

A COMMUNIST ALBANIA: CONTROL, CULTURE, & CONSEQUENCES

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The first search result when one googles *what is Albania known for* is the war bunkers built by the communist dictator Enver Hoxha. Only after that does one see the idyllic mountain ranges, the hidden beaches, and the mix of Ottoman and Byzantine culture. Google provides a handy metaphor: while Albania as a country is defined by many things, its communist past overshadows everything else. It provides a warning on the dangers of idolizing politicians and shows how a group's culture can be corrupted by Nationalism and used to justify great atrocities. This is especially applicable in the current American political landscape, with many politicians growing personality cults, trying to establish their own definition of American culture and values, and using that to justify lawmaking. Finally, it explains why so many Albanians today are vacating the country and leaving Albania struggling to feed an aging population. From 1944 to 1992, communism gripped Albania, with its primary leader, Enver Hoxha, establishing and maintaining control through a clever combination of propaganda, censorship, and economic power. This paper will explore Hoxha's initial rise to power, how he maintained it, and the fall of communism following his death. Further, its effects on a modern-day Albanian diaspora will be investigated.

In 1939, during World War II, the independent monarchy of Albania found itself invaded by Mussolini's Italy. Mussolini quickly created a puppet government and fascism ruled Albania. Resistance to this occupation was brewing, and the Communist Party of Albania was founded on November 8th, 1941. The party was both heavily influenced and supported by the Soviet Union and the communist party of nearby Yugoslavia. One crucial participant in the founding of the Communist Party of Albania was Enver Hoxha,

who at the time was merely a secretary on the party's central committee. Hoxha did not belong to any specific faction within the communist party, a fact that became key in his appeal for power. In 1942, the communists launched the National Liberation Movement, quickly gaining the following of the poor and working classes in Albania as the party was led by the working class. Once the Axis powers fell and retreated from Albania in 1944, Hoxha marched upon Tirana, the capital. A new government was created, and the Communist Party was renamed the "Democratic Front." During the 1945 elections, most of the ballot candidates were of the Democratic Front. Notably, the party secured votes not through coercion, but through heavy campaigning that utilized the youth and women in their party. Their messages claimed an end to fascism and a return to Albanian nationalism. The Democratic Front won in a landslide, and their power was secured (Mëhilli 17-21).

Ultimately, communist rule in Albania can be split into three eras: when Albania was allied with the Soviet Union, when Albania was allied with China, and when Albania was completely isolated. From the beginning of Communist rule, Albania was geographically cut off from the rest of the world. The countries surrounding it in the Balkans, Greece and Yugoslavia, were now hostile. Albania came to rely on the Soviet Union for aid and trade (Mëhilli 94-5). The Albanian Communist party was now known as the Party of Labor. During the early years of the government, farmland and private property were seized and redistributed among the population. The government determined the required amount of living space for each household and subsequently shuffled them to new housing (Mëhilli 31-1). With the help of Soviet funding, new factories and textile mills were constructed. Notably, many of these were outside the capital, allowing Albanians in more rural settings to view the industrialization process. This is a period in Albanian communist history

where the country was flourishing. Albania's general population had a much higher quality of life compared to before communist takeover, and the country was in economic prosperity (Mëhilli 97-9).

However, this all came to an end after the death of Stalin. Albanian communist ideology idolized only a few things: their leader Hoxha, Marxist-Leninist philosophy, and Joseph Stalin. Upon Stalin's death, Hoxha viewed the Soviet Union as becoming decreasingly communist and openly denounced the policies of Khrushchev, the new leader. The Albanian-Soviet Split occurred in 1961, marking the end of the Soviet aid on which Albania had become dependent. As the Soviet Union was Albania's primary trade partner and ally, the country was forced to look elsewhere. Albania then became trade partners with communist China in the late 1960s, which boosted their suffering economy. Only in 1978, when China completely cut all relations with Albania, was the country truly alone. This ushered in an era of Self-Reliance, where the country was now cut off from the rest of the world geographically, politically, and economically. Hoxha declared that Albania would now only rely on itself for both agriculture and industry. He also tailored their communist philosophy to this, claiming that a true communist state could only rely on itself. Due to Albania's small size (approximately half the size of Maine) and mountainous terrain, the existing agriculture was insufficient to sustain its population. It was also not yet industrially developed enough to sustain itself (Backer). As a result, the population became increasingly disgruntled, and following Hoxha's death in 1985, the disillusionment of many led to the commencement of protests. In the early 1990s, many fled Albania seeking asylum in nearby European countries. Uprisings grew at this time, with the Albanian Student Movement, composed of university students, responsible for much of the organizing (Shahini). The

new Democratic Party took control in March of 1992, ending communism in Albania.

Methods of Control

Once communism took hold of Albania, it did not have a difficult time maintaining control. Frankly, a majority of the Albanian population enjoyed a better quality of life for decades under the leadership of Hoxha. People saw an amount of food and job prospects that did not exist even before Mussolini's takeover. Due to Hoxha's modernization goals for Albania, agricultural production saw a 500% increase, and industrial production increased by more than 150%. He also oversaw the electrification of Albania, with the entire country being electrified by 1970. Mining projects and housing was also a focus (Artisien). Albanians as a whole had increased access to education, with the country reaching an almost 100% literacy rate. The people were also healthier. The communist government implemented free healthcare, drained marshes, and vaccinated the population against malaria, which had been a public health issue for years.

Many citizens, particularly women, enjoyed new rights under the communist regime. Previously, women did not have political power or access to education and jobs. Under Hoxha's leadership, women were now allowed into schools and encouraged to attend university. By 1988, one half of Albania's students were women and girls. The workforce, which was controlled by the government, also sought to include women, with 47% of the workforce being women. Additionally, Hoxha implemented quotas for the political representation of women, allowing them to vote and run for leadership. By 1988, around 33% of the party's government officials were women, and 40% of politicians voted to people's councils were women. Women also had

expanded maternity leave and access to care. However, Hoxha's demand for population increase erased women's reproductive choices and outlawed abortions. Divorce was also outlawed under this mindset, except for under very extreme cases. Additionally, despite Hoxha's efforts to enforce an equal division of labor with educational campaigns and in a law entitled *The Code of the Family*, social attitudes remained the same. Women were often forced to take care of the majority of household and childrearing work, on top of often having to work full time outside of the home (Kushi).

One clever way that the communist party assured the loyalty of the Albanian people is by repurposing folklore and traditional music into propaganda. The governmental study of *kultura popullore*, or popular culture, examined existing traditions and built up a national culture that was specifically framed under Marxism. Tradition therefore ultimately became a performance one did to honor communism and Enver Hoxha (Doja). Folk songs, dances, and costumes were now used only in rituals and celebrations regarding the communist party, such as visits of party leaders and historical anniversaries. One example is the repurposing of traditional singing styles into propaganda songs, notably that of Albanian iso-polyphony (Abazi). While specific styles vary depending on the area of the country, the singing overall is defined by having polyphonic singing combined with droning. Polyphonic singing is when there are two or more lines or melodies being sung at the same time and layered on top of each other. This is combined with droning, which in Albanian styles is a continuous "e" syllable sung by a chorus in the background of the lyrics. It is often used in religious celebrations, weddings, funerals, and other social events (Tole). The communists used this specific style when composing many of their propaganda songs. This can be seen in the song "Ligjero Shoku Enver," or "Speak, Comrade Enver." The song praises

Hoxha as a savior of Marxism for breaking ties with the Soviet Union and Krushchev. In the song, a woman speaker first sings a line, and then the chorus comes in with droning and layering lyrics as the line that was just sung repeats ("Ligjëro"). A similar example can be found in "Dilni se erdhi Enver," which can be translated to "Leave because Enver's Here," or "Get Out, Enver's Coming." This song is similar to the previous, except there are two primary singers that trade off lines instead of one. Here it can also be observed that the performers are wearing traditional Albanian dress while singing the propaganda ("Dilni").

With the outlawing of all types of religion, people's celebrations and folklore were all framed around the communist state and Enver Hoxha. Hoxha's framing as a pseudo deity of Marxism forced the nation into a Hoxha centered cult. The country's National Folklore Festival was held on Hoxha's birthday and at his birthplace (Abazi). This cult is intrinsically tied to Albanian national-ism. One of the communist party's main talking points was that Marxism was reestablishing Albanian identity that was lost under the years of fascist and feudal control. In order to do so, the government linked Albanian beliefs and culture to that of the ancient Illyrian origins of the people. It then established all rewritten communist folklore and tradition as a progression of the Illyrians, connecting communism to a romanticized past of the Albanian people. This identification was then used to justify any and all laws and activities of the party as upholding a lost society (Doja).

The idea of upholding a mythical past of the Albanian people was used as a justification for many of the atrocities committed by Hoxha and his government. Hoxha framed any western influence or ideas as anti-Albanian and as an enemy to communism. This definition is vague and convenient and was often

used to justify the surveillance and arrest of political opponents, religious figures, and ordinary citizens found breaking the law. The government instilled a fear of internal and external enemies to the Albanian people, keeping many of them complacent to a government they thought to be protecting them and their traditions (Artisien). This was while the government funded a secret police, forced people into labor camps, and stripped away the rights of groups not deemed perfectly Albanian.

The Directorate of State Security, or *Sigurimi*, was the intelligence and secret police force of communist Albania. They oversaw the surveillance of countless citizens, including hidden microphones and the monitoring of phone calls. They were on the lookout for anything deemed anti-communist or anti-Albanian. This could have been something as simple as listening to materials that were supposed to be censored or having a religious celebration. Although exact numbers are unknown, many party members were executed and even more citizens were sent to prison labor camps (Brunwasser). These camps claimed to focus on the re-education of inmates, but instead forced the prisoners into grueling labor and terrible conditions. Families of prisoners were also punished, with some being relocated to the prisons themselves or to similar facilities specifically for families (Gjoka). The *Sigurimi* also policed against homosexual acts, as those were deemed as an unnatural threat to traditional Albanian values. These atrocities were all justified under the framework of nationalism and ridding the country of any anti-Albanian threats, the definition of which was of course controlled by the government.

The government also heavily employed the use of censorship amongst the people. Histories were rewritten to frame them within the communist ideologies. Academics who wrote papers

on anything based in history, philosophy, and in the humanities were forced to somehow link their topic to the praise of Marxism. Literature was also not allowed to depict the Albanian state or the conditions under which Albanians lived as anything less than perfect. Writers and authors were in fact a decent size of the population of those who were sent to political prisons (Hoxha Beqiri). Media from outside sources were also banned, including music, art, and literature from any non-approved country. When religion was fully banned in the 1970s, any religious expression was also banned and censored, although the clergy and certain religions had been prosecuted since the beginning of communist rule. This was under the framework that any other religious activity was a poisonous enemy and took away from one's devotion to the party. Hoxha framed religion as an "opium" of the people, and that those who were poisoned had to be "cured" (Bezati).

Downfall and Impact: The Consequences on Modern Day Albanians

The death of Enver Hoxha in 1985 inevitably led to the downfall of the communist party in Albania. Although food, job, and housing shortages plagued the country during the total isolation period, the cult of Hoxha remained strong. It was upon his death that the disillusionment broke for many, and protests gained speed throughout the country. These were often spearheaded by the youth, with protests of university students playing a prominent role (Shahini). A watershed election in 1992 finally forced the communists out of power, prompting a new era for Albania. Of course, it would be inaccurate to frame all Albanian people as having fully embraced the government's ideology and rules up until Hoxha's death. Where there was oppression, there was resistance. For example, despite all religions being banned, many people kept worshiping in secret, with cases of catholic

clergy hosting baptisms and Muslims celebrating Ramadan in secret. In fact, many Albanians retained their faith, with 57% identifying as Muslim, 10% Catholic, 7% Christian, and 2% Bektashi Muslim on the 2011 census. The rest declined to state any religion or identified as atheist (Bezati).

The new democratic government faced many challenges, primarily since it inherited a poor country lacking in agriculture and industry. The new government and leader were growing increasingly authoritarian, pressing the media, and manipulating election results in 1996. Despite attempts at economic growth, the implementation of a market economy, and western aid, the economy and government collapsed in 1997 due to a large number of Ponzi schemes ("ALBANIA"). An election in 1997 brought the socialist party into power, which was the new name for the revamped communist party. They remained in power into 2005, but now with a democratic system of government, a constitution that guarantees free speech and other liberties, and a market economy. Although the democratic party won power in 2005, the socialist party won again in 2013, and still retains the majority of seats in the Albanian parliament today. Elections from the early 2000s to the late 2010s have been marred with violence, although reforms added in the recent years seem to have quelled politically motivated violence. Albania joined NATO in 2009 and is currently seeking to join the EU, having been granted candidate status in 2014 ("Collapse").

The reasons Albania has not been able to join the EU provide a direct comparison to how communism and the nationalist ideology pushed for decades still affects the country to this day. The reasons the EU gives for not yet accepting Albania as a full member are political corruption, economic struggles, and human rights violations. Indeed, while Albania has had significant progress in these areas, it is severely lacking. Notably, key

government positions and institutions in the present are still run by people who served or were proteges in the oppressive communist regime (Gjeta). Bribery of government officials and workers is a huge issue in the present, with 20% of Albanian citizens having reported a direct experience with having to bribe a government official, often to speed up a procedure or to receive better treatment ("Corruption"). Political corruption is a cause of the human rights violations that plague Albania. Since a good amount of the government is controlled by those who played a part in the past oppressive government, human rights violations from the previous regime have been glossed over and denied. Many families who lost people to the Sigurmi have not had their pain acknowledged, nor have any bodies or possessions been returned to families (Gjeta). On top of this, women and LGBTQ people are not granted equal rights. Despite both parties having legal protections in the Albanian constitution, government corruption often leads to these protections not actually being granted, particularly in the case of LGBTQ people, who are seen as anti-Albanian western forces. Social opinions around women and queer people remain pretty conservative, and women still face an unequal division of labor in the home (Foufa; Calloni). During communism, the nationalist ideology promoted definitions of what it means to be Albanian, which further reinforced these beliefs.

Despite progress, Albania still struggles to achieve its footing economically. When the new government in the 1990s fell victim to Ponzi schemes and subsequently collapsed, anarchy ruled the country for the first few years. This marked the beginning of the new Albanian Diaspora, where Albanians fled to neighboring countries for better economic prospects. This diaspora is ongoing, due to continued economic strain on Albania. Despite Western aid and economic investments, the country still has a high unemployment rate with low wages, with agriculture com-

posing the majority of labor. One-third of the population lives in poverty, and the population skews older as many young people leave the country for better opportunities. As the diaspora continues, the workforce continues to decrease, leaving Albania unable to stabilize its economy ("Economy"). Many Albanians have fled to Greece, Italy, Germany, Belgium, Switzerland, France, and Austria. Notable populations have also landed in the United Kingdom and the United States (Barjada). The Albanian communities residing in these countries have played a significant role in ensuring their host countries' ongoing support to-wards Albania in terms of aid. The Albanian community in the United States represents a powerful lobbying group, particularly when it comes to securing guaranteed aid (Barjada).

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