

Isa Boletini (1864-1916): An Ottoman Albanian Figure of Twists and Turns

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Abstract: Isa Boletini is one of the figures of Ottoman Empire with multiple identities and loyalties at the turn of the twentieth century. He was born in the village of Boletin near Mitroviçe during the transformation of the last Ottoman land in the Balkans into an independent state of Albania. He was one of the local figures who felt the foreign pressure in the region by the Great Powers and tackled them in his own ways which resulted in diplomatic crises between the Ottoman and Russian Empires. As a local power magnet, he was invited to the Palace to serve as a personal guard, tüfenkçi, to the Sultan Abdülhamid II. Endowed with privileges and concessions, he returned to his hometown where he became a gendarme of the Sultan and continued to exercise his authority within the limits. However, with the success of the 1908 Revolution by the Young Turks, the new regime targeted him and aimed to diminish the symbolism he carried as an old ally of the Sultan. Yet, in the tumultuous environment of the Balkans, perpetuating further violence turned the region into a more vulnerable land in the eyes of the Great Powers. This thesis aims to show the parallelism between the fluctuating events of the Balkans in nineteenth century and Isa Boletini's multiple identities, in the light of the "Imperial Biography" approach, by making use of Ottoman archival material which was not yet incorporated into the study of his life.

Keywords: Isa Boletini, Biography, Nationalism, Abdülhamid II, Kosovo



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Introduction

Isa Boletini is one of the Ottoman imperial figures with multiple identities and loyalties at the turn of the twentieth century. He was born in the village of Boletin near Mitroviçe during the transformation of the last Ottoman land in the Balkans into an independent state of Albania. He was one of the local figures who felt the foreign pressure in the region by the Great Powers and tackled them in his own ways which resulted in diplomatic crises between the Ottoman and Russian Empires. As a local power magnet, he was invited to the Palace to serve as a personal guard, “tüfenkçi”, to the Sultan Abdülhamid II. Endowed with privileges and concessions, he returned to his hometown where he became a gendarme of the Sultan and continued to exercise his authority within the limits. However, with the success of the 1908 Revolution by the Young Turks, the new regime targeted him and aimed to diminish the symbolism he carried as an old ally of the Sultan. Yet, in the tumultuous environment of the Balkans, perpetuating further violence turned the region into a more vulnerable land in the eyes of the Great Powers. This study aims to show the parallelism between the fluctuating events of the Balkans in the nineteenth century and Isa Boletini’s multiple identities, in the light of the “Imperial Biography” approach, by making use of Ottoman archival material which was not yet incorporated into the study of his life.

The study has three parts. The first part comprises a brief introduction about Isa and the way he was located in Albanian historiography. It is important to lay out the base which this study aims to challenge. The second part focuses on the Isa’s place within the Hamidian regime, specifically the period between 1902 and 1908. It argues that Isa Boletini fits in the general Albanian policy formulated by the sultan based on “bestowing favors, positions, and privileges on Muslim Albanians who became the linchpin of his regime in the turbulent region of Rumeli” (Gawyrch, 1980). The third part demonstrates the toxic and complex relationship between the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) regime and Isa starting from 1908 until 1912. The vague and unsteady structure of the CUP regime preferred to alienate Isa Boletini because he was a symbol of the Hamidian regime who cannot be trusted.

This study intends neither to “steal” a national hero nor to degrade Isa’s effort for better circumstances. Rather, it acknowledges the possibility of *non-national* narratives

to read Isa's effort. Bringing different variables into the equation, such as social networks, human factors, personality, contingencies in the international arena and culture, demonstrates the complexities of the situation. I hope this composite system of multiple nets paves the way for a deepened narrative of independence which aims to be broken away from traditional national Albanian historiography. I believe only then, Albanian historical narratives about Ottoman dominance can "make sense".

Isa Boletini and his Representation in Albanian Historiography

The Boletini family was functioning within a society composed of a unique tribal structure with a self-administrative system organized upon a common culture, ancestry and social links in today's Kosovo region. A strong consciousness of common blood ties and regional responsibilities related to the protection of lands and privileges were the primary concerns of the people in the region. That being the case, the Boletinis were among the crucial collaborators of the Ottoman Empire upon a shared goal of the land protection in the Northern parts of Kosovo due to the natural isolation of the mountainous terrain (Boletini, 1996). Consequently, these lands "featured a fluid and autonomous social milieu", were nominally under the state control, and enjoyed a relative autonomy (Maggiolini, 2014, p. 221). In other words, the state apparatuses were welcomed as long as they were in line with the tribal concerns.

Despite the various titles and surnames I came across such in the archives as *Bolatin*, *Poletin*, *Polimnac*, *Poltinac*, *Poletenacik*, *Polti*, *Bolistinac*, *Beletinatz*, and *Polsentisbac*, hereafter Isa's name will be mentioned as Isa Boletini because it is the way he wanted to be addressed according to his seal: Ibn Adem Isa Abduhu Boletini (Cumhurbaşkanlığı Osmanlı Arşivi, [COA], Y.EE. /15-209, 1325, 01.07, (M-20-02-1907). As a member of the Boletini family, Isa Boletini was born on the 15th of January 1864, as the second son of Adem in the borderline village of Boletin near Mitroviçe. This city was not simply a frontier zone due to the complex and multidimensional conflicts between different groups of people. Born in a region full of conflicts, Isa was a reactionary activist figure who pursued solutions mostly involving brute force (Blumi, 2011). His life has coincided with the formation of new nation-states which has threatened the security of the *sacred* lands of these tribes and the protection was the utmost goal to be achieved.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Kosovo region has faced the state authorities' insistence to carry the reform programs about centralization policies. In theory, the durable and powerful ties were going to protect the region from the intense foreign pressure of the time. Hence, in the same year when Isa became the head of the family, Hafız Mehmed Paşa (1844-1903) was appointed as the governor of Kosovo to suppress the revolts resulting from both internal and external pressures. Within such a context, Isa has encountered several problems that required certain abilities to maneuver between multiple concerns. For instance, first time under his authority, Hafız Mehmed Paşa asked him to surrender due to his resistance against the increased taxes and burned his *kule* in 1895 (Arel, 2012). Hence, in the last years of the nineteenth century, Isa has turned into one of the most influential activist figures with guerilla tactics to protect the region from the Great Powers' and the neighboring states' ambitious involvements. Meanwhile he had to oppose the new regulations of the Sublime Porte which were against local peoples' interests. Growing out of the ultimate upset in the balance of power in the region, his reactionary activism was degraded either in a national context or considered as banditry acts from the statist perspectives.

In 1901, after a couple of years of armed conflicts between the Ottoman forces and the local powers in the region, the connection between Isa and the Ottoman authorities has entered into a new phase with the involvement of another Albanian figure in the region, the commander of the Eighteenth Infantry Division based in Mitroviçe, Şemsi Paşa (1846-1908). With his pro-collaborative approach, Isa was introduced to the Yıldız palace as a possible ally to protect the region. Yet, the inter-imperial diplomatic crisis between the Russians and the Ottomans led the latter to secure Isa as a valuable collaborator-to-be. Therefore, in 1902, he arrived in Istanbul upon the request of Sultan Abdülhamid II. He has served as a *tüfenkçi* for four years and returned to Mitroviçe in 1906.

Between the years of 1906 and 1908, he fulfilled gendarmery duties following his tribal concerns. He tried to follow a careful balance between the Yıldız Palace and Mitroviçe in accordance with his multiple responsibilities and agendas. After the Revolution of 1908 and the dethronement of the Sultan in 1909, Isa became the initial target of the new Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) regime. During the years of 1909 and 1911, again, he became "the bandit" for the Ottoman authorities and compelled to search solutions and cooperation among the other ambitious figures in the region

such as Montenegro. Escaping from the bear and falling to the lion, Isa found himself as a pion to be manipulated for capturing the western parts of Kosovo by Montenegrins. This eventually created a shared concern by the CUP and Isa which forced them to start a reluctant cooperation process during the year of 1911. Yet, it was too late to harvest the fruits of this collaboration due to the Balkan Wars (1912-1913) and the WWI (1914-1918).

From the Balkan Wars until his murder in 1916, Isa has continued to search solutions for the unsteady circumstances surrounding all the Albanian lands. After he participated in the declaration of independence in 1912, he became one of the stable companions of İsmail Kemal Bey for his search of the Great Power's support to consolidate the independence. This cadre of political elites as well as activists has traveled to Italy and England to conduct political negotiations with the representatives of other Balkan states where Isa was labeled as "the Robin Hood of Albanians" (Musaj, 2000). Isa has continued to be in contact with the Great Powers and with the guidance of France, in 1916, he arrived in Montenegro and was assassinated on the 24th of January in Podgorica.

As can be seen from his simplified and shortened biographical information, Isa Boletini's life is full of turning points and actors, twisted and turned by the contingencies of the time, and complex to fit in a linear narrative. However, Albanian historiography follows a certain path to nationalize him.

In a typical Balkan historiography, Isa Boletini is represented as a praised hero, a freedom fighter and a guerrilla, who participated in battles for the sake of an independent Albania and sought out to prove that a strong national consciousness existed. He was an inspiring figure who "defended the national values with pride", stood loyal to fighting traditions, and even asked for help from other contemporary European states to achieve victory over the "invaders" (Abdyli, 1997, p.5-6). The first extended biographical study on him was published in 1972 by Skënder Luarasi. Mostly relying on the memoirs of Isa's contemporaries, it leaves a remarkable gap for interpretation and overestimation. Moreover, the articles and books on the national awakening and independence have touched upon Isa's figure; yet few were targeting him directly. Hence, in 1985, Fatmira Musaj collected relevant data on him and aimed to add the archival material as a new dimension in her dissertation. Musaj relied on the primary sources of Albanian, British, Australian, French, Italian, Bulgarian and Kosovar national archives,

as well as Serbian, American and German newspapers. The Ottoman archives, however, were excluded, although it is possible to come across with some Turkish memoirs of former Ottoman soldiers such as Fevzi Çakmak, Lütfi Simavi, and Süleyman Külçe.

Although Musaj's academic work is a satisfactory summary of previous studies, there is one important source providing insights about Isa's personality: a memoir of Isa's nephew, Tafil Boletini (1888-1970) who was raised by his uncle and accompanied his journey throughout his life, hence his book being named *Pranë Isa Boletinit* (Near Isa Boletini). The problem with this book is the fact that it was "edited" by one of the presidents of the Institute of History, Prof. Marenglen Verli, and printed twenty-six years after Tafil's death in 1996. Hence, the legitimacy of the book leaves some questions.

Lastly, Isa Blumi is among the historians who claimed that Isa Boletini was mythicized and transformed into an icon in the post-WWI era. Blumi (2011) considers Isa as an ambitious political entrepreneur who found the opportunities to attach himself in regional power politics. The most crucial argument is that "the resistance" of Isa against the new borders and border politics "cannot be interpreted as being driven by collective 'nationalist' sentiments" (2011, p.143-148). Therefore, Blumi argued that Isa Boletini's activism was more complex than to be depicted as one of the founding fathers of the Albanian nation.

Isa and the Sultan Abdülhamid II

Şimâlî Arnavutluk ki gegadırlar çok mutaassıp, Müslümandırlar. Besa verdiler mi sözlerinden dönmezler idi. Ben onlara, onlar bana besa vermişler idi.

Sultan Abdülhamid II¹

The reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II was marked with the Ottoman effort to prioritize strategies regarding "the integrity of the Ottoman Empire, but conducted a policy that contributed to its dismemberment" (Akarlı, 1976, p.254-255). The chronicle problems during the Sultan's reign have made the destinies of Isa and the Sultan encounter. Surprisingly enough, both were unexpectedly acquired power due to the loss of previous power holders and became the *heads* of their particular vicinities. The suspicious death

1 Atıf Hüseyin Bey, Sultan II. Abdülhamid'in Sürgün Günleri: Hususi Doktoru Atıf Hüseyin Bey'in Hatıratı, (ed.) M. Metin Hülâgü (İstanbul: Pan Yayıncılık, 2007), p. 254-5.

of his uncle and mental breakdown of his brother brought Abdülhamid II to the throne. Whereas, Isa became a clan chief after the loss of his brother (Musaj, 1987). Out of the blue, these two men were meant to have authority and leadership by faith.

The first impressions of Isa were negative according to the sources. His name entered into the official records due to the upheavals resulting from the reform programs at the end of the nineteenth century. In 1895, Isa and his friends were engaged with banditry and killings of Christians in the Mitroviçe region, therefore necessary measures needed to be taken in order to capture them to assure peace in the region. The governor of Kosovo at that time, Hafız Mehmed Paşa, was appointed to stabilize the turbulence and spent a great deal of effort to capture Isa. Hence, in 1895, he was sure that Isa was nothing more than “a bandit and a murderer” to be captured (COA: Y. PRK.A. 1895:10/ 15). Consequently, the first impression of Isa echoed in the Yıldız palace as a bandit who upsets the tranquility in the region who had to be eliminated.

At the turn of the twentieth century, his name became more familiar in İstanbul due to the consulate incident. At the time, the opening of the Russian Consulate in Mitroviçe created a tremendous impact in the region. To begin with, opening a Russian Consulate in the region was a disputed issue for the Muslim Albanians (Saygılı, 2019). Isa was one of the names that were associated with these reactions due to his severe opposition with an Islamic discourse against Russian domination in the region, contrary to Albanian literature where his efforts were considered purely nationalistic. In September 1902, Isa was sure that the opening of the Russian Consulate was about to upset the balance of power in the region and strengthen Serbian claims. The idea of the consulate was “contrary to the advantage of the Muslims” in the region, and Isa with his tribe, as well as tribes from Peja and Novi Pazar gave *besa* to hinder if such an action happens. (COA: BEO 1902: 1929/ 144657)

Isa has continued to occupy the telegram traffic between Yıldız palace and Kosovo meanwhile the Russian authorities in the region have been watching the course of events and interfering with the local homicides of the Orthodox Albanians as the ultimate protectorate. With the massacres they have conducted in Mitroviçe, Isa and his bandit friends were frightening and terrifying the Christian people (COA: DH.ŞFR. 1901: 268/58-0). The reason was the clandestine armament of the Christians in the region by the Serbian state, and ultimately by Russia (Boletini, 1996, p.34). Isa was one

of the repetitive names mentioned as a murderer and the Russian Embassy has been requesting to deploy more soldiers to the region (COA: DH.ŞFR. 1900: 271/ 16 – 0). Since then, the Ottoman authorities considered moving Isa away from the region because it was the only possible way to balance the demands of the Russians and local chiefs. Therefore, the Sultan considered him as a potential force to collaborate rather than an alienated enemy (Tahsin Paşa, 2019, p.399). Moreover, Tafil Boletini depicts the situation vividly: “At that time, propaganda was spread as if it would be easier for the government to attack Boletin rather than going to war with Russia but the Sultan did not want to attack Boletin. When the people heard this, they put their guns down.” (p.35). This also shows that the situation was beyond Isa yet embodied in his character. Abdülhamid was aware that it was a delicate matter and needed special attention.

After the Hafız Mehmed Paşa, it was Şemsi Paşa, the commander of the 18th regiment in Mitroviçe who was authorized to create order and stability. Regarding the consulate issue, Şemsi Paşa shared Isa’s ideas and tried to convince the Sultan to withdraw the permission (Yarçı, 2017). During his term, another problem occurred to confront Isa and the Ottoman authorities. His friend, Akif Bey from Novi Pazar, as another powerful figure in the region, has been creating disorder and instability. Şemsi Paşa managed to capture him and he was about to be sent to İstanbul. This created an agitation among others because the intention was clear: these local power magnets were eventually going to be eliminated. Moreover, there have been a lot of intelligence services warning the authorities that Isa was gathering his forces to march towards Novi Pazar to demand Akif’s release (COA: DH.ŞFR 1900: 281/ 54 – 0, 58-0). Şemsi Paşa was offering two options to the Yıldız: either there should be more soldiers to fight back or to release Akif Bey and have an agreement with Isa (COA: DH.ŞFR. 1900: 281/ 125 – 0). Şemsi Paşa’s suggestion was not a coincidence. As a half Albanian, he was aware of local peoples’ priorities and could predict further violence, if the authorities do not come to an agreement. This attitude of his as an arbiter was going to continue as it has been claimed that Isa was a blood-brother of him, or “a close friend from a very honored family from Sarajevo” (Saygılı, p.40), (Boletini, p.37).

After three months, the Russian Consulate issue has been deteriorated and created tumultuous sequence of events. Isa led both empires to a political crisis beyond his previous reputation of banditry. He acquired a political color and left no choice for the Russians to give an ultimatum to cut their relationship with the Empire if he was not

deported from the region. Even though the Ottoman authorities have managed to stall the Russians off, and gained one year to manage Isa's deportation, the last ultimatum triggered one of the turning points of Isa's life: the road to İstanbul (COA: Y. A. HUS. 1902: 434/12-3).

However, Isa was not sure about true intentions of the Ottoman authorities. The governor of Kosovo, Reşad Paşa, was informing the Yıldız that it was tough to convince him; he has been raising difficulties and worrying about his journey (COA: Y.MTV. 1902: 235/ 67 – 0). Isa had a point and sensed that there could be further plans for him. He was right because first, his exile to Konya was considered as a solution (COA: BEO, 1902: 1944/ 145768 – 0). However, such a solution might not work and may create further repercussions in the region. There was only one solution to convince him: a direct order from the Sultan for Isa to come to İstanbul. The telegram was mentioning the delicacy and the complexity of the Consulate issue and his journey to İstanbul was going to prevent the conflict with Russia. Isa was going to be safe and his life was under the assurance of the Sultan (Boletini, 1996).

The Sultan's way of addressing himself to Isa has created a persuasive atmosphere. The Sultan Abdülhamid II "had to win the goodwill of the provincial notables and tribal leaders by giving them positions of responsibility" (Karpas, 2001, p.175). It was partially the success of Şemsi Paşa as well. Eventually all parts met on a common ground: Russian enterprises in the region were disturbing.

Yet, Isa had conditions and the negotiations have continued throughout October of 1902. He was getting opinions of other tribal leaders in the region and finally, he made up his mind to take the order upon three conditions: the Russian consul would not come to Mitroviçe after he leaves, he was going to be able to keep guns and have friends with him in İstanbul, and to stay *only* in İstanbul (Boletini, 1996). Finally, Şemsi Paşa has completed his duty and feeling relieved, sent a telegram to Yıldız that Isa's departure was assured. In any case of cession, he was going to exercise brute force (COA: Y.A.HUS. 1902: 436/ 27).

On the fourth day of the holy month of Ramadan in 1902, with a hundred lira for the traveling expenses, Isa departed with his two friends from Mitroviçe to Selanik, then İstanbul (COA, BEO. 1904: 2448/ 183574), (COA, Y.PRK.ASK. 1902: 187/ 77 – 0). One of the aides-de-camp of the Sultan Yakovalı Rıza Bey, escorted Isa during his journey

(COA, DH.MKT. 1906: 1038/ 19). The measures were taken in Selanik as well to assure that his travel was safe and any possible escape was prevented (COA, BEO. 1902: 1934/ 145035-0). On the very same day, he was rewarded with the license to operate the mill-stone mine in his village, Boletin (COA, BEO. 1905: 2530/ 189723, 1323.01.13). Apart from that, he was also given a share from the revenue of the stone quarry in the region in return for the protection he will provide for the Christians in various villages for the upcoming years (COA, TFR.I.KV. 1904: 75/ 7458-0).

Moreover, the state officials were going to appeal neither to his family nor his property for the existing debt he had for the tithe (COA, TFR.I.KV. 1903: 26/ 2532-0, 1321.06.25). Furthermore, he was going to return when the dust settles with the Russians and be getting paid regularly for the services he provides in the Yıldız. Yet, Albanian literature demonstrates this major development as an act of personal enterprise “to convince” the Sultan to withdraw the permission for the consulate. (Musaj, p.44-45).

Immediately upon his departure, the house he was going to stay was arranged. It was located in Beşiktaş at Serencebey Yokuşu, twenty minutes walking distance to the Yıldız Palace, rented from another Tüfenkçi, Osman Ağa. Within a couple of months, the upholstery of the house such as the carpets, sofa, and curtains, was renewed (COA: HH.İ. 1903: 167/ 5), (HH.İ. 1904: 168/ 62). When his house was ready, he asked permission from authorities for his uncle Ahmet to come to İstanbul as well (COA: Y.MTV. 1903: 247/ 106). This may counterpart the arguments of Albanian literature claiming that İsa was kept by force in İstanbul.

İsa has served as a tüfenkçi in one of the most important organizations of the Hamidian regime. These special guards were dedicated to the protection of the Yıldız palace and the Sultan himself; they were charged with observation, tracing, surveillance, disquisition, and guarding in particular. Constituted of Albanians, Arabs, Bosnians, Circassians and Turks, these special forces were called “tüfenkçiler” or “silahşorler”, knights skilled in the use of arms (Mayakon, 2010, p.145). With a paramount appearance, they used to wear their ethnic and local clothes. The most prominent features of the Albanian clothing were a feathered but modest shirt, salta, a white headwear, qylaf, and purple trousers, potur (Deringil, 2014, p.35). In addition to that, they could not speak in Turkish.

Albanians used to dominate this organization in terms of number and power of influence. According to the grand Hamidian policy, Albanians were one of the cornerstones

and the Sultan had a special trust for them which was resulting from their bravery and loyalty. The majority of them enjoyed a lot of privileges, blessings, and even personal compliments of the Sultan. Isa was one of them. For instance, Isa has made a present of tobacco, almost 2 kilograms, to the Sultan in return of his compliments (COA, Y. PRK. AZJ. 1907: 53/ 6).

His services were going to continue and even intensify with his return to Mitroviçe. His positioning as the voice of the Sultan in the famous Firzovik Meeting, which made the 1908 revolution possible, is a clear example of how Isa personally attached to the Sultan beyond interest centered explanations and shows how he was *not* an opportunist.

The defeat of Russians by Japan and the Russian Revolution of 1905 was “contingent developments” for the Ottoman Empire (Sohrabi, 2011, p.29). It was hoped that these unexpected developments could put the Russians of the track in the Balkans (Akşin, 2017, p.48). It seemed the right moment to send Isa back as it was promised. However, the Russian authorities in the region were disturbed by this decision, and Isa continued to be a political problem between the two empires. The Ottomans were assuring the Russian authorities about the certain treatment of Isa. He was going to be reprimanded and advised when necessary (COA, BEO. 1906: 2839 – 212921).

In February 1906, Isa returned to Mitroviçe and was warmly welcomed by the people (Boletini, p.9). Because of his experience in İstanbul and the given privileges, he emerged as a more powerful, credible and influential figure. Related to his activities in the region, there are three main points to be mentioned.

To begin with, Isa served as a *deruhdeci* whose responsibility was to assure the protection in the region. In the long run, he transformed into “the Sultan’s surrogate policeman” in Kosovo. Several times, he was involved in both local and foreign conflicts. For instance, while exercising authority and dominance in his vicinity, he was prioritizing the safety of the local figures at the expense of the Ottoman security forces. His assistance to the absconding of a troubled figure was an alarming event for the Ottoman authorities. They ordered a detailed investigation to confirm the allegation, yet a link could not be found (COA, BEO. 1907: 3133/ 234942). Due to these actions, with the involvement of Şemsi Paşa, Isa was invited to Selanik where he was advised and exhorted about his methods. Şemsi Paşa tried to remind him of the fact that he was a trusted and

authorized ally in the region and his disposition should be following the Empire's rules and priorities (COA, TFR.I.A. 1908: 37/ 3643).

Secondly, he had a direct telegram access to the Yıldız palace and the Sultan himself. It gave him the ability to avoid any interference of vilayet authorities. Isa was integrated into the famous Hamidian espionage system as well. In 1907, when Selanik had already turned into one of the centers of the CUP, the propaganda against the Sultan took his attention. One of the reporters of *Asır* newspaper, İsmail Hakkı Efendi, was spreading disrespectful rumors about the Caliph. As his first and foremost holy duty, Isa asked for permission to silence him. He concluded the *journal* that he prepared for the Sultan with an emphasis on his devotion: a dedicated servant to his highness (COA, Y.EE. 1907: 15/209).

Thirdly, on the other hand, all these privileges made him a potential threat which caused the Ottoman authorities to constantly keep Isa under surveillance. He was not always on the same page with the imperial concerns. According to Tahsin Paşa's observations whom Isa has been in contact with, given benefits and concessions have turned him into an unnecessary "spoiled figure". He questioned the given privileges to Isa and failed to understand the Sultan's decisions: What was the reason to turn a bandit into a "feudal lord" (Tahsin Paşa, p.398-399)? However, the Firzovik Meeting, which was a critical turning point for the Empire, disclosed the intentions of the Sultan and his relation with Isa.

The Firzovik Meeting can be claimed to be an unexpected opportunity for the CUP to declare the constitution. In 1908, when Şemsi Paşa gathered several Albanians and intended to capture Resneli Niyazi Bey, the CUP had different plans. After assassinating Şemsi Paşa, they channelized this massive gathering into a popular demand for the constitution (Özdemir, 2014, p. 283). It was the moment of fortune for the CUP and the moment of calamity for the Sultan. During this critical meeting, Isa was commissioned to solve the matter in favor of the Palace.

He was trying to convince the people about the Sultan's deep understanding of politics as well as his importance as the trustee of the Prophet within an Islamic discourse (Külçe, 2013). Isa sent telegrams to the Yıldız several times to inform the Sultan about the latest news and assure him that there were no actions to deny his authority. But after the assassination of Şemsi Paşa, the Sultan considered the possibility of these

telegrams being a political game of the CUP (Özdemir, 2014). Nonetheless, Isa was not trying to deceive the Sultan; his observations were correct. The discourse employed by the CUP authorities during the meeting never targeted the Sultan himself but rather his close circle of bureaucrats (Akşin, 2017). They portrayed the declaration of the constitution as a necessary action *to rescue* the beloved Sultan from these bottom feeder bureaucrats.

Yet, Isa was not alone and had the support of almost all other prominent tribal chiefs such as Ipekli Hacı Zeko, and Zeynel Bey. The league of Kosovar chiefs managed to hold the propaganda until Isa's unexpected departure due to the death of his daughter (Gawrych, 1980). He planned to return after the funeral. This could be one of the reasons why the Sultan waited two days to reply to the telegrams that were demanding the constitution (Külçe, 2013). It was exactly that moment when the prominent CUP members such as Necip Draga and Galip Bey stepped in and turned the meeting into a CUP propaganda. Tafil Boletini (1996) claims that due to personal grievances towards Isa and expected gains from the upcoming regime, Necip Draga affected the course of the meeting vigorously.

Therefore, Isa Boletini fits in the general Albanian policy formulated by the Sultan based on "bestowing favors, positions, and privileges on Muslim Albanians who became the linchpin of his regime in the turbulent region of Rumeli" (Gawrych, 1980, p.64). His general tendency to create these "neo-patrimonial, clientelist policies" was considered backward to be implemented in a modernized state as the CUP claimed to be (Sohrabi, 2011, p.34). The Sultan was dethroned. Then, what was the positioning of the CUP towards Isa?

Isa and the Committee of Union and Progress

"İsa Bolatin, Şale kabilesinden pespaye bir adamdır ki asil olmadığı için Arnavudlar nezdinde hiçbir zaman bir baş gibi telakki edilmez. Abdülhamid'den 60 lira maaş alan, meşrutiyetten sonra bu maaşı kesilen İsa Bolatin'in en birinci arzusu eski devrinin iadesi ve Abdülhamid'in tekrar tahtına geçmesidir."²

2 Arnavudluk ve İttihat-ı Terakki Son Fesadın Hakikati, Tanin, 17.09. 1912, p.1.

The CUP was very much concerned about the privileged local clans in the Kosovo region who have not been fulfilling duties such as tax payment or military recruitment. Through the local members of the Party, they challenged these people even if it was not solving the matters but causing further terrorizations. Not being able to reveal a common political, economic, ideological, and social program in accordance with the needs of these people, the turmoil environment caused a clash of interests among the local figures. Moreover, brutally suppressing the revolts that were resulting from the dissatisfaction of the locals led to collaborations between Albanians and other contested lands, such as Montenegro and Serbia, at the expense of the Empire. "As far as Isa Boletini was concerned, the events surrounding the Young Turk revolution would displace him from one of the concentric circles of power in the region, thrusting him into a global arena that he would ultimately prove incapable of controlling" (Blumi, 2013. P.535).

To begin with, from Isa's perspective, the abrupt event of the Revolution resulted in the Sultan's disadvantage whom Isa was collaborating with. These people were infidels and the "Jews of Selanik" (Boletini, p.10). From the CUP's side, he was one of the "bought" people and wretched representatives of the Sultan. Therefore, the first impressions were not positive and promising for both sides. Isa was aware of the fact that the Hamidian regime used to "respect" his power and let him exercise it up to a certain extent. This was particularly in contradiction with the statist and centralized policies of the CUP. Apart from that, his granted privileges by the Sultan were threatened since the CUP was diminishing leftovers of the previous reign. They were attacking him from all aspects and trying to take away his privileges. In 1909, Isa was informed that the millstone was not under his responsibility anymore due to some of his "inappropriate behaviors". Isa opposed the situation severely and focused on the unlawfulness of the action and asked if there was a court decision. The situation deteriorated further and the CUP authorities had to step back (COA, DH. MKT. 1909: 2740/5).

A couple of months after the revolution, in November 1908, the first conflict took place between the forces of "executioner" Cevat Paşa and Isa as a former ally of the Sultan (Kırmızı, 2009, p.99). The destructive measures were taken and eventually, Isa's kule was torn down. It was the battle where people realized "the true face" of the new regime (Musaj, p.61). It was more of a failure rather than a success since it has created further repercussions among the other local figures. The CUP's measures were backfir-

ing and consolidating the illegitimate image of these military men (Blumi, p.537). Yet, the tension deteriorated between 1909 and 1910. As a result, the colossal terrorization program of the CUP compelled the moment of “loose-loose” by both the local and state figures.

In the winter of 1909, the CUP authorities made their plans to capture Isa because he already proved himself as a challenging figure right after the revolution. He was openly conducting actions against the CUP branches in İpek (COA, DH. MKT. 1909: 2718/ 52). He was expected to raise difficulties during the springtime and it was the right time to approach him under the severe winter conditions (COA, DH. MKT. 1909: 271/ 30). The Porte was advising and putting pressure on the local forces to capture Isa as soon as possible. Even though the plan has failed regarding Isa, deploying soldiers in the region has pacified the gatherings and dispersed the crowds. After a couple of months, Mahmud Şevket Paşa, the lieutenant inspector of Rumeli, assured the Porte with a confident attitude that due to the taken measures, the region was under control and the capturing “the bandit” Isa Boletini was going to be successful as well (COA, DH. MKT. 1909: 2768/ 23). After one week, they attempted to exterminate him “to be a lesson” for others (COA, BEO. 1909: 3517/ 263747). Despite the damage they caused, they could not succeed to capture him. Yet, an alternative solution was planned: to convince him to come to İstanbul and from there, to exile him to Anatolia (COA, BEO. 1909: 3629/ 272142). However, this plan did not work either.

In 1910, new taxes were imposed and two thousand armed Albanians gathered in Prishtina to protest. Isa was involved in this revolt as the chief of his tribe (Malcolm, 1998). When the revolt was suppressed, Isa and many other clan chiefs were forced to take shelter in Montenegro where the situation was manipulated due to Montenegrin annexation plans for some parts of Kosovo (Akşin, 2011). The Porte was aware of the situation and sought an opportunity to capture Isa (COA, HR. SYS. 1910: 133/34). However, when these “refugees” realized the true intentions of the Montenegrin King, they wanted to return to their hometowns (Boletini, p.45). The archival documents show that Isa asked for amnesty and it was granted by the Ottoman authorities. The Kosovar authorities were advised to treat him well (COA, BEO. 1911: 3875/ 290604). Moreover, Isa was paid from his share of the stone quarry that was granted by the Sultan (COA, BEO. 1912: 4016/ 301138). Eventually, in 1912, both sides came to terms

after realizing the bigger threat of the foreign intervention. It was the first time both camps started to narrow the gap after four years.

Despite the chaotic and rough relationship, independence was out of context. In 1912, Isa clearly expressed his ideas on a redundant interference of the CUP regime in the region. However, what they were asking was not the autonomy or independence but to feel unrestricted (Birecikli, 2010). This clearly shows that the concerns had nothing to do with nationalist aspirations. The Kosovar Albanians were “concerned with regional matters, such as the maintenance of their prerevolutionary privileges” and “they wanted as little administrative control over themselves as possible” (Gawrych, 1980, p.361).

During this period, one of the most exciting claims about Isa can be his intention to “rescue” the Sultan from Selanik. Imagining a large group of armed forces composed of local figures marching towards the south and confronting the CUP forces would have been one of the most interesting events of the time. With a little chance, capturing the Sultan could be an astonishing turning point not only for the Empire but also for world politics. Not only once but twice brought to the agenda, the situation became a concern for Rifat Paşa, the minister of foreign affairs, in 1910. The Albanians were planning to throne Abdülhamid through an Albanian revolution (COA, HR.SYS. 1910: 133/22). It could be a bluff to threaten the CUP about their immense interference in the region. However, the second time, it sounded more serious in 1912 due to the organized and worrisome armed forces of Albanians (COA, BEO. 1912: 4113/308453). The Grand Vizier Ahmet Muhtar Paşa expressed his ideas to the Kosovar authorities about the futility and insignificance of the matter; hence there was no need to be concerned.

Not only the archival materials but there are also some claims on Isa’s plans to rescue the Sultan by his “comrades” of the time. As Hasan Prishtina provides insights about the different privileges during the “declaration” of independence, Isa and Rıza Bey were eager to rescue the Sultan.

According to Hasan Prishtina’s memorandum, Isa Boletini and Rıza Yakova intended to move towards Selanik to rescue the Sultan. Rıza Bey had already planned the release of the Sultan and he informed the notables in the Kosovo region (Kırmızı, 2009). Therefore, the idea was not unique to Isa but shared by others during the year of 1910. Yet,

Isa was not able to counter the CUP forces. However, in 1912, Hasan Bey among others resented to this idea and it created a split in forces.

However, Hasan Prishtina was in contact with the CUP authorities and tried to convince them about the insignificance of the matter. The defense of these people was for the sake of the “Albanian-ness”:

The two of them had nothing else on the mind at that time than getting Sultan Hamid out of prison. You could not talk to them about independence, not even say anything about autonomy. This was a red flag for Riza bey and Isa Boletini. I held the view that, although the two of them ought to have been punished, they should be punished by the Albanians and not with the involvement of others (Elsie and Destani, 2018, p.68).

The situation might have been one of the reasons why the CUP authorities decided to bring the Sultan from Selanik back to İstanbul. Therefore, the attempt was a clear example of peoples’ multiple allegiances, loyalties, and identities in the region. It was the same time when Isa was on his way towards the South to search for solutions to secure the homeland just like many Albanians. Rescuing the Sultan was considered one of the solutions.

All in all, the vague and unsteady structure of the CUP regime preferred to alienate Isa Boletini because he was a symbol of the Hamidian regime and he cannot be trusted. Yet, the foreign threat of the time led both the CUP and Isa to start a reluctant process of cooperation. However, it was too late to harvest the fruits of this collaboration due to the Balkan Wars.

Conclusion

In the long and tumultuous environment of the nineteenth century, Isa Boletini has been part of the Ottoman milieu as an imperial figure. He was born in a family that had positioned themselves as both state collaborators as well as opponents depending on the local concerns. Operating through capricious ties with İstanbul, he constituted an exemplary figure with co-existing multiple identities and loyalties related to the changing circumstances of the time. While national narratives tend to portray local concerns as acts of independence, this study attempted to demonstrate how important contingencies were for Isa Boletini. Therefore, Isa Boletini can be represented as an

activist always in search of solutions, Albanian national figure, a loyal servant of the Sultan, and an ignored leftover in the eyes of the CUP. But reducing his fluctuating and multiple identities and loyalties into *only* a freedom fighter is what this study aimed to challenge.

Isa's complexities and multiple identities became more apparent when he tried to balance his local concerns with the imperial ones. His loyalty to his clan and effort to exercise power at the expense of the Ottoman authorities were some of the cases that revealed his uniqueness. A similar observation can be made for his experience of the reluctant rapprochement process with the CUP regime. Although he is represented as an arch-enemy of the regime by the majority of historians, this study demonstrated an alternative perspective in light of the Ottoman archival material. The dialogue this thesis attempted to create between multi-dimensional sources complicates the simplistic nationalist depictions, claims and suppositions. Therefore, the general aim of the study was to question the Albanian nation-building process through the complicated figure of Isa Boletini.

Despite the general tendency to portray Isa Boletini's activism as "simple acts of Albanian patriotism", the multiple identities and loyalties he carried challenge the existing literature on him (Blumi, 2011, p.144). Although this study does not claim to fulfill all the missing gaps, on some level, it completes his complicated figure and provides a different but essential perspective. It shows that imperial figures tend to have a complex set of identities which requires them to be studied carefully. Also, the well-known figures of independence should be analyzed within the major contexts of the time. In light of this, the more imperial figures are studied the more realistic narratives are constructed. Eventually, it will give insights about how the empires as major structures were understood from the perspectives of the agencies operating within them. Such a methodology eases the deconstruction and reconstruction processes of the nationalistic narratives. Ultimately this picture enables me to ask fresh questions about the relationship between nationalism and historiography, puzzling out which may well be a lifelong preoccupation.

All in all, this study will be valuable only if it inspires the need to rewrite Isa Boletini's biography with the use of Ottoman sources as well. It demonstrates how using Ottoman sources in hope to understand Boletini's era and the Ottoman imperial context

in all their complications should attract our attention to his multiple and fluctuating identities. It would then be possible to capture the complexities with twists and turns of a man and his era.

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