
Mother Teresa: Saint or Celebrity?

By Gëzim Alpion

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Reviewed by Stevan K. Pavlowitch

There is as yet no scholarly biography of Mother Teresa, however much admirers and detractors have written about her. Gëzim Alpion, a versatile academic sociologist and lecturer in Media Studies at Birmingham University, poses the question 'Saint or Celebrity?' in the title of his book. His answer could be 'saint and celebrity' if he accepted the religious call. As it is, his thesis is that Mother Teresa was aware that she was being used, but that she did not mind as long as the publicity she received helped her to serve the cause of Jesus as she understood it. He sets it out as a tribute to her integrity. One of the most interesting parts of his book deals with the irresponsible Balkan appropriations of Mother Teresa. He is anxious to reconstruct the 'unexplored' years — her youth in Skopje and her years in India to

1948. This, he claims, provides clues to understanding, with rough help from Marx and Freud, how Agnes Bojaxhiu found in Jesus a surrogate father and divine celebrity figure who eventually also turned into a heavenly spouse.

As a historian of the Balkans (who, incidentally, accepts that there is such a thing as religious call), I was particularly interested in the Skopje years between her birth in 1910 and her departure in 1928 to train as a nun in Dublin. Alpion's research has yielded facts, but multidisciplinary as he is, he is no historian. The reader does not understand the historical context. He is not told that Skopje in those very years was successively part of the Ottoman Empire (when it was known as Üsküb), of the Kingdom of Serbia (when it became Skoplje), under Bulgarian occupation, and then part of the newly formed Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, named Yugoslavia soon after Agnes Bojaxhiu's departure. Her father Nikollë and her brother Lazar are key figures in the story. We gradually learn that Nikollë, a Catholic, a successful businessman and a generally prominent personality in Ottoman Skopje, was involved in the Albanian nationalist movement, and that he died in 1919 in mysterious circumstances ('poisoned by the colonizing Serbs', p. 176), after attending a meeting in Belgrade whence he was driven back by the Italian consul. The sources are oral and anecdotal. Is there no trace of his death in the local press, in Italian consular reports, in Yugoslav police or registry records? The *Annuario Pontificio* could have been consulted for changes in the Roman Catholic diocesan sees and for the dates of incumbents. As for Lazar, on completing his secondary education in Yugoslav Skoplje, he went to the Albanian Military Academy in Tirana as an admirer of Ahmet Zogu, later King Zog. He is said to have been an officer in Zog's army until the Italian takeover in 1939, when he

went to Italy and became an officer in the Italian army. King Zog's admirer could have been 'recruited by the Italian intelligence service' (p. 144). Zogu returned to power from exile in Yugoslavia in 1924 with Yugoslav help and with Albanian armed followers. Could Lazar have been one of them? Why did he (with his supposedly fascist sympathies) not stay on in 1939 to serve the new puppet Albanian regime? Might there be answers in Italian military or intelligence records? His position in the Italian army after 1939 could at least be checked.

Generally too much is inferred from speculation and little evidence from unreliable sources, with a confused understanding of the historical background. Usual 'Greater-Serbian' villains (such as Vaso Čubrilović, who even becomes an ardent admirer and supporter of both Hitler and Mussolini, and the writer Ivo Andrić) are wheeled out from the usual suspect sources. Blunt statements such as 'It is a well-known fact that the Vatican started flirting with Hitler in 1919' (p. 147) are assumed to be so well known that they are left unexplained. Such historical precisions would not help to understand why Agnes Bojaxhiu became a nun who went out to help the poorest of the poor. However, if one does not really take in the religious call, and tries to find clues in the early years, it would help to be more precise with historical facts.