

## Why the Flag? Podcast

### Episode 8: The Albanian Flag: Skanderbeg's Revenge

March 6, 2021

Show Transcript

Welcome back to another episode of Why the Flag? The show that explores the stories behind the flags and how these symbols impact our world, our histories, and ourselves. I'm Simon Mullin.

Over the past two episodes, we told the remarkable history of the German flag – well, the two German flags; the black-white-and-red tricolor of imperialism and conquest, and the black-red-and-gold Bundesflagge of liberalism, democracy, and hope – a flag which fell twice to the forces of tyranny and fascism, only to be reborn a third time at the end of WW2. And the flag that united the whole German nation after the fall of communism in 1990. We traced the colors of the German banner back over a thousand years to the standards of Rome and Byzantium and to the rise of Charlemagne's red Oriflamme and the banner of the Holy Roman Empire. We traveled to 13th Century Palestine to the formation of the German Teutonic Order, with their black-and-white, eagle-laden flag, which rose to become the banner of the powerful Prussian Kingdom. And we witnessed Germany's unification in the 19th Century, as the Prussian flag was masterfully combined with the Hanseatic League's banner, creating the black-white-and-red tricolor of the first and second German Empires – the same colors adopted by Adolph Hitler's Third Reich and their Swastika flag. Alongside these Imperial banners, we also saw glimmers of republicanism among the German people; Germans who rejected imperialism and tyranny and flew the black-red-and-gold Bundesflagge in its stead, first during the revolution of 1848 and then during the tumultuous years of the Weimar Republic beginning in 1914, until the insidious cancer of National Socialism and its Nazi flag devoured the German state in 1933.

But no matter which flag was flown or which regime held power, one icon has always lived at the center of German national symbolism: and that is the Reichssturmflagge, the German eagle, adopted from the Romans and the Byzantines, that for a thousand years has represented German power. And if you recall from Part I, we explored how the 11th Century Holy Roman Emperor, Isaac I Comnenus, modified the eagle design by adding an extra head, creating a double-headed eagle, which came to symbolize the power of the Holy Roman Empire until its dissolution in 1806. But it wasn't just the Germans the carried on the ancient tradition of the double-headed eagle. Look at flags throughout European history. You'll see this same motif carried on in Russia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Austria – and yes, on the simple red-and-black flag of the small Balkan state of Albania, which we'll be exploring today.

So, in this episode, we'll unravel the mystery of the red Albanian flag and its black double-headed eagle design. We'll explore its origins on the battlefield in the 1440s, as the Albanians fought for national sovereignty against the Ottomans, leading to the first unified – if short-lived – Albanian state. And we'll follow the flag throughout its tumultuous years in the 19th and 20th Centuries, as the Albanian National Awakening spurred new battles for freedom – and shed untold amounts of blood.

I've often said that you can tell the story of a nation's history by examining its flag; that you can understand a country's origins by getting to the root of its national symbols. But, I also learned early on that national flags and emblems only tell the stories they want to share – too often is it the case that national flags are merely veneers hiding the crooked and yellowing smile of history. Flags are like conversations we have with ourselves, stories we tell each other about who we are, where we come from, and why we exist – they are the banners of our legitimacy in a world that is constantly threatening our right to national self-determination. As such, flags can be jealously protected by those they represent and equally, passionately hated by those just outside their borders.

I've also said that our flags are the manifestations of our national mythologies. And national mythologies, when rooted in common territorial history, religion, language, ethnicity, and symbolism, are the key ingredients for nationalism. While nationalism can be a useful tool to shake off the grasp of occupation, as we'll see in this history of Albania and its flag, when it goes unchecked, it can also lead to violence and the oppression of those deemed other. Nationalism and mythology wrapped in a flag: that's what this episode of Albania is really all about.

The story of the Albanian flag is a story of invasion and rebellion, nationalism and repression, conversion and conquest. And finally, eventually, freedom. It's the story of a European nation that had toiled under the thumb of occupation and imperialism for nearly two thousand years, from the rise of the Roman Emperors to the fall of Soviet dictatorships, only realizing its democratic national independence in 1992.

But most importantly, one cannot tell the story of the Albanian flag without exploring the extraordinary life of its designer, the man who stands at the center of Albanian national identity: Gjergj Kastrioti, better known as Skanderbeg. The revolutionary warlord who led the Albanians into battle against the Ottoman Empire under the double-eagle flag of rebellion.

As you'll see today, the national myth of Skanderbeg and the history of the Albanian flag are inextricably linked together – they are often one and the same. And each regime that has claimed the Albanian colors does so by upping the ante of the heroic Skanderbeg myth and by declaring that they are the true and rightful heirs to his increasingly infallible legacy and his iconic eagle flag.

So today, we'll ask, where do the black-and-red national colors really come from, and what do they mean? Why did Albania adopt the double-headed eagle of Byzantium? And who is the mysterious Skanderbeg who bore the flag of Albanian rebellion in the 15th Century – and how has this flag survived after centuries of occupation, conversion, and war? As always, we'll ask, why the flag? And today, why the flag of Albania? Stick around. We'll answer that and so much more when we come back.

[MUSIC]

Welcome back to the show.

George Orwell once wrote that soccer is just war, minus the shooting.

And that's exactly what unfolded at a soccer match in Belgrade on October 14, 2014. At the Euro Cup qualifying match between the Serbian and Albanian national teams, the atmosphere was tense. Serbian football hooligans were out in force, and Albanian fans were told not to come to the stadium, and for a good reason. Just 15 years earlier, the horrific war between the Yugoslavian Serbs and the NATO-backed Kosovar Albanians had pit these two nations against each other in a bloody conflict that left thousands dead and millions displaced. A couple of years after Yugoslavia's defeat, and following the arrest of the former Yugoslav president, Slobodan Milosevic, for war crimes, Yugoslavia was divided into Serbia and Montenegro – but much the old ethnic hatred between the hardline Serbs and Albanians still remained.

As the players faced off on the pitch, the crowd was hushed into a confused silence as a small drone carrying a mysterious flag approached the Serbian defender, Stefan Mitrovic, at mid-field. As the drone went still and the flag came into view, the Serbian crowd exploded into chaos. That's because the banner on the drone carried the images of two Albanian nationalist heroes, Ismail Qemali and Isa Boletini, men who had fought the Serbs in the early 20th Century. Between them was the Albanian double-headed eagle draped over a red map of Greater Albania, a map which included Kosovo – land that Serbia claims for itself. And worst of all, beneath the map, was the word autochthonous, a reference to the Albanians' claim that they are the indigenous people of the Balkans descended from the ancient Illyrians and that the Serbs are mere impostors.

The fans erupted into chants of "Kill, Kill, Kill," as the Serbian player tore the flag from the descending drone. Then a full-scale riot ensued when an Albanian player wrestled the flag away from the Serbian. Fans charged the field and attacked the Albanian players with chairs, water bottles, and anything they could get their hands on before the Albanians rushed to the safety of their locker room. In Kosovo, crowds of ethnic Albanians responded to the riot by marching through the streets of Mitrovica, chanting, "Kill Serbs!" And back in Albania, tens of thousands of fans would welcome their team home as heroes, waving the national flag in the streets like they had just witnessed victory in a great war. Then again, in a sense, they did, because soccer is war, minus the shooting.

Like we said earlier, flags can represent our legitimacy in a world that is constantly threatening our rights to national self-determination. And for those who don't accept our legitimacy, our flag can be passionately hated by those outside our borders. As we saw at the soccer match in Belgrade, few flags have the power to stir such national pride and fervent disdain than the flag of Albania.

So, how the hell did we get here? Who are the Albanians, and what is the story behind their flag? And why does this particular flag carry such an emotional burden? Well, on today's

episode, we're going to span nearly 3,000 years of Albanian history to try to get to the bottom of these questions. Let's dive right in.

Just like the flag from the soccer story tell us, today's Albanians see themselves as the descendants of an ancient ethnic tribe known as the Illyrians. The Illyrians were a loose coalition of Indo-Europeans who arrived in the Balkan Peninsula around 1000 B.C., just about the beginning of the Iron Age. For centuries, these Illyrians were known to be master horsemen, fearsome warriors, and terrifying pirates who plagued the trading routes along the Adriatic Sea. In fact, the name Albania is derived from the name of an Illyrian tribe called the Albanoi who lived on the West coast in a region called the *Durrës*. But, technically, Albania is not actually called Albania at all, but *Shiporea* – the land of eagles – a fitting name as you'll learn about today. In fact, the name Albania is an exonym given to it by past occupiers, occupations which shaped nearly the entire history of this nation, starting with the father of the famous Macedonian conqueror, Alexander the Great.

By the turn of the 4th Century B.C., the Illyrian tribes had consolidated their power and grew into a real force to be reckoned with in the Balkans – however, they proved no match to the military might of Macedon. In 358 B.C., the Macedonian King, Philip II, invaded the Illyrians, killed their king Bardylis and conquered huge swaths of their land, putting the Illyrian people under Macedonian occupation. But 23 years later, the sons of these two kings would continue their fathers' war and come face to face in battle. The slain Illyrian king's son, Cleitus, led a revolt against Philip's son, Alexander the Great, to push the Macedonians from Illyrian land. Despite its early success, Alexander finished his father's job by routing the young and inexperienced Cleitus during the famous Siege of Pelium, crushing the native resistance, and sending the Illyrian king into exile. In exchange for their lives, the Illyrians pledged fealty to Alexander and adopted the Greek gods as their own – and even went on to accompany Alexander during his conquest of Persia.

But, right after Alexander's death at age 32 in 323 B.C., the Illyrians saw no reason to accept the Macedonians as their masters, and independent Illyrian kingdoms started to emerge all across the Balkans and they even began expelling Macedonian civilians from their realms. As the Illyrians expanded their territories into what we know today as Ancient Greece, one Illyrian king got carried away and picked a fight with the wrong enemy. And it was this one king's hubris that may have led to the Illyrian's final demise. In 231 B.C., high from his unlikely victory over the Aetolian Greeks, an Illyrian king and infamous drunk named Agron started picking on a rising power across the sea in Italy – a little state who called themselves the Romans. Just before these Aetolian Greeks were crushed by Agron, they had sent a plea for help to Rome, begging them to negotiate with the Illyrians for their lives. But as these Roman envoys sailed across the Adriatic Sea, Agron's forces showed them no mercy. He attacked the diplomats and killed a Roman ambassador – seriously pissing off the growing Roman Republic. But it was also a great opportunity for Rome, giving them an excuse to conquer their neighbors to the East.

This incident sparked over a century of what the Romans called the Illyrian Wars. While most of the Illyrians were defeated by 168 B.C., the Romans would engage in costly and terrible conflicts against revolting Illyrians on land and at sea until the last of these tribes were finally

subjugated by Emperor Tiberias in 9 A.D. And by the end of the second century A.D., with their adoption of Roman language, religion, technology, and customs, the Illyrians, the people of Albania, became completely Latinized – in fact, they were the most “Roman” people in all the Balkans – and *Illyricum* would be a full-fledged vassal state of the Roman Empire for nearly 400 years.

As the Western Roman Empire collapsed in the 5th Century, Albania would suddenly find itself on the periphery of the Eastern Roman Empire under the flag of Byzantium. But because of Albania’s geography – far from the center of Byzantine power and with prime real estate on the Adriatic Coast – the region would suffer greatly in the early Middle Ages with clans and tribes vying for control in Europe. Between 529 and 640 alone, Albania would be invaded by the Antae, the Huns, the Lombards, the Gepids, the Slavs, and the Avars. In other words, after the fall of Rome, Albania was right in the crosshairs of all the great European power struggles of the time.

Centuries later, around the year 1190, the first known Albanian state emerged, known as the *Principality of Arbanon* or possibly the *Principality of Albanon*. This state was established by a native chieftain named Progon, who was the ruler of the famed Krujë castle in north-central Albania. And it’s this Krujë castle that will become central to Albanian flag history later on in this episode. Now, Progon and his sons would rule an independent Arbanon for only about 25 years until the state was absorbed into the reemerging Byzantine Empire around 1215. While Arbanon was short-lived, but what makes it so interesting to this show, besides it being the first Albanian state, are the heraldic symbols that have been unearthed from this time period. In an area called Geziq in northwestern Albania, archaeologists discovered the 12th Century emblem of Arbanon – and lo and behold, it’s a leftward facing eagle, wings outstretched, and talons open. This could be evidence that the first independent Albanian state symbol was very similar to the eagle that would emerge in the centuries to follow, predating the flag of Skanderbeg by nearly 300 years. Pretty cool stuff if you ask me.

But in 1271, the eagle of Arbanon would fall. The powerful Catholic King Charles of Anjou conquered Albania from the Orthodox Byzantines and introduced the French fleur de lis banner to the region. This symbol, along with the Byzantine eagles, would be adopted by some of the Albanian high nobility in the years to come. The Kingdom of Albania under the French Angevin Dynasty would exist for nearly a Century from 1272-1368, with the fleur de lis as a short-lived symbol of Albanian heraldry – but it would last until at least the year 1415. So, while there were eras of Albanian independence and self-rule in the middle ages – along with an influx of foreign symbolism, like the fleur de lis – Albania would spend the greater bulk of the 9th-14th Centuries being conquered and torn apart by European powers. They were conquered by the Bulgarians, the Slavs, the Sicilians, the Venetians, the Nicaean Empire – and every once in a while, recaptured by the Byzantines, the very empire that would most greatly influence the heraldic and vexillological customs of Albania for over a thousand years.

But by the mid-14th Century, there was a new power emerging into the European continent with a new culture, a new language, a new flag, and a new religion that would dominate

Albania – and transform the continent – for the next 600 years: Enter the Ottoman Empire. The Byzantines would soon fall and the Ottomans would take their place – and it was under this Islamic empire from which the modern flag of Albania was born.

So, when we come back from the break, we'll explore the bloody origins of the Albanian flag, this mythical banner of rebellion against the mighty sultan of the occupying Ottoman Empire. We'll be right back.

[BREAK]

Welcome back to the show.

On November 28, 1443, the Ottoman Governor-turned-Christian-rebel known as Skanderbeg, along with 300 men, captured the Krujë castle in northern Albania. It was from there that here raised the flag of revolt against the Muslim Turks. In the late autumn twilight, surrounded by the horrible screams of impaled Ottomans who refused to convert to Christianity, Skanderbeg hung his war banner from the castle walls, declaring holy war against Islamic rule. The blood-red flag with a black double-headed eagle was raised as a rallying cry for his people and as a warning to the approaching Ottomans. And it was on this day that the flag of Albania was born.

So, who was this legendary Albanian hero who impaled the Turks and raised the flag against the Ottomans? Where did his banner come from?

Well, this story begins with the Ottoman invasion of Europe in the mid-14th Century around the year 1352. If you look at a map of the region, you'll see that the Balkans is the gateway to Western Europe from Turkey and the Middle East, putting Albania squarely in the path of the Islamic conquest of Europe. After defeating the weakened Byzantine Empire in 1356, the Ottoman expansion began in earnest into the European continent and finally entering Albania in 1385. When the Ottomans arrived, the warring Albanian tribes were fighting each other, so they were certainly no match for the Ottoman colossus, who quickly took power. In exchange for some tribal autonomy, a large number of Albanian nobles converted from the Eastern Orthodoxy of Byzantium to Sunni Islam, with many Albanian principalities becoming vassals of the Ottoman state. Those who refused to bow to the new Islamic empire fled, many of the Albanian Catholics ran to neighboring Italy, where communities of diaspora Albanians, called the Arbëreshë, still live to this very day. But converting to Islam didn't mean the Albanian nobles were granted full rights. Far from it. While the Ottomans did allow the native chieftains to maintain their positions and properties, in exchange, they were forced to pay stiff taxes to the state and provide men to fight on their behalf – and in many cases, they were forced to send their sons to the Ottoman court as hostages, just so they would think twice about rebelling against the sultan.

One of these Albanian noblemen who submitted to the Ottomans was the tribal leader and hardened war veteran by the name of Gjon Kastrioti, head of the Kastrioti clan, who ruled large swaths of land along the northern Adriatic coast. Gjon had previously led the resistance against

the encroaching Ottomans, but defending Albania from the might of the Turks proved futile, and he was eventually forced to submit and pay his tribute to the Sultan, Bayezid I. Per Ottoman tributary custom, the elder Kastrioti sent his four sons to the Ottoman court as hostages, where they would be converted to Islam and train for military duty in the Ottoman capital of Edirne. But it Gjon's his youngest son, George Kastrioti, who would excel in his military training and gain the attention of the new Sultan, Murad II.

Upon his conversion to Islam and proving himself in battle, the young George Kastrioti was given the name Iskander – after Alexander the Great – and following his graduation from the military academy in 1423, Iskander quickly rose through the ranks of the Ottoman army. As a noble, he was granted a timar, which were lands given by the sultan for him to rule, and achieved the rank and title of bey, or governor. For the next 20 years, this Iskander Bey – but better known today as Skanderbeg – would lead thousands of cavalry troops into battle in the name of Ottoman conquest. So loyal was Skanderbeg to the Ottoman army that he even ignored his own father's pleas when Gjon Kastrioti rose up against the sultan during the first Albanian revolt of 1432. When the revolt was crushed in 1436, the sultan annexed the old Kastrioti territory but refused the request of his loyal general Skanderbeg to inherit the ancestral lands from his late father. For a man who gave his life to the Ottoman army – even against his own family and father – this was an unacceptable betrayal. And Skanderbeg, the battle-hardened military commander, and natural politician would bide his time – and he would soon have his revenge.

On January 1, 1443, Pope Eugene IV declared a crusade against the Turks, hoping to push them from Europe once and for all. With the sultan weakened and bogged down in military campaigns, Skanderbeg – along with several other Ottoman officials – mistakenly believed that this crusade would be successful in defeating the Ottoman Empire. So, to save his own head and avenge his father, Skanderbeg waited for the perfect time to join the crusade and revolt against the Ottomans.

And it was on November 28, 1443, during the failed Battle of Niš against the Hungarians, where opportunity struck for Skanderbeg. The Hungarian advance into Serbia forced the Ottoman army to retreat into the mountainous Balkans, and it was at that moment of chaos when, along with 300 loyal cavalrymen, deserted the Ottoman army and marched on the historic Krujë castle – the symbol of power in northern Albania.

Skanderbeg used a forged letter, supposedly from the sultan, to urge the governor of the castle to open his gates for Skanderbeg and his retreating men. But once they got inside, the butchery began. Right away, Skanderbeg converted back to Christianity, impaled any Ottoman official in the castle who rejected to a baptism, and raised the flag of holy war against the Islamic Empire – the empire that had stolen his childhood, his father's land, and his birthright. This flag of rebellion was none other than the red banner with a black double-headed eagle on its ground. From the bloodshed of the Krujë castle, the first flag of Albanian independence was born.

Now that we finally have the origin of the Albanian flag, let's explore the inherent symbolism and the simplistic genius of his choice of flag. The question, why did he choose the double-headed eagle on a red ground, has a few answers – answers ranging from the practical to the very political.

So, let's start with the double-headed eagle. As we've discussed in previous episodes, the eagle had been a symbol of absolute power and authority since the rise of the Roman Empire, when in 102 B.C. Emperor Gaius Marius decreed that the eagle alone should be the defining emblem of Roman power. And while the Western Roman Empire fell in 476, the Byzantine Empire – which included Albania – continued the tradition of the eagle's authority. The double-headed eagle is often attributed to the 11th Century Byzantine Emperor Isaac I Comnenus, who is said to have added the extra head, inspired by the ancient traditions of his native Anatolia, in modern-day Turkey, making it the emblem of Byzantium. And yes, I see that it is somewhat ironic that this ancient Turkish symbol would be used as a flag of rebellion against the Ottoman Turks, but I digress. Now, in a practical sense, using the double-eagle as a flag of rebellion against the Ottomans really is the perfect symbol of revolt, as it was the Ottomans who defeated the Byzantines, stole Albanian sovereignty, and subjected them to forced conversions, high taxes, and repression. The double-eagle then is a symbol of a glorified past just a generation or two out of memory, the symbol of the old empire from the time before the Ottoman incursion – in other words, the double-eagle flag is a promise of a return to independence, a return of autonomy, and a return to Christianity.

But that's not all. The double-headed eagle was also commonly found on the coats of arms and the heraldry of Albanian noble families during this period. Powerful and influential Albanian families, like the Arianiti, the Muzaka, and others already used the double-eagle on their arms, making it perfect as a unifying symbol for the organized resistance, which we'll talk about shortly. Yet most importantly, the black double-eagle on a red ground appears on the arms of the Kastrioti clan – Skanderbeg's own family – making this flag more than just a banner of Albanian rebellion, but the personal flag of Skanderbeg. And with this flag, he would elevate himself to the title of "Lord of Albania" – and his family arms to the ultimate symbol of Albanian power.

Now, as memorable as Skanderbeg and his flag are today, it's important to recognize that they could easily have been nothing more than footnotes in the annals of history, if remembered at all. And it's not hard to imagine why: He was just one military leader with only 300 men, who deserted from the Ottoman army, abandoned Islam, and sacked a small castle in the Balkans. One of these acts alone was tantamount to a swift and merciless death sentence and should have stood no chance against the colossus of the Ottoman Empire. In all probability, he should have been crushed. But mythology loves an underdog; a David for a Goliath. Skanderbeg is a great mythical hero because he was able to survive – and he was able to fight against the Ottomans because he was himself an Ottoman military prodigy – everything he knew about how the Ottomans fought, they had taught him, both in the academy and on the battlefield. So, Skanderbeg knew their tactics inside and out and was able to out-manuever them time and again, scoring victory after victory against his old allies – and conquering back territory from the



sultan. But for this rebellion to truly succeed, Skanderbeg couldn't do it alone. He needed allies – and once again, just like at the Battle of Nis, his timing was impeccable.

At around the same time that Skanderbeg raised the red flag against the Ottomans, the sultan was in the process of punishing the last revolt by centralizing Ottoman power and degrading the sovereignty of Albanian feudal lords. The Ottomans started annexing more territories, replacing local leaders, and increasing the tributary demands of the noble families. This action was obviously not very popular with the people. At this point, the Albanians were just a powder keg ready to explode – and Skanderbeg was just the spark they needed to ignite.

On March 3, 1444, Skanderbeg organized a meeting in the town of Lezhë, bringing together the Albanian noble families in common cause against Ottoman oppression. That day, they created what is now called the League of Lezhë, the first coordinated Albanian independence movement in history, which created the first semi-modern Albanian nation-state. And they elected Skanderbeg as their chief, and adopted his red, double-eagle banner as their national flag.

Now, the long and complex histories of the League of Lezhë and Skanderbeg – along with their many battles, intricate alliances, and internal politics – could fill an entire book. In fact, volumes of books on these topics have been published for centuries. But for our purposes, this is where the story of the Albanian flag will begin, and where we'll wrap up the history of Skanderbeg. Over the 24 years following the creation of the first Albanian state, Skanderbeg's influence and territory would wax and wane, battles would be won and lost, and alliances would be formed and would fall. But what's most important to us is that his power center at the Krujë castle would not fall to the Ottomans until after his death in 1468, which is why the Krujë castle is an icon of Albanian strength and independence today – and is one of the reasons why Skanderbeg is still considered one of or even the greatest military leaders in all of history. However, no matter how great, all men must die. And when Skanderbeg died, so did the first experiment with Albanian independence, with Albania falling back into Ottoman control entirely by 1479. For the next 400 years, as the majority of Albanians would convert to Islam and adopt Ottoman customs, Skanderbeg's flag would lie dormant, nothing but a distant memory of a failed insurgency from generations past. It was only with the rise of European nationalism in the late 19th Century that Skanderbeg's banner was resurrected from the ashes of history, and his flag would find a new home in the hearts and minds of those who dreamed of a nationalist revival.

The story continues right after this.

[BREAK]

Welcome back to the show.

The late 18th Century saw the beginning of the slow yet steady decline of the Ottoman Empire's power in Europe. The collapse of Napoleon's empire in the early 19th Century created vacuums of power across the continent, often filled by new nationalist movements pining for

independence from foreign control – much like we explored in the last episode with the explosion of German nationalism following Napoleon’s defeat in Russia. One of the early nationalist revolutions against the declining Ottomans was in Serbia – Albania’s neighbor to the north – which, with the help of Russia, the Ottoman’s enemy, saw full independence from the sultan in 1833. Similar nationalist revolutions against the Turks were taking place in Greece, Egypt, and Crimea, with the Ottoman collapse looking almost inevitable by the 1840s. Whether in Greece, Serbia, or Egypt, nationalism was possible because of each of these peoples’ adherence to a common language, a common religion, customs, and a mythical figure or a nostalgic past that could galvanize these groups to the cause of national independence and a return to glory. These very ingredients – common language, religion, and mythical past – are critical elements in the development of nationalism. And Albania had no such natural ingredients. So, as these revolutions carried on, Albanians remained largely stagnant – they were more or less blindly content with their position within the Ottoman Empire. This is because, for so long, the Ottomans had successfully destroyed the Albanian people’s ability to create nationalist movements and did so often with reward and punishment. For example, severe restrictions were placed on teaching the Albanian language, just so they could have no common literature and find no common past. Thus, the Albanians had no common language – some spoke Turkish, others Greek, others Albanian, Armenian, or local Slavic languages. At the same time, the Ottomans provided assimilated Albanians with opportunities for advancement in the government and in the military, where they were very well represented. Also, Albanians had no common religion – many had converted to Islam over the centuries, but others were Catholic, Orthodox, and a small minority were Jewish. And finally, they had no commonly-held national mythology, no era of greatness or leader or flag that they could rally around. You may be thinking that, of course, they had Skanderbeg and the double-eagle flag and the history of that short-lived independence; however, the myth of the Christian warrior Skanderbeg had not yet been invented. So, if you put all of these factors together, you’ll see that Albanians were strategically divided at almost every level of society, leaving very little room for unity – and even less so for successful nationalism to arise.

However late nationalism came to Albania, it did indeed arrive by the mid-19th Century. And I say arrive because it can be argued that nationalism wasn’t grown organically within Albanian society, but imported by foreigners, European Christians, and ethnic diaspora Albanians living in southern Italy, these Arbëreshë people we spoke about earlier. But to be fair to those who will disagree, the 19th Century did see revolts against Ottoman centralization efforts across Albania – similar to those in the 14th and 15th Centuries – uniting different clans against what they saw as the empire overstepping its traditional authority. Similarly, there were efforts by some Albanian intellectuals, like the early nationalist Naum Veqilharxhi, to revive and standardize a common Albanian language in the 1840s.

But it wasn’t until the early 1870s that the Albanian National Awakening really started coming to life. Inspired by the Italian unification of 1871, the Christian Albanians of southern Italy were able to exploit the commonalities between Italian and Albanian nationalist ideas, and rally anti-Ottoman Christian communities around the world to the cause of Albanian independence. This foreign, romantic idea of Albanian independence hit a fever pitch in 1873, when the renowned

Christian American poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, published an epic poem in The Atlantic magazine titled non-other than, *Scanderbeg*. To cite the most famous passage from his telling of Skanderbeg, he describes the capture of the Krujë Castle and the creation of Albania's first flag:

*"Anon from the castle walls  
The crescent banner falls,  
And the crowd beholds instead,  
Like a portent in the sky,  
Iskander's banner fly,  
The Black Eagle with double head;  
And a shout ascends on high,  
For men's souls are tired of the Turks,  
And their wicked ways and works,  
That have made of Ak-Hissar  
A city of the plague;  
And the loud, exultant cry  
That echoes wide and far  
Is: "Long live Scanderbeg!"*

With the popular invention of the Skanderbeg myth and his double-eagle flag – with its overt rallying cry for the defeat of Ottoman rule – the Albanian National Awakening could finally be set into motion.

Five years later, in 1878, Tsar Alexander II's decisive victory over the Ottomans in the Russo-Turkish War all but destroyed Ottoman control in the Balkans, with the exception of the loyal and Muslim-majority Albania. Following the 1878 Treaty of Berlin and the Treaty of San Stefano, which ended the hostilities, the major European nations, who were wary of the growing Russian power, redrew the national borders of the Balkans and ceded many Albanian-populated regions to the new and largely Christian nations of Serbia, Bulgaria, and Montenegro. Muslim ethnic Albanians had suffered greatly at the hands of their Christian neighbors during the war, and they were terrified at the prospect of being absorbed by their enemies and partitioned into nonexistence. This prospect of nonexistence undoubtedly helped fuel a burgeoning national consciousness. So, on June 10, 1878, with the support of the Ottoman government, the League of Prizren – or the League for the Defense of the Rights of the Albanian Nation – was established to raise an army to resist the partition of Albania and defend Albanian territorial integrity as an autonomous Ottoman principality against its hostile neighbors. And for their flag, the League adopted a stylized version of the Skanderbeg flag: a black, double-headed eagle on a dark red ground, with a white, six-pointed star above the eagle.

The addition of the star to this flag is really important to focus on, as it was adopted from the original 15th Century coat of arms of Skanderbeg and the Kastriotis. The original Skanderbeg star was a direct reference to the ancient Illyrians who lived in Albania for a thousand years before the rise of Rome – therefore, some will argue that the League's adoption of the Illyrian

Star for their flag is their claim to the native heritage of Albanian territory. So, this flag does much more than just unite Albanians around the gloried past of Skanderbeg, who had to fight for Albania's right to exist from hostile foreigners, just as they were called to do now – it also united the Albanians around the central idea that they were the direct descendants of Illyria, that they were the natives of this land, and it was their historical imperative to defend their ancient homeland. With this flag, nationalist mythmaking was taking off – they have a national hero, a national banner, and now an ancient past they can lean on. And to this day, their claimed lineage to the ancient Illyrians is a core tenet of Albanian nationalist thought. That said, with the adoption of this flag in 1878, the Albanian National Awakening had truly begun.

With native Albanians uniting together to fight against encroaching enemies on their borders on behalf of a national government and under a national flag, something very predictable happened. All of a sudden, they were no longer warring tribes or Ottoman auxiliaries – they were a nation in a struggle for self-preservation and self-determination. This led some nationalist factions within the League to start advocating for full sovereignty not just from their Balkan enemies but from the Ottoman Empire itself. But the League's military successes in thwarting the Treaty of San Stefano and the ferocity with which they fought against partition made the European powers very uneasy, as the last thing they wanted was a small Muslim nation eating away at the newly established Christian countries in the Balkans and upsetting the balance of power. And the calls within the League for independence from the sultan – along with military attacks by members of the League against Ottoman outposts – also rattled the Ottoman government. So, in an agreement with Europe to pacify Albania, the Ottomans marched into war against the League of Prizren, crushing them in battle, and snuffing out the last bouts of resistance by 1881. The three-year experiment of pseudo-Albanian independence was over – and the double-headed eagle flag of Skanderbeg fell once again to the Ottoman Sultan. But 1881 was not like 1468 or 1479. This time, the Ottoman Empire was crumbling from the inside out. This time, the seeds of an Albanian national consciousness that were planted by the League would continue to sprout throughout the country – but it would take 31 more years for Skanderbeg's flag to return to its rightful place over an independent Albanian state.

We'll continue the story right after this.

[BREAK]

Welcome back to the show.

By the end of the 19th Century, Albania was in Ottoman control – but the empire was crumbling, and nationalist forces within Albania were quickly gaining the sympathies of the common people. Not only were they up against the increasingly oppressive Ottoman government within Albania, but Muslim ethnic Albanians were suffering attacks from Bulgarian, Greek, and Slavic forces in Albanian populated regions of those Balkan nations. With militant Albanian resistance growing at home and abroad, the Ottoman Sultan Abdül Hamid II resorted to increasingly repressive tactics to quash the revolts by force. Nationalist groups were disbanded, and their leaders were arrested and executed. Albanian literature was banned,

Albanian education was restricted, and even speaking the language was punishable with violence. But this repression and violence only fueled the passions of the nationalists and international sympathizers, leading to years of bloody skirmishes and eventually to all-out war. At first, the aims of the Albanian nationalists weren't all about total independence – they simply wanted more autonomy over local governance and representation in parliament; they wanted to be recognized as an ethnic population; they wanted to fight only for Albania and not for Ottoman military adventures outside their borders; and they wanted the freedom to speak their own revived language and run their own education systems. While general uprisings in 1910 and 1911 were suppressed by Ottoman forces, the Albanian Revolt of 1912 was a surprising success, with the Ottoman government finally ceding to Albanian nationalist demands after years of terrible conflict. But there was little time for the Albanians to celebrate their hard-won status within the Ottoman Empire, because their Balkan neighbors – who hated the Ottoman Empire and the idea of Albania – saw weakness and opportunity, and they were out for blood.

So, the Albanian Revolt of 1912 really was a double-edged sword for the Albanian cause. On the one hand, they gained the autonomy within the empire that they so desired. But on the other hand, it showed the weakness of Ottoman control in Europe, leaving them exposed to the hostile Christian nations on their borders. During the First Balkan War, in October of 1912, the military alliance of Bulgaria, Greece, Serbia, and Montenegro smashed into Ottoman territory and drove them from Europe in just a matter of months. This left Albania alone and exposed, fighting on all fronts for their very survival. Fearing that their neighbors, particularly Serbia, would annex Albania according to the old Treaty of San Stefano – which the League of Prizren had successfully resisted decades prior – Albania appealed to the Great Powers of Europe for protection by finally declaring their independence from the Ottoman Empire on November 28, 1912. And for their flag, the young nation adopted the ancient banner of Skanderbeg – the mythical, anti-Ottoman freedom fighter: a black, double-headed eagle on a red ground. The popular myth of Skanderbeg and his war flag were powerful tools to pull at the heartstrings of some sympathetic European powers, particularly those in the British Parliament. And by the end of 1913, following the Second Balkan War, the great powers of Europe finally recognized a free and independent Albania, forcing Serbia to retreat from northern Albanian territories and putting the new nation under the military protection of Austria-Hungary, France, Great Britain, Germany, and Italy. It took nearly 435 years, but Skanderbeg's double-eagle flag would finally fly in the streets and in the mountains, and over the ancient castles of an independent Albania.

With the dream of Ottoman expulsion and national unity finally recognized, Albania was no longer just a concept, no longer a theory debated in academic circles across Europe and Turkey. Albania was now a reality; one built on the nationalist myth of Skanderbeg and an Illyrian nativist theory; a nation unified by a revived Albanian language, literature, and a recent history of common struggle; a nation defended by territorial borders from hostile Slavic neighbors; and united under a national flag – the ancient war banner of Skanderbeg. But independence came with its own struggles and external threats – and the conflicts of the 20th Century proved equally as existential to Albanian existence as the wars of centuries past. And with each new regime that controlled Albania – whether internal regimes or puppets of foreign powers – each

regime imposed unique alterations to the Skanderbeg flag, adding their own iconography to the national banner to symbolize their power and their legitimacy over the Albanian people.

For example, in early 1914, to “guarantee” the security of Albanian territory from the claims of Serbia, Montenegro, and Greece, the Great Powers of Europe selected the German Prince Wilhelm of Wied to reign as the sovereign over the newly rebranded Principality of Albania. With a new noble family styled after these other European nations, a new flag was in order to mark their ascendance. The black, double-headed eagle remained, but the beaks and talons were colored gold. Now, this makes sense to us, because they had a new German-born Prince, and this was the same color scheme as the imperial coat of arms of the German Empire. And if you recall from our Germany series, the gold color also represented divine royalty. So, this new flag would be both German-inspired for their new prince – as well as be redesigned with gold to be an appropriate flag for a modern European monarchy. Prince Wilhelm took the name Skanderbeg II – so, on the flag, they added a white, six-pointed star above the eagle’s heads, a direct allusion to the return of Skanderbeg’s rule. But, unfortunately for Wilhelm, this symbolism failed to sway the Muslim peasantry. To them, this so-called Skanderbeg II was a usurper king, a puppet of the Christian powers who dominated Europe. With the tacit support of the Ottoman Empire – and of Albania’s enemies at their border – The Peasant Revolt of 1914 was a somewhat successful Muslim uprising against Prince Wilhelm’s government. Even though they had just gotten independence, these rebels hated their Christian king and sought a return to the safety of the Ottoman Empire, and demanded Muslim rule. They even went so far as to lay siege to the city of Durrës, tear down the national banner, and raise the crescent moon flag of the Ottoman Empire over the capital. In short, the Principality of Albania was off to a disastrous start. To make matters worse, at the same time that Prince Wilhelm was fighting off this insurgency, WWI was breaking out across the continent. When Austria-Hungary demanded that Albania send troops to fight with the Central Powers, Prince Wilhelm had to refuse. First, Albania was officially a neutral country and constitutionally could not fight, and second, he needed troops at home to defend his royal flag. But with his refusal, Austria-Hungary cut off their vital aid to Albania, and the prince was forced into exile to Germany in September 1914, leaving his nation behind in a state of near anarchy, with the tribes reverting back to warring clans. Without a strong central government, the Albanian experiment was nearing total collapse.

Predictably, Albania’s neighbors took advantage of the chaos. Serbia, Greece, Montenegro, Italy, and even France all swept in, snatching up coveted Albanian territory. As the rival powers of Austria-Hungary and Bulgaria crashed into Albania in 1916, Albania was transformed into a literal battlefield between the warring Allied and the Central Powers, just as it had been during the tumultuous years of the 6th and 7th Centuries. When the war finally ended in 1918 – and following a series of massacres against ethnic Muslim Albanians by the Serbian army – control of Albania was essentially divided between Italy, Serbia, Greece, and France. Albania came its closest to total dissolution during the Paris Peace Conference, where the Great Powers once again sought to cede Albanian territory to its Balkan neighbors as essentially a reward for their part in defeating the Central Powers. However, this idea didn’t sit very well with the newest world power on the scene: enter, The United States. America had a large and thriving Albanian

population at home, and these groups successfully lobbied President Woodrow Wilson to veto this annexation of Albania. With what could arguably be the five most decisive words in modern Albanian history, on May 6, 1919, President Wilson simply stated, “Albania ought to be independent.” So, with the strong backing of the United States – and with the utter resentment of the Serbians and the Greeks – the Principality of Albania reclaimed its independence and even became a full member of the League of Nations in December of 1920, something that Wilson’s U.S. wasn’t even able to do. So, with no Skanderbeg II or royal family at its helm, the new Albanian flag removed the six-pointed star, and redesigned its double-headed eagle to look more contemporary, using a modern rebranding of Skanderbeg’s Byzantine eagle to mark a departure from its old, German-led regime, and look to the future as a free and independent nation. Well, at least for a time.

Two years later, in 1922, Benito Mussolini’s infamous march on Rome led to fascist rule in Italy. The Duce dreamt of establishing a new Roman Empire to rival those of Britain and France – and with his imperial ambitions, he immediately set his sights on neighboring Albania. Not only had Albania spent centuries as part of the Roman Empire he sought to resurrect, along with its historical ties to medieval Italian nobility, but Albania was also the entryway into the resource-rich Balkans. And the new Republic of Albania was easy pickings at the time. After five years of political instability and economic crisis since its independence in 1920, their 1925 constitution established the Republic of Albania, and they elected their first president, an ambitious man named Ahmet Bej Zogu. Now, President Zogu knew that the Italians were chomping at the bit to get a piece of the Albanian pie, and he exploited this by inviting a huge influx of capital and investments from Mussolini. With endless Italian money, the corrupt Zogu enriched himself and his supporters while using Italian loans to kickstart the Albanian economy and get the people behind him. But, like I said, he was ambitious. Mere president wasn’t enough for him. So, with the backing of fascist Italy – and with a chest of Italian weapons and cash at his disposal – President Zogu quickly declared himself Zog I, King of Albania, and ushered in a new era, the Albanian Kingdom, in 1928.

King Zog I unveiled a new royal flag for his Albanian Kingdom, redesigning the black, double-headed eagle to closely resemble Skanderbeg’s original coat of arms – the very eagle that flies on the Albanian flag today. But the Albanian monarch took the Kastrioti nostalgia even further by adding an extra element to his banner, topping his flag with the ancient golden horned goat helmet of Skanderbeg. And that’s not all. King Zog I physically recreated Skanderbeg’s helmet and adopted it as the national royal crown of the Albanian monarchy – so, by adding the helmet to the flag and by wearing it during royal ceremonies, King Zog was brilliantly exploiting the Skanderbeg myth and its symbolism to enshrine himself as the lord and savior of Albania and the living embodiment of the Albanian nation. While the original helmet is currently on display in a history museum in Vienna, the symbol has become a ubiquitous sight across Albania, even serving as the logo for Albania’s biggest gas station brand, aptly named Kastrioti.

Now, the 11-year rule of King Zog I was relatively stable in Albanian terms, but the nation was not without serious complications. Much like his Ottoman predecessors, King Zog relied on repression to hold onto power, and civil liberties, press, and political opposition were squeezed

into submission. And at the same time, Albania was rapidly modernizing its infrastructure, trade, education, and law, but it too came with a heavy cost: they were going ever deeper into debt with their fascist Italian financiers, who, in turn, were quickly taking control of almost every lever of Albanian civil society. So, along with an influx of Italian cash, Italian civilians were coming in and being strategically placed throughout the civil and government bureaucracies, and Albanian trade was growing ever reliant on its fascist protectorate. At first, King Zog may have arrogantly thought it was he was using Mussolini to secure his crown – and he maybe even believed that by flying the double-eagle flag and wearing his helmet that he was the resurrection of Skanderbeg, the mythical defender of Albania. But to no surprise, the truth was quite the opposite. The truth was that Mussolini was patient and calculating, simply biding his time before he would bring the entire Albanian nation into the new Roman Empire – and under the heel of Italian fascism.

When we come back from the break, the Kingdom of Albania will fall to the might of Mussolini's Italian Empire – and a flag of fascism will mark the beginning of a new era of war and terror across the occupied Balkan nation.

[BREAK]

Welcome back to the show.

In early 1939, Europe was on the brink of yet another cataclysmic war. And over the past decade, Hitler's Nazi Germany had eclipsed Italy as the leading fascist power in Europe, with Mussolini taking an increasingly secondary role in the Axis alliance. Mussolini's #2 position became clear on March 15, when Hitler invaded neighboring Czechoslovakia without even notifying his Italian counterpart. So, Mussolini decided to flex his muscles in response to Hitler, and he pulled the trigger on the inevitable: the total annexation of Albania. But before the invasion, Mussolini gave King Zog an ultimatum: accept Italian occupation of Albania, and you can keep your crown, or else, we're going to take you by force. But King Zog refused these terms, even though Albania couldn't possibly take on the Italian army. After all, he was the Lord of Albania; he wore the crown and flew the colors of Skanderbeg – and as such, he couldn't bow down to an occupier, even if it was himself who invited them in in the first place. But on April 6, nearly two weeks after this ultimatum, Italian planes covered the skies over the capital city of Tirana and dropped leaflets demanding that the Albanians submit to their new Italian overlords. And on April 7, Mussolini's imperial forces rolled into Albania and swept away the king's tiny army, which fell to Italy in just a matter of days. King Zog and his family fled in exile in Greece, and he was deposed by the Albanian parliament on April 12. Now under Italian control, the Albanian parliament offered the crown to Italy's king, Victor Emmanuel III, officially ending Albanian sovereignty and beginning a new era of fascist rule. With the capture of Albania, Mussolini declared the creation of the Italian Empire – and when he did so, for all intents and purposes, Albania ceased to exist; its military, government, and economy now merged into that of Italy. But even with Albanian puppet leaders installed to quell native dissent, Italy still had to put in some effort to claim their legitimacy to the people. And one way they did this was by introducing a new flag, one that symbolized more than just Italian fascist



dominance, but one that would also tell a powerful story of the glorious unification of their two realms.

So, in June 1939, a new fascist flag was enshrined in the Albanian constitution. *“The flag of Albania is red with the double-headed eagle in the center, together with the fascist fasces.”* For those who don’t know, Fasces are essentially bundles of sticks tied around an axe, and this axe symbol dates all the way back to ancient Rome, who leaders used these Fasces as symbols of their power and authority. The Fasces symbol was resurrected and adopted by Benito Mussolini’s Italian nationalist and fascist movement in the early 20th Century with the very term fascism deriving from the symbol that they used, Fasces. So, by adding the fasces, these axes, to the flag, they were showing their fealty to the Roman fascist cause while retaining the native symbol of Skanderbeg. The Albanian flag was then updated on September 28, 1939, by a royal decree, stating:

*“The national flag of Albania consists of a red rectangular cloth...containing in its center a red shield outlined in black containing the double-headed eagle, crowned by the helmet of Skanderbeg. The shield is supported by two black fasces whose heads face outwards, connected above by two Savoy ribbons in black and below with a black scroll, where the word FERT is written three times.”*

This 1939 flag was just dripping with Italian, royal, and Albanian symbolism. In the center, you have a shield, overlaid with the Kastrioti double-eagle and crowned with Skanderbeg’s helmet. In essence, this is telling the Albanian people that – while their King Zog was deposed – the continuation of the Skanderbeg royal line is alive with their new king, Victor Emmanuel III. These Albanian symbols, however, are then encircled – imprisoned, even – on all sides by foreign totems; images of their occupier. To the eagle’s left and right are the Fasces of the Italian fascist movement; and those Fasces hold up the two Savoy ribbons above. Savoy was the royal house of King Victor Emmanuel III. And wrapped around the axe handles below is a banner with the word FERT written three times. FERT being the old Latin motto of the House of Savoy, the Italian rulers of Albania.

But Italy’s brutal four-year occupation was not without resistance – from both the left and the right – a left and right who wanted distinctly different things. As Italy plunged Albania into the horrors of WW2 – including using Albania as the staging ground for their failed invasion of Greece – the National Liberation Army staged violent guerilla attacks against the Italian forces from the mountains, often under the red hammer-and-sickle flag of the international communist revolutionaries. And on the right, the ultra-nationalist Balli Kombëtar – or the National Front – were virulently anti-communist, but entered in a loose alliance with the reds to free Albania from foreign control, but with the distinct aim of retaining what they saw as Greater Albania, which included Kosovo and parts of Macedonia, Montenegro, Greece, and Serbia, which Italy had captured for Albania in the war.

National Front pledged their allegiance to the classic double-eagle banner of Skanderbeg, they subscribed to the nationalist myth that they were “Aryans of Illyrian heritage,” and they fought under the motto “Albania for the Albanians, Death to the Traitors.” And In the first part of their

ten-point party manifesto, the National Front opened their treatise with “We are fighting for the red and black flag, for the defense of the rights of the Albanian people.”

But when Italy finally fell to the Allies in September 1943, there was little time to celebrate. One fascist occupation was quickly replaced by another – enter Nazi Germany. Although the National Front had once allied with the communists against the Italian fascists, they quickly opened their arms to their new German occupier and allied with the Nazis in a brutal campaign against the Albanian resistance. To this day, the defenders of Albanian cooperation with the Nazis will point out that the nationalists were terrified that, if Germany lost, Albania would once again be at the mercy of their hostile Serbian and Yugoslav neighbors. So, if allying with Hitler meant defense from the Serbs and the retention of disputed lands in Macedonia, Kosovo, and Serbia, so be it they say – it was worth it.

So much for their motto, Albania for the Albanians.

By 1943, the war wasn't going super well for Germany, so the Nazis would hold Albania for only about a year. During the occupation, the puppet government – run by these National Front goons – broke from Italian tradition to give the illusion that Albania was in fact once again an independent nation, even reintroducing the crowned flag of the old Albanian Kingdom. But they were Nazis – it was just a P.R. stunt, a façade with a nationalist flag masking the fact that Albania was merely a tool for Hitler's anti-Semitic and genocidal aims. Under the National Front government, 40% of Kosovo's Jews were murdered at the hands of the 21st Waffen Mountain Division, an infantry unit made up entirely of Albanian volunteers that they nicknamed Skanderbeg and used the Skanderbeg double-eagle as their S.S. insignia. But it wasn't just the Kosovo Jews who suffered. It was the whole country. The brutal occupation and constant warfare left Albania as one of the most devastated nations in the wake of WWII.

The resistance fighters forced the Nazis to withdraw from Albania in the fall of 1944, with the help of British and American weapons and intelligence. But to the chagrin of the Western Allies, the party to fill the power vacuum left by Hitler was led by a revolutionary named Enver Hoxha, a staunch Marxist-Leninist nationalist who united the nation under the black and red flag of Skanderbeg, but adorned it with the hammer and sickle of Soviet communism. For the next eight years, the same Americans and Brits who put the communists in power plotted their overthrow, supporting those loyal to the exiled King Zog with violent attacks against the communist government. With each American plot foiled, the more the communist leadership repressed the opposition and grew ever closer to the Soviet Union. And in 1946, they established the People's Republic of Albania, under the black double-eagle of Skanderbeg on a red ground, with the gold star of communism above the two heads, in the place where the golden crown of King Zog once sat. Albania remained a solidly communist country from 1946 to 1992, with its Marxist-Leninist regime and its and communist Skanderbeg flag unchanged for 46 years until the collapse of European communism in the late 20th Century.

After nearly 50 years of communist rule, Albania held its first free and fair national election in 1992. Following the European trend, the conservative, western-backed Democratic Party swept

the communists from power and began implementing free-market reforms to the delight of NATO and the United States. Along with the new constitution ratified in 1998, the People's Republic of Albania was officially replaced by the Republic of Albania, adopting the double-eagle flag of Skanderbeg that still flies in the streets to this very day. Although regimes have changed and its flag altered over the year, the national anthem has remained the same since the Albanian Revolt in 1912. And its title is none other than Hymn to the Flag. It goes like this:

*“Around our flag we stand united,  
With one wish and one goal,  
A sacred oath we bestow upon it  
Proclaiming loyalty for our salvation.  
From war abstains only he,  
Who a traitor is born,  
He who is a true man is not frightened,  
But dies a martyr to the cause.”*

It continues

*“O flag, flag, you sacred symbol  
Upon you we now swear  
For Albania, our dear fatherland  
For honor and your glory.  
Brave man is named and honored  
The one who sacrificed himself for the fatherland  
Forever he will be remembered  
On earth and under as a saint!”*

While this is not nearly the end of Albanian history up to this day, we are nearing the end of the story of their national flag. The Civil War in 1997, spurred on by the outright corruption of the western-backed government, as well as the extreme brutality of the Kosovo War against the genocidal regime of Slobodan Milosevic's Yugoslavia in 1999, are events that have critically shaped the current politics and even the borders of Albania and its Balkan neighbors. And its these border disputes, particularly with their Serbian neighbors, that have created such vitriol in Serbia against the symbols of Albanian independence, much like we witnessed at the soccer match at the beginning of this show when the Albanian nationalist dropped a flag and map of Greater Albania on the soccer pitch in Belgrade. I might get a lot of hate mail for this, but we can't look at the 1999 war in a vacuum or see it as a singular event. Removing all emotion from the war and even in the absence of the horrific genocide against ethnic Albanians in Kosovo at the hands of the Serbs, one can ultimately see parts of this conflict as a continuation of the territorial disputes that go back centuries – and quite possibly even over a millennium. So again, while we barely scratched the surface of late 20th and early 21st Century Albanian history and conflict, this is the end of the incredible story of the Albanian flag.

So, let's do a quick recap to answer the questions we asked at the beginning of this episode: where do the black-and-red national colors come from, and what do they mean? And why did Albania adopt the double-headed eagle of Byzantium?

Red is the color of bloodshed and war, first raised by the mythical Skanderbeg as a banner of rebellion against the Ottoman Empire when he flew his banner above the Krujë castle – a castle which is a site of veneration and national pride in Albania today. The black, double-headed eagle was the coat of arms of the Kastrioti clan from which Skanderbeg was born – and the double-eagle was a very common heraldic device used by medieval Albanian families to tie their lineage and descendants to the glory of the Byzantine Empire.

Following Skanderbeg's death in 1468, and with Albania falling once again into complete Ottoman control by 1479, the flag – and the story of Skanderbeg – was mostly lost to common history for nearly 400 years. But that would all change as the Ottoman Empire's hold on Europe began to crumble in the 18th and 19th Centuries, and Christian European nationalism drove movements for independence across the continent. Albania was one of the last countries to leave the Ottoman orbit, because unlike their Greek and Serbian and Bulgarian and Hungarian neighbors, Albania had no real shared history. They had no common language, no common religion, no glorified medieval kingdom, and thus no common cause for which they could unite. Like we discussed, the ingredients for nationalism just weren't there. So, for the most part, Albanian nationalism had to be imported from abroad. Through the end of the 19th Century, the ethnic Albanian Arbëreshë people of Italy, along with anti-Ottoman European Christians and Americans – including poet Henry Longfellow – resurrected the myth of Skanderbeg and his flag and supported native Albanian efforts to revive the dwindling Albanian language and spark Albanian National Awakening. Following WWI, it was American President Woodrow Wilson who vetoed the Paris Treaty and demanded Albanian independence be recognized – a move which solidified the red-and-black flag's eternal place in the modern world.

And yes, following 500 years of Ottoman rule, the 20th Century saw invasions by the Serbs, the Greeks, and the Montenegrins, along with periods of fascist occupation by the Italians and Nazi Germany. Albania had Kings and despots, communist governments, civil wars, and corrupt democratic leaders. But the one thing they always had, the one heritage they all claimed and clung to no matter what side of the war they fell on – be they communist, fascist, or king – was the ancient myth of their national hero Skanderbeg and his black, double-headed eagle flag. And that is the flag that represents the Republic of Albania today.

That's it for this episode of *Why the Flag?* You can read show notes and see all the Albanian flags at [flagpodcast.com](http://flagpodcast.com), and follow us on Instagram @flagpod. And make sure you subscribe to this show on Spotify or wherever you listen to podcasts, and if you listen on Apple, don't forget to give us five stars in the app – it really helps. Thank you for listening, and we'll catch you next time.