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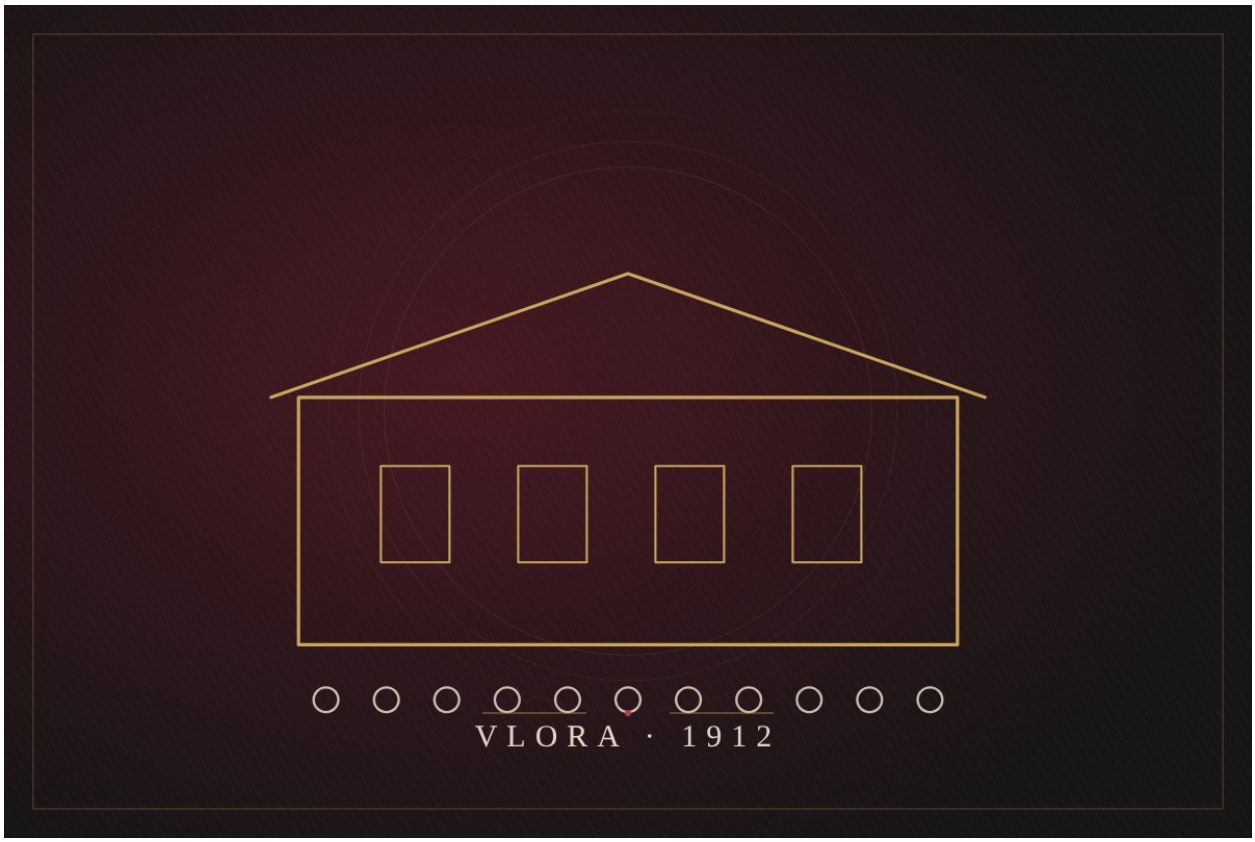
Heritage

Ismail Qemali and 28 November 1912: how independence was declared in Vlorë

An Ottoman administrator, a life in exile and the decision of an assembly in the middle of the Balkan War

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Translated from the Albanian original by the editors.



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Ismail Qemali, known in Ottoman documents as Ismail Kemal Bey Vlora, was born on 16 January 1844 in Vlorë, into a noble Muslim family. He received his first schooling in Vlorë, then attended the Zosimaia secondary school in Ioannina and studied law in Istanbul.

An Ottoman career

In 1860 he went to Istanbul and entered the Ottoman administration. He served as an official and as governor in several Balkan towns, and was a close collaborator of Midhat Pasha, leader of the reforming wing. When Sultan Abdul Hamid II dismissed Midhat in 1877, Qemali was exiled, later recalled, and appointed governor of Beirut, then of Tripoli, an appointment he regarded as exile.

In May 1900 he boarded the British ambassador's yacht and asked for asylum. For about eight years he lived outside the empire. After the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 he returned and was elected a deputy in the Ottoman parliament.

November 1912

In October 1912 the First Balkan War began. The armies of Serbia, Montenegro and Greece entered lands where Albanians lived. The danger of partition, which Albanians had seen since 1878, was now immediate. Qemali returned to Albania and met in Vlorë with delegates from different regions.

On **28 November 1912** the assembly of Vlorë declared the independence of Albania. Qemali and Luigj Gurakuqi raised the flag on the balcony of a house in Vlorë. The assembly elected Qemali its leader, and on 4 December, at its fourth session, the provisional government was formed, in which he was prime minister and foreign minister.

> *Independence was not declared in a quiet time. It was declared precisely because the time was not quiet, and waiting would have been more dangerous.*

After the declaration

The declaration was not enough for the state to be recognised. The borders were set by the Great Powers at the Conference of Ambassadors in London (1912–1913), and many lands with Albanian populations, including Kosovo and Chameria, remained outside Albania. Qemali's government had few resources and controlled only part of the country. In January 1914, after an incident with the gendarmerie led by Dutch officers in Vlorë, Qemali and his cabinet resigned.

Ismail Qemali died on 26 January 1919 in Perugia, Italy. His body was brought to Vlorë and buried in the city's Bektashi tekke.

Why we remember him

Qemali was not a leader born of war. He was an experienced administrator and a

diplomat who knew well how the Great Powers thought. That is exactly why he understood that, in November 1912, Albanians had to speak as a state before others decided for them. Today 28 November is Independence and Flag Day.

Sources

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