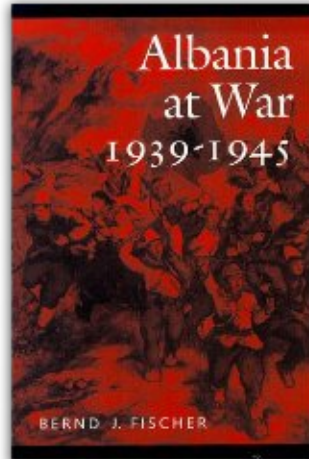


Book Review

By James Pettifer

ALBANIA AT WAR

Bernd J. Fischer



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Greenmantle and rivals

JAMES PETTIFER

Bernd J. Fischer

ALBANIA AT WAR 1939-1945

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British Communist such as James Klugman, who worked on Yugoslavia for SOE at the time, was manipulating the gold and weapons that were dropped in to the Albanian guerrillas from SOE Cairo by the RAF.

Bernd J. Fischer's *Albania at War 1939-1945* is the first independent and professional study of this period in English, and is likely to have considerable value in demolishing the "conspiracy theory", although in current circumstances it is perhaps too much to hope that any single book could bring a truce in the wider controversies and personal feuds. It is in many ways a study of the Italian invasion, and the later process of Axis occupation, as much as the Partisan war, and has benefited from the opening of new archives in Germany and from study of the material in the *Auswartige Amt* in Bonn.

Fischer paints a picture of confused Italian occupiers, who were ill-equipped to cope with the formidable geographical and logistical problems of policing Albania. They do not seem to have clearly understood that, under King Zog, there was barely a functional state. But the Germans were well informed about Albanian political culture and history. The British, on the other hand, with the exception of anthropologists, suffered from domination of pre-World War II



Greek soldiers in Albania with an Albanian boy, 1914

British Balkan studies by Hellenists, who (apart from F. W. and Margaret M. Hasluck) patronized and derided modern Albania. Into this information vacuum stepped the upper-class young bloods of SOE, who mostly saw Albania as a cross between Ruritania and a John Buchan novel, and behaved accordingly. The professional revolutionaries in the Partisan leadership, such as Mehmet Shehu, a man of real military ability and a veteran of the Spanish Civil War,

Were duly unimpressed, and took little notice of their advice.

In terms of the British controversies, Fischer comes firmly down on Hibbert's side of the argument, stating that his book has "immense value", largely, it seems, because it shows that the northern chieftains had often collaborated actively with the Germans and that, as in Yugoslavia, Churchill and SOE were interested in supporting those who were actually prepared to do some fighting. Fischer shows that there was a virtually inexorable logic to the struggle against the occupiers that would lead to an authoritarian solution. He calls this "Stalinist", rather a misnomer. In 1944-5, the Russian and international Communist leaders, like the British Foreign Office, were far from sure what would happen in Albania after the war. Some elements in the Russian leadership would probably have backed Tito to integrate both Kosovo and Albania into a "Greater Yugoslavia". Albania, and Hoxha, Chuvakin, may well cast light on this issue.

In general, Dr Fischer has written a very sane and sensible book that should help improve the quality of discussion about this vital and controversial period. He sees the German occupation as destroying the traditional society of Albania, along with most of the non-Communist opposition, and that factor as a far more important influence on Hoxha's victory than any misallocation of SOE aid. The book will also have considerable value in relation to current events, the discussion of Kosovo issues in particular. It is a pity some of the more grinding American academic jargon ("the war also impacted such basic indexes as urbanisation") that occasionally crops up was not removed before publication, and one or two of the photographic captions are of questionable accuracy.

Balkan wars are not only fought in the Balkans. Ever since the second Yugoslavia began to disintegrate, academic and journalistic protagonists of the different Balkan nationalities and internal political groupings have fought bitter "engagements" in the pages of newspapers and journals. Among all these controversies, none has been more intense than the British debate – if that is an adequate term – between the sympathizers of the Second World War Albanian Partisans and their nationalist opponents. Bitter personal enmity, libel cases and academic purges have duly followed.

In early 1943, Enver Hoxha's Partisans were no more than a few thousand committed militants at most, but by the end of 1944 they were in control of the country. During this time, British help officers of the Special Operations Executive was a central factor in the ebb and flow battle between the Partisans and the nationalists. Until now, memoirs of British ex-SOE participants have been in the main historical texts, with books such as the late Julian Amery's *Sons of the Eagle* and David Smiley's *Albanian Assignment* taking up cudgels for the nationalists, while the ex-Foreign Office Political Director Reginald Hibbert's volume *Albania's National Liberation – The Bitter Victory* defends SOE against charges that pro-Communist SOE officers handed Enver Hoxha victory on a plate.

Albanian historiography itself has reflected the political demands of different regimes, so that under Communism, the British were seen as conniving in their imperialist way to plan counter-revolution against Hoxha. Then after 1992, under Sali Berisha's government in Tirana, SOE was seen as manipulated by pro-Soviet elements in SOE regional HQ in Bari, so that aid was diverted to Hoxha that should have gone to the nationalists. A "conspiracy theory" grew up, based on the assumption that a