

HISTORICAL COMMEMORATIVE MONUMENTS IN PUBLIC SPACE DURING THE PERIOD OF STATE SOCIALISM IN ALBANIA (1945-1990)

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Abstrakt

The monumental plastic art produced during the period of State socialism in Albania (1945–1990), beyond its commemorative role of honoring important events and figures that left their mark on the old and modern national history, was primarily intended to be used by the monist State of the time in the service of its momentary ideological interests and affirmations.

Keywords: *historical commemorative monumentalism, State socialism, political noumenalism.*

Introduction

During the period of State socialism in Albania (1945 - 1990), the ruling party regime sought by any possible promotional, selective and discriminatory propagandistic means to construct what is known as a *genius loci* - the spirit of a nation. Assuming the characteristics of a political sect, the communist ruling class, rather than illuminating and affirming the Albanian people's tradition of freedom and independence, instrumentalized it, or in some cases even invented it¹, in order to legitimize its power and immediate interests through myths, rites, events, figures, and symbols from the past.

In his work *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World*, the German historian and political theorist Eric Hobsbawm analyzes Eastern State socialism as a system of hopes and beliefs bearing the characteristics of a secularized religion, and ranks it among the religions of the 20th century, a period which, for this historian, constituted *an era of religious wars, despite the fact that the most militant and blood-thirsty religions were in fact the secular ideologies developed during the 20th century, namely socialism and nationalism, whose idols were ideological abstractions and political figures venerated as deities* (Hobsbawm, 1994, p. 650).

The manipulation of Albanian history, both *old* and *new*, of dates, facts, and well-known national figures who had left their mark in different historical periods, formed part of a broader mechanism whereby every value of the past and the present was instrumentalized, affirmed or denied according to the interests of the doctrine in general, and, in particular, according to

¹ The term *the invention of tradition* was coined by the German historian and political theorist Eric Hobsbawm, who states that "*in the religion of politics, as in any traditional religion, some form of the invention of tradition is always present*". - Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World*, Penguin Group, UK, 1994, p. 650.

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sudden and abrupt shifts in the opposite direction. Communist totalitarian political terror, originating in Jacobin terror against opponents and even close collaborators, and later elevated into a legitimate criminal system by Stalin, was copied and implemented in post-war Albania by the ruling dictator Enver Hoxha. The manipulative fate of evaluation, promotion, and glorification, alongside oblivion, desecration, or even annihilation, would befall not only this dictator's collaborators, but also the entire long list of prominent historical figures from both Albania's distant and recent past.

The spirit of the nation was sought to be reintroduced onto the stage through an ideological - political filtering process applied to the most significant events in history and to its most emblematic figures across time. Careful State selection highlighted, for its own purposes, only certain events and only certain distinguished personalities who, according to the ruling party-state, were deemed worthy of the respect and attention of the era.

The heroic figure of Gjergj Kastrioti Skanderbeg was the most prominent, for the indisputable reason of his national and international importance. Perhaps also because the ruling party needed to reactivate the legendary myth of *the small one who does not fear the great* in the contemporary political context of Albania in the 1960s, a period in which the country had declared an open ideological war against the two world superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union. Besides this reason, the iconization of Skanderbeg's figure also served the interests of the leader himself, Enver Hoxha, who, with care and diplomacy, sought to self-identify and align himself symbolically and metaphorically with this medieval leader who led the Albanians in their struggle against a great empire.

Development

Ideological projection of the urban modernization of traditional cities

The end of World War II left several of Albania's principal cities in a grave urban and architectural condition, particularly the country's capital, Tirana. This was the result of the deterioration and the interruption of investments following the capitulation of Fascist Italy, and, finally, the destructive military developments that accompanied the withdrawal of German occupying forces. Once the initial emergency phase had been overcome, in the years immediately following the war the ruling communist authorities placed the reconstruction and urban modernization of the inherited cities at the center of their major undertakings. The first urban plans were drafted with the assistance of foreign specialists from the Eastern socialist bloc, particularly Bulgarian and Soviet experts.

These designs extended to a broad urban scale, encompassing the expansion of cities toward their peripheries, interventions within existing neighborhoods, and the transformation of historic city centers. As for this urban territory, namely, the historically inherited city centers, the urban requalification projects aimed for modernization to be not merely urbanistic and architectural in nature, but also political and ideological. Special attention was devoted to the affirmation of a new, specific urban language as a representation of the new State system; it not only had to be distinct from the previous one, but also its staunch opponent.

In the service of this aim, the main attack was directed at two urban-architectural formations of the past: the traditional old bazaars and religious buildings. This was because they represented private property, free trade, and religious belief - institutions which, symbolically, on the ideological, moral, and economic levels, stood in opposition to the State-controlled economy and the atheist doctrine.

With the idea of urban space as a paradigm, and of the city center as the representative face of power, interventions consisted of the demolition and destruction of buildings belonging to these two typologies, and their replacement with new, modern constructions bearing socialist State characteristics, such as palaces of culture, cinema-theatres, telecommunications post

offices, hotel-tourism complexes, party committees and so on. These large-scale interventions in the centers and squares of existing Albanian cities also resulted in their urban, political and economic rupture from the historical past.

However, the monist state, in its effort to complete the retouching of this new socialist urban face, also found it expedient to preserve certain links with the country's historical past. History, always politically selected, was presented within these urban spaces through the erection, alongside new buildings, of numerous statues, monuments, and commemorative memorials, as well as through the naming of State institutions, streets, and public squares after figures deliberately brought back into prominence.

The first statues and monuments erected after the war in the squares of Albanian cities were generally gifts of the Soviet political presence and the deification of its dominant figures. Statues and busts of Vladimir Lenin, and especially the numerous ones of Joseph Stalin, were installed since the early years of socialism and continued to reign on their pedestals until the end of the system, in the early 1990s. Similarly, a large number of commemorative memorials scattered throughout public spaces were erected to mark the many events of the antifascist National Liberation resistance, as well as numerous busts of heroes and martyrs who fell in this war.

During the years of socialist modernization, the State's particular care brought to the forefront events and heroes primarily of the *new history of Albania*. The National Liberation War, described by contemporary party propaganda as an *epic washed in blood* or as the *Albanians' principal war for freedom*, and the heroes who fell in this struggle, portrayed as *martyrs who sacrificed the most precious thing, their very lives, for the sacred communist ideal*, were monumentalized at the very centers of the newly redesigned urban spaces of the time.

The ritual of honoring and commemorating these martyr-heroes of the sacred binomial of *communist ideal* and *homeland* was conducted according to a liturgical protocol that rivaled, replaced, and lacked nothing in comparison with the theological - religious one of the past. Thus, placed at the heart of cities were: in Shkodra, the Five Heroes of Vigu; in Gjirokastra, the busts of Persefoni Kokëdhima and Bule Naipi; in Berat, Margarita Tutulani; in Durrës, the statue of Mujo Ulqinaku; in Vlora, the Independence Monument; in Tropoja, the statue of Bajram Curri; in Kukës, the bust of Shote Galica; and so forth.

Recycling of the monumental urban syntax of Tirana's central square

The monumental sculpture of the Albanian capital, particularly within its most representative spaces, such as (still today) *Skanderbeg Square* and "*Dëshmorët e Kombit*" (*Nation's Martyrs*) *Boulevard* also served to reinforce this ideological aim of affirmation. In the early postwar years (specifically on 8 November 1951, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of Albania), the statue of Joseph Stalin, depicted in military uniform, was installed in *Skanderbeg Square*. The work of the Soviet sculptor Sergey Merkurov Tomsy, the monumentalization of this iconic figure in the city's principal urban space was intended to clearly signal the country's new political orientation, and to testify to the servility and doctrinal veneration of the *cult of the individual* by the regime of Enver Hoxha.² (**fig. 1**)

This monument remained in the square for a long period even after the vilification of Stalin and his cult by Nikita Khrushchev in 1956 at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The statue was replaced only in 1968, several years after Albania severed ties with the Soviet communist superpower. On the occasion of the commemoration of

² In the documentary film chronicles of the time, the construction of this monument was presented as a major event testifying to the veneration of Joseph Stalin as "...the dearest name to our hearts. To dear Stalin, the Albanian people have erected a monument in the heart of the homeland, in Tirana, as a sign of gratitude, precisely on 8 November 1951, a date that coincided with the tenth anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of Albania".

the 500th anniversary of the death of Albania's national hero Gjergj Kastrioti Skënderbeu, the jubilee week of celebrations opened on 11 January 1968 (precisely the anniversary of Albania's proclamation as a People's Republic) with the grandeur of the inauguration by Hoxha himself of the equestrian monument dedicated to Skanderbeg. The authors of this monumental work were the three most prominent figures of Albanian sculpture of the time, belonging to the generation educated in European academies before the war: Odhise Paskali, Janaq Paço, and Andrea Mano (*fig. 2*)

Fig. 1.

The monument to Joseph Stalin, a work by the Soviet sculptor Sergey Merkurov Tomsky, installed in Skanderbeg Square in November 1951.



Fig. 2.

The equestrian monument to Albania's National Hero Gjergj Kastrioti Skënderbeu, installed in the square bearing his name in 1968, on the occasion of the commemorations marking the 500th anniversary of his death.



The statue of Joseph Stalin was relocated further down the boulevard, positioned along the edge of *Rinia Park* and facing a monument to another leader of international communism, Vladimir Lenin (a work by the Albanian sculptor Kristina Hoshi). This replacement of the monument to the Soviet hero Stalin with that of Albania's national hero Gjergj Kastrioti Skanderbeg appears to be linked to several reasons.

First, it was related to the profound political changes that occurred in Albania's relations with the Soviet Union and the severance of ties with it. *Second*, following Nikita Khrushchev's denunciation of the crimes of Stalinist terror, Stalin's figure no longer possessed its former aura within the international left. *Third*, the continued official defense of Stalin by the Albanian leadership and its reluctance to condemn his crimes were not connected to any alleged *Albanian pledge of honor* that could not be broken (as propaganda claimed), but rather to the very political survival of the cult of Enver Hoxha and his close circle of collaborators.

For Enver Hoxha, condemning Stalin's crimes would have amounted to turning the accusation against himself, as he could have been criticized for the same paranoid and ruthless application of the class struggle, for internments, and for the political prisons that were in no way inferior to the Stalinist models of the gulags. The only path to political survival was to oppose Khrushchev ideologically and politically, in the name of the purity of Marxist - Leninist dogma and the defense of the system of State socialism.

It is precisely in this narrow personal interest that one should understand the insistence of the leader Enver Hoxha to withdraw from the Warsaw Pact and enter into open conflict with the greatest military superpowers of the time. Similarly, it was precisely during this period that a new line of party-state propaganda emerged, aiming to construct the image of an *invincible Albania*. Although Hoxha himself - aware of what had happened to the cult of Joseph Stalin - was very careful not to allow excessive, direct glorification of his own image (Qëndro, 2010), he nevertheless, encouraged in a sophisticated manner the rise of a generalized cult of the *brave, loyal, visionary, and infallible Albanian leader*, once again bringing to the forefront, more gloriously than ever, the figure of Gjergj Kastrioti Skanderbeg.

The iconography of memory and oblivion has accompanied the figure of this national hero for centuries. Even this Albanian historical value of international stature, universally exalted throughout time, has not escaped periodic and deliberate instrumentalization within the country, for these specific reasons:

1- *Nation-forming*, as occurred at the end of the 19th century with the revival by our Renaissance (or Awakening) intellectuals of popular memory surrounding Skanderbeg. This medieval Albanian leader was brought back onto the historical stage after centuries of oblivion in order to awaken national consciousness and shape a new national identity, with the aim of breaking away from the Ottoman Empire, creating the Albanian state, and achieving national unification, as once *under the banner of Gjergj Kastrioti*;

2- *State-forming*, as in the case of King Zog I during the 1930s, who sought to build the modern Albanian state by reviving the early Arbër medieval reign of Skanderbeg;

3- *Ideologizing*, as the communist regime of Hoxha similarly used the figure of Skanderbeg as a symbol of contemporary Albanian resistance to the external imperialist-revisionist threat of the time.

In this new construction imposed upon Skanderbeg's image by the communist political power, *he was interpreted not only as the founder of the Albanian state and supreme military commander, but also as a revolutionary leader for his time*, as noted by the Polish Albanologist Agata Rogosh (Rogosh, 2016). Left isolated in the 1960s, with only a geographically distant ally such as Mao Zedong's China, the Albanian communist regime understood that it needed to promote the idea of the *invincible Albanian leader*, capable of successfully confronting an absurd situation in which a small country challenged the greatest superpowers of the era.

And where could propaganda find a better example in Albanian history than the glorious age of Skanderbeg? The parallels were evident: it was not the first time Albanians had successfully defied a superpower, and one of the reasons lay in the fact that they were then led by a brilliant, courageous, and capable leader such as Skanderbeg. The allusion was clear: in a similar situation of external threat, Albanians once again needed an equally brilliant, brave, and capable leader, under whose leadership the miracle of Albania's successful confrontation with the superpowers of the time would be repeated.

The historian Eric Hobsbawm defines as *political sacralization* the propagandistic process through which totalitarian regimes maintain ties with the past by presenting themselves as its legitimized continuation, through the staging of *a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past* (Hobsbawm, 1994, p. 454).

This is also why the statue of Skanderbeg in the square conveys the image of the Leader marching at the front of the army, proud, victorious, undisturbed by danger, with the confident stride of one who knows that Albania and history follow behind him. This impression is reinforced by his placement at the head of the flower garden leading into the boulevard meaningfully named "Dëshmorët e Kombit" Boulevard, the widest and largest in all Albanian

cities, and the preferred space for the organization of military parades. The mythic figure of the national hero thus served the communist leadership at that time more than ever as a vehicle for transmitting the symbolism of a brave small country that opposed and resisted the superpowers of the era.

But, within this trumpeted propaganda that drew parallels between these two historical leaders, a fundamental problem remained: Skanderbeg had fought to make Albania part of Western Europe, whereas Hoxha and his regime had openly turned their backs on - and even declared doctrinal war against - that very Europe. The political switch of monuments in the square, i.e., the replacement of the ideological figure of Stalin with the national figure of Skanderbeg, despite the awkward proximity it created with the Et'hem Bey Mosque in the background, altered nothing to the iconography or the content of the square's urban space, which continued to be used increasingly in the service of communist power rather than its citizens (Qëndro, 2010).

The ceremonial platform for the funeral rites of Enver Hoxha was erected in April 1985 (*fig. 3*) precisely there, in front of Skanderbeg's monument, exploiting the symbolic charge of eternal glory that it conveyed. Politically, however, this was no longer a matter of an implied parallel between the two figures. The power, upon the death of the communist leader, openly declared its historical positioning. As Ramiz Alia stated in his funeral oration, Albanians that day were *burying the most outstanding man ever born in their land*," thus clearly establishing the supremacy henceforth of Hoxha's ideological icon over Skanderbeg's national one (Qëndro, 2010).

Fig. 3.

Moment from the funeral ceremony escorting the communist leader Enver Hoxha to his burial on 21 April 1985, held in front of the monument of Skanderbeg.



Therefore, immediately after Hoxha's death, a colossal monument to his figure was swiftly conceived and realized, commissioned to be larger than Skanderbeg's equestrian monument and any other figure in Albanian monumental sculpture up to that point, cast in bronze with golden tint so as to shine intensely under the rays of the sun (*fig. 4*).

Fig. 4.

"Monument to Enver Hoxha", a work by the artists Sali Shijaku and Shaban Hadëri, installed in Skanderbeg Square in 1988.



This monument, with the butaforic plastic treatment of the broad forms of the clothing, which concealed and failed to decipher any biological bodily forms, reveals that it was conceived more as a representation of the political *noumenal* body of the immortal leader, rather than as a phenomenological depiction of Enver Hoxha's organic body. Through all its visual elements such as scale, silhouette, movement, schematism, and the lustrous texture of its surface, the statue asserted its hierarchical dominance within this civic urban space, where until then the monument to Skanderbeg had commanded attention. Its placement in the square as a complete volume, with its back turned to the West and its stride oriented toward the East, the numerous steps that visually led directly toward it (though physically more slowly, given their breadth); and the many red flags surrounding it in accompaniment (always lower in height), all reinforced its idealization and political instrumentalization in favor of communist dogma.

Scholars of totalitarianism Eric Voegelin and Emilio Gentile emphasize that the communist parties of totalitarian states, satellites of the USSR, functioned as national churches, headed by charismatic leaders whose political bodies - like those of medieval monarchs- were treated as embodying infallibility, justice, and eternity (Qëndro, 2016, p. 155). The charismatic leader and the cult of the individual represent the most prominent and widespread manifestation of the sacralization of politics. The history of totalitarian politics, much like the histories of sacred religions, cannot be understood without the political and mythical role played by charismatic leaders, who aroused enthusiasm, passion, belief, devotion, and the like, i.e., attitudes typical of religious movements.

Yet religion-politics should not be absolutized and regarded solely as product or deviation of individual charisma, nor reduced exclusively to the cult of the charismatic leader. According to Gentile, such an interpretation stems from an overly limited perspective. The religion of politics, he argues, are expressions of collective indoctrinations, collective spectacles, collective transformations, collective power, collective revolutions, and collective madness (Gentile, 2017, p. 268). Ironically, the fall of communism in Albania in 1990, a system that had attempted to rewrite the country's history by politically selecting it, including through monumental plastic art in public space, was foreshadowed by covert attacks precisely against some of these most typical political monumentalizations. Initially, the most targeted figure was Joseph Stalin, whose busts and monuments (scattered across the country) were subjected to spontaneous or organized attempts at destruction, including being blown up.

However, the event that unmistakably revealed the people's rejection - bordering on hatred - of the totalitarian communist regime was the toppling of Enver Hoxha's statue in Tirana

in February 1991. The historically and spatially uneasy coexistence between Skanderbeg's monument and Hoxha's statue came to an abrupt end that day, when exalted crowds descending from the *Student City* along the boulevard toward Skanderbeg Square spectacularly pulled down Hoxha's statue and, still scarcely believing their eyes, began to celebrate the simultaneous fall of the dictator and of the communist system (*fig. 5*).

Fig. 5.

Moment from the popular revolt and celebration following the toppling of the dictator Hoxha's statue on 11 February 1991, marking the fall of communism in Albania.



Conclusions

As suggested by the dynamics of events that unfolded in the capital's central square during the period of the socialist system in power (1945- 1990), the initial placement of Stalin's statue there for several years, followed by its removal to make way for the elevation of Skanderbeg's figure in the same location, served the monist State's aim of monumentalizing these two historical figures in accordance with its momentary political interests and affirmations.

In addition, the trajectory of deification and elevation of Enver Hoxha's monument (in the late 1980s), followed by its toppling and desecration in the same central square (in the early 1990s), clearly illustrates the momentary political treatment of this historical figure, on the one hand imbued with the delirious and narcissistic spirit of monist totalitarian typology, and on the other subjected to democratic popular judgment, or even anarchic crowd desecration.

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