

Scutari crisis

By [Marenglen Kasmi](#)

Summary

The Scutari Crisis illustrates questions surrounding the creation of the new Albanian state at the beginning of the 20th century. It also shows the transformation of the aims of the First Balkan War, which was seen as a liberating war against the Ottoman Empire, to a war for expansion of territories by the Balkan states.

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Introduction

The Scutari Crisis was a product of the [First Balkan War](#) and of the efforts to create a new state map in the Balkans. The Balkan War began in October 1912, when Montenegrin troops entered northern [Albania](#), though Serbian and Greek troops also invaded Albanian territory during this war. Unlike other Albanian territories, the city of Shkodra, the centre of the vilayet of Shkodra known historically in English as Scutari, fought under siege against Serbian and Montenegrin troops for 183 days.

The Albanian Question

Military struggles over Scutari caught the attention of the Great Powers – [Great Britain](#), [Austria-Hungary](#), [Russia](#), [Germany](#) and [Italy](#) – because they occurred at the same time as the Ambassador's Conference in London, where the main issue was resolving the "Albanian problem". This referred to the recognition of Albanian independence, proclaimed by [Ismail Qemali \(1844-1919\)](#) and the Albanian patriots in Vlora on 28 November 1912, as well as the future of the new Albanian state. From the first meeting of the conference, the Great Powers agreed to recognize Albania's independence. What caused a problem during the discussions was the size of the future state. The creation of an Albanian state based on the principle of ethnicity was problematic since it would have aroused opposition from Albania's northern and

southern neighbours. This would have been reflected in the attitude of Great Powers such as Russia, France and Italy, which supported the intentions of these countries. Conversely, the creation of a small Albanian state, which would not have included many regions inhabited by Albanians, was also problematic. Austria-Hungary opposed this version because [Serbia's](#) access to the Adriatic Sea jeopardized its strategic interests in the Balkans. Furthermore, Vienna thought that such a small Albania would be unable to survive. Consequently, Vienna supported the variant of the state borders proposed by Albanian [nationalists](#), such as Ismail Qemali, who sought to include in the new Albanian state all the existing Albanian territories. Rather than being a sign of supporting Albanian national interests, this position was largely concerned with the creation of the largest possible buffer state in the Balkans.

The Struggle of Scutari

Although the Great Powers quickly agreed to recognize Albania's independence and the creation of an Albanian state, discussion surrounding the establishment of Albanian borders dominated the first three months of the conference. Most problematic were discussions about today's Kosovo and the city of Shkodra. Austria-Hungary argued that, in ethnic, cultural and economic terms, the inclusion of Shkodra within Albanian borders was essential for the Albanian state. Austria-Hungary sought the inclusion of the cities of Peja, Gjakova, Prizren as well as the entire province of Dibra within the new Albanian state because there was sufficient racial and religious evidence to not hand over these provincial towns to [Montenegro](#) and Serbia. Of course, Vienna's political interests were hidden within this proposal. Shkodra was the centre of Catholicism in Albania. If this episcopal city were taken by Montenegro, then Vienna would lose its influence over Albanian Catholics and, consequently, the region. The compromise made by the Great Powers to define Albania's borders was difficult. Only after satisfying the territorial ambitions of Serbia in northeastern Albania did Russia agree that Shkodra remain within the borders of Albania.

Montenegro, the northern neighbour of Shkodra, disagreed with these discussions, and with the decision of the Great Powers. For that reason, it hastened to launch combat operations on 8 October 1912. The main strategic objective of Montenegro was the occupation and annexation of Shkodra, a historic city of economic and cultural importance. Meanwhile, Serb army forces marched through northern Albania to Lushnje, Central Albania. In the South, the Greek army invaded Epirus, encircling the city of Ioannina.

Both the Albanians and the Ottoman army garrison located in the city's castle were interested in the protecting Shkodra. For the Ottoman garrison, Shkodra represented the ultimate withdrawal point from the Balkans. The Ottoman garrison of about 12,000 soldiers was headed by Turkish colonel [Hasan Riza Pasha \(1871-1913\)](#). In addition, he was assisted by

[Esat Pasha Toptani \(1863-1920\)](#), who commanded approximately 10,000 volunteers from middle Albania.

The Turkish Garrison Command organized the defense of the city. For the first time in 20th century Albania, a defense would be organized with elements of modern fortification. For this reason, the territory was divided into four zones, which created a protective ring around the city. The first order of the Turkish general command was to take fortification measurements sufficient to organize the city's defense for a period of forty-five days. Later, this deadline was extended to six months. Trenches were constructed, and [barbed wire](#) barriers were prepared. For the first time, field telephones were used to connect trenches and war sites to command.

The siege of the city by Montenegrin and Serbian forces and the open position of the Montenegrin government towards the decisions of the Ambassador's Conference was a provocation made to this conference by a small country. The Great Powers therefore increased pressure on governments in Belgrade and Cetinje. As a result of diplomatic pressure, in early 1913 the Serbian government ordered the withdrawal of its army from fighting in Shkodra, while the Montenegrin government continued to hold the same position. Consequently, upon the proposal of British Foreign Minister, Sir [Edward Grey \(1862-1933\)](#), the Great Powers decided to escalate their stance towards Montenegro by establishing a coastal maritime blockade from Antivari (Bar) to the Drin River estuary. This operation was to be carried out by the Great Powers' combat ships. Austria-Hungary sent the first battleship division (*SMS Erzherzog Franz Ferdinand*, *SMS Radetzky*, *SMS Zrinyi*, *Kleiner Kreuzer SMS Panther* and two torpedo boats), Italy sent two battleships (*Admiral Di Saint Bon* and *Francesco Ferruccio*), Great Britain sent the battleships *HMS King Edward VII* and the light cruiser *HMS Dartmouth*, France sent *Edgar Quinet* and Germany sent the light cruiser *SMS Breslau*. Austria-Hungary also sent three seaplanes for reconnaissance purposes. Interested in these developments, Turkey also sent the *Hamidiye* ship near the Albanian coast to prevent the Greek ships from approaching the ports of Durres and San Giovanni di Medua, which had been occupied by the Montenegrins. Despite these measures, [Nikola I, King of Montenegro \(1840-1921\)](#) did not give up his decision to take the city of Shkodra and the fighting around the city intensified dramatically. Consequently, the Great Powers decided to expand the naval blockade, including on the Montenegrin coast and the Albanian ports that were occupied by Montenegrins. In the city, a lack of food and ammunition made the situation increasingly difficult. Most of the city was destroyed by bombing. There was no place for the injured in hospitals. The defense troops had suffered many losses. The Montenegrin army also suffered many losses. Regardless of this situation, the citizens of Shkodra did not consider surrendering. This was also encouraged by the Vlora government, which called for resistance. While diplomatic and military pressure grew against the Montenegrin army to

withdraw from the siege, after 183 days of fierce fighting, on 23 April 1913, Esad Pasha Toptani, now in charge of the city's defense, made secret deals with the Montenegrin army and handed Shkodra over to them. A short time before this occurred, the Turkish commander of Shkodra garrison, Hasan Riza Pasha, who was against the surrender of the city, had been murdered. His murder was organized by Esat Pasha. According to the agreement with the Montenegrin army, Esad Pasha was allowed to retreat with his 12,000 men and their [weapons](#), ammunition and food. Furthermore, Montenegro had assured Esad Pasha that it would support his ambitions to become Albania's ruler. Also, according to sources of the time, Esad Pasha received a large sum of money from the Montenegrins, which was influential in handing over the city.

Conclusion

The next day, the Montenegrin army entered Shkodra and raised the Montenegrin flag above the city's castle. A few days later, King Nikola proclaimed Shkodra the capital of Montenegro. This shows how important Shkodra was to Montenegro. Opposing this decision, the Great Powers blocked the port of Durres. Austria-Hungary, which had the largest international military contingent involved in the blockade, threatened to disembark its naval infantry forces on Montenegrin land. It also encouraged other states to create an international military land force. This made the situation even more serious as the risk of opening up a new front was growing. As a result of this heavy international pressure, on 4 May 1913, Montenegro declared its willingness to hand over the city of Shkodra to the Great Powers. On 14 May 1913, the city surrendered to the international military corps. Diplomatic pressure, as well as the naval blockade, had succeeded. Montenegro withdrew from Shkodra and was forced to abide by the decision of the Great Powers. The city was taken by about 1,000 international naval troops.

Marenglen Kasmi, Independent Scholar

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