

THE HEROIC IMAGE IN ALBANIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

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History is how we see ourselves in the past, and in the post-communist transition period in Albania and elsewhere in the Balkans, it has been no less a controversial and important subject than it was under communism, or preceding political systems. Western international bodies like the European Union have devoted funding and commitment to what has been regarded as the ‘modernization’ of ‘false’ or ‘distorted’ communist history.¹ The argument I am putting forward in this paper suggests that in reality only very limited change has been achieved towards transnational historical writing since 1990, and much post-communist Albanian historical writing rests on intellectual foundations concerning the national identity, principally in linguistics and archaeology, that developed in the communist period. Furthermore, some aspects of post-1990 writing have actually embodied strongly Panalbanian conceptions, due to the ‘recovery’ of the Balli Kombetar narratives in Kosova and Western Former Yugoslav

Macedonia/Republic of Macedonia suppressed by the Titoist and Enverist educational systems. The importance of the Kosova Liberation Army in achieving the independence of Kosova in 2008 is likely to reinforce the analysis of the Partisan and informal military traditions in Kosova Albanian historiography.

It is important to bear in mind that Albanian political, economic and military history has always been little known outside the country, in fact for long periods knowledge can hardly be said to have existed at all. Foreign scholarship always concentrated on cultural history, the language and literature, from the translations and literary text production in the Venetian world of Buzau and his successors to the scholarly researches of the Austrian Hellenism Johannes von Hahn in the nineteenth centuryⁱⁱ. English readers in the later nineteenth century could have learned about Skanderbeg from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poetry, just as fifty years before Byron defined an image of Albania in his work. It would not have been possible for them at the same time to go into a London or New York bookshop and purchase a History of Albania, of any kind, whether a good or bad book.

In most of this cultural tradition, the figure of sixteenth century national icon Skanderbeg has always been central, embodying the image of the heroic, through leading Albanian popular resistance against Ottoman occupation. Before him in the narrative there was only oppression, defeat, mystery and uncertainty. These negative factors reappeared after his death, with the imposition of hundreds of years of Ottoman rule. After Skanderbeg, the Albanians disappeared into the Ottoman Empire, to reemerge in English literary tradition in the Romantic period through Byron and the depiction in his poetry of the court of Ali Pasha of Tepelena .In France, an author such as Pouqueville performed the same role. After the fall of Ali Pasha there was another short eclipse, and then Albanian history 'began again', so to speak, in

this perception, at the time of the mid-nineteen century *Rilindja* period of nationalist renewal and during the formation of the Leagues of Prizren, and Peje, after 1878. The Congress of Berlin saw the arrival of the Albanian Question onto the European diplomatic stage. A generation after it came the slow and uncertain emergence of the new Albanian nation state from the collapsing Ottoman system.ⁱⁱⁱ

After independence in 1912 and the defeat for Albanian national unification aspirations at the conferences held before the First World War, Albanian history became subsumed in the regional crisis that engulfed the Balkans during and after the world conflict. The survival of the nation was problematic and without the commitment of the United States to an independent Albanian state in the period of the Versailles Treaty negotiations, it is possible the territory would have been divided between Greece and Serbia. The history of the inter-war period is well known, with the fragile Zogist monarchy being swallowed by Mussolini's fascist Italy in the 1930's.^{iv} Whatever interpretations are made of this period, in terms of the general atmosphere of the historiography, there were few positive let alone heroic images. Only in Kosova history are they found and here the dialogue is that of martyrdom, with figures such as Bajram Curri and Hasan Prishtina who stood for principled Albanian nationalism losing their lives in humiliating and difficult circumstances.

But with World War II, the Axis Occupation of Albania and Kosova provided a terrain where the traditional discourse of heroic resistance to national occupation could resume. The Communist Partisan army successfully appropriated the natural instincts of the great majority of Albanians against the Axis forces, wiped out other resistance forces, and waged a remarkable military campaign in 1943-1944 to liberate the nation. In doing so they of course effectively also conducted a civil war against the predominantly northern-based non-Communist nationalists,

some of whom, like the Kryeziu family had been patriots and untainted by collaboration with the Axis forces.

The individual Partisan soldier became the universal hero, and in turn the Communist party itself appropriated the heroic, the representation of a small and oppressed nation finding the strength, yet again, to fight against great odds the foreign forces, and to overcome them. But while the Partisans undoubtedly dominated the resistance forces in Albania, and triumphed, in Kosova and Chameria and the Albanian-majority areas of what became the Socialist Republic of Macedonia within the second Yugoslavia the stories in these disparate places were very different. In Chameria/Threspotia in north-west Greece the remaining Albanian speaking population had been driven out or killed in 1944 on the basis of alleged collaboration with the Axis by Napoleon Zervas's Rightist militia, and in Kosova and Western Macedonia there had been very few ethnic Albanians active in the Titoist Partisans. The majority had been affiliated with the defeated and exiled independent nationalist Balli Kombetar movement. There were Cham Partisans, as Enver Hoxha noted in his account of Albanian-Greek relations *Two Friendly Peoples* but they were few in number and in the chaotic military situation in Epirus as the Axis power disintegrated, other Chams fought in the Greek Communist resistance army ELAS and a few subsequently in later stages of the Greek Civil War in the Communist Democratic Army. The small number of Kosova Albanian partisan fighters, of whom the most prominent, Fadil Hoxha was later leader of the League of Communists in Kosova had to overcome the difficult inheritance of ethnic Albanian participation in Kosova in the Nazi SS 'Skanderbeg Division' which was used against the Montenegrin Partisans in the last stage of World War II. In Kosova the most capable ethnic Albanian Partisan military leader, Colonel Qemal Brovina threw in his lot in 1948 with those

who were in favour of the Russian line over the Cominform and he was arrested by Tito's secret police and imprisoned in Goli Otok labour camp in the Adriatic^v.

In 1945, the Albanian communists inherited this difficult patrimony^{vi}. It was a narrative of cultural and literary presence in the West, and through the researches of early travelers like Mary Edith Durham also an anthropological presence, just as the dominant narrative of Serbia in the English-speaking world was (and remained) military, 'the guardians of the gate' as the title of R.G.Laffan's interwar book indicates^{vii}. It had been preceded by numerous more or less propagandistic works about British-Serbian relationships in the World War I period. An indicative title is that of Herbert Vivian's 'Serbia – The Poor Man's Paradise'.^{viii} The difficulties of the Zog period and the collapse of the nation under pressure from Mussolini's fascist Italy compounded the difficulties for historians. There was little 'good' history to draw on in the twentieth century after the 1912 Declaration of Independence at Vlora. In terms of periodisation, there was an extended and very 'long' nineteenth century in the Albanian history, starting from around 1810 and the spread of knowledge of Ali Pasha, right through to the independence declaration in Vlora which was only gained well into the twentieth century in 1912. For British scholars focused on the origins and development of the Yugoslav national ideal, the period of the Albanian national revival, the Rilindja and independence, did not provide a single heroic 'founding father' figure to compare with Vuk Karadic in Serbian cultural history. Kosova Albanian heroes were fighters, activists, like Isa Bolletini and Hasan Prishtina, as indeed Skanderbeg himself had been. The writing of the great Prussian historian Leopold von Ranke established a similar pattern of perceptions in the German-language world, where his study of Serbian and Montenegrin emergence from the late-eighteenth century Ottoman and

Venetian worlds established the ‘heroic’ credentials of those nationalities as the major factors in the post-Napoleonic Balkans.^{ix}

In the years after the Treaty of Versailles and the seizure of power by Ahmet (later King) Zog, little substantial historical writing was produced in Albania. The historical tradition was still primarily oral; this was also the case in much of newly-established Yugoslavia. It was the time of the folk-epic collection work of Albert Lord, Milman Parry and others, and the epic works transcended modern national boundary formation, as Parry’s collection among the Albanians of the modern Kosova-Montenegro- Serbian border region indicates. These epics were in a real sense, the history of the *ethnos* in the narrow Rankeian sense. The basic impetus of the new Communist government after 1945 was to put history, like the rest of society, on a ‘scientific’ basis. It was to be combined with the mass literacy campaigns – before 1939 only a tiny proportion of the population could read and write and secondary and higher education were non-existent outside a few more developed towns such as Korca and Shkoder, and to a degree, the capital Tirana. In rural and mountain areas, illiteracy was more or less universal. This campaign produced significant advances towards modernity in some fields. In developing higher education, after about 1955, in the key discipline for ancient history of archaeology there had been marked advances. They built upon the pre-war efforts of foreigner archaeologists like Ugolini at Butrint and Leon Rey at Apollonia which were taken over by a new generation of indigenous scholars, like Hasan Pollo. This research was focused on the objective of reinforcing the Illyrian origins of the Albanian people, and their origins.^x It thus, in many ways, marked the arrival of the modern national issues in Albanian intellectual traditions. The work can perhaps be compared to laying foundation stones for a large building, that being the construction of a continuous linear narrative of Albanian activity and achievement. The Illyrians were co-opted

into the 'heroic ideal' of communism in the Albanian present, with all the usual implications of an *ethnos* fighting external colonisation from Greece and Rome. But of course, little is known about many aspects of Illyrian society, and they left few literary remains. Thus they contributed substantially to the making of the heroic- but partly mythical - image of the Albanian past, and some prominent figures in the classical and immediately pre-classical world, like King Pyrrhus of Epirus, were designated proto-Albanians. Pyrrhus is important symbolically, as his past was also one of resistance to foreign invasion and guardianship of the home territory, a key political theme for the Albanian communists throughout their period of rule from 1945 until 1990. The communist regime can be said to have had some real success in this, and nowadays Albanian education has accepted these 'discoveries' as part of the received national wisdom and is wholly uncontroversial. The narrative of the communists has in many ways become the national narrative even under the long periods of rightist government of Dr Sali Berisha in the post-communist period. It is perhaps indicative that the large standing statue of the heroic Partisan liberating the city in central Tirana has survived the Berisha period without disturbance, while virtually all Party of Labour originated monuments elsewhere have been demolished, including all statues of Enver Hoxha himself. The Partisans with their local heroic images have remained embedded in an honourable way in the historical writing and public historical art and iconography/practice. The bitter disputes about the efforts of the first Berisha government between 1992 and 1996 to modernize the exhibitions in the National Museum in Tirana about the Second World War also illustrate the situation. This is certainly not true of other periods of national history, as demonstrated by the distinguished author Ismail Kadare's disparaging view of the entire Ottoman period of Albanian history. When the Turkish government in 1996 paid for

the erection of a statue in central Tirana to a prominent Pasha involved in the founding of the Ottoman town, the city council was widely criticized for allowing it.

In Kosova and Former Yugoslav/Republic of Macedonia the situation with historical writing was quite different. Here since 1990, the history of the World War II period has been entirely changed, so that in an important town like Tetovo, only what could be termed the 'Ballist' narrative exists in school teaching and new textbooks, and recently produced local studies by Macedonian Albanian historians almost exclusively embody the Ballist narrative. In Gostivar and elsewhere in western FYROM/Republic of Macedonia Partisan statues have been extensively vandalized and often demolished. The Partisan tradition here, as in much of Kosova, is seen by the Albanians as 'slavocommunist', where race, ethnicity and a Marxist outlook are conflated together. In using this term, Albanian nationalists on the political Right seem unaware that they are using a term that was coined in Metaxas's national-chauvinist Greece; the transfer of meaning from the archaeological discoveries about ancient Illyria to historical writing has also been difficult.

At the heart of communist practice was the search for 'good' national history, as indicated above. The 'good' embodied the 'heroic'. Ancient history had been transformed by the archaeologists from 'bad' – ancient Greek imperialism and Roman conquest – to 'good' where there were now glimpses of an indigenous 'Illyrian' world – although the exact connection with modern Albanians is tenuous, in some eyes. But late antiquity and the medieval period was often obscure, with only glimpses of an Albanian people of any kind. The period of Skanderbeg was followed by the so-called 'Ottoman yoke'. Scientific archaeology was perhaps the most lasting inheritance of the early communist period. It altered the balance of the entire narrative, as it validated the classical world in Albania where the Greek and Roman glories of a site like Butrint

were actually physically constructed on top of ancient Illyrian walls. This appealed to Enver Hoxha and his associates – Albania was surrounded by hostile neighbours, particularly Greece, who often sought to denigrate the ancient Illyrian heritage and this was and still is linked in some Greek extremist minds to irredentist ambitions to annex parts of southern Albania. If the ancient past was also Illyrian, as well as Greek and Roman, Albania was more secure as a state. Thus when the nationalist story of other Balkan nations like Croatia was also founded on ‘Illyrianism’, elsewhere it was part of a nineteenth century narrative that was later substantially modified and Illyrian aspects either diluted or abandoned altogether by the Versailles Treaty period, in Albania it was not properly constructed on a rational basis until after 1945. And archaeology, unlike linguistics, is also a widely popular subject of study outside academies and universities, and hence links with the popular discourses of national identity building in way linguistics does not. There are hundreds of programmes on European and American television every year inspired by archaeological discovery, but few or none concerned with language sciences.

How were these gaps and elisions overcome? School history teaching and textbooks were an immediate problem. In the absence of a functioning university in Tirana for some years after 1945, the issues of higher education history teaching were pressing. After the break with Tito in 1948, positive images of Yugoslavism, in the widest sense, were removed from the curriculum. A ‘Greek’ dimension, however, was retained. Archaeological discoveries meant that it was impossible to neglect the role of classical Greek colonization in bringing urbanism and ‘civilisation’ to the southern Albanian lands. But perhaps more important was the role of Albanians in the Greek War of Independence. This provided heroic images for the young of Albanian participation (Albanian leadership in some places, as on islands like Hydra and Spetses, or parts of southern Epirus) in the struggle for Greek independence and thus the wider

anti-Ottoman struggle. The images were also conveniently traditional e.g. of fighting men (or woman as with the Arvanitika naval heroine Bobalina on the Saronic Gulf Island of Spetses) with weapons in hand fighting a foreign occupier. For Hoxha and the communists it was very usable history. The heroic had entered the modern nationalist narrative. Yet even in this period there were difficulties. The towering figure of Ali Pasha poses problems for Albanian historiography. He was undoubtedly 'Albanian' in his general culture, yet he was also an Epirote who spoke good Greek and was an overbearing tyrant and oppressor of the people. Even in the 1990's it was possible to see derelict settlements in southern Albania that had never been rebuilt after the wars between the *Beys* in his period of rule and its chaotic aftermath.

In Hoxhaist pedagogy a very authoritarian method was adopted, of 'top down' national 'enlightenment'. A 'question and answer' format was adopted in school history teaching, and pupils learned by rote. There were 'right' and 'wrong' answers on all historical problems, and evidence-based debate was not encouraged. Debate in higher education was also rare, even in Tirana University, once it was established, and objective historical research, other than in archaeology, did not exist. The answers were often as limited as the questions, and some aspects of the early communist period history textbooks have a catechismic quality that might be seen as more redolent of religious instruction than normal history teaching. It could, of course, be observed that this was not new in Albanian culture, or a product of Marxist-Leninist or Enverist political priorities. The famous saying of nineteenth century nationalists that 'the true religion of Albanians is being an Albanian' encapsulates this neatly. The understanding of historical study involved is thus in some senses Hegelian, the unfolding of an Albanian national spirit, which has distinct religious connotations. Archaeology became the practical theology of the national

history. With linguistics, it was crucial in establishing scientifically the Illyrian foundation of the national narrative.

It is also a profoundly elitist perspective, for the national spirit might be in everyone's heart but it was not in their intellectual capacity. Educated intermediaries were needed. Before 1945 they hardly existed. In the Zogist period, school education had been confined to tiny urban elite, mostly in Tirana, Shkoder, Korca and Elbasan. Under Hoxha, a mass literacy campaign was spread over the whole country, modeled in many ways on what happened in Russia after the Bolshevik revolution, or in China after 1949. In terms of popular historical understanding, oral tradition remained very important, as elsewhere in the Balkans, so little children in school learned how to write down the words of songs they had already learned at their grandmother's knee. A unified and developed narrative of cultural and linguistic history was once again called upon to reinforce national consciousness and cover problems in the political and military past. But of course this oral tradition was that of 'the Albanians', not of post-1912 'Albania'. The Albanian Party of Labour became the intermediary that interpreted the national historical spirit after 1945, and would brook no opposition to their interpretations, but the survival of major oral historical tradition softened their understanding of their role, for, after all, figures such as Skanderbeg and Isa Bolletini were heroes to all Albanians, as the massive statue of the latter which was constructed in the communist period in the generally anti-communist northern city of Shkoder indicates.

Thus the view of the communist intellectuals after 1945 on many historical and cultural issues was indistinguishable from that of most of the people, however much many of the

people disliked the imposition of communism itself. This may help to explain what to many foreign observers has been the survival of the Hoxha dictatorship for much longer than might have been expected in the period of general crisis for East European communist regimes after about 1980 that culminated in the dramatic collapses of 1989-1990. It also help explain difficulties in the national historiography that still exist. The communists had no problem with the cultural history; in fact they used it cleverly for their own purposes. It was soon supplemented by military history which after about 1950 soon became very important. It also reflected a narrowing of outlook, a rejection of Panalbanianism in the depiction of the national question. For the Party of Labour, military history, almost exclusively that of the Partisans in World War II narrowed the focus onto Albania, and eventually excluded the Kosova and other neighbouring Albanians to an extraordinary extent, so that later editions of the official 'History of the Albanian Party of Labour' do not mention Kosova at all. The history of the Albanians in the Balkans generally became constricted and displaced into the history of only Albania itself. The narrative was always dominated by local warfare and resistance against external rule, particularly Ottoman, of course. The communist Partisan resistance to Axis occupation in World War II was seen as the only legitimate inheritor of this tradition. Yet it could not be a substitute for a coherent national narrative covering much earlier periods, and above all the twentieth century historical experience of the Albanians who until the Balkan Wars (1912-1913) had lived together in the Ottoman system without divisions from new national boundaries. In the communist textbooks, there were many, many omissions.

What was deliberately elided, as periods with few of no 'heroic' aspects? There is one major period. This is late antiquity and Byzantium. Hoxha and his associates were at ease

with the archaic world and classical antiquity, as indicated above, and the 'Illyrian' origins of some later Roman emperors were also useful. But then difficulties arose. Byzantium was an uncomfortable entity for the Albanian nationalist and Marxist intellectuals. It was a transnational empire with Greek as its main language, Orthodox Christianity as not only the main religion but centrally embodied in the state structures as well as the ideological state apparatus. In Byzantium, the Illyrians successors in late antiquity and in the early medieval period, the proto-Albanians, are virtually invisible. Modern Byzantine scholarship that often emphasizes the contradictions and diversity within Byzantium and the less than totalizing role of the Greek language was not yet in existence. Although the word 'Albanian' first appears in a Byzantine chronicle, we know little about who these people really were. The scholarly work of Alain Ducellier in France and numerous historians in Albania has now changed this, but his discoveries were not available to Albanian historians until after about 1960. It is also the case that Ducellier was one of the founders of the history of the Adriatic, as much as the history of Albania. His Albania and Albanians are a coastal people, rather than a mountain people, and this is important in discussion of some issues involving the formation and construction of the modern national identity. The central issue with Byzantium after 1945 for Albanian intellectuals was that it was 'Greek' in a very specific sense, when the role of the Orthodox inheritance of the mostly southern believers was difficult for Hoxha and Party of Labour to handle. Many Orthodox believers had fought as patriotic Albanians against the Axis occupiers and some had been Partisan heroes and heroines. Many southern families included family members who were practicing Orthodox Christians and also members of the Party of Labour. They came from the only part of Albania, the south, where there was active and significant popular support for communism, unlike in particular the Roman Catholics concentrated in the city of Shkoder and

the north west. Some members of the Greek Minority had also become active communists, both at local level in the Minority area in the south-west, and a few in the higher organs of the Party of Labour. But Greece itself under its monarchist government after the end of the Civil War in 1949 was a prime enemy of Albania, and a state of war technically existed between the two countries (and still does at the time of writing). Albania had harbored Greek refugees after the defeat of the Democratic Army in 1949 as well as providing various forms of practical assistance while the Civil War conflict had been in progress. Cham refugees had flooded into southern Albania after 1944 and to the general population were a reminder of the evils of Greek nationalism and irredentism.^{xi}

Other periods provided little useful history, from the point of view of the Enverists, but this did not stop the manufacture of historical concepts of dubious validity. The feudal (if that is not an outmoded word) kingdoms of Arber did certainly exist, but in what sense they were Albanian (or 'Kingdoms', or 'Feudal') is often unclear. The concept is derived from the canonic status of the writings of George Ostrogorski in the Albanian (and much other East European) history writing of the period^{xii}. The officially approved historians of the Hoxha period, Arben Puto and Stefanaq Pollo base their views of the period on Ostrogorski and in a particularly uncritical way. In the Ottoman period the history of the Albanian elite under the Empire with their effective assimilation and use of the Turkish language means that their history is part of that of the Ottoman world itself, while in the Albanian lands most of the literary production rests on oral tradition and practice to an exclusive degree.

Thus Albanian historiography in the current period is faced with many unresolved issues, perhaps the most important being the ambiguities about how far the history of the Albanians within the current state boundaries really is independent from that of kinship Albanians in the

neighboring states, and the wider history of the neighboring states in general^{xiii}. It has taken much longer for the Balkan nations that had communist governments to resolve these complex issues than might have been expected, just as it has taken much longer than might have been expected in 1990 for the region to evolve towards stable independent democracies.

ⁱ See the volume produced by the Centre for Democracy and Reconciliation in South East Europe with EU funding, 'Clio in the Balkans The Politics of History Education', Ed. Koulouri.C., Thessaloniki,2002

ⁱⁱ See 'A History of Albanian Literature' Mann. R., London, 1971, and 'History of Albanian Literature, Elsie.R,' Boulder, 1995, and the work of other historians of the literary tradition.

ⁱⁱⁱ For interesting observations on these issues as seen from Central Europe, see 'Albanische Geschichte Stand und Perspektiven der Forschung' Ed. Schmitt.O and Frantz. E. ,Munchen, 2009. For the standard narrative as made in Tirana in the Hoxhaist period, see 'The History of Albania From its Origins to the Present Day' by Pollo.S and Puto.A (with the collaboration of Frasher.K and Anamali.S), London, 1981

^{iv} See Entstehung und Ausbau der Konigsdiktatur in Albanien (1912-1939), Schmidt-Neke.M., Munchen, 1987 for an excellent account of how Zog seized power, and 'King Zog Self Made Monarch of Albania' Tomes. J., Stroud, 2003.

^v For a general discussion of the Kosova Albanian informal warfare tradition, and its relationship to the Yugoslav Partisans, see 'The Kosova Liberation Army Underground War to Balkan Insurgency 1948-2001', Pettifer. J., London and New York City, 2012.

^{vi} For Enver Hoxha's general outlook on the historical context, see 'Laying the Foundations of the New Albania', Hoxha.E.,Tirana, 1984

^{vii} Ref.' The Serbs- Guardians of the Gate', Laffan.R.G., Oxford, 1918

^{viii} Ref.'Servia The Poor Man's Paradise', Vivian.H., London, 1897

^{ix} See 'Servia, Bosnia and the Slave Provinces', Ranke. L von , London, 1953

^x The best analysis of the role of archaeology in the communist and post communist period in Albanian national self-definition is in 'Epirus Vetus The Archaeology of a Late Antique Province' by William Bowden (London, 2003). Bowden as a practising archaeologist had worked for several years after 1992 on the excavations at Butrint, and gives a cogent account of the contradictions in the classical tradition, and between Greek and Albanian nationalism.

^{xi} For these and other issues, see the innovative work of Beqir Meta, in 'Albania and Greece The Elusive Peace 1949-1990, (Tirana, 2007), and other works.

^{xii} See Ostrogorski.G, 'History of the Byzantine State, New Brunswick, 1986. Also Ducellier.A, Chapter in 'The Cambridge History of the Byzantine Empire' Vol 1. Ch 26, 'Balkan Powers, 'Albania, Serbia, Bulgaria (1200-1300), For a cogent modern account of Byzantine society, see 'The Byzantines', Cameron. A. ,Blackwell, Oxford,2006

^{xiii} For a discussion of this problem in the development of Montenegrin and other regional history, see 'The Enigma of Montenegrin History The Example of Svac', Cameron. A and Pettifer.J, in 'South Slav Journal', London, Vol 28 No 1-2, July 2008