

The epic of the National Liberation War

Where is the foe that ever saw
their back?

Lord Byron

The Albanian people were among the first victims of fascism and the first in Europe to take up arms against it. They did not stop fighting until they crushed the nazi-fascist occupiers and the local traitors, thus writing the most glorious epic of their history in their liberation war.

The Italian fascists invaded Albania, but never succeeded in reducing its indomitable spirit. Alone in front of a savage enemy armed to the teeth, they put up a valiant and bold resistance to the enemy that had trampled their hearths. After the bloody events of April 1939, many sons and daughters of Albania, with what weapons they could find, began the partisan war. Despite the terror and the demagogic manoeuvres of the enemy, who did everything to break the Albanian resistance, anti-fascist manifestations broke out in the towns. The first guerrilla units, led by the communists and enjoying the support of the population, carried out all sorts of actions, attacking enemy columns, blowing up military stores, carrying out surprise attacks on the enemy, killing spies and traitors. On the Greek front two battalions of Albanian soldiers, recruited by force, either deserted and took to the mountains or defected to the Greek side.

With the founding of the Communist Party of Albania on November 8, 1941 the National Liberation War entered a new phase. Very soon it grew in scope and strength and turned into a true popular revolution. The Party worked a clear political program of the National Liberation War and made the people aware of the goals of this struggle.

The Communist Party rallied and organized the Albanian people in a united front for national liberation, the foundations of which were laid at the Conference of Peza which was held on September 16, 1942¹. Large-scale partisan warfare began in 1942 under its leadership.

The fundamental aim of the war of the Albanian people was the complete liberation of Albania from the foreign occupiers, the achievement of true national independence and the establishment of a regime of people's democracy. Partisan warfare was a form of struggle known and tested in the course of centuries both in Albania and other countries. The Albanian people had an ancient tradition of patriotic struggles, and guerilla wars against the invaders. Availing itself of these traditions, the Communist Party of Albania gave the partisan struggle against the fascist occupiers and the local traitors a profoundly popular and revolutionary content.

The National Liberation War of the Albanian people had a double character: it was an anti-imperialist and anti-fascist and at the same time an anti-feudal and democratic revolution. The motive forces of this struggle were: the working class, the poor and middle peasantry, the petty- and middle bourgeoisie of the towns, the patriotic intellectuals. The working class was the leading force, the other forces being its allies.

The essential social contradictions existing at that time in Albania consisted of the contradiction between the fascist occupiers who had enslaved the people, on the one hand, and the Albanian people who wanted to live free and independent, on the other, and the contradiction between the feudal-bourgeois strata which supported the foreign occupation, and the broad masses of the people who called for the instauration of democratic freedoms. The Albanian reaction, represented by the

1 Peza is a region near Tirana, where under the leadership of the Party, the anti-fascist movement and the National Liberation War, had set up strong bases.

big feudal landlords, the big bourgeoisie, etc. who had made common cause with the occupiers, was forced to respond to the national liberation movement, especially following the historic Conference of Peza. In these circumstances, under the sponsorship of the fascist occupier, the Balli Kombëtar (the National Front) was formed — a traitor organization which took upon itself to wreck the National Liberation War and to assist the foreign occupiers, even by organizing its own armed units and throwing them in action against the partisans.

The Party dispatched a number of its members, young communists and friends, experienced in urban guerilla warfare to the countryside to rally new fighters, mainly from among the peasantry for the creation of guerilla units. The countryside became the base and the principal source of supply of the partisan guerillas.

There was no class limitation as to the composition of the guerillas. All those who expressed their readiness to fight the occupier were admitted. Only elements of dubious record, criminals and gangsters who had been branded by the people as such were barred from joining. A partisan guerilla unit numbered 50 to 60 fighters. It was headed by a commander and a political commissar who jointly led its actions and were answerable for the military training and the political preparedness of the partisans. Along with their intensive military activity against the occupiers and traitors, the partisan guerillas did tireless political work to expose the occupiers and the local traitors, organized cultural and educational activities not only among the partisans but also among the population of the areas in which they operated. The guerrillas had their bases in the liberated regions in which they had destroyed the organs of the state power of the occupier and helped the people set up national liberation councils as organs of the National Liberation War. They assisted the peasants in farm work and served as guardians of law and order for the national liberation councils. Besides partisan guerillas, after the Conference of Peza, territorial guerilla units, one for every big village or for two or three small hamlets were also formed. They were self-defence units which took up arms to assist the partisan guerillas in important actions or to oppose enemy incursions in the liberated areas. The self-defence units served at the same time as a reserve force to complete and increase the regular partisan units.

After the Conference of Peza, the number of urban guerillas, partisan guerillas and self-defence guerillas rapidly increased. Towards the end of 1942, the partisan forces proper numbered about 2,000 men besides thousands of fighters incorporated into the urban and rural guerillas.

In an attempt to wipe out the partisan guerillas, the Italian occupiers launched a large-scale punitive operation from September to December 1942 in 27 regions of the country, and a campaign of terror in the towns, which always ended up in failure. In July 1943, the fascist occupiers proclaimed the whole of Albania a zone of war operations. The Italian commander-in-chief was forced to admit that «the Albanian people, in their great majority and without class distinctions, have risen against Italy and against the presence of our troops in their country.» He demanded reinforcements from Rome in order to be able to cope with the situation.

The repeated waves of terror, far from putting out the fire of the liberation struggle, fanned it out even more. The National Liberation War assumed more and more the form of a great people's uprising. Most of the Albanian territory (with the exception of the main towns) was controlled by the freedom fighters. In these conditions, in the beginning of July 1943, the National Liberation General Council was convened. It decided to set up a General Staff and to incorporate all the partisan guerillas and battalions into one National Liberation Army. After the creation of the General Staff, of which Enver Hoxha, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Albania, was the political commissar, the armed struggle entered a new phase characterized by a higher degree of organization and more vigorous extension — the phase of the general people's uprising. The General Staff proceeded with the organization of the National Liberation Army and concentrated in its hands the strategic and operational direction of the armed struggle against the occupiers and traitors, while at the same time working out the tactic of this struggle. At the moment when the General Staff was set up, the Albanian National Liberation Army numbered in its ranks about 10,000 fighters incorporated into permanent partisan detachments. Besides this, self-defence guerillas in the liberated villages and guerilla units in the occupied towns and regions comprised a number of fighters double that of the year before. In order to put the enemy under all-round fire, and bring the outbreak of the general uprising nearer, the General Staff

set about creating greater, better organized and equipped units, capable of engaging in large-scale fighting. As a result the 1st Shock Brigade was formed (15 August 1943), followed by others all over the country.

Another very important step taken by the General Staff was the organization of military power in the rear. Regional commands and local commands were set up as organs of this power. They carried out the functions of people's police in the liberated areas and served as support for the national liberation councils.

Even after the creation of the General Staff, the National Liberation Army continued its tactics of partisan warfare as the main form of activity against the enemy, and this because of the numerical superiority of the occupation forces, and above all, their superiority in armaments, ammunition, means of transport and communications, supply and equipment. In these conditions, to accept battle in open field would have spelt death for the people's armed uprising.

The partisan units and detachments carried out offensive operations, harassing the enemy at any unexpected moment, which they did with rapid manoeuvring and surprise attacks, with the initiative of the commanders of brigades, groups and battalions, and an intelligent utilization of the terrain.

The cadres who led the National Liberation Army, the commanders and commissars came from the ranks of the workers, peasants and patriotic intellectuals, from among the braver and more capable partisans, and were formed as such in the crucible of the war. The enemy, the army and depots of the occupiers, which remained until the end of the war the main source of supply for the partisans in arms and ammunition, were seized through hard-fought battles. Food and shelter were provided mainly by the urban and peasant population.

Great attention was attached to keeping the morale in the army high. With its work of political education the Communist Party raised an entire generation of fighters, ready to lay down their lives for the Homeland and the freedom of the people. This moral force had its roots in the high consciousness of the fighters, who knew what they were fighting for, were fully aware of the difficulties, the privations and the sacrifices their struggle called for, and were animated by an unshakeable faith in the triumph of their cause.

From the first day of its formation, the National Liberation Army was a profoundly democratic army of the revolution. The rank-and-file enjoyed equal rights with the commanders and commissars and complete freedom to participate in the political life of the country, the solution of the military, political and organizational problems of the army. Everything — including military operations of army units, political work, the activity of commands and the behaviour of the partisans and cadres, was subject to the judgement and criticism of the collective. The order of the command was the desire of the fighters and the people. To ensure that orders were executed to the letter, broad debate and exchange of opinions was organized.

Democracy in the Albanian National Liberation Army was an expression of its popular character and emanated from the principle that the masses play the decisive role as the makers of history.

This democracy did not weaken military discipline in the slightest, on the contrary, strengthened it, made it more conscious, not only did it not effect centralized leadership, but made its application easier.

In each unit, the party basic organizations were the animating spirit of all the activities of the partisan fighters.

After the capitulation of fascist Italy, on September 8, 1943, Albania came under German occupation. Fifteen thousand Italian soldiers and officers surrendered to the National Liberation Army and 1,500 of them joined the Albanian partisan units, mainly as part of the 1st Shock Brigade, in the battalion «Antonio Gramsci». The rest lived and worked with the peasants.

In the beginning the Hitlerites tried to deceive the Albanian people by pretending that they had come to liberate Albania from the Italian yoke. In collusion with the local traitors, they staged the «separation of Albania from Italy» and set up the organs of the «independent Albanian state», such as the «Executive Committee», the «Regency», the «Albanian Government», the «Albanian Army», the «Albanian Gendarmerie», etc. The Balli Kombëtar and the Legaliteti, two traitor organizations, of which the latter sought to restore Zog's monarchic regime as the «legal» regime of the country, supported this demagogical campaign. These two organizations, as well as the other reactionary groupings aligned themselves openly with the German nazis and parti-

cipated arms in hand in the military operations carried out by the occupiers against the National Liberation Army and the Albanian people.

But the Albanian people were not to be taken in by this demagogery. Everywhere they waged fierce battles against the new occupiers. On the Struga-Libratzhd road, at Drashovica near Vlora, at the Kardhiq Bridge near Gjirokastra, along the Elbasan-Tirana road, at Kruja, Konispol, Delvina and Saranda, at Bilesh, on the Korça-Leskovic road and in other places, the detachments of the National Liberation Army prevented them from occupying the whole Albanian territory. Most of the liberated regions and a number of towns remained free in the hands of the National Liberation Army. In autumn 1943, the units and detachments of the National Liberation Army went over to the offensive against the Hitlerite troops and the reactionary forces all over the country. On October 18, a battery of the Albanian National Liberation Army shelled the palace in which the quisling assembly was convened on the initiative of the German command.

The nazi occupation stepped up the process of differentiation of forces in the country. All the reactionary groupings and trends which had gone over to the armed struggle against the National Liberation Movement, rallied around the new occupiers.

Internal reaction and the traitors felt less and less capable of coping with the situation on their own. Therefore they sought the assistance and protection of the nazis and openly placed all their forces under the command of the latter.

The nazi invaders made desperate efforts to put down the national liberation movement. During the winter 1943-1944, the Germans, assisted by the local traitors, undertook a large-scale campaign with the objective of wiping out the National Liberation Army. Four Hitlerite divisions, assisted by many thousands of gendarmes, ballists and Zogits, about 45,000 men all told, took a direct part in this operation. By that time the National Liberation Army had about 20,000 fighters operating all over Albania.

Both in number and armaments the enemy was far superior than the partisans who were in great shortage of weapons, ammunition, supplies and equipment, and, moreover, were forced to fight in the conditions of the severe winter of our mountains.

The German occupiers backed up their large-scale offensive against the National Liberation Army with a wave of terror on a scale never seen in Albania until that time. Whole villages were plundered and burnt down. Thousands of men and women, young and old, even children, were shot, massacred, burnt alive, imprisoned or deported to extermination camps. At any moment of the day or night, the German nazis, the gendarmes and ballists broke into people's homes, plundered them, rounded up men and women, young and old, beat them or executed them on the spot without trial, and threw their corpses into the gutters. The bodies of partisans killed in battle, or murdered after their capture or even exhumated from their graves were often loaded on animals and paraded through streets or exhibited in town squares, in order to strike terror into the hearts of the people. «Blood-letting is a radical remedy against infection. Blood must flow in torrents in the streets of Tirana if we want to re-establish peace. One day of terror ensures ten years of peace!» reads an editorial of the official press of the quisling government on February 4, 1944.

Nevertheless, the peace they wanted was not re-established. With all the efforts of the enemy, their winter operation proved a disaster for them. More than 1,000 partisans laid down their lives on the battlefield, but the ranks of the National Liberation Army did not shrink or weaken, on the contrary grew and strengthened with the 4th, 5th, 6th and 7th Brigades which were formed precisely at this time. The fighting, the difficulties and privations it had to go through, tempered the National Liberation Army morally and made it stronger than ever. The commanders, commissars and the rank-and-file fighters gained rich military and political experience. On the other hand, the partisan units and detachments improved their armament through capturing new German weapons in the course of fighting.

Although they had the advantage of the offensive, the occupier and the traitors suffered much heavier losses than the partisan forces. From the political aspect the partisans gained the greatest victory. By this time most of the reactionary forces began to understand the futility of the fight against the National Liberation Front and lost faith in victory.

The enemy did not succeed in destroying either the

national liberation councils or paralyzing their activity. These organisms continued to give the National Liberation Army considerable aid by procuring supplies, equipment, means of transport, and above all, increasing its ranks with new volunteers. They carried out a large-scale activity to keep the morale and the fighting spirit of the people high, to assist the victims of the war and to save the peasant masses from starvation.

In the spring 1944, the Albanian National Liberation Army had the initiative of the operations. In April the partisan units and detachments went over to the offensive all over the country. Almost all the regions south of the Shkumbin River were liberated, while in Central and Northern Albania operations by partisan forces were intensified. The occupation troops and the reactionary forces entrenched themselves in their barracks in the cities or in the fortified positions along the main routes and the coast.

The situation became even more favourable for the forces of the National Liberation Army following the series of the brilliant victories of the Red Army over the German armies.

In these circumstances the first Anti-fascist National Liberation Congress was held in the liberated town of Përmet. It elected the Anti-fascist National Liberation Council as a legislative and executive body and the Anti-fascist National Liberation Committee with the attributes of a provisional government, with Comrade Enver Hoxha at the head.

Besides creating the supreme organs of the people's power, the Congress of Përmet took the following decisions: to build a new people's democratic Albania according to the will of the people as it was solemnly expressed at the Anti-fascist National Liberation Council today; to prohibit the return of the ex-King Zog to Albania; to deny recognition to any other government that might be formed in the country or in exile against the will of the Albanian people; to fight the German occupier and the local traitors until their total destruction and the establishment of the state of people's democracy all over the country.

At its first session the Anti-fascist National Liberation Council took a number of decisions of major importance which were adopted by the Congress and which constituted the first laws of the Albanian state of people's democracy. Of

particular importance was the revolutionary decision to annul all the political and economic agreements the Zog government had concluded with the foreign states as incompatible with the interests of the Albanian people, had a revolutionary character and particular importance. The Council set up a special state commission for detecting and identifying the war criminals and investigating the crimes committed by the invader and the traitors.

It was at this Congress that the unification of the High Command of the National Liberation Army and the introduction of military rank were decided on. Comrade Enver Hoxha was appointed commander-in-chief. The Congress issued the directive to form divisions and army corps. The General Command announced the formation of the 1st Shock Division.

The Congress reaffirmed its allegiance to the Anglo-Soviet-American alliance and the friendship of the Albanian people with all the peoples of the world anti-fascist coalition, while at the same time it warned the imperialist powers that the time when Albania could be used as a token for barter was gone for ever. From now on Albania would decide its own fate. The Congress publicly denounced the attempts of the Anglo-American allies to interfere in the internal political and military affairs of Albania.

The historic decisions of the Congress were received with great joy and immediately embraced by the broad people's masses.

Meanwhile the Hitlerite occupiers mounted the second large-scale operation against the partisan forces. For this offensive the enemy threw in four divisions and a half of the Wehrmacht, and more than 50,000 gendarmes, ballists and Zogites. This operation, too, which is known as the June operation ended in complete defeat for the nazis and the forces of reaction. It was another proof of the invincible strength of the National Liberation Army and the Albanian people. From this operation the people's army emerged stronger and more mature, the people were deeply resolved to continue the war till final victory.

The enemy operation was still going on in the South when on June 26, 1944 the forces of National Liberation Army launched a general offensive for the liberation of the territory of Northern Albania. The enemy was taken unawares, unable to face this sudden attack. The German garrisons

and the gangs of reactionaries, and their routes of communication were subject to daily destructive attacks by the Albanian National Liberation Army. Unable to counter the general offensive, the enemy evacuated regions and cities it had previously occupied, one after the other. By October 24, the Hitlerites were driven out of the whole southern part of the country to the north of the Shkumbin, where in June-July 1944, the 1st and 2nd Divisions of the Albanian Liberation Army had switched over to the offensive, the Germans continued to only hold the cities of Elbasan, Tirana, Durrës, Kukës and Shkodra.

One of the more important consequences of the general offensive of the National Liberation Army was the complete annihilation of internal reaction. The Balli Kombëtar, the Legaliteti, their armed gangs and the gendarm detachments were wiped out under the blows of the storm brigades and divisions of the Anti-fascist National Liberation Army, the Regency and the quisling government were completely paralysed.

The battle for the liberation of the Capital — Tirana, which went on for 19 days, from October 29 to November 17, 1944, was among the great battles the National Liberation Army fought in the final phase of the war. The battle of Tirana had the character of a pitched battle. The Hitlerites lost 5,000 men besides a considerable number of prisoners.

On November 28, 1944, the Democratic Government chaired by Comrade Enver Hoxha entered Tirana amidst the indescribable enthusiasm of the population.

On November 29, 1944, with the Liberation of Shkodra in the North, the forces of the National Liberation Army completed the liberation of Albania. The state of people's democracy was established all over the country.

The heroic struggle of the Albanian people under the leadership of the Communist Party of Albania was crowned with complete victory. The fascist domination in Albania came to an end; at the same time, all dependence on the imperialist great powers was done away with, and all enslaving links with them were severed. The Albanian people achieved their full national independence, and the rule of the landlords and the bourgeoisie was overthrown. Albania broke away for ever from the world capitalist system. This was the greatest victory ever achieved by the Albanian people throughout their history.