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**ALI PASHA AND NAPOLEON BONAPARTE: FROM DIPLOMATIC
CORRESPONDENCE TO STRUGGLE OVER POSSESSIONS
IN THE IONIAN BASIN¹**

Abstract: In this paper, we explore the nature and extent of diplomatic contacts between Napoleon Bonaparte and Ali Pasha of Ioannina between 1797 and 1807, and how they influenced both the French and the plans of Ali Pasha in the Ionian basin. The first contacts were established in 1797 through General Gentili and continued until 1798 when the forces of Ali Pasha and France found themselves at war. Relations were renewed in 1805 with the mission of Consul General Pouqueville, who described in detail the experience of his stay in his memoirs. Diplomatic contacts were conducted through letters by which Napoleon ordered his generals to communicate and make alliances with Ali Pasha, as well as directly through personnel, initially in military and informal positions, while in the later period, contacts were conducted through the formal part of the general consul in Ioannina. Among the Ottoman “ayans”, Ali Pasha was the only one whose position was so independent that he could entertain diplomatic relations of such a nature with, at the time, the most significant European power.

Key words: Ali Pasha, Napoleon Bonaparte, Ionian Sea, Corfu, France

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Introduction

The Treaty of Campo Formio – concluded between France and Austria – was the initial event that opened communication between Ali Pasha and Napoleon. After a successful French military campaign, the treaty followed the Treaty of Leoben (April 1797). The peace that ended the War of the First Coalition resulted in favor of France. After its victorious Italian campaign, France replaced the Habsburgs as the most dominant power on the Apennine Peninsula. The Republic controlled the former Austrian Nederland – one of the wealthiest Habsburg provinces; Austria and France agreed to divide the territories of the Venetian Republic that ceased to exist as a sovereign state in May 1797; Mainland territories were divided between the Habsburgs and the newly established Cisalpine Republic. At the same time, France took over the Ionian Islands and the most southern mainland possessions of the Republic: Preveza, Vonitsa, Parga, and Butrint.² For Napoleon, it was crucial to gain strategic possession of the Ionian islands and their most fortified island, Corfu, as soon as possible. Hence, the French fleet from Ancona was anchored in the bay below the town of Corfu on June 28, 1797.³

After the arrival of French troops in June, the most potent regional ruler, Ali Pasha, realized that he would have a more robust and ambitious neighbor compared to Venice. Ali Pasha was among the strongest ayans in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. During his reign as pasha of Ioannina between 1788-1822, he oversaw some of the most dramatic changes in the history of the Mediterranean. He became a personification of the “oriental despot” in literature. One of the most vital features of Ali Pasha’s regime was a pragmatic adjustment to new circumstances. Once the French came, he hoped that the unique constellation of forces would help him gain more independence from the Porte.⁴

The Ionian islands and the coastal towns were primarily supplied from the mainland, from Epirus to Peloponnesus. Therefore, it was necessary to maintain relations with the local lords. While in possession of the Ionian islands, the Venetian Republic was not favorizing only one local lord. If France applied the same policy, it would have more sources for supplying islands. The islands and the

2 R. A. Davenport, *The life of Ali Pasha, Late vizier of Janina*, London, 1878, 84; H. Dajč, *Istočni Mediteran: Velika Britanija i Francuska na Levantu 1796–1807*, Beograd, 2020, 71–74.

3 The National Archives (=TNA), Public Record Office (=PRO), Foreign Office (=FO), 42/2, Consul Spiridion Foresti to Lord Grenville, Principal Secretary of the State, Corfu 5th August 1797.

4 Q. and E. Russell, *Ali Pasha Lion of Ioannina. The Remarkable Life of the Balkan Napoleon*, London, 2017, 142.

Italian possessions themselves needed access to Albanian grain and timber. There was also a strategic importance. The Adriatic and Albanian coasts, according to Napoleon himself, were more strategically significant than Italy.⁵ “The islands of Corfu, Zakynthos, and Cephalonia are more interesting to us than all of Italy together,” he wrote. “Possession of these islands would put us in a position to either take part in or, as much as possible, support the Turkish empire, which is continually falling apart.”

Later events after the failed Egyptian expedition proved to Napoleon that his exaggeration of the importance of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Levant was a mistake.⁶

The French knew before that Ali Pasha was the most powerful ruler in Albania and gained his significant influence and wealth through either usurpation or skill. Pierre Jérôme Dupré, who wrote in the 1790s, considered it extremely important to maintain close ties with the Albanian leaders, especially with the most powerful among them. In his letter to the Directory, he wrote, “All who are under his rule have a greater need of his protection than of the protection of the Porte, which he knows how to use according to his needs.” That is why it is crucial for the French to have such a powerful man as their friend.⁷ Dupré was well received by the Pasha, as evidenced by his later return from Constantinople.

The first stage

On July 5, 1797, General Gentili began the occupation of the Ionian Islands and Corfu on behalf of France and the Cisalpine Republic. The Cisalpine tricolor flag was raised above the fortresses in the first few months.⁸ In his letter to the Directory dated August 1, 1797, Napoleon describes the welcome that General Gentili received from the local population, “An immense crowd was on the shore to welcome our troops with cries of joy and enthusiasm that animate the people when they recover their freedom. At the head of this crowd was the Papa, or chief of the religion of the country, an educated man already of advanced age. He approached General Gentili and said to him, ‘French! You will find on this island people ignorant of the sciences and arts which illustrates the nations, but don’t disdain it! It could again become what it once was, and you will learn something about it by reading this book.’ The book that the priest gave to General Gentili

5 *Correspondance de Napoléon Ier*, т. III, Paris, 1859, 285.

6 H. Dajč, *Istočni Mediteran: Velika Britanija i Francuska na Levantu 1796–1807*, 123.

7 A. Boppe, *L’Albanie et Napoleon*, Paris, 1914, 3.

8 TNA, PRO, FO, 42/2, Consul Spiridion Foresti to Lord Grenville, Principal Secretary of the State, Corfu 5th August 1797.

was Homer's *Odyssey*.⁹ From other sources, we see that there could have been greater enthusiasm from the locals.¹⁰ The sudden ending of trade with Great Britain and the introduction of new taxation were the main reasons for the islanders to be frustrated with the new French administration.¹¹ According to the British consul from Zakynthos, Spiridion Foresti, the French were most hated by Slavs and Greeks. More than 800 former Venetian soldiers, a majority of them Slavs, decided to be transferred back to Venice as they didn't want to join the French troops.¹²

The French needed Ali Pasha and the other beys of Albania so that they could provide them with an unhindered supply of grain, meat, wood, and everything else that was necessary for the functioning of a military garrison. Therefore, Gentili began a tour of the former Venetian possessions and thus had the opportunity to speak personally with Ali Pasha. Immediately after the arrival of the French garrison, Ali Pasha asked for permission to pass ships through the Corfu Channel (which was previously forbidden to him by Venice), which the French allowed. That permission enabled Ali to attack the two Suliot strongholds.¹³

The first meeting between General Gentile and Ali Pasha took place at the ruins of the ancient city of Butrint. In his letter to Napoleon dated August 18, 1797, General Gentili described Ali Pasha as "our best friend of all the Albanian pashas" and said he had long been known for his attachment to the French. In the same letter, Gentili notes that he intends to maintain a friendship with the Pasha but that he "made several indiscreet requests," to which the general disagreed.¹⁴

Ali Pasha himself sent a letter to Napoleon on June 1, 1797, in which he wrote, "The estimation and veneration that I have for you, General, and for your great and mighty nation, makes me desire even more your friendship; it would be very agreeable for me to receive the testimony and to tighten the links of friendship with the heroes of France, and it is a real pleasure for me to welcome and to give the most determinate aid to all Frenchmen who came to my court."¹⁵

9 *Correspondance de Napoléon Ier*, t. III, 285.

10 TNA, PRO, FO, 42/2, Consul Spiridion Foresti to Lord Grenville, Principal Secretary of the State, Corfu 28th August 1797.

11 TNA, PRO, FO, 42/2, Consul Spiridion Foresti to Lord Grenville, Principal Secretary of the State, Corfu 23rd October 1797.

12 TNA, PRO, FO, 42/2, Consul Spiridion Foresti to Lord Grenville, Principal Secretary of the State, Corfu 5th August 1797.

13 G. Vaudoncourt, *Memoirs on the Ionian islands*, London, 1816, 98.

14 *Correspondance inédite officielle et confidentielle de Napoléon Bonaparte*, t. III, Paris, 1809, 526–532.

15 *Ibidem*, 351–352.

Ali Pasha was not satisfied with the help promised by the French – “two artillery experts and a few grenadiers.” Instead, he wanted gunpowder and ships with which he could sail through the Gulf of Arta, which Arnault states in his letter to Napoleon of July 29, 1797, as his only wish.¹⁶ The Pasha wanted the right – which the Venetians had invariably denied him – to sail through the Gulf of Corfu and went so far as to claim ownership to establish his presence in Butrint. General Gentili treated the Pasha’s demands with prudence and promised to send the Pasha three artillery officers who would teach and train his troops for the time being. Gentili was unsatisfied with his position to balance between the Albanian beys and wrote, “Even though Ali Pasha is our friend, we should not anger the Porte with our actions.” Gentili made the additional mistake of not approaching (other) Albanian pashas from Delvino and Valona, who were in conflict with Ali Pasha as that would have given him a better strategic position.

Napoleon replied in his November 10, 1797, letter that Gentili had done well not to agree to all the Pasha’s demands. He also told him, “to avoid giving up what belongs to the French, he should support and favor Ali Pasha in everything.”¹⁷ He considered it in the interest of the Republic that Ali Pasha should defeat all his opponents and expand his territories as much as possible to become a sufficiently powerful and influential ruler so that the Republic could use him for its interests. He believed that it was also in Ali Pasha’s best interest to be a friend of the French and that he would reasonably follow such a policy. These instructions clearly show that Ali Pasha deceived the French, who thought he would stay a loyal partner to them.

He also told Gentili to send General Staff officers to the Pasha so that they could report more on Albania the Pasha himself.

Gentili soon left his post and passed on Napoleon’s advice to his successors, General Chabot and General Roze. Nicolas Roze was an emissary to the Levant and was well acquainted with Eastern manners and style. He will be able to navigate the complicated world of conspiracies and temporary alliances that characterized this volatile region very well.

Gentili sent Roze to Ioannina with Napoleon’s letters about his (Napoleon’s) desire to “fraternize” with the Pasha.¹⁸ Ali Pasha greeted the French officer with great honor, shook hands with him, and received the French cockade with the tricolor in his hands. The general was received with honors befitting a Pasha. In July 1797, he even married a girl from Ali Pasha’s palace in a wedding attended

16 A. V. Arnault, *Souvenirs d’un sexagenaire*, т. IV, Paris, 1833, 16.

17 *Oeuvres de Napoleon Bonaparte*, т. II, Paris, 1821, 84–85.

18 A. Beauchamps, *Vie d’Ali Pacha, Visir de Janina*, Paris, 1821, 79.

by all of Ali Pasha's family.¹⁹ Ali presented himself as the best friend of France, quickly learned new principles and customs, and tried to appear credible in everything. Pasha complained to the French about the former Venetian Republic and the Porte, asking for their support in his plans. Still, Ali Pasha was one of the most experienced Ottoman pashas, and he wanted to rely on someone other than France. He kept other channels open: for the Porte, he presented himself as if he were utterly loyal to them by obtaining a firman that recognized his authority in Arta; and, at the same time, he presented himself as a friend and ally of the French. A large number of letters and ambassadors were exchanged between Corfu and Ioannina. Ali Pasha sent his emissary, Pope Demetrius – called Grammaticus – to General Chabot, showering Chabot with flattering words.²⁰ The general knew how to respond in kind. However, it is not possible to determine whether these relations were serious politics or simply diplomatic games and oriental courtesy.

Ali Pasha succeeded in his plan to raise a small coastal fleet, for which he received French acceptance. Beauchamps believes that Ali Pasha achieved this “by caressing the chimeras and illusions of the French officers, flattering their vanity and their enthusiasm, and capturing in his arms the young republican idealists who were enchanted by the manners of the Epirus despot who showered them with celebrations, provisions, and even Greek women.”²¹ Ali Pasha suspected that Napoleon had more ambitious plans for the Eastern Mediterranean and Orient, so he decided to act. He decided to send one of his men with a personal letter to Napoleon's headquarters in northern Italy on the advice of General Roze. The letter he sent was full of flattery and admiration, calling Napoleon the most significant general ever and praising his genius. The letter impressed Napoleon, who had it printed in all the newspapers.

Ali Pasha wanted to benefit from these negotiations and immediately made his request. He demanded the right to pass his fleet through the Gulf of Corfu – which was granted. During his travels in this area, Ali Pasha convinced the French commander in Pervez that he believed in the “Jacobin religion” and that he wanted to be initiated into the “Cult of Carmagnola.”²²

Rupture

However, in 1798, the situation became significantly more complicated for Ali Pasha. The Porte ordered him to gather his Albanians and march against

19 E. Rodocanachi, *Bonaparte et les îles Ioniennes*, Paris, 1899, 76.

20 A. Boppe, *op. cit.*, 10.

21 A. Beauchamps, *op. cit.*, 80–81.

22 R. Rodocanachi, *op. cit.*, 200.

Osman Pazvantoglu, who had rebelled in Vidin. General Chabot decided to send his aide-de-camp Scheffer to Ioannina to ensure Pasha's loyalty to the French and prevent him from openly turning against Pazvantoglu, who was a French ally. Scheffer presented France's views to the Pasha, but the Pasha continued to claim that the French were helping him only in words and not in deeds, and that he was in no position to openly oppose the Porte.²³

Ali Pasha nevertheless parted for Vidin. Pressed by the Porte to surrender to the army sent against Pazvantoglu, he declared himself ready to disobey: (if) "I am given 10,000 French and 100,000 sequins (about one million francs)."²⁴ Yet Chabot, despite the desire of the French government to prevent the Albanian contingents of Ioannina from joining the Ottoman army, could not submit to these conditions of Ali Pasha, and they had to agree on his departure to the Ottoman camp with his two non-commissioned French officers.

Napoleon hoped that Pazvantoglu would hold out as long as possible and thus tie up the Ottoman troops in that territory so that his planned campaign in Egypt would be easier. The displeasure of the French with Ali Pasha's participation in the campaign against the Vizier of Vidin was clear, and they even offered him the Albanian crown in case they captured Morea.

Ali Pasha's departure for Vidin did not diminish the diplomatic activity between the French officers stationed in Corfu and Ali Pasha, however. The civil authorities wrote to the Directory and complained against the generals and officers, to whom, "intoxication by power, clouded the right understanding of things."²⁵ At that time, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was preoccupied with negotiations with Ali Pasha. Talleyrand wrote about Ali Pasha with great suspicion: "This man combined an enlightened mind uncharacteristic of a Muslim with a cunning spirit and an ambitious character. The proposals he gives us could very well be formed in collaboration with the Porte. As much as he wants to expand his power, he is shrewd enough not to notice that the republican spirit brought by our soldiers who rule near him can very quickly overthrow his authority. He could thus become a victim of his ambitions. That's why you shouldn't associate too much with people like him."²⁶

The Directory, which had earlier decided to pursue a passive policy in the territories surrounding Ali Pasha's possessions, was forced to change that approach when the decision was made to go on a campaign in Egypt. It was important for France, for the success of their campaign, that the Christian population

23 J. P. Bellaire, *Précis des opérations générales de la division française du Levant*, Paris, 1805, 24.

24 *Ibidem*, 20.

25 A. Boppe, *op. cit.*, 13.

26 *Ibidem*, 12.

in Turkey rise against the Ottomans. Napoleon sent his emissaries to Morea to spread propaganda among the population.²⁷ But he also sent emissaries to Vidin to see Pasha Pazvantoğlu. They believed that Pazvantoğlu could play a similar role along the Danube as Ali Pasha had in Epirus, and that his activities hindered and influenced those of the Porte.

Napoleon's aide-de-camps, Lavalette, arrived Corfu at the beginning of July 1798. The French had just captured Malta and abolished the Order of Saint John in a very swift operation.²⁸ Lavalette had the task of communicating this to General Chabot, who was then to spread the word among the local pashas and beys from Shkodër to the Morea. The most important thing, however, was to see Ali Pasha himself. Chabot was supposed to hand over Bonaparte's letter to Ali Pasha, in which the French general promised him the help they had agreed on earlier. The conquest of Malta was important for several reasons, including giving the French a very good strategic position for further military campaigns in the Mediterranean.

Napoleon wrote, "Tell him that I have just taken Malta and that I am in these seas with over thirty ships and fifty thousand soldiers. I would like to have contact with him, and I would like to know if I can count on him, and I would also like him to send to me, by a frigate, a man of distinction who enjoys his confidence so that I, for the help he has given to the French and for his courage, could, if he proves his loyalty and desire to follow me, multiply and increase his possessions and glory."²⁹

The letter itself contained the following words, "My very respectable friend, after having offered you my best wishes for your prosperity and the preservation of your life, I have the honor to inform you that for a long time, I have known the attachment you have for the French Republic, which would make me want to find a way to give you proof of the esteem that I have for you. On occasion appearing favorable to me today, I hastened to write you this friendly letter, and I instructed one of my field assistants to bring it to you and deliver it to you personally. I have also instructed him to make certain overtures to you on my behalf, and as he does not know your language, please choose a faithful and reliable interpreter for the interviews that he will have with you. I beg you to give credence to everything he tells you and to send him back to me promptly with an answer written in Turkish in your own handwriting. Please accept my wishes and the assurance of my sincere devotion."³⁰

27 D. N. Stephanopoli, *Voyage de Dimo et Nicolo Stephanopoli en Grece*, t. I, Paris, 1799, 85–106.

28 H. Dajč, *Istočni Mediteran: Velika Britanija i Francuska na Levantu 1796–1807*, 87.

29 *Correspondance de Napoléon Ier*, t. IV, Paris, 1860, 229–230.

30 *Oeuvres de Napoleon*, t. II, 231.

However, Napoleon's aide-de-camp could not fulfill the intended task. The reason for this was the fact that Ali Pasha was absent from Epirus and that he was in front of the walls of Vidin, where he was still fighting against Pazvantoglu. Chabot felt that meeting Ali Pasha and Lavalette would seal their friendship. He regarded Ali Pasha's friendship as the best guarantee of the safety of their possessions in the Ionian Sea against Turkish attacks. He believed that Ali Pasha would immediately return from Vidin as soon as he heard of the fall of Malta.³¹ Chabot was wrong in his assumptions. Napoleon and the rest of the French had seemingly misunderstood Ali Pasha's intentions. Napoleon, in his letter to General Roze dated August 17th, 1798, instructed him to continue watching Ali Pasha's movements, especially considering the situation with Pazvantoglu.³²

He sent a letter from Vidin to his brother Muktar and his sons to be ready for any such eventuality. Muktar introduced Ali Pasha to the activities conducted by the French, such as distributing pamphlets and tricolor flags among the Souliotes. The Porte had already informed Ali Pasha that war would be declared against France, and he decided to return to Ioannina and leave the command to his brother Muktar. However, he was then informed about the arrival of the Russian fleet, which surprised him unpleasantly, as did the presence of the Ottoman army itself. Napoleon's campaign in Egypt meant a complete shift in French Oriental policy that had kept good relations with Ottomans since the 16th century. The grandiose Oriental plan of Bonaparte was doomed after the August 1st-3rd battle of Aboukir, where he lost almost his entire Mediterranean fleet.³³ Ali Pasha, encouraged by the French defeat at Aboukir, decided to take the side of the Porte in the new war, and the news of the French defeat reached the Ionian basin very soon.³⁴ Ali Pasha shocked the French with his swift moves; he summoned General Roze to an audience, arrested him, imprisoned him, and later transferred him to Constantinople.³⁵ Afterward, he sent a letter to General Chabot presenting an ultimatum in which he announced that he would hold Roze as a hostage until he was paid for the property he claimed to own and until Preveza, Vonitsa, Lefkada, and Butrinto were surrendered to his forces.

31 *Correspondance de Napoléon Ier*, t. IV, 233–235.

32 *Ibidem*, 351.

33 H. Dajč, *Sumrak starog Mediterana: Jonska ostrva 1774–1815*, Beograd, 2016, 71.

34 TNA, PRO, FO, 42/2, Consul Spiridion Foresti to Lord Grenville, Principal Secretary of the State, Lazzareto Venice 14th September 1798.

35 F. Pouqueville, *Histoire de La Regeneration de La Grece*, Paris, 1824, 126.

While Napoleon wrote from Cairo in December 1798 asking for news about Albania,³⁶ Ali Pasha had already openly entered the war against the French. By December, Ali Pasha dealt with French forces in a very cruel manner and completely annihilated the French presence in Preveza and Vonitsa.³⁷

Ali Pasha's destruction of the French garrison in Preveza, the succeeding massacre and enslavement of the French prisoners of war, and his participation in the siege of Corfu meant the end of diplomatic relations between him and Napoleon. In 1800, through an agreement between Russia and Turkey in Constantinople, the Republic of the Seven Islands (Septinsular Republic) was formed, consisting of Corfu and six Ionian islands, as well as Parga, which managed to defend itself against Ali Pasha. With this, France lost its territorial gains from the Treaty of Campo Formio.³⁸

Ali Pasha had reason to be disappointed and dissatisfied with the results of the war. The agreement of 1800, which established the Republic of the Seven Islands, meant that Porte once again became the suzerain of Preveza, Vonitsa, and Butrint, and not Ali Pasha's, although he fought for it. The Porte allowed the inhabitants their old privileges. But Ali Pasha, on the other hand, was allowed to be the only Bey to rule in the vicinity and was given a position of honor.

In 1802, the Porte appointed Ali Pasha as the Beylerbey of Rumelia, which was the highest – as well as the highest paid – administrative position in the empire. He was also given the position of “Dervendgi Pacha” which meant “overseer of the roads and mountain passes” in Rumelia. These positions brought Ali Pasha additional power and wealth.³⁹

The second period of correspondence

On April 24, 1801, Napoleon informed General Murat that he should “write to Ali Pasha.”⁴⁰ Napoleon sent a letter dated May 23rd, 1801, to Talleyrand in which he instructed him to hold an audience with General Charbonnel and to give him a mission near Ali Pasha, so that they might be better acquainted with Ali Pasha's intentions.⁴¹ This shows us that even after the bloody break in relations with Ali Pasha, Napoleon was still interested in the possibility of renewing relations with him, taking into account the difficult French position in the region.

36 *Correspondance de Napoléon Ier*, t. V, Paris, 1860, 217.

37 H. Dajč, *Sumrak starog Mediterana: Jonska ostrva 1774–1815*, 73–74.

38 *Ibidem*, 83–84.

39 G. Vaudoncourt, *op. cit.*, 247.

40 *Correspondance de Napoléon Ier*, t. VII, Paris, 1861, 172.

41 *Ibidem*, 201–202.

Immediately after the establishment of the Republic of the Seven Islands and even before re-establishing official relations with the Porte, France decided to send its emissary to Corfu. The emissary was adjutant-commander Romieu, who also took care of relations with Ali Pasha. At first, Romieu was very suspicious of Ali Pasha but he soon made the first steps. Ali Pasha sent his envoys to Corfu and a man named Martin received them from Marseilles.⁴² Martin had previously accompanied General Roze several times during his travels in Epirus and was well acquainted with Ali Pasha.

The Archbishop of Arte was chosen as Ali's emissary to the commission for foreign relations and conveyed what Ali Pasha had said to Martin in Ioannina. The archbishop noted that Ali Pasha swears that he has always considered France only as a friend and that he is grateful to France for the friendship and help they had given him. He claimed that he was ready to do anything to regain that friendship. He also claimed that it was the French who had deceived him and that, while it was true that he had betrayed General Roze, he had been forced to do so by the intrigues led by General Chabot.⁴³

After the Egyptian expedition, French influence in the East Mediterranean decreased rapidly. The British took over the French positions in Constantinople and the French also endangered their merchant interests due to the failed campaign. The French lost not only Egypt and their possessions in the Ionian Sea, but their access to the Balkans was blocked by the British, and the Russians assumed the role of instigators of rebellions among the Christian population in the Ottoman Empire.

After the peace of Amiens in 1802 and the re-establishment of formal relations with Ottoman Empire, Napoleon could finally turn his attention again to the territories in the Orient that he had not dealt with in the previous few years. After his coronation as Emperor, Napoleon felt that the moment had come to carry out his plans.

In 1805, Napoleon defeated the united Russian and Austrian troops near Austerlitz and the Peace of Presburg gave France possession over Dalmatia. The acquisition of significant new territory meant it was in France's vital interest to control the south of the Ionian-Adriatic basin. France was worried about the actions of Britain, which freely passed its ships through these waters, and Russia, which had almost complete power over the Republic of the Seven Islands.⁴⁴

The rebellion of the Serbs and their uprising – first against the Dahijas and then against the Porte itself – and the emergence of independent pashas

42 A. Boppe, *op. cit.*, 33.

43 G. Vaudoncourt, *op. cit.*, 243.

44 A. Boppe, *op. cit.*, 38.

in Bosnia and Albania represented a security risk for the French territories in Dalmatia, and they feared the possibility of overflowing instability or rebellion. It was necessary for the French to get to know these lands better. For this purpose, the French General Staff of the Army in Dalmatia established diplomatic outposts in Travnik, Bosnia; Shkodër; as well as in Ioannina.⁴⁵

Ali Pasha, the most powerful of the Ottoman ayans, wanted to re-establish relations with France. He feared Philhellenism and considered it a key threat to his rule since a rebellion of the Greek population could be potentially disastrous for him. But Ali Pasha felt a significant lack of support for his rule among the local Christian population. He felt that, by taking France as his ally, he would, in a way, tie the hands of Philohellenistic ambitions.

The commissioner for foreign relations, Romieu, who was stationed in the Republic of the Seven Islands, entered into communication with Ali Pasha and sent his emissary, Captain Lovredo, to Ioannina. Despite all the competencies that Lovredo had, he proved not to be the ideal person for that mission. Ali Pasha considered that the French government had broken off relations with Ali Pasha so violently and suddenly that restoring them would not be proper through an agent who did not possess sufficient authority.⁴⁶

If Napoleon planned to forget what he considered the betrayal of Ali Pasha and the losses and defeat at Nicopolis before the massacre of the French in Vonitsa, as well as the cruel treatment and execution of French prisoners, it seemed to him that the only proper way to do this was to send someone whom Ali Pasha could appreciate. The emissary should be someone who had witnessed the bloody events of the past so that they could not be easily deceived in the future. As someone who met all the requirement, Bessieres was first chosen for this position.

Bessieres, meanwhile, became the commander of the imperial guard as well as the governor of the department in the Upper Alps, where he planned to settle down and rest from the hard time he had spent in Egypt and Albania. However, his past made him too valuable to be left alone so quickly. He was officially entrusted with the mission of re-establishing relations with the Pasha and, if the Pasha accepted that he should settle next to him, to be the Imperial Consul in Ioannina at the court of Ali Pasha. In order to make it easier for Ali Pasha to accept having a French agent next to him, Napoleon thought it appropriate to also choose someone who had previously stayed in Epirus and who had medical knowledge so that he could present himself as Pasha's doctor rather than as a political agent.

45 *Ibidem*, 39.

46 G. Vaudoncourt, *op. cit.*, 40.

Bessieres's friend and old colleague from the Commission of Science and Art that was sent to Egypt, François Pouqueville, fulfilled these given conditions. It was then that Pouqueville published his famous work "*Voyage en Morée, à Constantinople en Albanie, et dans plusieurs autres parties de l'Empire Ottoman pendant les années 1798, 1799, 1800, et 1801*", in which he collected his impressions and descriptions during his period of captivity in Albania, and through whom we learn most of the information about that period. By describing the difficult time he spent in Epirus, Pouqueville managed to achieve literary fame since oriental themes were of great interest to the audience at that time. Nevertheless, Pouqueville was not enthusiastic about his new position, based on his experiences from the time when he was Pasha's prisoner and also "knowing about his reputation".⁴⁷

Before the very beginning of the mission, Napoleon requested that a comprehensive portrait of Ali Pasha's character and his political situation be made for him; what were his opportunities for attack and defense, and what were his ambitions? He also wanted to be informed about the history of contact between France and the territories ruled by Ali Pasha. Bessieres and Pouqueville presented Napoleon with a portrait of Ali Pasha based on what they had personally experienced. Ali Pasha was presented as someone who had always admired Napoleon and his military exploits, even attributing a magical and supernatural influence to Napoleon's victories.⁴⁸

They also believed that the establishment of a consulate in Ioannina would help France contain its rivals, – primarily Britain, which had established its naval power in the Mediterranean and which began to turn more and more towards Epirus, wanting to obtain timber as well as to harm French interests. The authors of the report, therefore, conclude that by establishing a consulate in Epirus, France would better establish itself in the region as well as potentially gain access to important resources.⁴⁹

Pouqueville and Bessieres left Paris on October 21, 1805, and landed in Porto Panorama on February 1, 1806, where they were met by Ali Pasha's envoy and given a sumptuous feast according to local customs, which left a significant impression on Pouqueville.⁵⁰

Pouqueville had the opportunity to see the Pasha for the first time in Mouchari, where the Pasha's country residence was located. Pouqueville described in detail the meeting in which mostly polite words were exchanged,⁵¹ and where the

47 F. Pouqueville, *Voyage de la Grèce*, Paris, 1820, 1.

48 A. Beauchamps, *op. cit.*, 149.

49 *Ibidem*, 150.

50 F. Pouqueville, *Voyage de la Grèce*, 82.

51 *Ibidem*, 116.

former monk Guerini served as translator, who seven years earlier was captured together with Pouqueville on the Madonna di Montenegro ship and decided to convert to Islam and become Pasha's foreign minister at his court.

Pouqueville's position was formally confirmed by the Sultan's berat on March 4, 1806. Not long after that, Bessieres left Ioannina, carrying with him Ali Pasha's gift for Napoleon, the saber of the great Khan of Crimea, Selim Giray, with the words: "This (saber) could not save the land of its first owner from the Russians; I am sending it to the one who avenged him at Austerlitz."

The beginning of Pouqueville's mission was very successful. The conflict between the Russians, who were positioned on Corfu and other Ionian islands, and the French led Ali Pasha to believe that he could greatly profit from such a situation. On his return to France, Napoleon received a letter from Bessieres and presents from Ali Pasha, and ordered his Minister of Foreign Affairs, in a letter dated June 19, 1806, to inform Ali Pasha that he had received the saber of Khan Giray with pleasure and that he was acquainted with the good intentions that the pasha had towards France. He also supported him in his monitoring of the Greek population to prevent the Russians from exerting influence in that way. Napoleon also pointed out in the letter that, because he had sent his fleet to the Indian Sea, he would not be able to send a fleet equal to Russia's to the Ionian Sea.

He also added, "If Corfu falls under my rule, I could not find a better guardian for it than Ali Pasha."⁵² These words of Napoleon pleased Ali Pasha so much that it greatly improved Pouqueville's position, whom Ali Pasha treated with the greatest honor. Pouqueville describes how Ali Pasha once, holding a portrait of Napoleon in his hand, said that he would like to be his cousin even if he had to be a Christian.⁵³ His gratitude towards Napoleon increased even more when, thanks to the proposals of the French embassy in Istanbul, Ali Pasha was given pashaliks in Morea and Lepanto for his sons Muktar and Veli.

In 1806, after the defeat of the Austrian and Russian troops at Austerlitz in late December 1805, Russia's positions in the Ionian basin were less favorable. At the same time, the new French ambassador in Constantinople, Horatio Sebastiani, gained the trust of Sultan Selim. Ali Pasha rightly believed that a war was being prepared between France and Russia – also in the Ionian-Adriatic basin – and he wanted to take as much advantage as possible of that situation for himself and his position.⁵⁴ According to Napoleon's order, weapons and ammunition were distributed to Bosnian and Albanian pashas who were on good terms with the French authorities in Dalmatia. But the Pasha sent General Sebastiani a request

52 *Correspondence de Napoleon*, t. XII, Paris, 1863, 577–578.

53 F. Pouqueville, *Voyage de la Grèce*, 214.

54 G. Vaudoncourt, *op. cit.*, 250–251.

for arms, which Sebastiani conveyed to Marshal Marmont, Duke of Ragusa: "Ali Pasha, whose forces are considerable enough to resist the Russians and their supporters on the coasts of Epirus, lacks 12 and 16 caliber cannonballs, as well as powder. I ask you that you make every effort to send him as many as you are able, either by land or by sea, and even, if possible, to send him some artillery officers."⁵⁵

Napoleon, however, was not satisfied with Ali Pasha's proposals and, in a letter to Marmont, pointed out: "Ali Pasha does not need any help!" Napoleon nevertheless agreed to send some cannons, ammunition, and artillery experts to Ali Pasha. In a letter to the King of Naples dated March 27, 1807, he nevertheless emphasized his suspicion of Ali Pasha, saying: "One should not go too far with that; even though he is an enemy of the Russians, that man is too volatile."⁵⁶

Two ships were sent from Naples with four cannons, 3,000 guns, and 20 gunners,⁵⁷ while Marmont sent 18 cannons and one small artillery regiment by land, headed by an officer of Greek origin, Hadji Nikola Papazoglu.

The French wanted to collect volunteers from Albania as well, for which they received Ali Pasha's permission. Captain Nikola Kiriakou arrived in Ioannina on March 24, 1807. Turpin de Montigny, the captain of the Hussars, sent by the King of Naples, arrived there soon, followed by the artillery colonel Guillaume and Captain Palma. Pouqeville welcomed them all and accommodated them in his residence – given to him by Ali Pasha, with all his servants and companions.

Ali Pasha estimated that he was in a favorable position to attack the islands of Lefkada and Paksos and that, with the advice of General Guillaume de Vaudoncourt and the support of French artillery, he could capture Corfu itself. Taking those territories would give him control over trade, and the rich trading community would pay him a very high tribute.

Ali Pasha tried to conquer Lefkada, which was almost glued to the mainland and looked like a more achievable prize than other islands. Yet, 2000 Russian soldiers were backed by thousands of volunteers from other islands, which also brought together a joint spirit of defense among the islanders from Ioannis Kapodistrias to Mocenigo and Kolokotronis, the klephtic leaders, that were otherwise politically fragmented.⁵⁸ It is interesting to note that Ali Pasha didn't hesitate to ask for British help in April 1807 for his plans to conquer the islands.⁵⁹ This is also a great example of how practical Ali Pasha was as, although he praised the

55 A. Marmont, *Mémoires du maréchal Marmont, Duc de Raguse*, Paris, 1857, 93.

56 *Correspondance de Napoléon Ier*, t. XV, Paris, 1864, 342.

57 G. Vaudoncourt, *op. cit.*, 251.

58 H. Dajč, *Sumrak starog Mediterana: Jonska ostrva 1774–1815*, 126.

59 TNA, PRO, FO, 78/61, Visir Ali Pascha to William Leake, Ioannina 15th April 1807.

French and was engaged with them in the joint fortification of Preveza, he still tried to gain British support and help for his plans.

After the failed attempt to take these two islands, Ali Pasha feared that the French would disapprove of his territorial ambitions and attack him. He wanted to make sure of French confidence in him and was even ready to “bow his grey head before the throne of His Majesty (Napoleon)”.⁶⁰ Guerini, the former monk, was allocated the mission of communicating his missions to Napoleon.

Mehmet Guerini set off from Ioannina, carrying letters for Napoleon and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, as well as recommendations written by Pouqueville for the French generals he might meet during his journey. He also carried sabers that Ali Pasha intended as a gift for Napoleon. Guerini aroused suspicion among the surrounding Albanian and Bosnian beys, and the Pasha of Shkodr invited the French consul to protest to him because Ali Pasha was sending his emissaries directly to Napoleon. The Pasha of Shkodr asked the French consul for an answer as to why Ali Pasha gave himself the right to communicate with the French Emperor. He asked him if it was true that Ali Pasha had received a promise of independence and sovereignty, as well as the title of King of Epirus from the French. He also asked the consul what the French meant by the word “Epirus.” The consul explained to him that they meant the territories inhabited by Albanians except Shkodr, which, according to him, belonged to Macedonia.

Disillusionment

Guerini, who left Ioannina at the beginning of April, passed through Albania and Bosnia. On May 12, he found himself in Travnik, then, via Split and Zadar, he reached Vienna, where, on June 14, Ambassador Andrásy took him to Napoleon’s headquarters. During that time, the French began major preparations for war in Epirus. Pouqueville testified that he had never seen such a hectic atmosphere in Preveza before and that he even saw “the Turks running”. This was thanks to the French officers who placed artillery towards the Russians, laid wooden bases for the landing, and, according to Pouqueville “did more in a few days than the Albanians did in five months.”⁶¹

Pouqueville followed the preparations and praised, above all, Colonel Nikola, whom he called worthy of his rank and whom even the Albanians naturally obeyed. Albanians also welcomed Pouqueville with respect. Pouqueville also witnessed the laying of the first brick of the fortress that was being built by Ali Pasha.

Colonel Nikola demonstrated to the Pasha the power of French artillery by firing on a Russian ship and sinking it. Ali Pasha was delighted; he praised the

60 A. Boppe, *op. cit.*, 75.

61 *Ibidem*, 76.

French and Napoleon, and claimed that he had no other to fight for the world than the French Emperor and his army.

However, the reception of Ali Pasha's envoy to Napoleon did not go as Ali Pasha had planned. For military cooperation, Ali Pasha should have asked Guerini for authority over Corfu from Napoleon, however, on the same day, the Russian Emperor had already handed it over to Napoleon. Napoleon remembered his promise to surrender Corfu to Ali Pasha if it fell into his hands but, when it actually happened, he was not ready to fulfill that promise. He wrote to the King of Naples that he should not send any more help to Ali Pasha and that he had "put too much zeal into this matter."⁶²

Guerini's reception was cold. He explained Ali Pasha's demands to Napoleon that it would be good for France to hand over the island of Corfu to the Vizier of Ioannina but Napoleon simply replied, "How to take it?" With the Russian surrender of Corfu still a secret to the public, Guerini replied that Napoleon would surely occupy it at some point, yet the Emperor stuck to his argument.

Guerini was sent back with letters from Napoleon and from Foreign Minister Talleyrand. In the letter, Talleyrand simply expressed his respect and affection for Ali Pasha and nothing more. Napoleon wrote that he appreciated Pasha's friendship and that he had concluded an agreement with the Russians that would finally bring peace and stability to war-torn Europe. He also expressed his respect for him. But Ali Pasha did not get the answers he expected.

Napoleon ordered Ali Pasha to withdraw his forces and informed him that France would retake the former Venetian possessions. He also ordered the withdrawal of Greek mercenaries and Colonel Nikola, who left Albania for Dalmatia. Ali Pasha needed to find out what Napoleon and Alexander I concluded in Tilsit and its implications for the Ionian basin. The Peace of Tilsit almost completely canceled Ali Pasha's grandiose dreams of expanding his territory. After that, Ali Pasha again intensified his contacts with British Consul Foresti and Captain William Leake as he hoped their help might secure him some of the islands he was hoping to conquer.⁶³

Conclusion

The relationship between Napoleon Bonaparte and Ali Pasha is interesting from various perspectives. Ali Pasha managed to become one of the most known Oriental pashas in France – made possible through his correspondence with Napoleon. Still, the image of Ali Pasha as a cruel, despotic, and cunning character who also oppressed Christians led to the rise of Hellenophiles in France, which

⁶² *Correspondance de Napoléon Ier*, t. XV, 482–483.

⁶³ TNA, PRO, FO, 42/10, Consul Spiridion Foresti to Lord Colingwood, Malta 6th April 1808.

had quite a significant influence during the Greek Revolution. The additional importance of this correspondence is how long it lasted and that Ali Pasha was, at some moments, considered the leading French ally in the greater region of the Ionian basin and neighboring Turkish mainland territories. After their first arrival in the Ionian islands in 1797, the French underestimated Ali Pasha, one of the most experienced Turkish pashas. The French thought he would be loyal to them, which cost them bitterly when Ali Pasha joined the Turkish, Russian, and British forces in 1798. Still, the fascination with Ali Pasha – or the lack of other possible allies in the region – led to renewed contact between Ali Pasha and the French, and significant correspondence between him and Napoleon Bonaparte. The French changed their tactics and avoided repeating the same mistakes as the first time, while Ali Pasha benefitted from collaboration with the French again. The sudden defeat of the Russians at the battle of Friedland in June 1807 led to the collapse of Russia's plans in the Adriatic and Ionian basins. The French, perhaps, should have considered giving the territories they gained at Tilsit away to Ali Pasha.

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АЛИ ПАША И НАПОЛЕОН БОНАПАРТА, ОД ДИПЛОМАТСКЕ ПРЕПИСКЕ ДО БОРБЕ ЗА ПОСЕДЕ У ЈОНСКОМ МОРУ

Резиме:

Рад се односи на динамику и значај дипломатских односа Наполеона Бонапарте и Али паше Јањинског у контексту борбе за власт над кључним поседима у Јонском мору. Након мира у Кампоформију Француска република је постала сусед Османског царства, односно области које су се налазиле под влашћу јањинског паше Алија. Мир у Кампоформију значио је нестанак Млетачке републике, а њене поседе у Јонском басену је преузела Француска. Нове околности су пружиле прилику Али паша да покуша да оствари планове чији би врхунац био његово успостављање као независног владара. Француски и Али пашини интереси су се у почетку подударали, те је успостављен дипломатски контакт 1797. превасходно кроз посредовање војних власти на Крфу, прво генерала Ђентилија, а затим генерала Кабота. Сам Наполеон је писао Али паши и обрнуто, док су обојица гајила наду да ће тиме ојачати своју позицију. Али паша је профитирао од добијања приступа француском оружју, као и помоћи коју је добио преко француских официра и инжењера, али је остао незадовољан ограниченим размерама те сарадње. До насилног прекида ових односа долази 1798. када је Али паша остао лојалан Порти у рату против Француске и тешко поразио француску војску код Никопоља, након чега је заузео Превезу. Оно што се јасно може установити као Али пашин стратешки дугорочни циљ јесте успостављање

власти над бившим млетачким поседима у Јонском мору, пре свега острвима – Крф, Паксос и Лефкада. Али паша се у циљу испуњавања тих планова приклањао страни за коју је веровао да ће му омогућити остварење тих жеља. Након свог разочарања уговором у Цариграду 1800. који му није омогућио власт над јонским поседима, Али паша се поново окренуо дипломатским односима са Наполеоном, посебно након француске победе код Аустерлица. Дипломатски односи од 1805. године су вођени формално, преко генералног конзула у Јањини, Франсоа Пуквила, и били су обележени поновним надама Али паше о француској подршци његовом заузимању јонскихседа, који су се у том тренутку налазили под контролом Русије. Пуквил је у својим мемоарима оставио детаљне описе времена проведеног код Али паше. Са друге стране, оно што је Наполеон очекивао од Али паше, био је савезник који би помогао Француској, на стратешки кључном месту, против Руса, Британаца и саме Порте. Међутим Наполеонов однос према Али паши и његовим амбицијама остао је сумњичав, пре свега због његове сумње у искреност пашиних намера, као и због сећања на прекид односа 1798. године. То је и довело до Алијевог коначног разочарања након Тилзитског мира 1807. године, када је Наполеон одбио да му преда Јонска острва, која су опет постала француски посед.