



SCIREA Journal of Sociology

<http://www.scirea.org/journal/Sociology>

July 6, 2021

Volume 5, Issue 4, August 2021

CENSORSHIP DURING THE REIGN OF KING ZOG I IN ALBANIA, THE BANNING OF BOOKS AND PERIODICALS

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Abstract

Censorship is a commonly encountered phenomenon in XX century Albania. Using documents, we are going to try to prove that this phenomenon was regulated by law not only during the communist dictatorship, but also during King Zog's reign (1928 – 1939). Laws and regulations were approved, and institutions of censorship were established to control every publication entering the Albanian borders or being published within them, every newspaper, magazine, or book. A list of banned books and periodicals was announced, and a large number of newspapers and magazines closed down either as a result of their opposition to the monarchy, or due to economic austerity measures set in place precisely for this purpose. This period saw the publication of several important magazines and newspapers such as *Minerva*, *Illyria*, *Rilindja*, *ABC*, etc. where some of the greatest writers and poets of Albanian literature, among which Ernest Koliqi, Migjeni, Lasgush Poradeci, Petro Marko, etc. began to leave their brilliant mark.

Keywords: *King Zog I, law, reform, education, censorship, press, magazine*

Introduction

During XX century, Albania went through one of the darkest periods of isolation, prosecution, and censorship. But we are not only referring to the communist regime which ruled the country for almost half a century. The period of the monarchy (1928-1939) is known as the one that brought Albania out of the chaos that had plagued it after the Declaration of Independence, but, on the other hand, it strengthened the control of the state over free thought. Using documents of the time, we are going to try shedding light on this aspect of the reign of Zog I.

In 1928, Ahmet Zogu proclaimed himself King of the Albanians. Starting as a prime minister and continuing later as a king, Zog began to undertake a series of reforms of judicial, economic, and social character, also known as “Zog’s reforms”, that aimed the recovery of the country. His self-proclamation as king was preceded by important events. On January 1, 1928, the new Criminal Code had entered into force, and on April 1 of the same year the Albanian Civil Code had replaced the Ottoman Civil Code. *“The entry into force of Zog’s Civil Code also indicated the affiliation of Albanian Civil Law to the Romano – Germanic family, conclusively separating it from Ottoman law.*

The code regulated issues pertaining to family law, such as those related to inheritance, marriage, dowry, will, divorce, polygamy, etc. King Zog considered it important to clarify the state’s relations with religion, which were sanctioned by the Constitution. According to the latter, (December 13, 1928): *“Albania has no official religion. All religions and faiths are respected, and their free practice is guaranteed. In no way can religion serve as grounds for legal exclusion or obstacle of any kind. In no way can religion and faith be used to achieve political goals in any way”.*

Two of the fundamental reforms undertaken by King Zog were the administrative and the legal reform. The administrative reform sought to modernize the state administration, to strengthen the gendarmerie for the reformation of which he also requested the expertise of foreign specialists, to reduce the number of criminal offences, and to secure the housing and free movement of the citizens.

One of his main merits was the replacement of the old legislation with a new one of European standards, to which he had committed since when he was leader of the republic. A committee of law scholars worked to implement the radical changes.

“With the accession of the King to the throne, there is a fundamental law of the Ministry of Finance, dated April 17, 1929, which deals with the regulation of property registration offices and their taxes, including the former property offices of the Ottoman era and its amendment on March 29. This proves that from this viewpoint, King Zog’s Albania has managed to set up an administration that does not fall behind those of the most civilized countries” (Xoxa.Z, 1938).

Education

Ahmet Zogu realized that the key to the path to modernization and stability was the younger generation (Fischer, B.J, 2010). Believing that the older generation was not very likely to break away from feudalism and clan mentality, educated young people were those who could build a new Albania. This was why education became one of Ahmet Zogu’s priorities. In 1927, the Ministry of Education was set up. Its mission was to undertake reforms in the education system as pertained to school curricula and study subjects. The educational network stretched throughout the country (Frashëri, K., 2014). Elementary education was extended to five years and secondary education consisted of eight years divided into two levels: lower secondary school and higher secondary school or lyceum or gymnasium. Additionally, there were also vocational schools and general education schools. Dormitories were set up to accommodate students whose homes were away from schools. Educational curricula and textbooks were modeled on Western European Schools.

According to historian Kristo Frashëri, the orientation towards Western European continued to deepen until the closing of private and foreign institutions. Only state schools were allowed, while their administration was appointed only by the state.

This reform affected schools with a long tradition, such as the French Lyceum in Korça, the American Technical School in Tirana, the Italian Commercial School in Vlora, the Qiriazhi Women's Institute in Kamza etc.

A special decree banned the mandatory classes of Greek, Italian, and Slavic languages and removed Greek, Italian, and Slavic teachers from other schools. Meanwhile, every year,

about 400 students were sent from the Albanian state to countries like Italy, France, Austria, Switzerland and Germany. These students brought with them the culture of the countries where they were educated.

By the time of the Italian invasion in 1939, there were 633 elementary schools and 19 high schools in the country, compared to 580 elementary schools and 13 high schools that existed in 1930 (Fischer, B.J, 2010).

Under the considerable influence of the king's sisters (the princesses), who had become patrons of charity, art and sports, King Zog undertook several reforms to modernize Albanian life, especially that of Albanian women. To break away from the Ottoman past, in 1937, the Parliament passed a law banning the wearing of a burqa. For women who covered their faces, the fine reached up to 500 gold francs.

Censorship

Documents show that King Zog I created and strengthened the institutions of censorship. Nothing could be published in Albania, no foreign or Albanian newspaper/magazine/book could enter or leave the country's territory, unless it had previously passed through the institutions set up specifically for this reason. Committees were established, the post offices were under constant surveillance, the bookstores were inspected.

Driven by the modernizing and emancipatory reforms, by a kind of stability that was growing in the country during King Zog's reign, many high quality newspapers and literary magazines were founded, but under political and economic pressure many books were banned from circulation, and many newspapers and magazines were closed. Among them, Franciscan magazine "Hylli i Dritës" went through several openings and closings, much the same as "LEKA", "Minerva", "Rilindja", "Bota e Re", "ABC" etc.

In the Central Archive of the Albanian State, in the Secret Fund of the Ministry of Interior, there are dozens of files containing hundreds of orders, reports and decisions related to the control and censorship of publications, be they newspapers, magazines or books. All the books, brochures or newspapers that criticized and attacked the king and the kingdom or that contained Bolshevik or communist ideas were banned by the Albanian monarchy.

One of the numerous 1936 (Central State Archive , 1936) reports of the Press Directorate at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, states:

Opinion of the press director of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the general directives of control on books:

I. Absolutely all publications are banned if they:

- 1) Speak against our Sovereign Augustus, against the Royal Family, Albania or its politics;
- 2) Are related to the spreading of communist and socialist ideas, in any form that these ideas are presented;
- 3) Oppose the idea of a monarchical state or a nationalist dictatorship (Fascism and Hitlerism);
- 4) Encourage antagonism and hostility between social classes or religious groups;
- 5) Deal with pornographic descriptions aimed at inciting sexual feelings.

II. The following can be banned on a case by case basis:

Popular fiction. These can be left free to circulate and called useful when they have a superior literary form, having been written by well-known writers, such as, Wallace, Conan Doyle, Maurice Leblanc, etc., whereas it is for the best to keep works of the likes of Nat Pinkerton away from the hands of children.

In this case, care must be taken, because popular fiction attracts young people, makes them get used to reading books and encourages them to learn foreign languages.

Almost every day of the year there was a report or a decision. The foreign press was especially targeted, even in the case of “journals” coming from Greece, Yugoslavia, Romania, England or France. Major newspapers of the time were “forbidden”, such as the French “Le Figaro”, “Le Monde”, “Vendredi”, “Le Journal” etc.

Biographical books on Lenin, Stalin, or the philosophical works of Marx and Engels were categorically banned. So were other authors who presented leftist ideology in their works, such as Gorky, Ibanez etc.

On the other hand, Zog also used financial measures by issuing special laws.

In the third issue of the quarterly magazine “Cahier de la Presse” (July-September 1939), in addition to the numerous details on the Albanian press between years 1848-1939 within and outside the country’s borders, French journalist André Ravry also writes: “The Law of January 24, 1931 stipulated that every editor (publisher) must be 25 years of age and older and have a high school diploma; a deposit of 5,000 gold francs was also needed. The provisions of this law - more than 60 articles - violated the right to a free press and the

situation was further aggravated by two decrees issued on February 1, 1937, because a significant number of newspapers were eliminated”(Ravry, A, 1939).

Under these conditions, Albanian publishers lost their independence from politics. In 1937, the “Përplekja Shqiptare” magazine announced the adoption of two new laws related to Albanian publications, one on the prohibition of receiving funds from foreigners or Albanians abroad, and the other on the control on books and brochures (Përplekja Shqiptare, 1937).

Thus, it was understandable why the portrait of the monarch, the queen mother or the princesses - sisters of Zog - was placed on the covers of the biggest cultural magazines of the time, just as writings praising his Majesty would appear time and again.

With the establishment of the fascist occupation, “Demokratia” of Gjirokastra, “Cirka” of Shkodra, “Jeta”, “Diana”, “Bota”, “Përplekja Shqiptare” etc. came out of circulation.

Of the 27 journals circulating in early 1939, in the second week of April were only left 4 (“The Official Journal”, “The National Economy”, “The National School” and “Donika”) which adapted to the new political situation.

Conclusion

During the reign of Zog I several reforms were undertaken with fundamental importance in the legal, administrative and educational field. During this period, the number of schools and dormitories increased; the school took on national character; foreign-funded and private schools were closed. But on the other hand, King Zog I legalized censorship, controlled print media, issued laws and regulations which did not allow the entry into Albania of materials (books, newspapers, magazines) which went against the policies of the King or had Marxist or pornographic content, or popular fiction.

Without wanting to be drastic in saying the last few words, many times the censors used the economic factor to keep the media under control. The media often failed to survive. As a result, some of the best cultural magazines and newspapers were closed down. But despite these measures, the 1930 and 1940s are the richest years in publications and literary works, opinions and debates in the field of literature. Closure was the punishment for any political deviance.

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