

Time-trend of the Albanian Migratory Movements

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Abstract

Finding a promised land has been a continuous test for human beings. Migratory movements have obviously a time trend, and Albanians have constantly moved westwards, with Americas being the main final destination. The authors describe in the present paper some of the archival details from the Albanian immigration in the United States, exploring the reasons for these human movements, and describing the time trend of the latter. Prior to such movements, Albania has been familiar to other displacements, mainly towards Italy, a phenomenon of centuries before that recently saw a reactivation, obviously related to economic grounds.

Keywords: Migratory movements; Time trend; Economic emigration

Introduction

Observing the routes of Albanian emigrations in the course of the history might be challenging. These population movements were intensified during the mediaeval period, prompted by demands for services (particularly of a military character) by the Byzantine invaders of that period. A considerable wave of Albanian emigration especially towards the regions of Italy is recorded after the death of Scanderbeg and the invasion of Albania by the Ottomans and their revenge on the Albanian population [1].

In the end of the 19th century, a new emigration pattern was beginning, spurred principally by economic reasons. Emigration operated like a safety valve, bringing the indispensable oxygen for the Albanian poor. Even though this phenomenon spread all over Albania, it was more present in south and southeast Albania [2]. In addition to the relieving factors that it had for families in need, this emigration had other consequences as well, particularly regarding the demographic aspect for the society of that time; the number of the population should have been a vital asset for a new and weak state as Albania. The country was going through dark times and facing existential risks and challenges mainly during the first decades of the 20th century.

Historical review of emigration trends

Before the year 1945, emigration was primarily male-oriented [3]. The chances and opportunities of an emigrant to return to Albania were very scarce. The implications were that he was not able to create a family in his home country and if he married, he would not bring his new family to Albania. Thus it is not surprising that the families whose members were emigrants used to mourn them while they were alive, considering them as “dead”. The Albanian lexicon has a significant word for emigration, the word *kurbet*, a word which connotes suffering, despair and pain for the lost of a beloved family member. The motif of emigration is frequent in Albanian folklore. Emigration is portrayed through a number of mythological and biblical figures as a calamity that destroys both the body and the soul – that of the individual but also that of the nation. However, if we take into consideration the economic results of emigration, its emancipating role, as well as its direct impact on the destiny of the Albanian political and cultural elite, who were mainly operating in the Diaspora, then this negative portrayal of emigration in the Albanian folklore seems to be unnatural.

It may be argued that the massive and constant emigration of the political and military elite (from the 16th century to the 18th century) towards Italy has borne deep marks on the national memory. This

emigration left a vacuum by creating historical delays in the process of the development of the Albanian nation. The relative smallness of the country population also had its own effects; even a single wave of emigration could have significant repercussions for the reduction of the population. It should be noticed that according to the 1938 census the population of Albania was 800000 [4]. Nevertheless, it can be asserted that without this emigration process – in spite of the emotional and demographic perspective – a considerable number of Albanian families would face extreme economic difficulties. Emigration was the main economic relief for a great number of Albanian families [5]. Their economy was supported by remittances brought by Albanian emigrants living in different countries, especially in the US. The US provided employment opportunities due to the working places in road construction, mining, and other public service facilities. These emigrants not only provided the vital economic “oxygen”, but they also spread the democratic values to the isolated Albanian society [6].

Besides the US, Albanian emigrants emigrated to Argentina, Australia, Canada, France, etc. The gradual introduction of transportation facilities helped the movements of these people toward their “Promised Land”, USA [7]. Familiar with the phenomenon of immigration for quite a long time (the US was established by immigrants from all over the world), the Americans established an administration which created a flawless register of foreigners entering the country. On the basis of this documentation, it results that the first Albanian immigrant who entered the US (in 1876) and was officially registered, was a man from Korça [8]. However, this does not exclude the fact that there might have been other Albanians who had entered America earlier but who were not officially registered. The initial wave of Albanian emigration (to the US) is thought to have originated in the city of Korça and its surrounding villages as well as other regions of southern Albania [9].

According to Roucek, a great number of Albanian economic immigrants came to the USA mainly forced by the bloody Balkans

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wars in the beginning of the 20th century [10]. During this period the Balkan population suffered massacres, massive damages to houses, agricultural and farming property, which were accompanied with famines. As a result, one part of the population was turned into refugees within the country, whereas a part of it left the country. When these wars ended, a number of emigrants returned to their homeland. According to Federal Writer's Project 1939, the highest number of emigrants returning to Albania was registered during the summer of 1941. The termination of the Balkan wars and the gradual confirmation of Albania as an independent state by the European countries urged immigrants to return to their homes, bringing with them their earnings, working experiences, as well as the much-needed demographic energy. According to American documents, during 1919-1925 thousands of Albanians returned to Albania. Very soon they would be disappointed by the economic, political and social situation in Albania and within few years they would go back to the USA, most of them accompanied by their families. This second stage of emigration included the family members of the Albanian emigrants. Based on the data of Federal Writer's Project, during the years 1920-1930 the number of Albanian women immigrants was reaching that of men. The fact that emigrants were now accompanied by their families meant that the chances of their return to their home countries were very slim. It is interesting to notice that women emigration was not allowed by the state until the end of the 1930s, since women were considered essential for the demographic stability [11]. The population was significantly reduced due to the wars, the difficult economic conditions, as well as the health and birth conditions.

Postscriptum

Finding a promised land has been a continuous test for human beings. Migratory movements have obviously a time trend, and Albanians have constantly moved westwards, with Americas being the main final destination Figure 1. In the Fuller Museum of Art in Boston, a photo of an Albanian woman immigrant was displayed in the spring of 1998, a photo taken by the well-known photographer Lewis Hine, at Ellis Island in 1905 [12]. Ellis Island was the main gate through which immigrants entered USA [13]. This photo is certainly a rare document.

Observing her portrait we could detect a mixture of sensations – the shyness and restraint, typical of Albanian and Balkan women in general, accompanied by a look of confidence, which she gradually acquired while in contact with the Western civilization. The clothes she is wearing bear mark to this blending of different cultures –belts and laces in the American style and a headscarf tied in the traditional Albanian way.

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Figure 1: Albanian Woman in Head Cloth, Ellis Island, 1905.