

Albanian Transnational Fighters: From the Spanish Civil War to the European Resistance Movements (1936–1945)

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Enrico Acciai

University of Leeds, Leeds, UK

Abstract

This article investigates the trajectories of a small group of Albanian veterans of the Spanish Civil War after leaving Spain, in early 1939. By focusing on the way in which Albanian veterans reached the European resistance movements between 1941 and 1943, we both enhance and problematize our understanding of the European resistance movement as a transnational phenomenon with its roots in the Spanish Civil War. This article aims to contribute further to a better understanding of the *longue durée* of the anti-fascist fight between 1936 and the end of the Second World War.

Keywords

transnational war volunteering, Spanish Civil War, Second World War, International Brigades, resistance, Albania

In 1975, the Yugoslav historian Ramadan Marmullaku published a volume in English on recent Albanian history. Marmullaku's interpretation of the national struggle for liberation during the Second World War was clear: 'From the very outset the Balkan nations, particularly the Albanians, Yugoslavs and Greeks, put up a resistance against Italy and Germany and created strong resistance movements, which led eventually to liberation and socialist revolutions. Albania and Yugoslavia are examples of countries that underwent autonomous revolutions.' According to Marmullaku, both Balkan states achieved liberation thanks solely to the work of endogenous forces.¹ In addition to not citing the

1 Ramadan Marmullaku, *Albania and the Albanians* (London, 1975), p. 41.

Corresponding author:

Enrico Acciai, University of Leeds, Michael Sadler Building, Leeds LS2 9JT, UK.
Email: enrico.acciai@gmail.com

Allied armies' contribution to the struggle for liberation from Nazi-Fascism, the author makes no reference to the transnational dimension of the anti-fascist struggle during the Second World War. Another reflection on resistance in Albania, published in Italy in the early 1990s, adopts the same stance: 'the Albanian people based their country's liberation primarily on the human, material and moral forces at their disposal'.²

None of this should come as any surprise. Indeed, until very recently, historiographic reconstructions of armed resistance movements against fascism have followed typically national canons.³ In the context of Western Europe, the French and Italian cases appear emblematic: in both countries, recounting resistance to Nazi-Fascism has been central to the construction of post-war democracy and, in both cases, such accounts have been set in exclusively national terms.⁴ This is due to multiple factors. First, the resistance movements were indisputably primarily national in scale: most of the combatants in the European resistance movements fought within the borders of their own countries. And second, until recently, historiography has also rarely considered the transnational dimensions of the phenomena being studied.

Six years after the publication of Marmullaku's book, in December 1981 Mehmet Shehu, the former Albanian prime minister, committed suicide. At the time, Shehu was 68 years old and was considered as a likely successor to Enver Hoxha. 'He studied at a military school in Naples on a scholarship in 1935', wrote a news correspondent for *The New York Times*,

but was sent home because of his anti-Fascist views. He then trained for a military career in Tirana and put his training to work as an acting battalion commander of the Garibaldi International Brigade. After the Republican defeat, he was interned in France. He returned to Italian-occupied Albania in 1942 to join the partisans and came to command a brigade and a division. His troops freed Tirana.⁵

A few decades later, during an event at the Spanish embassy in Tirana in 2007, Arianita Marko recalled how her father Petro would often tell her about the civil war he had fought in, far from home: 'some of the first words I learnt were *Ebro, Madrid, España, Libertad, Internacionalismo, Hermano*, and some of the first names I ever heard were

2 National Committee of Veterans of the Struggle of the Albanian People, 'La lotta antifascista di liberazione nazionale del popolo albanese e la partecipazione degli antifascisti italiani', *Lotta armata e resistenza delle Forze Armate all'estero* (Milano, 1990), p. 140.

3 Alberto De Bernardi, 'L'antifascismo: una questione aperta', *Antifascismo e identità europea* (Roma, 2004); José M Faraldo, 'An Antifascist Political Identity? On the Cult of Antifascism in the Soviet Union and post-socialist Russia', in *Rethinking Antifascism. History, Memory and Politics. 1922 to the Present* (New York, 2016); Claudio Pavone, 'Negazionismi, rimozi-
oni, revisionismi: Storia o politica?' *Fascismo e antifascismo. Rimozi-
oni, revisioni e negazioni* (Roma, 2000); Claudio Pavone, 'La Resistenza in Italia: alcuni nodi interpretativi', *Ricerche di Storia Politica* 1 (2002), pp. 31–8.

4 Philip E. Cooke, *The Legacy of the Italian Resistance* (Basingstoke, 2011); Robert Gildea, *Fighters in the Shadows* (London, 2015).

5 W. Saxon, 'Gen. Mehmet Shehu Dead at 68; Served Albania as Prime Minister', *New York Times*, 19 Dec. 1981, p. 50.

those of his friends, either dead or still living. He called them, quite simply: *Compañeros de España*.⁶ The short obituary and Arianita Marko's recollections reveal something that was missing from Marmullaku's description of the Albanian anti-fascist struggle: its transnational dimension. Prior to one of them becoming a leading figure of the Albanian resistance and the other one of the best-known Albanian writers of the period after the Second World War, Mehmet Shehu and Petro Marko lived, and in some cases fought, in Greece, Italy, Spain, and France. The trajectories they had followed after enlisting as volunteers in the International Brigades (IBs) influenced their involvement in the Second World War, as we will see.

This article investigates the trajectories of a small group of Albanian veterans of the Spanish Civil War after leaving Spain, in early 1939. By focusing on the way in which Albanian veterans reached the European resistance movements between 1941 and 1943, we both enhance and problematize our understanding of the European resistance movement as a transnational phenomenon with its roots in the Spanish Civil War. This article aims to contribute further to a better understanding of the *longue durée* of the anti-fascist fight between 1936 and the end of the Second World War. The case of the Albanian veterans also allows us to analyse the circulation of anti-fascist practices in a relatively peripheral European country. At the same time, the experiences of the individuals discussed here remind us that the events of the European anti-fascist movement between the 1930s and 1940s, and in particular those of the communist militants, must be interpreted from a transnational perspective, and on an at least continental scale.⁷ 'Recent discussions on the transnational approach', writes Alix Heiniger in an intervention on German communist militants during the Second World War, 'allow us to renew our paradigms, concentrating our attention on the practices and circulation of actors beyond the national context, and thereby enabling us to go beyond an account focused on the parties or the International.'⁸ As we will see, the biographies of the Albanian combatants examined in the following pages attest to the need to proceed in this direction. This article is based on primary documentation proceeding from Italian, Russian, and British archives. The 'Comintern files' from the Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sotsial'no-Politicheskoi Istorii help to illuminate the participation of Albanian volunteers in the IBs and their subsequent internment in French Camps. These sources are complemented by Italian documents from the Archivio Centrale dello Stato and the Archivio Storico Diplomatico and by British sources from the National Archives that shed light on the participation of

6 Arianita Marko, 'Viva la Vida!' *Voluntarios de la Libertad. Petro Marko, Hasta la Vista y los Brigadistas albaneses en la Guerra Civil Española* (Madrid, 2009), p. 40.

7 See: Robert Gerwarth and Robert Gideia, 'Resistance and Collaboration in the Second World War as Transnational Phenomena', *Journal of Modern European History* 16 (2018), pp. 175–82; Lisa A. Kirschenbaum, *International Communism and the Spanish Civil War. Solidarity and Suspicion* (Cambridge, 2015); Glenda Sluga, 'Fascism and Anti-Fascism', in A. Iriye (ed.), *The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History* (Basingstoke, 2009), pp. 381–90; Brigitte Studer, *The Transnational World of the Cominternians* (Basingstoke, 2015).

8 Alix Heiniger, 'Des pratiques transnationales pour une lutte internationale? Les militants communistes allemands en exil à l'Ouest pendant la seconde guerre mondiale', *Crit. Int.* 66:1 (2015), p. 37.

Albanian veterans of Spain in the resistance movements in both Italy and Albania. The article also draws on diaries and memories to create the fullest picture yet of this relatively understudied group of International Brigaders.

Fighting in Spain: A Brief Group Portrait

The participation of Albanians in the Spanish Civil War has often been overlooked. As a small national group, the specificity of the Albanian collective has been almost lost, becoming diluted in the larger context of international volunteering in Spain.⁹ Before getting to the heart of the discussion, a brief group portrait is therefore necessary. Who were the Albanian volunteers? And, above all, can we identify specific characteristics of their involvement in the Spanish conflict that would help us better understand their participation in European resistance movements? Although, according to certain authors, at least 50 Albanian volunteers fought in Spain, the Comintern documentation suggests a smaller number of around 30.¹⁰ Irrespective of this, the number of Albanian volunteers that quickly made their way to Spain is still considerable in light of two factors: first, the geographical distance separating the Iberian Peninsula from the small Balkan state; and, second, the absence of an Albanian communist party during the Spanish Civil War. The presence of Albanian volunteers in Spain is merely the umpteenth indication of what has been emerging in international historiography in recent years: the extraordinary capacity of the Spanish conflict to mobilize anti-fascists. In Europe in the second half of the 1930s, especially after Hitler had seized power in Germany, Fascism had begun to be seen as a continental problem. Even among Communists, after the Bulgarian Dimitrov was appointed secretary of Comintern, the decisive seventh congress of 1935 and the beginning of the politics of popular fronts, the anti-fascist struggle had unexpectedly become a strategic priority.¹¹ In this respect, since its outbreak the Spanish Civil War constituted a real testing ground for the international communist movement and it should come as no surprise that many militants, and not only the Albanians discussed in these pages, chose to enlist voluntarily.¹² The conflict arose at a specific historic moment in which the anti-fascist and communist movements appeared to have finally acquired a definitive common purpose. As one American volunteer recalled, 'I saw in the invaders

9 Andreu Castells, *Las brigadas internacionales de la guerra de España* (Barcelona, 1974); Jaques Delperrie de Bayac, *Les Birgades internacionales* (Paris, 1968); Michael W. Jackson, *Fallen Sparrows: The International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War* (Philadelphia, 1994); R. Dan Richardson, *Comintern Army: The International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War* (Lexington, 1982); Rémi Skoutelsky, *Novedad en el frente. Las Brigadas Internacionales en la guerra civil* (Madrid, 2006).

10 Stephen Schwartz, 'Enversits and Titoists – Communism and Islam in Albania and Kosova, 1941–99', *Muslims and Communists in Post-Transition States* (London, 2012), 86–112.

11 Silvio Pons, *The Global Revolution. A History of International Communism, 1917–1991* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 77–80.

12 See: Daniel Kowalsky, *La Unión Soviética y la guerra civil española. Una revisión crítica* (Barcelona, 2003); Yuri Rybalkin, *Stalin y España: la ayuda militar soviética a la República* (Madrid, 2007); Frank Schauff, *La victoria frustrada. La Unión Soviética, la Internacional Comunista y la Guerra Civil Española* (Barcelona, 2008).

of Spain the same people I've been fighting all my life.'¹³ An Italian communist, on the other hand, spoke of an 'enormous hatred that had built up inside him'.¹⁴ Spain easily became a hub for like-minded activists. Moreover, as underlined by Brigitte Studer, the whole Spanish venture represented 'a distinctive space of transnational communication with its cross-border contacts and exchanges'.¹⁵ This is borne out by the experiences of the Albanian volunteers, as we will see shortly when we analyse the relationships they formed with the Italian volunteers.

One element needs to be borne in mind. The IBs were not only devised by the Comintern, but most importantly, the organization of volunteer recruitment and their transfer to Spain were therefore generally entrusted to individual national communist parties.¹⁶ In the absence of this in the Albanian case, volunteers were obliged to arrive in Spain in dribs and drabs, organizing themselves on their own account. As a rule, aspiring combatants arrived in Paris where there was a large community of political exiles, often intellectuals, many of whom were communists that could offer advice on getting to Spain.¹⁷ The latter directed the Albanian anti-fascists towards other, better-organized communities of exiles, often Italians, or towards the French communists. Petro Marko, Skender Luarasi, Mehmet Shehu, and many other volunteers turned to Lazar Fundo, a well-known Albanian communist who, in the years of the Spanish Civil War and the Great Terror in Moscow, broke with the Soviets, adopting an anti-Stalinist position.¹⁸ The decisive role Fundo played in recruiting Albanian volunteers is attested to by the vehemence with which Mehmet Shehu needed to be defended against the accusation of acting as a saboteur a few months after his arrival in Spain.¹⁹ The lack of a national Communist party to turn to, and espousing an anti-fascism that was often pre-political, led the Albanian volunteers to seek political contacts directly in Spain, within the IBs. In this context, they formed a special relationship with the Italian communists, which, as we will see, came to influence Albanian veterans' participation in European resistance movements. Most of the Albanians were member of the middle class and had a medium to high level of education. Petro Marko, for example, had studied at the University of

13 Richard Baxell, *British Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War. The British Battalion in the International Brigades, 1936–1939* (London and New York), p. 46.

14 Enrico Acciai, *Antifascismo, volontariato e guerra civile in Spagna. La Sezione Italiana della Colonna Ascaso* (Milan 2016), p. 147.

15 Studer, *The Transnational World of the Cominternians*, p. 24.

16 Daniel Kowalsky, 'The Soviet Union and the International Brigades, 1936–1939', *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 19:4 (2006), pp. 681–704.

17 Biografia de Militantes. Shehu Mehmet, 1 April 1938. Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sotsial'no-Politicheskoi Istorii [henceforth RGASPI], F. 545, O. 6, f. 86.

18 Luarasi Skender. Document biographique. RGASPI, F. 545, O. 6, f. 85, Mickaël Wilmart, 'La "colonie albanaise" de Paris dans l'entre-deux-guerres', in *Histoire des migrations en Ile-de-France. Actes du XII colloque d'histoire régionale* (Paris, 2010), p. 15. See also: Reginald Hibbert, *Albania's National Liberation Struggle: The Bitter Victory* (London, 1991), pp. 14–15; Altiero Spinelli, *Come ho tentato di diventare saggio* (Bologna, 1999), pp. 264–7.

19 Biografia de Militantes. Shehu Mehmet, 1 April 1938 and Letter from Mehmet Shehu to 'compagno Pisani', 13 March 1938. RGASPI, F. 545, O. 6, f. 86.

Athens and Skender Luarasi at the University of Vienna. A few of them had a solid military background, especially thanks to their experience in Italian academies. Moreover, most of the Albanians were familiar with the Italian language.

Most of the volunteers travelled to Spain directly from Albania, while others arrived from Italy. The latter included Shaban Basha, soon to become captain of the Garibaldi Brigade, Veli Dedi, and Xhemajil Kada.²⁰ Basha and Dedi had been cadets in the military academy in Turin.²¹ The latter moved to Italy in September 1931 as part of an exchange project by the Albanian war ministry. In Italy, Dedi studied at the Military School of Artillery in Turin and, on 8 January 1936, he and Basha deserted to go to Spain.²² In the summer of 1936, Dedi and Basha were singled out as anti-fascists by the Italian authorities, after being denounced by a woman they had encountered in a hotel ('a certain Bruna Marta . . . reported that . . . said officials had confided in her that one day everyone would be a communist because there would be no more rich and poor people, and capitalism would disappear').²³ In September 1937, shortly after his arrival in Spain, Dedi was promoted to the role of captain in honour of his service on the battlefield. A few months later, he became an instructor at the military school of Morata.²⁴

The leader of the small group of Albanian combatants in Spain was Skender Luarasi. He was born in 1901 and lived in the United States for a few years before undertaking university studies in Vienna between 1926 and 1930. While working as a secondary school teacher in Albania, Luarasi had already been involved in anti-fascist activities on numerous occasions and, in December 1936, he left his family and job to go to Spain and enlist in the IBs. This background, along with his being older than most of the Albanian volunteers, conferred a certain level of prestige upon him among his compatriots. In Spain, he was assigned to the censorship office of the IBs (in English and German), where he helped draft texts for the in-house press of the IBs and for radio transmissions, and also served as a librarian for the volunteers.²⁵ Luarasi had also arrived in Spain with a recommendation from the Italian socialist leader Pietro Nenni.²⁶ This detail proves that the Albanian anti-fascists, or at least some of them, were in contact with their Italian counterparts right from the outset of the Spanish Civil War.

As explained at the beginning, two key figures in this regard can be found in Mehmet Shehu and Petro Marko. After his studies at the technical institute of Tirana, Shehu lived in Italy between 1935 and 1936. In Naples, he was a cadet at the local military academy.²⁷ After his expulsion for subversive activities, Shehu was forced to return home

20 Shaban Basha, 28 December 1938. RGASPI, F. 545, O. 6, f. 85.

21 *Officeret Shqiptare ne Brigadt Internacionale*, RGASPI, F. 545, O. 6, f. 85.

22 *Biographie von Kapitanen Veli Mustafa Dedi*, RGASPI, F. 545, O. 6, f. 85.

23 *Certo Dedi, non meglio indicato, ed altro compagno albanese*, 13 October 1936. Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome [henceforth ACS] Ministero dell'Interno, Divisione Polizia Politica, Fascicoli personali, F. 'Dedi Veli'.

24 *Nota, XV División, Estado Mayor*, 16 September 1937 and *Nota, XV División, Estado Mayor*, 12 January 1938 RGASPI, F. 545, O. 6, f. 85.

25 Skender Luarasi, 28 December 1937 and Skender Luarasi, personal file, 14 November 1938. RGASPI, F. 545, O. 6, F. 85.

26 Letter by Custicik to Gelesof, 16 June 1938. RGASPI, F. 545, O. 6, f. 85.

27 *Biografia personale*, Mehmet Shehu. RGASPI, F. 545, O. 6, f. 86.

shortly before the outbreak of the civil war.²⁸ Petro Marko, on the other hand, had studied at the University of Athens, where he came into contact with local communists, before leaving for Spain.²⁹ In Spain, Shehu and Marko acquired special military abilities, which would prove useful a few years later. For two months, Marko was a cadet at the Advanced Military School of Pozo Rubio, where the officers of the IBs were trained.³⁰ There, Marko also took a course to become a sniper, at the end of which he was described as having ‘very good military capabilities’.³¹ According to the Italian Pietro Pavanin, Shehu also proved an excellent combatant: ‘he is the best comrade I know . . . During his time in Spain, we kept a particularly close eye on him and . . . he repeatedly displayed his courage, sangfroid, spirit of sacrifice, and commitment to the cause.’³² As a rule, Albanian volunteers not only often arrived in Spain with a medium to high level of military know-how under their belts, but they were also able to fine-tune this during their time in the IBs, emerging as capable soldiers. This was the case not only for Shehu and Marko, but also for Veli Dedi, Emrush Myftari, and Shaban Basha. The military competences they gained in Spain were to prove very important in their subsequent participation in European resistance movements.

The Albanians did not serve, as might have been expected, in the primarily Balkan battalion: the Dimitrov of the XV International Brigade. Rather, many of them preferred to fight in the Garibaldi Division. For instance, the volunteer Faik Dardha asked to be moved from the first to the second division.³³ Suleiman Nishova followed a similar path.³⁴ In October 1937, the Albanian volunteers in Spain at the time asked to be grouped together in the Garibaldi Brigade: ‘Albanian comrades Emrush Myftari and Petro Marko . . . raised the issue of whether it would be possible to group all the Albanians together in the Garibaldi Brigade.’ According to Pietro Pavanin, this would not be easy, but it was worth trying: ‘there will be around 30 to 35 Albanian volunteers, distributed across all the units of our Brigade. For the most part they are former officers of the Albanian army, and are therefore in possession of military capacities.’³⁵ The Albanians preferred to fight alongside the Italians because, among them, they found a more welcoming environment as well as freedom of expression as a national group. The aforementioned letter also contained other requests: Myftari and Marko asked ‘to have a platform on the newspaper “Il Garibaldino” and “Volontariato della Libertà” in Italian, and to have fifty copies per issue to be sent by post to their country’. According to Pavanin, this would not be hard to obtain.³⁶ Luigi Longo, too, Commissioner-General of the IBs, approved of the request.

28 Peter Lucas, *The OSS in World War II Albania: Covert Operations and Collaboration with Communist Partisans* (Jefferson, 2007), p. 142.

29 Autobiografía del Petro Marko, RGASPI, F. 545, O. 6, f. 85.

30 Letter by Petro Marko, 5 November 1938. RGASPI, F. 545, O. 6, f. 85.

31 Nota sobre Petro Marko. RGASPI, F. 545, O. 6, f. 85.

32 Letter from Pietro Pavanin to Edoardo D’Onofrio, 19 March 1939. RGASPI, F. 545, O. 6, f. 86.

33 Faik Dardha, 28 December 1937. RGASPI, F. 545, O. 6, f. 85, Letter to Raimondi, 01 February 1938. RGASPI, F. 545, O. 6, f. 85.

34 Personal file Suleiman Nishova, 5 November 1938. RGASPI, F. 545, O. 6, f. 86.

35 Letter from Pietro Pavanin to Luigi Longo (Gallo), 8 October 1937. RGASPI, F. 545, O. 6, f. 85.

36 Letter from Pietro Pavanin to Luigi Longo (Gallo), 8 October 1937. RGASPI, F. 545, O. 6, f. 85.

Just a few weeks later, the publication *Vulnetari Ilirisë* was released as early as the following December, overseen by Skander Luarasi. The first page of the opening issue featured a greeting by Luigi Longo himself, who gladly welcomed ‘the publication of this first issue in Albanian of *Volontario della Libertà*’. Longo recalled that the Albanian volunteers were fighting ‘side by side’ with the Italian volunteers of the Garibaldi Brigade, not only against Franco’s soldiers, but also against Italian Fascism and its imperial ambitions. Longo also cited the Garibaldian tradition, which united the two peoples and originated in the struggles for the Italian Risorgimento. ‘As an Italian and a lover of freedom . . . , I welcome the fraternity between the Italians and the Albanians.’³⁷ In February 1938, Mehmet Shehu asked Pietro Pavanin for more resources for the publication project. According to Shehu, the Albanian anti-fascists in Spain needed to establish themselves as the vanguard of anti-fascist political emigration, and to do so they needed to make their voices heard more forcefully in Albania (‘if those of us here today do not do what the Albanian people ask of us, we will have betrayed the trust they have placed in us’).³⁸

Almost contemporaneously with Pavanin’s missive to Longo, Emrush Myftari wrote to the French communist IB commander André Marty, reminding him of the potential the Albanian volunteers in Spain represented and, like Longo, he also requested permission to set up a specific cultural undertaking.³⁹ Marty’s response was stern, terse, and slow to arrive. The Frenchman called upon the Albanian volunteers to focus on the military struggle, without wasting time on propaganda for their national cause.⁴⁰ Longo and Marty’s contrasting responses to the Albanian requests shed light on why volunteers from the small Balkan country preferred to serve under the Garibaldi Brigade: among the Italian volunteers, they found a freedom of expression as a national group that they were denied elsewhere. Consequently, not only did the Albanians systematically ask to be moved to the Garibaldi Brigade but, above all, human and political ties were formed between the two national groups that outlasted the Spanish experience. Shortly before leaving Spain, Luarasi declared that, for him, that experience had been ‘rich: working in the press allowed [him] to understand the reality of the political situation’, and that in the future he would do his utmost ‘to place [his] experience here at the service of [his] people, and to organize the Albanian workers’.⁴¹

Veterans

In mid-1938, in a final effort to localise the war, the Non-Intervention Committee put forward a plan to withdraw all non-Spanish troops from Spain. At first, the Republican government balked at the suggestion, but in September, during a famous intervention at the League of Nations, Negrín publicly revealed the decision to withdraw the IBs from the front in Spain. Recognizing that the Popular Army could not hope to win the war

37 *Saludos* in: *Vulnetari Ilirisë*, n. 1 December 1937.

38 Letter from Mehmet Shehu to Pietro Pavanin, 18 February 1938. RGASPI, F. 545, O. 6, f. 86.

39 Letter from Emrush Myftari to André Marty, 19 October 1937. RGASPI, F. 545, O. 6, f. 85.

40 Letter from André Marty to Emrush Myftari, 2 March 1938. RGASPI, F. 545, O. 6, f. 85.

41 Skender Luarasi, personal file, 14 November 1938. RGASPI, F. 545, O. 6, F. 85.

against the Rebels, who enjoyed better armour and air superiority as well as being better trained and led, he hoped that if the Rebels would have to make do without Italian and German help, they might be inclined to agree to a negotiated settlement. Within days, the volunteers went from being combatants on the front to being treated as veterans. The announcement of the withdrawal elicited the disapproval of most of the IBs. Andreu Castells, a veteran of the IBs before becoming a historian, described the indignation elicited by the decision: ‘All of a sudden, many volunteers realized they had fought for a lost cause.’⁴² The Italian Giovanni Pesce spoke of a profound sense of bitterness that extended transversely among his comrades-in-arms.⁴³ The volunteers experienced conflicting emotions, particularly those who could not return to their own country. While, on the one hand, an intense period was drawing to a close, new clouds were gathering on the horizon. People were aware of the uncertainty that characterized the immediate future. Foreigners were grouped together in camps far from the front, where they were disarmed, divided up by nationality and, wherever possible, prepared for repatriation. Veterans were informed that those who could not return to their country of origin would be hosted by third countries. On 24 September, the Garibaldi Brigade, and hence also the group of Albanian volunteers it comprised, was gathered in a camp along the El Parelló–Rasquera road, near Tarragona, where its members were disarmed.⁴⁴

Unable to return to their own countries and turned back at the Franco–Catalan border, many of the volunteers from the IBs were held up in Spain until the fall of Catalonia in the early weeks of 1939. The total number of volunteers rejected by France is not known; in the months before the end of the war, the Franco–Catalan border was in fact subject to constant pressure and ultimately, with the capitulation of the Republicans, it had to give in to the flood of people fleeing Franco’s troops. According to Rémi Skoutelsky, around 5,000 to 6,000 men were turned back at the border; they were mostly Germans, Poles, Italians, and Austrians.⁴⁵ The small group of Albanians formed part of a larger group of veterans not free to return to their countries. Going back home would have presented a risk for the Albanian veterans: the illiberal government by King Zog was ruling the country since the late 1920s. Furthermore, a few weeks later the Italian troops occupied the small Balkan country and returning home became even more dangerous for the veterans. Despite the difficulties of the time, these anti-fascists were well aware they would have to continue to fight, often irrespective of their own wishes: in their case, the time to choose had coincided with their arrival in Spain and their enlistment in the IBs. This recognition is confirmed by a specific episode. In November 1938, the Italian Ottorino Orlandini was stopped in the demobilization centre of Torrelló on account of his attempt to recruit men willing to organize a guerrilla movement in Spanish Morocco from among the IB veterans. This was an ambitious plan that involved both the Spanish government and certain sections of Italian anti-fascism in France. The project never came to fruition,

42 Castells, *Las brigadas internacionales de la guerra de España*, p. 372.

43 Franco Giannantoni and Ibio Paolucci, *Giovanni Pesce ‘Visone’, un comunista che ha fatto l’Italia. L’emigrazione, la guerra di Spagna, Ventotene, i Gap, il dopoguerra* (Varese, 2005), p. 68.

44 Note on the XII Brigade, 24 September 1938. RGASPI, F. 545, O. 3, f. 148.

45 Skoutelsky, *Novedad en el frente. Las Brigadas Internacionales en la guerra civil*, p. 392.

and Orlandini found himself in trouble because the commanders of the IBs judged his initiative to be ‘provocative’. It was only the direct intervention of the Chief of Staff of the Republican army that saved the Tuscan anti-fascist from a tragic epilogue.⁴⁶ In just a few days, Orlandini managed to recruit more than 30 veterans: all he asked was that they possess experience in guerrilla warfare. Mehmet Shehu was among the volunteers that presented themselves.⁴⁷ This tells us three things about the Albanian veteran: first, that he too was aware the fight would continue; second, that he had gained experience during his time in Spain that would prove useful in Albania from 1942; and third, that he was open to pursuing the struggle with his Italian comrades-in-arms.

The veterans of the IBs finally crossed the Franco–Catalan border between 6 and 9 February 1939. The Albanians crossed the border with the Italians, the latter numbering a thousand or so men in total, on 7 February. Once in France, the last to cross, under the command of Frenchman André Marty, handed over the flag of the IBs to Prime Minister Juan Negrín.⁴⁸ A few days later, the Albanian veterans drafted a short report. They were interned in the camp of St Cyprien, where they shared their barracks with the Italians: ‘we held a meeting here on 18 February 1939, chaired by comrade Veli Dedi, to take stock of our work’. The report also set out their desire to soon be able to fight for their country: ‘we are changing front and will continue our fight wherever we find ourselves, and under whatever circumstances’. The Albanians also proposed collaborating with other anti-fascist forces as much as possible, ‘especially those of the Italian people’.⁴⁹ Shehu began to emerge as a key figure in the group of veterans, especially because of the military qualities he had demonstrated on the field. In March that year, in a document on the prospective futures of the veterans of Spain, the Frenchman André Marty ‘bet’ on him (‘it is in him that we must place our trust for our work among the Albanians’).⁵⁰

Despite being essentially overlooked by historiography on volunteering in Spain, the experience in the French camps is central for understanding the transition from the struggle in Spain to that of the European resistance movements. Living conditions in the French camps were very testing. For many, arriving in the camp was a distressing experience; new internees found themselves faced with completely makeshift conditions. Worn-out and dejected, the veterans were literally thrown out onto the sand without any shelter. ‘A few wooden barracks have been constructed but they are not enough to shelter everyone’, Pietro Pavanin wrote to Edoardo D’Onofrio in February. ‘The camp’, he continued, ‘is situated in the sand by the sea, such that there is water fifty centimetres beneath the sand. As such, it is extraordinarily damp and comrades sleep on top, without any straw or hay, right on the sand itself.’⁵¹ It is hardly surprising that many immediately

46 Note by the General Inspector of the BI, Luigi Gallo, 24 November 1938. RGASPI, F. 545, O. 6, f. 521.

47 List of the officials recruited by Cap. Orlandini. RGASPI, O. 6, f. 521.

48 Enrico Acciai and Ilaria Cansella, *Storie di indesiderabili e di confini. I reduci antifascisti di Spagna nei campi francesi (1939–1941)* (Arcidosso, 2017), pp. 60–3.

49 Al comitato della Liberazione Nazionale, Paris, 19 February 1939, RGASPI, F. 545, O. 6, f. 85.

50 Note by the Comité Central du Parti Communiste Français, 18 March 1939. Al comitato della Liberazione Nazionale, Paris, 19 February 1939, RGASPI, F. 545, O. 6, f. 85.

51 ‘Rapporto della situazione esistente fra gli internazionali [sic] nei campi di concentrazione’, letter from Pavanin to D’Onofrio, 20 February 1939. RGASPI 545.6.2a.

attempted to escape. Among the first to succeed were two Albanians: Emrush Myftari and Petro Marko.⁵²

After initially being placed in the so-called sand camps, in particular those in Argelès and Saint-Cyprien, from late spring 1939 they began to be transferred to the camp in Gurs, further north along the Franco–Spanish border in the western Pyrenees area, just before the Basque Country. By that point, the small group of Albanians had come to be considered as an integral part of the Italian one. In the camps, the internees wasted no time in getting organized. In Saint-Cyprien, for example, they did ‘gymnastic exercises’, played football, and established a cultural commission that organized the first language and mathematics courses. Anti-fascists of all nationalities took part in these activities, thereby fostering relationships between the different groups. On wall newspapers of the Italian group, it was reported that inside the camp ‘instructor comrades . . . helped improve the life of our collective’ enthusiastically, and cautioned that study was indispensable for the veterans: ‘let us make the most of this period of forced inactivity to better ourselves! More dynamism! Physical exercise out in the open air and sunshine to keep us strong and healthy. And in your barracks, on with your studies, everyone!’⁵³

Particularly after their transfer to Gurs, many veterans from Spain started dedicating themselves to cultural and political initiatives in a more systematic manner. In our opinion, such initiatives are very important for understanding their subsequent contribution to European resistance movements and especially the origins of the networks of transnational combatants (not only Albanian ones). The French government decided to concentrate all the veterans of the IBs in Gurs; in June 1939, their national composition was as follows: 950 Poles; 872 Italians; 735 Germans; 600 Czechs; 483 Austrians; and 332 Portuguese. It was a multinational population. In total, at least 6,800 veterans of the IBs passed through the camp, just under 20 per cent of all the volunteers that were part of the military force between 1936 and 1938. It is therefore no exaggeration to affirm that Gurs constituted a key passage in the complex events of anti-fascist volunteering in Spain.⁵⁴ The Italians, the second national group in terms of size, organized their allotted area as follows: ‘each barrack is divided into two sections, with an officer in charge of each, along with a barrack supervisor, who acts as another officer, and a cultural delegate that receives instructions from the cultural commission of the Italian group’. In Gurs, the Albanian veterans settled into *îlot* J, sharing their barracks with Italians, Spaniards, Moroccans, and Argentinians, which cemented relationships.⁵⁵ According to a note on Luarasi, it was thanks to the experience in the internment camps in France that the Italian communists began to see him as ‘an actual member’ of their party.⁵⁶

52 Al comitato della Liberazione Nazionale, Paris, 19 February 1939, RGASPI, F. 545, O. 6, f. 85.

53 ‘Più dinamismo’ (Ettore), in ‘La vita nel campo, Bollettino Gruppo italiano’, n. 1. 2 April 1939. RGASPI 545.4.17.

54 Denis Peschanski, *La France des camps: l'internement, 1938–1946* (Paris, 2002), p. 44.

55 ‘Rapporto sulla situazione organizzativa, economica e materiale, politica del gruppo italiano del campo di concentrazione [sic] di Gurs, Francia, fino al 26 maggio 1939’. RGASPI, 545.6.469a.

56 Luarasi Skender. Document biographique. RGASPI, 545.6.85.

Cultural life inside the camps was important. Not only were actual courses organized on the most disparate of topics (the Albanians, for example, arranged a course on mathematics that proved very successful among the Italians and Germans), along with collective readings of newspapers or books, but more multifarious, complex initiatives were also arranged, leading to real artistic productions. A publication drafted inside the camp described an actual ‘University of Gurs’: numerous courses were held and, above all, there were many veterans eager to learn. As for languages, there were 62 courses with no fewer than 523 students (largely Poles, Germans, and Austrians).⁵⁷ Physical and cultural activities helped reinforce relationships between veterans of different nationalities too, more so than in Spain, where they had served in military units that were more nationally, or at least linguistically, homogeneous. ‘We discuss Italian fascism’, wrote a German internee, ‘geopolitical problems in the Mediterranean, the Jewish question, German farm workers, the history of Czechoslovakia, the Berne Convention, trade unions, agriculture, relationships with the Catholics, and youth.’⁵⁸ The Italian volunteer Lorenzo Vanelli also recalled how important relationships between the different national groups in the French camps were: ‘next to our islet, separated by nationality, are German, Yugoslav, Austrian, Hungarian, Polish, Romanian and Bulgarian comrades, as well as a few Israelites and a group of Cuban combatants. The contacts between us will be long-lasting and will help consolidate ever-stronger ties of friendship and solidarity.’⁵⁹ In March 1941, just before the end of the period of internment in France and two years after it had begun, Albanian veterans, including Shehu and Luarasi, still numbered among the members of the Italian group.⁶⁰

Faced with the choice of either being repatriated or handed over to the Germans, from the second half of 1941 the Italian veterans were almost all handed over to the Italian authorities. Once they had crossed the border, the veterans were first handed over to the authorities of the local prefecture in question, usually that of their birth, before receiving their sentence at the border. Albanian veterans suffered the same fate because the small Balkan country had been occupied by the Italians in the spring of 1939. Between the end of 1940 and the summer of 1943, in the internment sites many of the protagonists of the conflict in Spain came face to face with the exponents of Italian anti-fascism that had remained on the peninsula. Often, this initiated a dialogue between different generations of opponents, and there was a synthesis in these months between two types of anti-fascism that had been mutually impenetrable up to that point: that of the exile, and that of those who stayed put.⁶¹ The military experience gained in Spain was one of the central

57 Nos ecoles. RGASPI, 545.4. 62.

58 Gilbert Badia, *Les barbelés de l'exil* (Grenoble, 1979), pp. 252–5.

59 Vita e lotta nei campi. Argelès, St. Cyprien, Gurs, Vernet. Archivio dell'Istituto nazionale per la storia del Movimento di Liberazione nazionale (now Istituto Nazionale Ferruccio Parri), Milan [henceforth AINSMLI], Fondo Associazione italiana combattenti volontari antifascisti in Spagna [henceforth FAICVAS], b. 23, f. 241.

60 List of the Italians internee at Vernet, 20 March 1941. RGASPI, 545.6.059.

61 Acciai and Cansella, *Storie di indesiderabili e di confini. I reduci antifascisti di Spagna nei campi francesi (1939–1941)*, pp. 159–73. See also: Ilaria Poerio, *A scuola di dissenso: storie di resistenza al confino di polizia (1926–43)* (Roma, 2016); Camilla Poesio, *Il confino fascista: l'arma silenziosa del regime* (Roma, 2011).

topics of the discussion. Underscoring the reciprocal exchange between anti-fascists with widely divergent human and political trajectories, Pesce recalled that,

For me, [the camp at] Ventotene was a highly significant experience that I later drew upon during the War of Liberation . . . Ventotene helped open my eyes, awakening me to the reality of my country . . . When he found out that I had fought in Spain, Eugenio Curiel wanted to meet me and talk. He obtained all the details from me: the military policy of the IBs, the history of the Garibaldi Brigade, the technique of the battle, the clash between Italians and Italians in Guadalajara, the long, exhausting guerrilla war in Ebro.

Pesce further noted that the internees also included Albanian veterans from Spain, including Mehmet Shehu.⁶² In his memoirs, the future president of the Italian Republic Sandro Pertini also mentioned the presence of the Albanian internees in Ventotene, particularly Lazar Fundo, who had helped many get to Spain.⁶³ Altiero Spinelli, in his memoirs, spoke about the Albanians' arrival on the island, in particular

ten or so intellectuals that had studied at the famous universities of Europe and spoke three or four languages . . . They quickly forged good relationships with the Italian prisoners, developing politically preferential bonds, some with the Communists, others with the 'giellisti' [members of the 'Giustizia e Libertà' movement].⁶⁴

Some Albanian veterans from Spain had managed to escape from the French camps before being handed over to the Italian authorities. This was the case with Veli Dedi and Petro Marko, for instance. The latter, after hiding out in Grenoble for a few months with some compatriots, managed to return home in March 1940. He was assisted by the Albanian senator Mustafa Kruja, whose son Marko was a friend of his. The politician provided the young man not only with the money to return to Albania, but also with other funds to put towards anti-fascist activities.⁶⁵ It did not take the Italian authorities long to work out what was happening and they arrested Marko in Valona in May of that year. The veteran from Spain was attempting to organize a communist cell in the city and had already got a dozen students involved. Among his papers, they found photos of him in Spain: this was indisputable evidence of his recent past, marking the end of his brief experience as a conspirator in Albania.⁶⁶ Marko was then interned in an Albanian camp as an anti-fascist.

By the end of 1941 several permanent organized guerrilla groups were reported by the British to be in operation.⁶⁷ The communists organized their first guerrilla units. During

62 Giannantoni and Paolucci, *Giovanni Pesce 'Visone', un comunista che ha fatto l'Italia. L'emigrazione, la guerra di Spagna, Ventotene, i Gap, il dopoguerra*, pp. 81–9.

63 Gianni Biasich, *Pertini racconta. Gli anni 1915–1945* (Milano, 1983), pp. 89–90.

64 Spinelli, *Come ho tentato di diventare saggio*, pp. 264–5.

65 Relazione segreta. Petro Marko. Archivio Storico Diplomatico, Rome [henceforth ASD], Gabinetto Albania, B. 196/2, F. 7.

66 Letter to Zenone Benini (Undersecretary for Albania Affairs), 19 June 1940. ASD, Gabinetto Albania, B. 196/2, F. 7.

67 Bernd Jürgen Fischer, *Albania at War, 1939–1945* (London, 1999), p. 111.

the following months Italian control was restricted to the major towns, the major roads, and military installations. In the spring of 1942, on account of the intensified sabotage activities by the resistance movement, the Italian government decided to transfer the most dangerous political prisoners from Albania to Italy, particularly the communists. Many Albanians were therefore moved to the Italian internment camps.⁶⁸ Petro Marko was part of the group that left on 26 March 1942 to be transferred to the Sicilian island of Ustica.⁶⁹ The group also included Magbule Dibra, the wife of Hulmi Spahiu, a veteran from Spain. Magbule was interned for her involvement in a public rally against the Italian occupation in Tirana.⁷⁰ Ustica was one of the many *confino* islands where the Italian Fascist Regime interned political opponents. In the late 1920s the well-known anti-fascist Antonio Gramsci was detained on this island.⁷¹ Once in Ustica, Marko immediately took up contact with the Italian anti-fascists again: ‘the first thing to be done was to get in contact with the comrades from there, and that is what we did’. As soon as news spread on the island about his Spanish and ‘Garibaldian’ escapades, Marko was approached by members of the local communist cell and, over the following months, he acted as a bridge between the different national groups on the island.

There were many Croatian, Slovenian and Montenegrin comrades. Each group had its own cell, but there was just one committee and each nation was represented. We set up a committee with two representatives for each nation. Elections were held. I was elected military commander, while our comrade Alois, from Slovenia, was nominated commissioner.⁷²

The veteran from Spain was commended for his military valour. The internees were forced to live in small and crowded barracks. Despite the severe living conditions, the community of anti-fascists in Ustica was a solid and transnational one.

Marko remained on the island until May 1943, when the Italian authorities decided to pull the internees out of Ustica and to move them to the mainland, in view of a possible Allied landing in Sicily.

One morning, two boats came to take us away. We were ordered to go to the jetty in great haste. We loaded the bare necessities only and, in the confusion, like an army in retreat, they made us descend in small groups and, freed from our chains, they boarded us . . . Once we got to Palermo, we were gathered together in a square. They chained us up and sent us off towards Monreale on foot. We stayed there for a week. Afterwards, they loaded us onto a train headed for the continent . . . Towards the north: where? Why did they not set us free? . . . After several days, we reached a camp in Alatri, Frosinone.⁷³

68 Davide Rodogno, *Fascism's European Empire. Italian Occupation during the Second World War* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 357–8.

69 Confinati albanesi, 29 March 1942. ASD, Gabinetto Albania, B. 181, F. 54.

70 Makbule Dibra Spahiu, confinata Albanese, 29 January 1943. ASD, Gabinetto Albania, B. 181, F. 6.

71 Carlo Spartaco Capogreco, *I campi del Duce. L'internamento civile nell'Italia fascista (1940–1943)* (Turin, 2006), pp. 19–21.

72 Marita Sauku Bruci and Vittorio Bruno Stamerra, *Il Cristo Rosso e il suo Apostolo. Storie di confinati politici ad Ustica, Vincenzo Gigante nei ricordi di Petro Marko* (Brindisi, 2015), p. 10.

73 Sauku Bruci and Stamerra, *Il Cristo Rosso e il suo Apostolo. Storie di confinati politici ad Ustica, Vincenzo Gigante nei ricordi di Petro Marko*, pp. 13–14.

It was thus that Petro Marko reached the camp in Fraschette, where, on the eve of the fall of fascism in the summer of 1943, the Italian authorities had decided to assemble the Croatian, Montenegrin, and Albanian prisoners.⁷⁴

Fighting Again

In this final part of the article, we will concentrate on the trajectories of the two Albanian veterans, Petro Marko and Mehmet Shehu, and their return to arms during the Second World War. Marko and Shehu were not the only veterans who participated in European resistances. Emrush Myftari fought in Kosovo (he was killed in 1944 in Pristina by the Yugoslavs because he had been suspected of being a British spy), Veli Dedi took part in the French Resistance.⁷⁵ Others decided not to take action again as was the case with Skender Luarasi, who spent the Second World War hiding in France and, returning to Albania once the conflict ended. Italy invaded Albania in April 1939, when the veterans from Spain had been languishing in the French camps for a few weeks, and just a few months before the outbreak of the Second World War.⁷⁶ Although the small Balkan country was one of the first areas of the European continent where rebellions were recorded, as is also underlined in a report by the SOE, a more organized armed resistance took longer to establish itself there than elsewhere.⁷⁷ In December 1940, the SOE agent Qasim Kastrati reported to London as resistance in the Balkan country was struggling to develop into a real guerrilla war: ‘The question which then arises is: shall the Albanians be mown in groups at each local and sporadic revolt – which is inevitable if they are left to themselves – or shall they be encouraged to strike according to one effective plan, by giving them for the first time a chance of success against the hated invader.’⁷⁸ This was not easy, because Albania lacked one of the principal actors of resistance movements against Nazi-Fascism, at least in those parts of the Balkans: a well-organized communist party. What we wish to underline is not so much a political lack as the absence of the conspiratorial infrastructures that a communist party could have provided for the development of a guerrilla movement. Not only did such a party not exist in 1939 when the Second World War broke out, but it had not even been founded by the spring of 1941, when Germany invaded Yugoslavia and Greece. It was only after the German attack on the Soviet Union, and the consequent appeal by Stalin’s for an anti-fascist war, that the dispersed communist groups started to organize themselves in Albania too, finally producing a party.⁷⁹ In the process, the contacts established with the Yugoslav communists by a large

74 Luigi Centra, *I deportati: internati civili nel campo di concentramento Le Fraschette di Alatri* (Casamari, 1998).

75 *Below the Radar. Memories of the Second World War in Kosovo* (Pristina, 2015), p. 15.

76 Alberto Basciani, ‘Tra politica culturale e politica di potenza. Alcuni aspetti dei rapporti tra Italia e Albania tra le due guerre mondiali’, *Mondo Contemp.* 8:2 (2012); Redi Halimi, ‘L’Albania fascista (1939–1943). Stato della ricerca e piste da seguire’, *Diacronie Studi Storia Contemp.* 9:3 (2017); Pasquale Iuso, *Esercito, guerra e nazione. I soldati italiani tra Balcani e mediterraneo orientale, 1940–1945* (Roma, 2008); Rodogno, *Fascism’s European Empire. Italian Occupation during the Second World War.*

77 SOE activities in Albania. The National Archives [henceforth] TNA, HS 7/69.

78 Proposal for an Albanian Revolt against the Italians, December 1940. TNA, FO 371/29712.

79 Hibbert, *Albania’s National Liberation Struggle: The Bitter Victory*, pp. 11–28.

community of Albanian exiles who had fled to Yugoslavia after the Italian invasion proved very important. It was these exiles that returned home and, ‘following instructions from Comintern . . . began their organisational and terrorist activities’.⁸⁰ In the summer of 1941, the Yugoslav Communist Party sent two leading members to Albania – Dušan Mugoša e Miladin Popovic – who helped their comrades found the Albanian Communist Party (ACP). Enver Hoxha, a teacher from Gjirokaštër, was designated coordinator of the works of the central committee. There were no veterans from Spain among the party founders.

In January 1942, the members of the newly established ACP numbered around 200. Many devoted themselves to organizing the first partisan units, gathered together under the so-called National Liberation Movement (Lëvizja Nacional Çlirimtare, LNC).⁸¹ It was during that year that the Italian occupiers finally started to see the partisans’ actions as a real problem: in September, the first large-scale anti-guerrilla operations were organized in the eastern zone of Durazzo.⁸² The Italian troops suffered greatly from the advent of a modern guerrilla war, which they were poorly equipped to confront.⁸³ It was in this context that Mehmet Shehu resurfaced, having meanwhile returned to Albania following an amnesty. In April of that year, he had been reported by the British as being in command of a group of around a hundred men active in the area of Mallakastër, in central Albania.⁸⁴ When the First Division of the partisan army was founded in May, the ACP designated Shehu as its commander: the military experience he had acquired in Spain played a key role in this choice.⁸⁵ During that summer, the First Division drew in over 500 men, divided into three battalions with three companies each.⁸⁶ For almost two years, until at least the spring of 1944, Dušan Mugoša was part of the division as a military instructor. Like Shehu, he too was a veteran from Spain.⁸⁷

The establishment of the First Division helped improve the efficiency of the Albanian resistance movement. In April 1943, the British finally sent their first mission to the country. This was followed, in September, by the beginning of a more systematic engagement in Albania.⁸⁸ According to a British agent of the SOE, the communist party quickly emerged as a leading player in the resistance because many young people came to see it as the only organization with the military efficiency to oppose the invaders.⁸⁹ The

80 Attività comunista, 14 April 1942. ASD, Gabinetto Albania, B. 148, F. 23/1.

81 Gani Manelli, ‘Partisan Politics in World War II Albania: The Struggle for Power, 1939–1944’, *East European Quarterly* 40:3 (2006).

82 Iuso, *Esercito, guerra e nazione. I soldati italiani tra Balcani e mediterraneo orientale, 1940–1945*, p. 226.

83 Fischer, *Albania at War, 1939–1945*, p. 139.

84 List of the most important guerrillas, August 1943. TNA, HS 5/65. See also: Lucas, *The OSS in World War II Albania: Covert Operations and Collaboration with Communist Partisans*, pp. 142–3.

85 *Liri Popullit. Partigiani italiani in Albania un esempio di internazionalismo proletario* (Firenze, 1974), p. 81; Fischer, *Albania at War, 1939–1945*, p. 137.

86 Roderick Bailey, *The Wildest Province. SOE in the Land of the Eagle* (London, 2009), p. 77; Hibbert, *Albania’s National Liberation Struggle: The Bitter Victory*, p. 22.

87 Dedijer, *Jugoslavensko-Albanski odnosi, 1939–1948*, p. 42.

88 Appreciation on Special Operations in Albania by Comd. Force 399. TNA, HS 5/68.

89 Report on Albania by Mrs. A. Djakova. TNA, HS 5/4.

military capacities of the communist partisan bands are also underscored in another report, from July 1943.⁹⁰ 'Numerous battles, fights and skirmishes against the Italians have been fought by the guerrillas of the party . . . The acts of sabotage carried out by the members of the party and their guerrillas are countless.'⁹¹ In the summer of 1944, the group led by Shehu had grown to a force of around 2,000, becoming one of the most efficient formations in Albania.⁹² An American agent from the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) who had spent a long time by Shehu's side remembered him as follows: 'The Partisans soldiers favored Shehu. There was closeness between him and his men. The people liked Shehu as well because he was a fighter fighting for his country. He had a good reputation from fighting in Spain. He came back to Albania as a hero. He was a solid disciplinarian and very strong. He was respected.'⁹³

When news spread on 8 September 1943 about the armistice that the Italian general Pietro Badoglio had signed with the Allies, this marked an important stage in the Albanian resistance movement.⁹⁴ As elsewhere, the Italian troops in Albania suddenly found themselves without orders, and chaos quickly prevailed. 'When they heard the news, the soldiers began firing into the air in joy, because they thought they would soon be able to return to Italy. We officers, however, could not mask our fears.'⁹⁵ Just a few hours after the Italian troops had been disbanded, a large part of the Albanian territory was occupied by the Germans.⁹⁶ A number of Italian soldiers soon began to pass over to the Albanian partisans.⁹⁷ 'Many soldiers', a note dated 12 September explains, 'wearing Albanian uniforms passed over to the partisans'. In those same days, a proclamation signed by the Committee for the Independence of Albania of Scutari circulated among the Italian soldiers. In the document, the Italian soldiers stationed in the area were asked to join the partisans, following the example of the garrison of Elbasan: 'after opening the prison, the ammunition and victualling depots [the military ones], they fled to the mountains to join the partisans'. The proclamation continued with an interesting reference: 'here is a deed worthy of the descendants of Garibaldi'.⁹⁸ This connection with the 'hero of the two worlds' does not seem banal; as well as seeking to associate the fight against the German invaders with the actions of the popular Italian hero, it is also clearly a reference to the most recent Garibaldians of Italian history: the anti-fascists in Spain. Something similar

90 Memorandum by Stavro Skendi, 21 July 1943. TNA, HS 5/4.

91 Report on Albania, August 1943. TNA HS 5/65.

92 Daily situation. Report n. 206, 14 March 1944. TNA, HS 5/68.

93 Lucas, *The OSS in World War II Albania: Covert Operations and Collaboration with Communist Partisans*, p. 142.

94 Elena Aga Rossi, *A Nation Collapses: The Italian Surrender of September 1943* (Cambridge, 2000); Eric Gobetti, *Alleati del nemico. L'occupazione italiana in Jugoslavia (1941–1943)* (Roma, 2013); Federico Goddi, *Fronte Montenegro. Occupazione italiana e giustizia militare (1941–1943)* (Gorizia, 2016).

95 Mario Fantacci, 'L'armistizio e la mia partecipazione dalla guerra di liberazione in Albania', *Lotta armata e resistenza delle Forze Armate all'estero* (Milano, 1990), p. 153.

96 Fischer, *Albania at War, 1939–1945*, pp. 161–5.

97 Fischer, *Albania at War, 1939–1945*, pp. 161–5.

98 Diario degli eventi accorsi in Albania dall'8 settembre 1943 al 26 settembre. ASD, Gabinetto Albania, B. 196/2, F. 1.

had occurred a few weeks earlier when a message to the Italian soldiers stationed in Albania ended with an invitation to the soldiers to remember ‘the glorious days of Garibaldi and Mazzini’s Italy, which instilled in the people the lofty ideal of the “Freedom of the People”’.⁹⁹ As we will see shortly in the case of the Italian soldiers that joined the First Division commanded by Shehu, these entreaties certainly played an important role in the decision to change sides.

On 1 October 1943, the general staff of the LNC announced that the partisan formations needed to welcome any Italian soldiers that wished to join them ‘without delay, and consider [them] as comrades in arms’.¹⁰⁰ A few days later, a group of disbanded Italian soldiers set up a small camp at the foot of Mount Dajti. It consisted of the remnants of the Florence Division, a unit that had recently disintegrated after losing a hard battle against the Germans in Kruja. On 9 October, Mehmet Shehu went to visit them, accompanied by three Italian partisans. Bruno Brunetti recalled that it was the veteran from Spain himself that convinced them to join the resistance: he spoke about the Albanian anti-fascists’ participation in the war in Spain and the large number of Italian comrades he had met in the IBs. He mentioned many names and specified that the Albanian anti-fascists had formed a special solidarity with the Italian comrades. Shehu addressed the group of disbanded soldiers in Italian, which, he explained, he had learnt during his years spent alongside the Italian anti-fascists between 1937 and 1941. ‘You can form an Italian battalion, which will become part of the assault First Division. You will appoint your Battalion Commander, Company Commanders, and political commissioners yourselves.’¹⁰¹ The day after this appeal, around a hundred Italians presented themselves to the General Staff of the Division. Shehu suggested that the new battalion, which he described as Garibaldian, be named in memory of the Italian communist of Albanian origins, Antonio Gramsci. Sergeant Terzilio Cardinali was placed in command.¹⁰²

As had been the case for the Albanians at the time of the IBs, the Italians were granted considerable freedom from a cultural perspective:

. . . the Gramsci partisans have an established government, their partisan formations, their police; they govern and protect the former Italian prisoners, administer justice, and organize cultural activities . . . The Italian partisans in Albania have the press. At first, a number of magazines are published (‘La Catapulta’) in small formats (cyclostyled), then a weekly is released in a beautiful typeset and sound journalistic form, an expression of militant anti-fascism on Albanian soil (Union).¹⁰³

Over the following months, as Brunetti recalls, Shehu often delivered lessons on guerrilla warfare to the Italians, teaching them what he had learnt in Spain.¹⁰⁴ In the last days

99 Bruno Brunetti, *Da oppressori a combattenti per la libertà* (Lucca, 1990), p. 274.

100 Comitato Nazionale dei Veterani della Lotta del Popolo Albanese, ‘La lotta antifascista di liberazione nazionale del popolo albanese e la partecipazione degli antifascisti italiani’, p. 143.

101 Brunetti, *Da oppressori a combattenti per la libertà*, pp. 28–9.

102 Fantacci, ‘L’armistizio e la mia partecipazione dalla guerra di liberazione in Albania’, p. 160.

103 Arturo Foschi, ‘I partigiani della “Gramsci” combattenti in terra d’Albania’, *Lotta armata e resistenza delle Forze Armate all’estero* (Milano, 1990), p. 185.

104 *Liri Popullit. Partigiani italiani in Albania un esempio di internazionalismo proletario*, p. 86.

of November 1944, Mehmet Shehu and his partisans liberated Tirana. Shehu conquered the city 'after a battle that could be judged to be just as significant and epic for these people as Stalingrad was for the Russians'.¹⁰⁵ The Italians of the Gramsci Battalion played a leading role in the conflicts, proceeding to parade through the newly liberated city waving an Italian flag. By that point, Shehu's men were seen as the elite of the Albanian partisan army. Hence, following the liberation of Tirana, the members of the First Division were divided up into two groups, at Hoxha's request: some went to Yugoslavia to fight alongside Tito's partisans, while the others were sent to the north of the country, to the area of Scutari, whence they entered Montenegro, pursuing the retreating Germans.¹⁰⁶ In total, around 2,000 Italians fought alongside the Albanian partisans, more than 500 of whom joined the existing partisan brigades. Around 70 lost their lives in battle.¹⁰⁷

While Shehu joined the resistance movement in Albania, Marko partook in the Italian one. On 8 September, he escaped from the camp in Frascette and, in the following weeks, he joined one of the first bands of partisans formed in the Terni area.¹⁰⁸ Several dozen Albanians took part in the Italian resistance movement; generally, as was the case with Marko, they had escaped internment by the fascist police. After a few months in hiding, Marko returned to civil life in late spring 1944. At the end of May, just before the liberation of Rome, there was a meeting of the Albanian exiles residing there. Participants deliberated on the establishment of a Committee to support Albanians in Italy. The former deputy Mehmet Konitza was elected president, and the promoters included Petro Marko himself, as 'student representative'. One of the committee's first initiatives was the attempt, never realized, to organize a small contingent of volunteers to fight alongside the Allied troops ascending Italy. The Allies maintained that the Albanians in Italy were too few (numbering a few dozen) to organize an autonomous military unit.¹⁰⁹ It was after the liberation of Rome that Petro Marko's role became apparent: he firmly established himself in the city and made contact with Albania and the ACP. A few weeks later, it was he who welcomed the military mission of the LNC forces in Italy.¹¹⁰ Marko was part of an interesting triangulation between Allied forces, Albanian resistance fighters, and the Italian authorities of the southern kingdom. In August, he travelled to Bari where he helped set up a health centre to treat casualties arriving from Albania. According to the Italians, however, Marko sought to use the Committee to assist Albanians in Italy as a means of spreading communist propaganda. This did not seem to concern the Allies,

105 Albania. *Telespresso* n. 2306/1190. 7 December 1944. ASD, Gabinetto Albania, B. 196/2, F. 10.

106 Lucas, *The OSS in World War II Albania: Covert Operations and Collaboration with Communist Partisans*, p. 168.

107 Comitato Nazionale dei Veterani della Lotta del Popolo Albanese, 'La lotta antifascista di liberazione nazionale del popolo albanese e la partecipazione degli antifascisti italiani', pp. 144–5.

108 Sauku Bruci and Stameria, *Il Cristo Rosso e il suo Apostolo. Storie di confinati politici ad Ustica, Vincenzo Gigante nei ricordi di Petro Marko*, p. 19.

109 Attività politica degli albanesi residenti in Roma e costituzione di un Comitato, 27 June 1944. ASD, Gabinetto Albania, B. 196/2, F. 2.

110 Missione albanese in Italia, 3 August 1944. ASD, Gabinetto Albania, B. 196/2, F. 2.

however. The Italians also maintained that Marko was a Yugoslav agent or a secret agent for the Greek communists.¹¹¹ This may have been because Marko played a very active role in the recruitment of volunteers to send to Yugoslavia to fight among the ranks of Tito's partisans, in collaboration with his compatriot Vasil Lazari.¹¹² The Italian authorities' obsession with such activities on Marko's part and their conviction that he might be a Yugoslav or Greek agent illustrates the failure to grasp what it meant to be a veteran of Spain. In newly liberated central-southern Italy, Petro Marko immediately set about reactivating the channels he had established in the previous years, and sought to help the cause of the anti-fascist struggle as best he could, both by making contact with resistance fighters in his country and by recruiting men to send to Yugoslavia. Marko returned to Albania in the winter of 1944, enlisting in the partisan forces of his country.¹¹³

In November 1944, the American Maurice Rosenberg, an agent of the US Office of War Information (OWI), went to Tirana a few days before the liberation to meet with the leaders of the local resistance movement. Mehmet Shehu was the first such figure Rosenberg spoke to: 'he is a hard fighter whose victories have gained him great popularity among the partisans. He speaks English and wastes no words in expressing his thoughts.' Rosenberg met a fighter at the very pinnacle of his success, celebrated by his soldiers and unanimously recognized as one of the great leaders of the Albanian resistance movement.¹¹⁴ The painful exit from Spain in February 1939 was now nothing more than a distant memory. A few months later, Shehu announced that the future Albanian army would no longer be formed of volunteers, as it had been for the partisan formations or the Spanish IBs; rather, conscription would be introduced. To this end, he had two schools set up for officers: one in Tirana, the other in Berat.¹¹⁵ The time of the armed volunteer was over. Between 1945 and 1946, Shehu moved to Moscow temporarily to take some courses at the Voroshilov Military Academy; upon his return in Albania, he became one of the leading exponents of Enver Hoxha's regime.¹¹⁶ In December 1946, the veteran from Spain was finally appointed Chief of Staff of the Albanian army.¹¹⁷ In post-war Albania, Petro Marko worked as a journalist for the newspaper *Bashkimi* and soon became its editor-in-chief. In 1947 Marko was arrested under the accusation of collaborating with the Western Powers. Two years later he was released. It was in the late 1950s and early 1960s that Marko's novels started to be published in Albania. During the following years, Petro Marko became a prominent Albanian writer. In his books he wrote extensively about his experience as transnational anti-fascist fighter in the 1930s and the 1940s.¹¹⁸

111 Attività degli albanesi in Italia. Dissidi nel 'Comitato di Assistenza', 29 September 1944. ASD, Gabinetto Albania, B. 196/2, F. 2.

112 Nota segreta, 22 August 1944. ASD, Gabinetto Albania, B. 196/2, F. 2.

113 Robert Elsie, *A Biographical Dictionary of Albanian History* (New York, 2012), p. 296.

114 Report on Trip to Tirana, November 1944. TNA, HS 5/4.

115 Report on the National Liberation Movement in Albania by Captain Marcus Lyon, December 1944. TNA, HS 5/7.

116 Current situation in Albania, 15 December 1949. National Archives and Record Administration [henceforth NARA], Records of the CIA, Intelligent Publication File, ORE 71-49.

117 Albania, Situazione Militare, 31 December 1946. ASD, Affari Politici 1944–50, Albania, f. 1.

118 Robert Elsie, *Albanian Literature. A Short History* (New York, 2005), pp. 184–5.

Conclusion

While, after 1939, entering the decades of Franco's long dictatorship, Spain became, or returned to being, a periphery of the European continent, the international volunteers who had fought there not only kept the memory of what had happened on the other side of the Pyrenees alive, but also became the agents of an armed anti-fascist movement that re-emerged with force during the Second World War. Thus, the veterans from Spain were not only witnesses to the deeds they had just experienced but, as we have seen, they also became the vectors that helped the spreading of armed resistance across the European continent. Those veterans, who stayed committed to the cause, brought with them not only ideological zeal but also military experience.¹¹⁹ Without the Spanish precedent, the European resistance movements would not have been the same. In these pages, we have seen how it was precisely the experience of armed volunteering that enabled the Albanian anti-fascists to enter into contact with a vaster, transnational community. In Spain, the Albanians approached the Italians, establishing a collaboration that undoubtedly had a bearing on the occurrences of the Second World War.

After being forced into the French camps, the veterans from Spain spread profusely across southern Europe, getting mixed up with the protagonists of the new, now definitive, fight against Fascism. We would agree with the British historian Helen Graham when she describes the volunteers in Spain as soldiers who, often unwittingly, embodied a 'cosmopolitan cultural modernity', which clearly re-emerged during their participation in the Second World War, both as resistance fighters and as members of the armed forces, and which was radically opposed to the 'principles of purification and social hygiene' of the Fascist movements.¹²⁰ This was also true of the Albanian veterans described in these pages. As José Faraldo recently underscored in his book on European resistance movements, from a typically military perspective the war in Spain was, for the anti-fascists that partook in it, 'a school in techniques and strategies that they later used in their own struggles'.¹²¹ In their involvement in the resistance movements in Albania and Italy, Mehmet Shehu and Petro Marko reveal the extent to which this was true. As noted at the beginning, the armed struggle against Fascism between the second half of the 1930s and the end of the Second World War must also be interpreted, even if exclusively, from a transnational, long-term perspective. It is only thus, we believe, that it will be possible to finally fully comprehend the interconnections between various national experiences, the circulation of practices, and the importance of the Spanish Civil War for subsequent continental events. In this light, the case of the Albanian anti-fascists reconstructed here must not, and indeed cannot, be considered as a peculiar and/or rare example. Rather, it must be set within

119 Nir Arielli, *From Byron to bin Laden. A History of Foreign War Volunteers* (Cambridge, 2018), pp. 169–94.

120 Helen Graham, *The War and its Shadow: Spain's Civil War in Europe's Long Twentieth Century* (Brighton, 2012), pp. 82–3.

121 José M Faraldo, *La Europa clandestina: resistencia a las ocupaciones nazi y soviética, 1938–1948* (Madrid, 2011), p. 68.

a far vaster, more composite framework of research, which is the direction historiography finally appears to have taken.¹²² To conclude, we would like to return to the words of Arianita Marko, who in 2006 described her father as ‘a volunteer in the International Brigades, a freedom volunteer, a guerrilla, a journalist, a poet, a patriot, and an Internationalist’.¹²³ Examining the biographies of the veterans of Spain from a supranational, medium-term perspective reveals how close these multiple definitions were to reality.

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122 See: Hugo García, ‘Transnational History: A New Paradigm for Anti-Fascist Studies?’ *Contemporary European History* 25 (2016); Hugo García, Mercedes Yusta, Xavier Tabet, and Cristina Climaco, ‘Beyond Revisionism. Rethinking Antifascism in the Twenty-First Century’, in *Rethinking Antifascism. History, Memory and Politics. 1922 to the Present*; Gerwarth and Gildea, ‘Resistance and Collaboration in the Second World War as Transnational Phenomena’; <http://transnational-resistance.history.ox.ac.uk>.

123 Marko, ‘Viva la Vida!’ p. 46.