

## The Humanitarian Crisis in Albania in 1924: American Efforts to Relieve the Social Condition of the population in the North

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**Abstract:** *This article examines the humanitarian crisis in northern Albania in 1924, focusing on the American Red Cross's relief efforts and the broader social and political conditions of the period. It investigates the United States government's assessment of Albania's social and economic situation in the mid-1920s; it analyses the underlying causes of widespread poverty, evaluates the legitimacy of famine claims made by Albanian authorities, and considers the scope and challenges of American humanitarian intervention within a context of structural vulnerability and limited administrative capacity.*

*The article argues that, unlike the acute famine, chronic and severe poverty has been a longstanding condition in Albania. In such circumstances, the Albanian government's claims carried a strong element of propaganda arguably influenced by systemic corruption within the local administration and the commercial interests of local merchants. The administration of the American humanitarian aid funds in Albania required strict accountability from American officials, specifically Minister Grant-Smith and Fultz, who were liable to the American public. In this regard, the financial department in Albania lacked the necessary reliability and credibility for effective humanitarian aid distribution, highlighting the practical and political challenges of early twentieth-century international relief.*

*The Mamurras incident, involving two prominent American citizens, highlighted the risks which the U.S. personnel was confronted with and exposed the vulnerabilities of diplomatic operations in Albania. The event prompted a more cautious approach in the USA involving governmental engagement, directly influencing the management and timing of humanitarian aid, while also shaping broader U.S. political policy and bilateral relations with Albania. Drawing on United States diplomatic archival sources, the study employs analytical and interpretive methods to examine the interplay between American relief efforts, the League of Nations, local political dynamics, and socio-economic conditions. It demonstrates how U.S. humanitarian intervention navigated the tension between critical basic needs and broader structural constraints, offering insights into the complexities of post-war humanitarian aid and governance challenges in post-war Albania.*

**Keywords:** *Albania, American Red Cross, famine, League of Nations, United States, Mamurras.*

## Introduction

The humanitarian crisis that engulfed northern Albania in 1924 highlighted the fragility and limitations of the country's early social safety net in the aftermath of the Balkan Wars, the Paris Peace Conference, and successive periods of political instability. What initially appeared to be a localized shortage of food quickly revealed a deeper pattern of structural deprivation, weak governance, and political instrumentalization that shaped Albania's interwar development. The crisis also became a pivotal moment in the evolution of American humanitarian engagement in Southeastern Europe, marking one of the earliest instances of substantial U.S. involvement in a civilian emergency in the Balkans. Drawing on U.S. diplomatic archives, this article argues that the 1924 emergency cannot be understood merely as a famine but must be seen as the convergence of longstanding poverty, administrative fragility, and politicized appeals for international relief. It further contends that the American Mission in Albania did not interpret the situation as an abrupt catastrophe but as evidence of deeper socio-economic distortions and insurrections that severely constrained Albania's capacity to safeguard its population.

The crisis thus provides a revealing window into the broader dynamics of humanitarian politics during the interwar period. It unfolded at a moment when the League of Nations was attempting to build mechanisms for international cooperation but lacked the financial and administrative capacity to enforce meaningful oversight. American relief efforts, operating outside the League's institutional framework, demonstrated both the possibilities and limitations of bilateral intervention. While the United States could mobilize resources quickly and independently, its representatives faced the practical challenges of delivering aid in a state where authority was diffuse, inconsistent, and frequently mediated by local power brokers. The tension between humanitarian urgency and institutional weakness became a defining feature of the American mission.

The findings yield three central insights. First, U.S. officials understood the crisis through the lens of structural poverty rather than sudden disaster, reshaping contemporary interpretations of its causes and implications. Second, the administration of relief exposed the limits of Albania's fiscal and bureaucratic capacity due to political disturbances, foreshadowing obstacles that international organizations would continue to face in the region. Third, the episode illustrates the emergence of an American humanitarian role in the Balkans—cautious in approach, skeptical of local governance, yet ultimately influential in shaping subsequent patterns of engagement.

The economic and social conditions in Albania during the early 1920s were profoundly challenging, shaped by a decade of political upheaval,

internal unrest, and the aftermath of regional wars from 1914 to 1918. These conflicts caused extensive material destruction,<sup>1</sup> hindered economic recovery, and entrenched widespread poverty, leaving Albania among Europe's most underdeveloped states. Over 90 percent of the population depended on agriculture and livestock farming, yet only nine percent of the land was arable.<sup>2</sup> The country's economy remained largely pastoral, with agricultural practices that were rudimentary at best, shaped over centuries by mountainous terrain and repeated local self-defense wars that prevented systematic cultivation. Northern Albania's relief was constrained by its rugged landscape, while large swathes of the western lowlands were marshy, producing low crop yields. Industrial development was minimal, and the absence of a coherent road network linking north and south further impeded trade and economic integration.<sup>3</sup> Compounding these structural weaknesses was the lack of consolidated state institutions, particularly in finance, which contributed to the proliferation of a black market economy and limited state capacity for crisis management.<sup>4</sup> Social indicators reflected these challenges: approximately 80 percent of the population relied directly on agriculture or livestock, only 15 percent resided in settlements exceeding five thousand inhabitants, and roughly 80 percent of the population over age seven was illiterate.<sup>5</sup> In times of scarcity, these conditions magnified the vulnerability of Albania's population, particularly in the mountainous northern and southern regions, where famine threatened large segments of the population.<sup>6</sup>

The social crisis was further shaped by the political and economic ambitions of neighboring states. Yugoslavia, Greece, and Italy actively sought to extend influence over Albania, leveraging the state's fragile financial position.<sup>7</sup> Contemporary British diplomatic reports describe the Albanian government's finances as chaotic and unsustainable, noting repeated failures to balance the budget and mounting national debt. In this context, the state lacked the resources to address the mounting social

- 1 M. ÇAMI, *Shqipëria në rrjedhat e historisë 1912-1924*, Botimet Onufri, Tiranë 2007, 90.
- 2 B. FISCHER, *Mbreti Zog dhe përpjekja për stabilitet në Shqipëri*, Çabej, Tiranë 2004, 35.
- 3 S. KADRIA, *Kriza humanitare e viteve 1923-1924 në viset e Shqipërisë së Veriut - ndihma e qeverisë britanike dhe e Lidhjes së Kombeve*, "Studime Historike", nr. 3-4, 2016, 140.
- 4 I. FISHTA, V. TOÇI, *Gjendja ekonomike e Shqipërisë në vitet 1912-1944, prapambetja e saj, shkaqet dhe pasojat*, 8 Nëntori, Tiranë 1983, 29-30.
- 5 J. ROTHCHILD, *Evropa Lindore Qendrore midis dy luftërave botërore*, Dituria, Tiranë 2004, 353.
- 6 B. META (ed), *Historia e shqiptarëve gjatë shekullit XX*, vëll. II, Botimet Albanologjike, Tiranë 2019, 379.
- 7 P. T. DIBRA, *Shqipëria dhe diplomacia angleze 1919-1927 (në dritën e burimeve arkivore angleze)*, Neraida, Tiranë 2005, 179.

needs of its population, leaving communities highly susceptible to food insecurity.<sup>8</sup>

The first tangible signs of a humanitarian crisis appeared in 1922, when shortages of corn—the staple food of much of the population—became evident. By 1923, the threat of famine had extended across multiple provinces, with bread shortages affecting communities from Malesia e Madhe in the north to Tepelena and Himara in the south.<sup>9</sup> The limited capacity of the Albanian state to respond to these shortages intensified the crisis. Constrained by minimal budgetary resources and administrative weaknesses, the Albanian government formally sought international assistance on March 13, 1924, appealing to the League of Nations. Benoit Blinishti, Albania's representative, informed the League that nearly 200,000 residents in the northern and northeastern regions faced acute food scarcity caused by poor harvests over two consecutive years, themselves a consequence of the Balkan conflicts. Blinishti emphasized that the state could not provide relief as it had in previous years, highlighting the structural constraints that shaped the crisis.<sup>10</sup>

In response, the League of Nations coordinated support from its member states, organizing both collective and individual aid initiatives, primarily in the form of corn.<sup>11</sup> In addition to collective aid, member states also granted individual aid. Contributions included 2,800 pounds sterling raised in England and 90,000 lire from the Vatican, alongside other financial and material assistance from additional states.<sup>12</sup> While modest, these aid signaled the emergence of a multilateral approach to humanitarian crises and underscored the international community's recognition of Albania's vulnerability. The relief efforts, however, were constrained by Albania's geographic, administrative, and infrastructural limitations, revealing the complexities of delivering aid in a state marked by chronic poverty and weak governance.

### **Managing Relief: U.S. Engagement in Northern Albania**

The humanitarian intervention of the United States in northern Albania during 1924 illustrates the sustained and coordinated involvement of American authorities in addressing crises abroad in the early twentieth century. Reports of acute food shortages prompted diplomatic action,

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8 THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES (UK), FO 371/9643, C 6193/3231/90, Report by H. Eyres, Durrës, 2 April 1924.

9 *Ibid.*

10 THE ARCHIVE OF THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS, File R617/11/34584/34584, 2.

11 B. META (ed), *Historia e shqiptarëve gjatë shekullit XX*, 386.

12 DH. BERATI, *Qëllimet dhe organizimi i Lidhjes së Kombeve*, Laurasi, Tiranë 1931, 28.

reflecting both an awareness of the humanitarian stakes and a strategic commitment to stabilizing the Balkans. Guided by directives from Secretary Hughes and on-the-ground assessments by Minister Grant-Smith, American officials sought not only to verify the existence of a crisis but also to design aid rooted in local realities. The careful verification of conditions, combined with practical recommendations for regulating grain distribution, suspending taxes, and curbing exploitative practices, demonstrates a deliberate effort to tailor relief measures to the structural and social needs of affected communities. These actions underscore the emerging American emphasis on evidence-based humanitarian diplomacy, linking direct field observations to informed policy decisions.

Solidarity with the population of northern Albania, suffering from severe food shortages, came not only from Europe but also from the United States. Reports of the crisis reached the U.S. Department of State, prompting Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes,\* on February 2, 1924, to request that the U.S. Minister in Tirana, Ulysses Grant-Smith,\* verify the existence of a famine in Albania. Hughes also provided detailed instructions regarding the procedures the Albanian government needed to follow when applying for humanitarian assistance from U.S. agencies.<sup>13</sup> A few days later, following Hughes's directives, Grant-Smith confirmed that famine conditions did prevail in the northern regions and emphasized the urgent need for immediate intervention.<sup>14</sup>

However, the measures to be taken could not be determined without a firsthand understanding of conditions on the ground. To this end, Grant-Smith investigated and consulted multiple sources, concluding that the situation in the northern parts was indeed severe. The destruction of homes and crops by Serbian troops during the war had left many residents in near-total poverty. This hardship was compounded by two consecutive years of poor harvests. Grant-Smith further noted that the crisis was intensified by the combination of taxes and usurious practices, in which villagers borrowed corn seed and were required to repay it in kind, placing

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\* Charles Evans Hughes served as the U.S. Secretary of State from 1921 to 1925.

\* Ulysses Grant-Smith served as the American Legation Minister in Tirana from 1922 to 1925.

13 NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION (NARA), *Records of the U.S. Department of State relating to the Internal Affairs of Albania 1910–1944* (DOS-A), Doc. no. 875.46/57, "The Secretary of State (Hughes) to the U.S. Minister in Albania (Grant-Smith), requesting information about starving conditions in Albania," 2 February 1924.

14 NARA, DOS-A, Doc. no. 875.48/58, Legation of the United States, Albania, Tirana (U.S. LEGATION), "The U.S. Minister to Albania (Grant-Smith) to the Secretary of State (Hughes), informing that inhabitants of the northern mountain areas of Albania were encountering starvation," 7 February 1924.

an additional burden on already struggling households.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to identifying the causes of the crisis, Grant-Smith offered concrete recommendations for humanitarian intervention. In a telegram dated March 20, 1924, addressed to Secretary Hughes, he stressed that relief measures would be effective only if four conditions were met: (1) the deliberate hoarding of grain to inflate prices was prohibited; (2) the usurious practices of grain merchants—who typically charged peasants at least 50% in kind for every kilogram of corn seed—were curbed; (3) taxes were suspended for at least two years to protect peasants from the abuses of tax collectors, who were often also landowners; and (4) a moratorium was declared for the same period to prevent creditors from collecting long-standing debts that had burdened the population. Grant-Smith explained that these measures aimed to “raise” the peasant, restoring their economic footing. He also cited Austrian humanitarian interventions during 1915–1918, when thousands of carloads of corn and potato seeds were distributed to these regions, as practical precedents for effective relief.<sup>16</sup>

While deliberations at the League of Nations focused on humanitarian aid for Albania, the American Legation in Tirana provided a detailed account of the situation on the ground. The report noted that “*the Albanian highlanders are chronically living in critical conditions, which have been particularly aggravated this year near the border with Yugoslavia. Due to primitive agricultural methods, they can barely sustain themselves; oppressive usury on corn seed and agricultural taxes further exacerbate these conditions.*”<sup>17</sup> The account reiterated previous recommendations, emphasizing that without proper oversight, grain merchants and tax collectors would be the primary beneficiaries of any aid.<sup>18</sup> The American minister was fully aware of the deficiencies within the Albanian administration—ranging from apathy and corruption to politicization, cronyism, and nepotism<sup>19</sup>—and aimed to prevent such abuses in the distribution of American humanitarian assistance.

Following Grant-Smith’s reports on April 1, 1924, the American Red Cross requested that the State Department provide the minister in Tirana with a fund of \$5,000 as emergency financial aid to support the population

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15 NARA, DOS-A, Doc. no. 875.48/69, U.S. LEGATION, “The U.S. Minister to Albania (Grant-Smith) to the Secretary of State (Hughes) concerning the farming conditions in areas affected by famine and measures to be taken,” 20 March 1924, No. 232 – Confidential.

16 *Ibid.*

17 NARA, DOS-A, Doc. no. 875.48.62, U.S. LEGATION, “The U.S. Minister to Albania (Grant-Smith) to the Secretary of State (Hughes) advising him on the conditions to be followed if the U.S. decides to get involved in humanitarian aid,” 20 March 1924.

18 *Ibid.*

19 B. META (ed), *Historia e shqiptarëve gjatë shekullit XX*, 393.

in famine-stricken regions. The minister was given discretion to distribute the funds in the most effective manner.<sup>20</sup>

However, the allocation of this aid proved far more challenging than anticipated. In his reports to the State Department on April 2 and 3, 1924, Grant-Smith highlighted the difficulties posed by the mountainous terrain, logistical constraints, and pervasive corruption in the local administration. He warned that the fund could easily be “swallowed” by local officials, beneficiaries, and professional relief workers, and therefore recommended that some form of guarantee or oversight be provided, possibly through the League of Nations.<sup>21</sup>

Grant-Smith’s recommendation to seek guarantees from the League of Nations was not fully endorsed by the State Department, which argued that, under such an arrangement, the fund would have to be administered directly by the League. Instead, Secretary Hughes encouraged Grant-Smith to coordinate with other relevant parties while maintaining American oversight of the aid.<sup>22</sup>

### **The Mamuras Incident and Its Impact on U.S. Diplomatic Policy and Humanitarian Engagement in Albania**

The incident involving two American citizens in Mamuras in April 1924 underscores the precarious security and political volatility in Albania during the mid-1920s. Taking place amid severe food shortages and widespread social distress, the incident revealed both the personal risks faced by foreigners and the fragility of American diplomatic and humanitarian operations. The killings prompted immediate attention from the U.S. Legation in Tirana, leading to thorough investigations and documentation to clarify the motives behind the attack and the surrounding circumstances.

Beyond their immediate human cost, the episode carried significant diplomatic implications, shaping U.S. decisions regarding political engagement as well as the timing and administration of humanitarian aid. Occurring during a period of political unrest that culminated in the June

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20 NARA, *DOS-A*, Doc. no. 875.48/65, The American Red Cross National Headquarters, Washington D.C., “The American Red Cross to the Secretary of State (Hughes) requesting that financial aid of 5,000 dollars be placed at the disposal of the American Minister in Tirana for the needs of regions affected by famine,” 1 April 1924.

21 NARA, *DOS-A*, Doc. no. 875.48/64, U.S. LEGATION, “The U.S. Minister to Albania (Grant-Smith) to the Secretary of State (Hughes) concerning the severe conditions in field relief work,” 2 April 1924.

22 NARA, *DOS-A*, Doc. no. 875.48/66, “The Secretary of State (Hughes) to the U.S. Minister in Albania (Grant-Smith), providing instructions regarding the American Red Cross fund,” 7 April 1924.

1924 revolution and the overthrow of Ahmet Zog's proxy government, which led to the establishment of Fan Noli's administration, the murders heightened scrutiny and political tensions. They underscored the difficulties of delivering relief in famine-stricken regions, where political instability, social disorder, and security risks were deeply intertwined. U.S. officials were thus tasked with the dual responsibility of safeguarding American citizens while ensuring that emergency assistance could be provided effectively and ethically amid profound uncertainty.

Concurrently, correspondence continued between the U.S. State Department and the American legation in Tirana regarding the distribution of emergency financial aid. During this period, news arrived of the murder of two American citizens in Mamurras. According to the *San Francisco Examiner* on April 8, 1924, Robert Lewis Coleman and George B. Long—wealthy businessmen and members of prominent Californian families—were traveling in Albania when they fell victim to an ambush. The attack, carried out by Albanian bandits, occurred the previous day on a remote road near Tirana, underscoring the precarious security situation in the country.<sup>23</sup>

The killing of two prominent Americans was treated with utmost seriousness by the American Legation in Tirana. In a detailed report by Koding, the American diplomat temporarily replacing Minister Grant-Smith, who was in Paris on official business, the legation documented the victims' entire itinerary, the circumstances of their deaths, and the vigorous measures taken by local authorities to apprehend the perpetrators. These actions led to the deaths of several members of the Rama family and the imprisonment of one individual, all residents near the site of the crime, who were suspected of involvement.<sup>24</sup> While the report suggested that robbery was the primary motive—given that the victims had been stripped of their suitcases and valuables—it also recorded statements from Albanian political circles. Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Shefqet Bey Vërlaci asserted to Grant-Smith that the killings were politically motivated. Furthermore, in his report dated April 26, 1924, Grant-Smith noted rumors in Albanian public opinion alleging Yugoslav instigation, claims that League of Nations representative Professor Pittard had been the

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23 *The San Francisco Examiner*, 8 April 1924, "Murder of Robert Lewis Coleman," <https://www.newspapers.com/article/the-san-francisco-examiner-murder-of-rob/31292952/>, accessed 30 August 2024.

24 A. HADRI, A. MEHMETI (eds.), *Informal Relations: United States and the Revolutionary Government in Albania, 1924. Volume of Documents*, Institute of History "Ali Hadri", Prishtina 2024, 147–154, Doc. no. 33, "The American Chargé d'Affaires in Albania (Kodding) to the Secretary of State (Hughes), providing detailed information about the murder of two American citizens near Tirana and the response of the Albanian authorities," 13 April 1924.

intended target, and assertions that the attack aimed to discredit Albania during the Conference of Ambassadors' deliberations on the country's borders, potentially involving Italian and Greek interests.<sup>25</sup> Even amid the subsequent transition of power, the intense political struggles that had unfolded between 1921 and 1924 continued to reverberate across Albania. These confrontations culminated in an organized uprising by a political faction that succeeded in toppling the existing government and installing a new administration under the leadership of Fan Noli on June 16, 1924.\* In the wake of these dramatic developments, political accusations proliferated, with opponents seeking to implicate the former Prime Minister, Ahmet Zogu, in various alleged conspiracies and acts of wrongdoing, including the controversial incidents surrounding the deaths of prominent Americans.<sup>26</sup> Such claims reflected not only the enduring tensions within the Albanian political landscape but also the highly polarized nature of public discourse during this period of rapid governmental change.

Despite the vigorous measures undertaken by Albanian law enforcement, the killing of the two Americans carried significant political ramifications. The incident notably undermined the confidence and resolve of the American minister in Albania. In a report dated May 16, 1924, addressed to the U.S. Secretary of State, Grant-Smith argued that in the aftermath of the murders of Coleman and Long, it was not an appropriate moment to release the fund contribution from the American Red Cross.<sup>27</sup> He contended that providing aid under such circumstances could convey a dangerous message to the Albanian population, suggesting that the most effective way to secure humanitarian assistance was through acts of violence against Americans. Grant-Smith further criticized the restrained response of the U.S. government to the killing of its citizens, noting that local residents

25 *Informal Relations*, Doc. no. 34, 158–159, “The U.S. Minister to Albania (Grant-Smith) to the Secretary of State (Hughes), enclosing a detailed report on the circumstances surrounding the murder of two well-known American businessmen, George B. DeLong and Robert Lewis Coleman, during a robbery carried out by brigands in Mamurras,” 26 April 1924.

\* The political confrontations between 1921 and 1924 culminated in an uprising that overthrew the existing government and led to the establishment of a new administration under the leadership of Fan Noli on June 16, 1924... for further details, see: V. DEDI (ed), *Dokumenta e materiale historike nga lufta e popullit shqiptar për liri e demokraci 1917-1941*, Publication of the Directorate of State Archives of the Republic of Albania, Tirana 1959, 151-152.

26 NARA, *DOS-A*, Doc. no. 875.041, U.S. LEGATION, “The U.S. Minister to Albania (Grant-Smith) to the Secretary of State (Hughes) concerning the establishment of a political trial in Albania,” 8 July 1924.

27 NARA, *DOS-A*, Doc. no. 875.48.72, U.S. LEGATION, “The U.S. Minister to Albania (Grant-Smith) to the Secretary of State (Hughes) requesting that the \$5,000 aid be returned to the American Red Cross for regions affected by famine,” 16 May 1924.

interpreted this inaction as evidence of indifference to American lives. Concluding his report, Grant-Smith recommended that the emergency fund be returned to the American Red Cross, emphasizing that disbursing the aid prior to the resolution of the murders could compromise both the integrity of U.S. humanitarian efforts and the moral authority of American diplomacy in the region.<sup>28</sup>

Grant-Smith's hesitation to disburse emergency humanitarian aid prompted complaints from Albanian officials, who claimed that the American Red Cross was holding "*in abeyance*" the distribution of U.S. contributions.<sup>29</sup> In response, the American Red Cross reported the matter to the State Department, which requested detailed clarification from Grant-Smith.<sup>30</sup> In his reply, Grant-Smith reiterated that it was not an appropriate time to release the funds following the murders of Coleman and Long. He also confirmed that the donation remained untouched and securely deposited at the Morgan, Harjes Bank in Paris.<sup>31</sup>

Harry Fultz,<sup>32</sup> director of the Technical School in Tirana, publicly defended Grant-Smith against the accusations leveled at him. In a report dated June 16, 1924, addressed to the American Red Cross, Fultz explained that the source of the allegation was Salih Vuçiterni, an Albanian deputy from Dibra. Vuçiterni's letter claimed that the American minister had returned the financial aid to Washington, asserting that "*the residents of Dibra did not deserve such help*."<sup>33</sup> After verifying these claims, Fultz concluded that Vuçiterni had been misinformed. He emphasized that Grant-Smith had instructed the Albanian government to implement critical recommendations, including the declaration of a moratorium on all debts

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28 *Ibid.*

29 NARA, DOS-A, Doc. no. 875.48/70, The American Red Cross National Headquarters, Washington D.C., "The American Red Cross to the Secretary of State (Hughes) conveying information that the American Minister in Albania is blocking humanitarian aid," 2 June 1924.

30 NARA, DOS-A, Doc. no. 875.48/70, "The Secretary of State (Hughes) to the U.S. Minister in Albania (Grant-Smith) regarding the relief issue," 3 June 1924.

31 NARA, DOS-A, Doc. no. 875.48/72, "The Secretary of State (Hughes) to the American Red Cross (Bicknell) regarding the stance of the American Minister in Tirana in relation to the relief fund," 13 June 1924.

32 In 1921, responding to the aspirations and needs expressed by the Albanian population, the American Red Cross established the Albanian Vocational School, the first institution of its kind for many years. Over time, it became known as the Tirana Technical School. Harry Fultz, a professor of Mechanical Arts at the University of Chicago, was appointed to lead the school. For further details, see: *Harry Fultz Technical School*, <https://www.harryfultz.edu.al/historiku/>, accessed 20 September 2024.

33 *Informal Relations*, Doc. no. 48, 197-199, "The Director of the Vocational School in Tirana (Fultz) to the American Red Cross (Swift), denying allegations made against the American minister regarding the relief fund," 16 June 1924.

in the Mirdita and Dibra regions and the suspension of all taxes for a period of two years for the affected areas—recommendations that had been ignored.<sup>34</sup>

Fultz further contextualized the silence and inaction of the government. In the same report, he highlighted the role of the British in distributing corn in the Dibra region, noting that officials from the British Committee, specifically Messrs. Parr and Stirling, had observed the indifference of Albanian officials. This apathy had obstructed and delayed humanitarian aid, a process intertwined with corruption and abuse. Reports indicated failures in transporting aid, physical roadblocks, and collusion between government officials and grain traders in exploiting humanitarian assistance. On this matter, Fultz fully endorsed Grant-Smith's position, asserting: *"The American minister's stance seems entirely well-founded and probably the only honest and sincere position. He simply refuses to see money thrown away in a situation where the odds are strongly in favor of tax collectors and other harpies who prey on the misery of the people."*<sup>35</sup>

The aforementioned Fultz report indicates that the letter from Deputy Vuçiterni was not the only complaint directed against Minister Grant-Smith. Fultz explicitly noted that *"...our official representative in this country has become the target of continuous and well-organized propaganda, almost since his arrival last fall, a year ago. Various statements have been made and are being made with the very clear intention of damaging and discrediting him personally. The main mistake of the minister seems to be that he tries and tends to care excessively for the interests of the government and his fellow citizens. These represent distinct independent elements in a foreign representative and are not to be counted in a part of the world where Americans are considered a legitimate victim."*<sup>36</sup>

Although the State Department supported Grant-Smith's decision, the American Red Cross insisted that the humanitarian donation proceed, as regulations prevented the withdrawal of such aid, particularly while the affected population faced famine conditions.<sup>37</sup> Acting in good faith regarding Minister Grant-Smith's stance, a practical solution was reached, and the \$5,000 fund originally under the control of Grant-Smith in Tirana was transferred to Harry Fultz, director of the Technical School, who then

34 *Ibid.*, 198.

35 NARA, DOS-A, Doc. no. 875.48/77, Mr. Harry T. Fultz, Director of the Albanian Vocational School, Tirana, "The Director of the Vocational School in Tirana (Fultz) to the American Red Cross (Swift), denying allegations made against the American Minister regarding the relief fund," 16 June 1924.

36 *Ibid.*

37 NARA, DOS-A, "American Red Cross to Mr. Harry T. Fultz, Director of the Albanian Vocational School, Tirana, authorizing him to accept and manage financial aid for regions affected by famine," 2 July 1924.

assumed responsibility for its distribution in the famine-stricken regions.<sup>38</sup>

### **Harry Fultz in Charge of Emergency Assistance Operations**

The emergency humanitarian efforts in Albania during 1924 highlight the complex interplay between field assessment, logistical challenges, and political dynamics in the delivery of aid. Following the assignment of a dedicated mission to administer the American Red Cross's emergency fund, a systematic evaluation of conditions across northern Albania was undertaken. This assessment emphasized direct observation, extensive travel, and careful verification of local needs, particularly among vulnerable populations such as Kosovar refugees and children in remote mountain communities. The initiative also integrated medical and educational considerations alongside food distribution, reflecting a comprehensive approach to humanitarian relief that went beyond immediate subsistence to address broader social vulnerabilities.

In early August 1924, the American Red Cross entrusted Harry Fultz with detailed instructions for administering the emergency humanitarian fund. Over the next two weeks, despite his parallel commitments to preparations for the forthcoming school year, Fultz systematically collected data and formulated an operational plan. He placed particular emphasis on securing information from government representatives, including arranging a direct meeting with Prime Minister Fan Noli. Noli expressed strong support for the American relief effort and subsequently presented the matter to the Council of Ministers. Following his intervention, the Council designated the regions of Kosovo in Kruma and Shkodra as priority areas requiring urgent humanitarian assistance.<sup>39</sup>

Fultz adopted a field-based inspection method, deliberately avoiding excessive reliance on government intermediaries who often attempted to shape the narrative to suit their own preferences and interests. Determined to assess conditions accurately—particularly the extent of hunger affecting local populations—he undertook extensive travel, covering approximately 200–250 kilometers by road to verify the situation directly on the ground. Fultz's mission began in the vicinity of Kavaja, where approximately 250 Kosovar immigrants—primarily from the border areas with Yugoslavia—had been resettled on state-owned land. Although the government's stated intention was for these families to secure their livelihood by cultivating free state property, the reality on the ground was markedly different. They

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38 NARA, *DOS-A*, Doc. no. 875.48/78, U.S. LEGATION, "The U.S. Minister to Albania (Grant-Smith) to the Secretary of State (Hughes) notifying and explaining the transfer of relief funds to Harry Fultz," 23 June 1924.

39 NARA, *DOS-A*, Mr. Harry T. Fultz, Director of the Albanian Vocational School, Tirana, "The Director of the Vocational School in Tirana (Fultz) to the American Red Cross, regarding inspection and findings in regions affected by famine," 27 September 1924.

had been placed in a marginal, swampy, and malaria-prone area, without housing, agricultural tools, or working animals, making any meaningful cultivation nearly impossible. Nearby, however, lay fertile tracts of land used freely by local villagers as grazing fields. This contrast led Fultz to suspect that the placement of the Kosovars on inhospitable terrain reflected an attempt to prevent their settlement on productive agricultural land. After completing his visit to Kavaja, Fultz continued his mission toward northern Albania, accompanied by two school-age boys from the affected regions—individuals he trusted more than official translators. The team proceeded to Shkodër and Krumë, following the Vau i Dejës–Pukë route, with the intention of later advancing toward Bicaj, Peshkopia, the prefecture of Dibra, and ultimately returning to Tirana. The mountainous terrain posed severe challenges; the journey from Shkodër to Krumë alone required three full days of travel.<sup>40</sup>

From Krumë, Fultz proceeded to Kukës and subsequently to Peshkopi, where a British mission was engaged in distributing corn as humanitarian assistance. Fultz observed that transportation of supplies posed a serious challenge, both logistically and financially. Of every one hundred kilograms of corn transported, thirty kilograms were claimed by the carriers as compensation—a disproportionately high cost, particularly in the context of an acute humanitarian emergency. Fultz's reflections on the situation offered a more nuanced assessment than the alarming reports circulating at the time. Confronted with the question of whether the regions were suffering from famine, he responded unequivocally: *"Famine? We did not find it, at least not in the usual connotation of the word. In the territories we traveled, we neither saw nor heard of persons affected by famine. There is no famine there now, and I feel obliged to say bluntly that I do not believe there has been such a crisis during the past few years."* Instead, Fultz emphasized that what he encountered was pervasive poverty, widespread hunger, and profound human suffering—conditions severe enough to deteriorate further with the onset of winter. Although he rejected the characterization of a full-scale famine, his observations led him to affirm that the hardships were sufficiently grave to warrant the distribution of humanitarian relief in the counties of Kosovo in Kruma and northern Shkodra.<sup>41</sup>

Fultz's statement reveals a deliberate effort to differentiate between acute famine and chronic deprivation—a distinction crucial for shaping an appropriate humanitarian response. His insistence on precision suggests both a skepticism toward exaggerated claims and a commitment

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40 *Ibid.*

41 *Informal Relations*, Doc. no. 73, 288–298, "The Director of the Vocational School in Tirana (Fultz) to the American Red Cross, regarding inspection and findings in regions affected by famine," 27 September 1924.

to grounding aid decisions in direct observation rather than political narratives. At the same time, his acknowledgment of worsening conditions underscores his recognition that, even in the absence of famine in the strict sense, the humanitarian needs were urgent and justified external aid intervention. The effort to distinguish famine from chronic economic hardship is accompanied in his report by an assessment of the underlying causes that, in his view, produced such dire conditions. He first points to the legacy of the Balkan Wars and their long-term consequences for the borderlands between Albania and Yugoslavia. The newly drawn boundary cut directly through the former Ottoman Vilayet of Kosovo. On the Yugoslav side remained the prosperous urban centers of Prizren, Peja, and Gjakova—cities with extensive forests, fertile agricultural land, and well-developed markets that had historically served as economic hubs for northern Albania. On the Albanian side of the border, however, no comparable urban center existed; Shkodra, though significant, was geographically distant and practically inaccessible due to the poor state of transportation.<sup>42</sup>

The account identifies this economic rupture as one of the primary factors exacerbating hardship. Poor harvests alone did not explain the severity of the situation. Rather, the inability of Albanian highlanders to cross the border and sell their products in their traditional markets deprived them of essential income and prevented them from obtaining grain they could not produce in sufficient quantities due to the poor quality of local soil. This structural isolation intensified food insecurity. In response to these constraints, smuggling became a widespread survival mechanism. Yet the Yugoslav army routinely opened fire on those attempting to cross the frontier, and Albanian highlanders often retaliated in kind. The report illustrates that this violent environment illustrated both the desperation of local populations and the destabilizing impact of disrupted economic networks that had previously sustained the region.<sup>43</sup>

Although the field inspection was completed in August 1924, the distribution of food aid to the affected populations began in early September. The first assistance consisted of a modest quantity of provisions delivered to the Kosovar refugees settled near Kavaja. The transport of corn from Durrës to Kavaja was organized in coordination with the municipal authorities of Durrës, while many of the Kosovars themselves contributed voluntarily to the loading and delivery work, facilitating the initial phase of the relief effort.<sup>44</sup>

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42 *Ibid.*

43 *Ibid.*

44 NARA, DOS-A, Mr. Harry T. Fultz, Director of the Albanian Vocational School, Tirana, "The Director of the Vocational School in Tirana (Fultz) to the American Red Cross, regarding inspection and findings in regions affected by famine," 27 September 1924.

Following this initial phase, Fultz drafted three guides for the administration of the humanitarian fund, which were submitted to the American Red Cross for review and further guidance. Based on information obtained from British contacts, he noted that conditions in the Dibra district had improved sufficiently for the local population to manage independently, and that in the Mirdita district along the Mat River, the League of Nations had already distributed aid. Consequently, Fultz focused his proposals on the Kosovar population in the northern and northeastern areas of the Shkodra district. The first proposal targeted the refugees near Kavaja, recommending not only the provision of food aid but also the distribution of quinine as a supplementary measure. This approach entailed minimal financial cost<sup>45</sup> while offering significant benefits in combating the rapidly spreading malaria that threatened the health of the population.<sup>46</sup>

The second initiative focused directly on Kosovo county. In this plan, Fultz recommended procuring food supplies from the market in Gjakova and then following the model established by the League of Nations for transporting aid from Prizren to Kukës, contingent on the consent of the Yugoslav authorities. Should the project receive approval, Fultz committed to organizing voluntary labor on the Albanian side of the border, coordinating closely with Albanian government officials to ensure the effective distribution of relief.<sup>47</sup>

The third plan reflected Fultz's commitment to combining humanitarian aid with educational support. He recommended allocating cash allowances to provide food assistance for 50–60 students attending a school in the remote mountain village of Kolgecaj, ensuring that vulnerable children could continue their education despite the harsh conditions. Finally, the proposal suggested guidance regarding the implementation of the proposals. In the same report, he also addressed the American Red Cross's instruction that the fund could be entrusted either to a humanitarian organization operating in the field or directly to the Albanian government. After evaluating the operations of the British and League of Nations teams in the Dibra and Shkodra regions, Fultz concluded that transferring the remaining funds to the government was not feasible, citing inevitable losses during the distribution of corn. His concerns reflected broader issues of corruption, mismanagement, and the pervasive state of disorder in Albanian society at the time.<sup>48</sup>

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45 *Ibid.*

46 S. KADRIA, *Kriza humanitare e viteve 1923–1924*, 159.

47 *Informal Relations*, Doc. no. 73, 288–298, "The Director of the Vocational School in Tirana (Fultz) to the American Red Cross, regarding inspection and findings in regions affected by famine," 27 September 1924.

48 *Ibid.*

Fultz vividly illustrated these challenges in his own words, *"I find it quite difficult to illustrate to you adequately a really complicated situation. The facts, however strange they may seem, are more elusive, and it is exceedingly easy for supposed facts to be confused with the true ones, or for you to base your actions on what you see as facts and later realize that these things that seemed tangible were only illusions. I am forced to admit that here truth and fiction are intertwined in many subtle ways. Sometimes it is not so easy to separate them into the two. Much of what I have written will not be of particular value to you, and much of the rest that would be of value to you I am sure I have omitted, but nevertheless, I believe I have presented you with enough of an illustration within the bounds of truth to enable you to charge us to work in one way or the other."*<sup>49</sup>

The American account underscores the complexities of delivering humanitarian aid in a context marked by administrative weakness and societal instability. These reflections reveal both the practical difficulties of monitoring and distributing resources and the broader challenge of discerning reliable information amid competing narratives. By emphasizing the intertwining of truth and illusion, the account highlighted the necessity of direct oversight and caution when engaging with local authorities, reinforcing the rationale for retaining control of the aid within a trusted, field-based framework rather than delegating it to potentially unreliable government channels.

Meanwhile, efforts were underway to procure and transport corn from Yugoslavia, following the model established by the League of Nations. To facilitate this, Harry Fultz sought the assistance of the American Legation in Belgrade. A formal request was submitted to the Yugoslav government in early October 1924. However, by the end of December, no response had been received. Fultz interpreted this prolonged silence as a deliberate decision by the Yugoslav authorities, reflecting an unwillingness to approve the initiative while avoiding direct association with the rejection of a humanitarian appeal.<sup>50</sup>

The political developments of December 1924, including the return of Ahmet Zog to the leadership of Albania, created a new and uncertain context in the country.<sup>51</sup> In this environment, the American position regarding the formation and legitimacy of the new government—and, by extension, the administration of U.S. humanitarian aid—was reassessed. This shift also affected the American mission in Albania to manage emergency financial assistance.<sup>52</sup>

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49 *Ibid.*

50 NARA, DOS-A, Doc. no. 875.48/83, American Red Cross, 28 January 1925.

51 A. PUTO, *Shqipëria politike 1912-1939*, Toena, Tiranë 2009, 382.

52 NARA, DOS-A, Doc. no. 875.01/258, "The Secretary of State (Hughes) to the U.S.

In a report to the American Red Cross dated February 14, 1925, Fultz noted that no significant progress had been made in the context of Yugoslavia's continued silent refusal to authorize the purchase and transport of grain products, schools remained closed due to the deteriorating security situation, and, as a result, no information could be obtained regarding the Kolgecaj school. Meanwhile, the refugees previously settled in Kavaja had relocated to Tirana, where they were engaged in various forms of labor to sustain themselves and support their families. The report concluded by noting that no contact had been made with the new government regarding the humanitarian aid, and that future engagement would be postponed until the political situation stabilized. It recommended deferring any discussion of the matter until conditions were more favorable, reflecting a cautious and measured approach to administering humanitarian aid amid political uncertainty.<sup>53</sup>

Fultz's stance illustrates the challenges of delivering aid in a volatile political environment, where both local instability and international diplomatic sensitivities could obstruct relief efforts. His decision to delay engagement with the new government demonstrates a strategic awareness of the need to protect the integrity and effectiveness of humanitarian assistance in a context of political flux.

These efforts reveal the multifaceted obstacles inherent in humanitarian administration during periods of political instability and social disruption. The inability to rely on local authorities, the challenges of cross-border transport, and the ongoing effects of structural economic dislocations all complicated aid delivery. The careful prioritization of humanitarian interventions, including the temporary suspension of government engagement, illustrates a pragmatic strategy aimed at safeguarding both the effectiveness and integrity of relief operations. Equally significant is the role of the field reports themselves, which provided a detailed, firsthand account of conditions on the ground and offered an objective reflection of the social, economic, and political realities in Albania in 1924.

## Conclusions

The findings from the American Mission in Tirana indicate that northern Albania between 1922 and 1924 was experiencing a profound social crisis. This crisis was marked primarily by a severe shortage of corn, the

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Minister in Albania (Grant-Smith), providing instructions about the stance towards the Albanian Government," 10 January 1925; Doc. no. 875.01/265, U.S. LEGATION, "The U.S. Minister to Albania (Grant-Smith) to the Secretary of State (Hughes) regarding Ahmet Zogu's commitment to refute falsifications against him in the case of the murder of two Americans," 29 January 1925.

53 NARA, *DOS-A*, Doc. no. 875.48/84, American Red Cross, 10 March 1925.

population's staple food, resulting in chronic hunger and extreme poverty rather than the famine described by government officials. Contributing factors included primitive agricultural practices, rugged mountainous terrain, and successive poor harvests, compounded by territorial fragmentation following the Balkan Wars and the desolation wrought by the First World War. The isolation of northern border regions from their traditional markets in Kosovo—areas historically prosperous and agriculturally developed—further intensified economic marginalization, leaving local communities unable to access essential goods.

American observers assessed this situation through multiple sources and direct field inspection, proposing practical measures that addressed immediate food needs while also aiming to support longer-term agricultural development. Their work revealed the deep impact of apathy, corruption, politicization, nepotism, and cronyism, which not only hindered the fair administration of American and other international humanitarian aid but also obstructed broader economic and social progress within Albania. They highlighted that the notion of a “bread famine” could be exploited for economic or political gain, emphasizing the need for careful, accountable management of relief resources.

The Mamuras incident, which involved the murder of two Americans, further underscored the dangers facing U.S. personnel and the fragility of diplomatic engagement in Albania. This event directly influenced U.S. policy by prompting caution in government dealings and shaping the approach to administering humanitarian aid. In this context, the meticulous oversight demonstrated by the American mission—through extensive travel, verification of conditions, and careful calculation of expenditures—ensured that the American Red Cross fund continued to operate effectively despite political instability and societal disorder.

These historical accounts underscore the vital role of field-based reporting and evidence-driven decision-making in the administration of humanitarian operations. Objective and accurate documentation was essential not only for guiding immediate relief efforts but also for providing a clear and reliable account of the social and economic conditions in Albania during the mid-1920s. Through the combination of firsthand observation, strategic caution, and rigorous accountability, American actors were able to respond effectively to urgent needs while safeguarding the integrity of humanitarian assistance.

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