1. Historical and cultural setting

On 28 June 1389, the Turks defeated a coalition of Balkan forces under Serbian leadership at Kosovo Polje, the plain of the blackbirds, and established themselves as masters of the Balkans. By 1393 they had overrun Shkodër, although the Venetians were soon able to recover the city and its imposing citadel. The conquest of Albania continued into the early years of the 15th century. The mountain fortress of Krujë was taken in 1415 and the equally strategic towns of Vlorë, Berat and Kaninë in southern Albania fell in 1417. By 1431, the Turks had incorporated southern Albania into the Ottoman Empire and set up a sanjak administration with its capital in Gjirokastër, captured in 1419. Feudal northern Albania remained in the control of its autonomous tribal leaders, though now under the suzerain power of the Sultan.

The Turkish conquest did not meet without resistance on the part of the Albanians, notably under George Castrioti, known as Scanderbeg (1405-1468), prince and now national hero. Sent by his father as a hostage to Sultan Murad II, the young Castrioti was converted to Islam and was given a Moslem education in Edirne (Adrianople). The Turks called him Iskender and gave him the rank of bey, hence the name Scanderbeg. In 1443, Scanderbeg took advantage of the Turkish defeat at Nish at the hands of John Hunyadi to abandon the Ottoman army, return to Albania and reembrace Christianity. His first great achievement was to unite the feudal and independent-minded tribes of northern Albania into the League of Lezhë in 1444. By a ruse, he took over the fortress of Krujë and was proclaimed commander-in-chief of an Albanian army which, though independent, could be no match for the huge military potential of the Turks. In 1453, Constantinople itself fell to the forces of Mehmet II Fâtih (the Conquerer), thus putting an end to the thousand-year-old Byzantine Roman Empire of the East. But Albania, though abandoned to its fate, was not to give up easily.

In the following years, Scanderbeg successfully repulsed thirteen Ottoman
incursions, including three major Ottoman sieges of the citadel of Kruje led by the Sultans themselves (Murad II in 1450 and Mehmed II Fâtih in 1466 and 1467). He was widely admired in the Christian world for his resistance to the Turks and given the title "Atleta Christi" by Pope Calixtus III. Albanian resistance held out until after Scanderbeg’s death on 17 January 1468 at Lezhë (Alessio). In 1478, however, the fortress at Kruje was finally taken by Turkish troops, Shkodër fell in 1479 and Durrës at last in 1501. By the end of the sixteenth century the Ottoman Empire had reached its political zenith and Albania was to be subjected to over four centuries of Turkish colonization which changed the face of the country radically.

Modern Albanian scholars tend to view the consequences of these centuries of Turkish rule as completely negative, in terms of wild Asiatic hoards ravaging and plundering a country which might otherwise have flourished in the cradle of European civilization. This rather one-sided view is determined to a large extent by the experience of the Albanian nationalist movement in the nineteenth century when the Ottoman Empire was in a period of profound decay. Although the Turkish occupation of Albania no doubt brought untold suffering to the inhabitants of the country, it also introduced a new and refined culture which was later to become an integral part of the Albanian identity.

A new religion, Islam, had wedged itself between the Catholic north and the Orthodox south of Albania and, with time, became the dominant faith of the country. Although during the first decades of Turkish rule there were few Moslems among the Albanians themselves, an estimated 50% of the population of northern Albania had converted to Islam by the early seventeenth century. Roman Catholicism and Greek and Serbian Orthodoxy in Albania had, after all, been the vehicles of foreign cultures, propelled by foreign languages, religions to which the Albanians, as opposed to their Serbian, Bulgarian and Greek neighbours, had only been superficially converted. The mass conversion of the Albanian population is all the more understandable in view of the heavy poll taxes (harâc) imposed on the Christian inhabitants of the Empire (râyâ).

Hasan Kaleshi¹ (1922-1976) has convincingly suggested that the Turkish occupation of the Balkans had at least the one positive consequence, that of saving the Albanians from ethnic assimilation by the Slavs, just as the Slavic invasion of the Balkans in the 6th century had put an end to the process of Romanization which had threatened to assimilate the non-Latin-speaking ancestors of the Albanians a thousand years earlier. Although not recognized by the Turks as an ethnic minority (the population of the Ottoman Empire was divided according to religion, not according to nationality), the Albanians