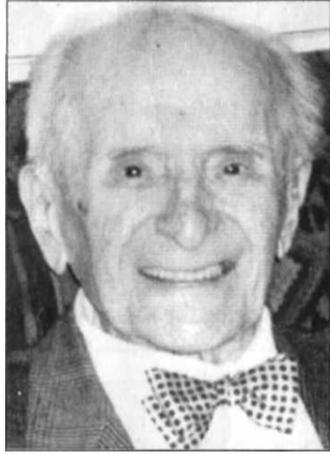


Ihsan Bey Toptani

IHSAN BEY TOPTANI was the last direct male descendant of the great Toptani family who dominated the Albanian capital for 150 years, and the last living man to hold the rank of Ottoman bey to reside in Britain. But despite these extraordinary and archaic origins, and after a prominent role in the Second World War, he lived a modest life in south London in the last 40 years, a victim of the post-war Communist victory in Albania, and was well known as a leader of the Albanian emigre world in London.

The Toptani family were in many ways the founders of contemporary Tirana, and played a crucial role in the political intrigues surrounding the foundation of modern Albania in 1913. His most notorious ancestor was Esad Pasha Toptani, the mentally disturbed traitor who plotted with the venal Serbs and Greeks against the fledgling state.

The family's great period was the early and mid-19th century when the decline in the Ottoman system allowed considerable freedom of action to the beys, who lived more or less as feudal princelings on their estates. The Toptanis owned much of central Tirana, including the land on which the modern parliament stands, and had farms and forests in the wild lands beyond the Dalti mountains to the east of the capital. His father, Abdi Bey Toptani, was active in the late-19th-century renaissance of Albanian literature and



Toptani: resilience

nationalism, and then became a cabinet minister after the independence declaration at Vlorë in 1913.

At that time, little Ihsan was a boy of five years of age, and after elementary schooling in Tirana he was sent away to Austria, Albania's traditional friend among the European powers, for his later education. He impressed his teachers with his intellectual ability, and had science, politics and philosophy as his main interests. He was also a skilled photographer, and good at languages, and was awarded a doctorate in political sciences at Graz University.

Returning to Tirana, he found the country being drawn increasingly into the maw of the Italian Fascists, and the old dominance that the Toptanis

had enjoyed in Tirana society was being eroded by the brash new men who had allied themselves with the Italians. He was involved in a short, unhappy marriage arranged by his family. King Zog was never very keen on the Toptanis, and Ihsan lacked a political party to advance his interests.

On the outbreak of the Second World War, as Albania was used as a base for invasion of Greece, Toptani joined the resistance as an independent nationalist, and was in contact with the British Special Operations Executive (SOE), who were beginning operations to help the anti-Axis forces in Albania. This was not a simple relationship, however, and he also had contact with the Axis occupiers, and later wrote quite sympathetically of those Albanians who had been active collaborators and who had seen the best interests of their country as resting with a German victory in the war.

In the complex intrigues within the Resistance, his finest moment was at the Toptani estate hill village of Mukje in August 1943, when he presided at talks held between the Communist-dominated National Liberation Council, led by Enver Hoxha and the rightist Balli Kombetar. Both sides agreed to fight for an independent Albania, including Kosovo, but within days of its being signed it was rejected by the Communists as a result of policy differences over Kosovo. Toptani always believed that Enver Hoxha had been a

traitor to the national cause and had worked with Tito's envoy, Svetozar Vukmanovic (General Tempo), after this key meeting to destroy the agreement and betray the Kosovars into Yugoslav servitude.

A period of activity in the resistance followed and he spent a good deal of time working with Julian Cater Lord) Amery and other SOE agents who had been dropped into Albania by SOE HQ in Cairo, and were ultimately unsuccessful in uniting the northern feudal lords and Zogist sympathisers against Enver Hoxha and the Partisans. This period is described in Amery's controversial book *Sons of the Eagle* (1948).

Toptani was evacuated to Italy after the Communist victory, and began working with the Americans, obtaining a staff job as a journalist on *Newsweek*. When the CIA and MI6 began to try to organise the overthrow of Enver Hoxha's regime, Toptani set up the liberation committee in Greece, and was responsible for recruiting emigres into the force that was trained by David Smiley and others in MI6 on Malta to confront the Communists. It is generally believed that the Soviet spy Kim Philby, then a senior official in the Secret Intelligence Service, played an important part in betraying this operation to Hoxha.

After the collapse of this operation, Toptani returned to Britain, and found work in the BBC Monitoring Service at

Caversham. In 1958 he became a British citizen, and worked in the Anglo-Albanian Association for the freedom of his country. His fellow ex-intelligence officer Harry Hodgkin-son, the biographer of Scanderbeg, was a close friend and Hodgkinson's death in 1994 affected him. Toptani was very happy to see the end of Communism, and returned to Albania after a 47-year interval to see the return of most of the family lands.

He saw the end of Communism as opening the doors to the reunification of the Albanian lands, and, although in his late eighties, he learnt to use a computer, and soon all his friends began to receive his e-mails with material calling for the liberation of Kosovo from Serbian oppression.

Ihsan Toptani was a man of strong views, but he had great charm and kindness and tolerated differences of opinion over historical interpretation. A visit to his Streatham flat was a happy event. He suffered from leukaemia for many years but although of a slight frame had a typical Albanian physical resilience that enabled him to carry on the struggle against Serbia until near the end of his life.

JAMES PETTIFER

Ihsan Toptani, journalist and political activist: born Tirana 25 August 1908; died London 28 May 2001.

Ihsan Bey Toptani

MAY I correct one inaccuracy in James Pettifer's otherwise excellent obituary of the Albanian patriot Ihsan Toptani [1 June]? **writes Richard Houghton.** Far from being evacuated to Italy after the Communist victory in Albania and the expulsion of German forces from the country in 1944, he had to make his own way there,

succeeding in procuring a small boat which ran adrift for several days in the Adriatic. The British military mission, including "Billy" Maclean, Julian Amery and David Smiley, were expressly forbidden to bring any of their Albanian friends with them when they themselves withdrew from the country.

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