement, education). Ömer Lütfî pleaded for military disciplinary actions against the mountain tribes in the areas of Peja/Peç and Gjakova/Đakovica (in today's Kosova) and subsequently those of Shkodra. His forecast was that within one summer the whole region could be subdued and brought to its senses. The example of Bosnia – argued Ömer Paşa – had shown that disciplinary military measures were indeed expensive but that the increase in tax income justified such an investment. Bosnia and Herzegovina had brought 30,000 *kise*. One might surmise a tax income of some 8,000 to 10,000 *kise* for the poorer region of Northern Albania. The *meclis-i vâlâ-yı ahkâm-ı adliyye* in Istanbul endorsed Ömer Lütfî's representations:<sup>45</sup> The anti-reform attitude of the population in the province of Shkodra was evident. Its representatives had even asked for reducing the already exceedingly low taxes. The Sublime Porte joined the chorus. With Northern Albania being reformed and disciplined one might expect a tax income in the quantity envisaged by Ömer Lütfî.<sup>46</sup>

Yet, the project of the "Tanzimat" in Northern Albania did not make headway in the following years. Even the existing low taxes could not be collected. The tax burden of the *reâyâ* (non-Muslim subjects) in the province of Shkodra was traditionally 226,000 *куруш*, to be paid as a lump sum as substitute for the *cizye*. As the local authorities reported that even these taxes could not be collected, the Sublime Porte came to the conclusion that it would not make sense to enforce the new tax rates until the Tanzimat had not been implemented in its entirety. Considering the question of Montenegro it was of high priority to keep the population well-disposed towards the Ottoman state.<sup>47</sup>

Several months later, in July 1853, Ottoman authorities complained once again about the continuing lack of tax income. Even minimal tax demands would be met with grumbling on the side of the population and its leaders. In such a delicate situation (the vicinity to Montenegro and the imminent danger it exerted) one would have to be

<sup>43</sup> Ömer Lütfî Paşa (1806-1871), originally a Croatian of Greek Orthodox denomination (Michael Lattas). Besides many important military positions he was also Ottoman governor of Mount Lebanon from 1841 to 1842. For information on him, see S. Kunalp, *Prosopografik Rehber*, p. 116; M. Süreyyâ, *Sicill*, vol. 3, pp. 602f.

<sup>44</sup> BBA İrade Meclis-i Vâlâ 7784, leff 1: Ömer Lütfî on 20 ZA 1267/17 September 1851.

<sup>45</sup> BBA İrade Meclis-i Vâlâ 7784, leff 9: *mazbata* of the *meclis-i vâlâ-yı ahkâm-ı adliyye* from 23 S 1268/17 December 1851.

<sup>46</sup> In a response to a inquiry of the Sublime Porte Ömer Lütfî, however, doubted that it would be possible to relocate large military units to Northern Albanian without threatening the security of Bosnia; BBA İrade Meclis-i Vâlâ 7784, leff 2, inquiry of the Sublime Porte with the *serasker* on 30 M 1268/24 November 1851, response of the *serasker* on 10 S 1268/4 December 1851.

<sup>47</sup> BBA İrade Meclis-i Vâlâ 9915, leff 1, the *mazbata* of the *meclis-i vâlâ-yı ahkâm-ı adliyye* from 5 CA 1269/14 February 1853 is model for the shorter *arz tezkiresi* from 6 CA 1269/15 February 1853.

careful, but, nevertheless, from now on one should collect the taxes applying the less burdensome rates fixed for the lower and middle classes.<sup>48</sup>

Ahmed Cevdet's mission to Shkodra and his comments influenced Ottoman tax policy in the province in the first half of the 1860s. After a briefing given by Ahmed Cevdet in summer 1862 before the *meclis-i vâlâ-yı ahkâm-ı adliyye* a memorandum of the council argued that since the Ottoman conquest of that region tax exemptions had been granted to Christians and Muslims. The reason for this leniency would be evident. First, one had to take into account the strategic importance of the region, secondly, the fact that both Muslims and non-Muslims would render military services, and, thirdly, the extremely mountainous and rocky nature of the region. Additionally one would have to understand that the population was living in close proximity to the predatory and rebellious Montenegrins. Since the inhabitants of the province of Shkodra would fight continuously against Montenegro one should exempt them from the *iâne-i askeriyye*, being anyway of trifling fiscal relevance. The outstanding debts of the rebellious *nâhiyes* should not be collected by force.<sup>49</sup> A supplement recorded the very modest tax obligations of the North Albanian tribes.<sup>50</sup>

In the 1860s the moderate tax policy vis-à-vis the population in the borderland region was continued. A memorandum reiterated the rule that reforms should be implemented with great care, given the immediate vicinity of the region to Montenegro. As already in the instructions to Râşid Paşa from October 1861 a memorandum of the *meclis-i vâlâ-yı ahkâm-ı adliyye* from May 1862 explained at some length the historical and geographical reasons for the tax exemptions and tax cuts. Because of the proximity to the rebellious Montenegrins the local administration should never act without an understanding and tolerant attitude. Since the tax income on the tithe would anyway be insignificant tax exemptions granted since time immemorial should not be abrogated.<sup>51</sup>

Particularly vexing to the Ottoman authorities was the case of the lower Vasojevići (Vasovik). For years the Serbian-speaking and partially Orthodox, partially Muslim population,<sup>52</sup> located half-way between Northern Albania and Bosnia, had

<sup>48</sup> BBA İrade Meclis-i Vâlâ 10885, the *mażbata* of the *meclis-i vâlâ-yı ahkâm-ı adliyye* from 7 L 1269/14 July 1853 is repeated with modifications in the *arż tezkiresi* from 12 L 1269/19 July 1853.

<sup>49</sup> BBA İrade Dahiliye 32729, leff 14, order from 25 Z 1278/23 June 1862 to Ömer Lütfi and the *mutasarrıf* of Shkodra.

<sup>50</sup> BBA İrade Dahiliye 32729, leff 16: “İşkodra malisyaları sırb ve sengistân ve ehâlisi fakîr olduğundan vergüleri az olduklarından başka ba’zıları hîn-i fethden berü hem öşürden ve hem de vergüden ve ba’zısı yalnız vergüden mu’âf olmalarıyla esbâbi ber vech-i âtâ tafsil ve izâh olunur.”

<sup>51</sup> BBA İrade Meclis-i Vâlâ 21026, *mażbata* of the *meclis-i vâlâ-yı ahkâm-ı adliyye* from 23 L 1278/23 April 1862, recommendations completely adopted in the *arż tezkiresi* from 20 ZA 1278/19 May 1862.

<sup>52</sup> A. Cevdet, *Vesikalar*, p. 182, Gurre B 1278/3 January 1862; according to A. Cevdet, *Tezakir*, no. 18, p. 193, the population of the lower Vasojevići consisted of 1,052 Muslim and 1,028 Orthodox households.

refused to pay their taxes. In late winter 1855 military units were sent from Shkodra to the region in order to bring to an end a conflict between the Vasojevići and the Muslim population of Gusinje (Ottoman: Ğusinye) that had been smoldering for years. After the arrival of the military that had been sent out with the order to collect the taxes, the two officers in command met with the entirety of the Vasojevići's *kocabaşıs*. They assured the officers that all Ottoman demands would be met. Some of the tribal leaders – according to the established custom – were then taken as hostages and brought to Gusinje.<sup>53</sup>

The resistance of the Vasojevići against the collection of taxes, however, was not broken. In October 1857 Mustafâ Tevfîk sent reports about the unrest of the Vasojevići. Once again, the military was sent into the region. The Vasojevići realized that they would not be able to resist the Ottoman military force. All their leaders presented themselves before the Ottoman military officers and declared their allegiance. Military units accompanied the leaders into their respective villages in order to collect the taxes on the spot. A regular battalion was ordered to stay in Gusinje until all tax arrears were paid and the region completely pacified.<sup>54</sup>

Internal discussions in Istanbul in November 1860 – after a letter sent by Ahmed Cevdet had arrived – showed that the question had not been settled at all.<sup>55</sup> Ahmed Cevdet, upon the request by the Porte, sent several reports describing the strategic importance of the Vasojevići region and the nature of the conflict.<sup>56</sup> Whereas Ahmed Cevdet saw the necessity to strike militarily against the Vasojevići he added that one should not treat them, after having been subdued, as simple *reâyâ*. In contrast to the leaders of the Vasojevići being of a decidedly pro-Montenegrin stance the population would accept Ottoman sovereignty under the condition that it experienced Ottoman rule as not oppressive and too demanding.<sup>57</sup>

As in the case of the Albanian population in the borderland region closer to the Mediterranean, Ottoman statesmen and bureaucrats understood that it would pay off to postpone the implementation of a rigid fiscal and disciplinary regime for the sake of keeping the Vasojevići well-disposed towards the Ottoman state.

<sup>53</sup> BBA Īrade Hariciye 5862, leff 1, report by Mehmed Tevfîk and Mehmed Râĝib from 3 B 1271/22 March 1855 on the Ottoman expedition.

<sup>54</sup> BBA Īrade Dahiliye 25710, leff 2, Mustafâ Tevfîk to the Sublime Porte on 20 S 1274/9 October 1857; affirmative reiteration of the comments in the *arz tezkiresi* from 13 RA 1274/1 November 1857.

<sup>55</sup> BBA Īrade Meclis-i Mahsûs 1019, *arz tezkiresi* from 4 CA 1278/8 November 1861.

<sup>56</sup> The comments by Ahmed Cevdet on Ottoman policy towards the Vasojevići are to be found at separate places: *Vesikalar*, pp. 40-43; document no. 13 from 3 CA 1278/7 November 1861: A.C. to the military commander of Gusinje, Alî Bey; *Vesikalar*, pp. 45-50; document no. 16 from 12 Ca 1278/16 November 1861: A.C. to the *serdâr*; *Vesikalar*, pp. 181-185; document no. 18 from Gurre B 1278/3 January 1862: A.C. to the Sublime Porte; *Tezakir*, no. 18, pp. 170-172, 179f, 183, 189, 193; also see BBA Īrade Meclis-i Vâlâ 21026, leff 1, *mazbata* of the *meclis-i vâlâ-yı ahkâm-ı adliyye* from 23 L 1278/23 April 1862.

<sup>57</sup> BBA Īrade Dahiliye 32729, leff 2 (1862).

### Conclusion

Ottoman policy in Northern Albania was to a large extent determined by the presence of the *de facto* autonomous mountain principality of Montenegro and its ambitions to extend its possessions and obtain an outlet to the Mediterranean Sea at the Ottoman Empire's expense. The Ottomans reacted by upholding the fiction of Ottoman sovereignty over Montenegro and – on the local plane – fighting back Montenegrin inroads and attempting to stabilize the borderland region. Obviously, the Ottoman military and administrative personnel seem to have mastered the task of following a two-tracked course without greater difficulties. Although Ottoman documents are silent about this question, the split notion of sovereignty (defending it officially, but accepting its non-existence in daily politics) seems to have been not at all strange to the Ottoman political tradition. But it would be worthwhile to speculate what effects this contradiction between sovereign rights, being stubbornly defended on the international and diplomatic plane, and daily political practice had on the Ottoman political mind in the nineteenth century – in a time when the Ottoman state was vigorously trying to make felt its presence throughout the empire. One psychological outlet and recompense for the feelings of frustration in face of the self-assertive mountain principality backed by the European powers was to conceive the struggle against Montenegro as the confrontation between a civilized state and a barbarous and unruly tribal people.

When Ottoman authorities strove to implement the Tanzimat from the 1850s onward in Northern Albania they soon came to understand the limits of their grand designs. Particularly symptomatic is the discrepancy between the expectations, formulated, for example in 1851 by the *serdār* Ömer Lütfî on possible future tax revenues for the Ottoman state, and the meager results obtained in the following decades.

In the inner-Ottoman regions of Northern Albania, at some distance from Montenegro such as the tribal region of the Mirdita, however, Ottoman policy was less lenient and tried hard to press upon the population the Tanzimat institutions. In the 1840s and 1850s, the Ottoman authorities had still judged the whole of the Catholic population in the province of Shkodra (representing still the majority) as loyal towards the empire. But with the 1860s the picture changed radically, these tribes were seen as unruly people deserving to be punished, disciplined and civilized. Key terms of the Tanzimat ideology such as *terbiye*, *inzibât* and *tedîb* were dominating the Ottoman terminology. From this general Ottoman discourse, intensifying from the 1850s onwards, stressing the need of reform, centralization, control and civilization, the very pragmatic political practices in the borderland regions differ remarkably.

Ottoman policy in the Ottoman–Montenegrin borderlands of Northern Albania was confronted with a Gordian knot. In order to implement the Tanzimat and to transform Northern Albania into a region where the Ottoman state would see a net return of its investments on military security and infrastructure, the borderlands facing Montenegro had to be secure and stable. Such an aim, however, could – given the limited military and financial means of the Ottoman state and the international setting –

only be obtained with the cooperation of the local population. But according to the Tanzimat ideology just these people had to be chastised and civilized. Ottoman policy had thus to struggle with Montenegro and its own borderland population simultaneously and face at the same time an almost complete lack of tax income from these regions. Confronted with this dilemma Ottoman policy seems to have resorted (and resigned itself) to its traditional policy of bargaining, cooptation, limited military pressure and of playing the various tribes off each other. One must say, however, that the necessity to adjust to the particular conditions of the struggle against Montenegro in the borderlands saved the Ottoman authorities from executing some of the rigid and even partially self-defeating measures of the Tanzimat that contributed substantially to the alienation of the people from Ottoman rule in other parts of Albania and the empire as a whole.

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