



# Living and Surviving Communism in Albania

Review essay by **Enriketa Papa-Pandelejmoni**

Shannon Woodcock, *Life is War: Surviving Dictatorship in Communist Albania*, Tirana: HammerOnPress, 2016, 238 pp, \$22 (paperback), ISBN 1910849030

Margo Rejmer, *Mud Sweeter Than Honey: Voices of Communist Albania*, translated by Zosia Krasodomska-Jones and Antonia Lloyd-Jones, London: MacLehose Press, 2021, 320 pp, £18.99 (hardback), ISBN 978-1529411461



Thirty-one years after its fall, the history of communism still presents itself as one of the most polarizing and controversial themes in Albania. Today, as witnesses of communism are passing away, politicians, historians, and NGOs are trying to reconstruct a social memory. Public discourse and important debates demonstrate the changes in social consciousness related to the events of the communist past.

And as Maria Todorova has asserted, fewer and fewer people have immediate memories of communism.<sup>1</sup> But how do people understand their own lives in the light of remembering the past? What was communism about? How was life under communism? Were people free to live their lives under the dictatorship? Do they feel free today in postcommunist Albania? Can the past be relativized in the face of the many problems that the country faces today?

The two books under review here—by Australian historian Shannon Woodcock and Polish journalist Margo Rejmer—contribute to the public debates on what communism was and what came next in Albania. The experience of reading them was a throwback to my childhood years, as I was born in mid-1970s communist Albania. Many of the life stories shared in these books are strikingly similar to episodes in my own life, and all of them depict life under Comrade Enver Hoxha, the communist leader of Albania from 1945 to 1985.

Shannon Woodcock focuses on the lives of ordinary people in communist Albania, having recorded the stories of more than two hundred people. She structures the book around the narratives of six ordinary individuals, three of whom are women (Mevlude, Diana, and Liliana). As a historian, she points out in the preface that the stories in her book were not sensational to Albanian readers. They simply detailed the



hunger, isolation, and oppression that every ordinary person, except privileged Party members, experienced in socialist Albania (6).

The peculiarity of the book lies precisely in the combination of historical analysis and the unfolding, through their narratives over the many hours that Woodcock spoke with them, of the stories and personal vicissitudes of individuals surviving the dictatorship, simply reflecting on the country's isolation and its extreme poverty compared even to other countries of the Eastern European Bloc. Through the personal stories of Thoma, Mevlude, Liliana, Diana, Riza, and Jeras, Woodcock sheds light on the daily routines and difficulties to survive in a context in which "life was war" (38) and the Party monitored through the Secret Police (*Sigurimi*) the lives of every individual (4).

Isolationist paranoia, emancipation, indoctrination, the reliance of the economy on the country's own efforts, and the formation of the New Man through the so-called "revolutionary triangle"—education, manufacturing work, and physical and military education (85)—are masterfully presented in the book through the details provided by the interviewees. The stories share life experiences of attending *zbor* (annual military training) (46, 72, 85) and *aksion* (community public service labor) (46, 85), reading *fletërrufe* (denunciation posters) (88), walking *xhiro* (the daily afternoon promenade) (117), standing in *rradha* (queues) (131), rationing food according to *talloni* (ration cards) (132), and using the TV's *kanoçe* (a small homemade tin-can transistor that enabled reception of foreign TV broadcasts) (133).

Through this routine, Mevlude Dema concluded only in 1991, after a visit to Germany and Hungary as part of a delegation of factory workers, that "her life was being a life without a meaning" (73). Diana Keçi, an English language teacher, after listening to the Voice of America (VOA) in 1991, understood the truths that were whispered in her home during communism, where even children understood that what was spoken at home should not be mentioned outside (84). Listening to the VOA's Elez Biberaj speak in Albanian, she realized that "this was the voice that had been telling the truth! I knew this voice so well. All those years when I had doubted both my father and the state, he was telling us the truth!" (85).

Hoxha's emancipation of women demanded that people be treated equally without discriminating against their ethnic or cultural differences. But in everyday life, as narrated by Liliana Majko, an English language teacher of Romani Albanian descent, prejudices against people like her were felt, despite the fact that Romani and Egyptian ethnic minorities were not persecuted politically as a class, because socialism was the dictatorship of the proletariat regardless of gender and ethnicity (110).

Life under communism, as archaeologist Professor Riza Hasa narrated to Woodcock, was organized with the Party at the center of all relations (137). The families of *deklasuar* (declassified) people, accused by the Party of being bourgeois kulaks and declassified by the state, were deported to remote villages to become supervised workers (139) in cooperatives. The lives of such declassified people were made hell, and in a country where even the "walls had ears" (142), people would call their cooperative a *gropative* (a *gropa* is a hole, so a *gropative* would be an organization that digs people's graves) and turn the *shtet* (state) into *pusht-et* (a derivation from *pusht*—a crook or womanizer) (142–143). In a country governed by this *pusht-et*, Prof. Hasa joked that once, when a teacher was telling his class how beautiful and great a country Albania

was, the best country in the world, with the happiest people, and that everything was in abundance, much more than everywhere else in the world, a kid started crying and wailed to the teacher, "I want to go to Albania!" (138).

This kind of everyday life experience, along with the oral stories of survivors of repression, prisons, and exile, are wonderfully combined in Margo Rejmer's book as well. Written in a light style for the reader, the book unfolds a broad picture of life in communist Albania (1945–1991), about which few in the outside world knew. The book reveals the untold histories of politically persecuted individuals and their memories of the time, but also those of ordinary people. It accurately documents the daily lives of Albanians during "the dictatorship of the proletariat," where, behind the façade of "building socialism with our own forces" and contrary to the lavish propaganda on the construction and emancipation of the New Man, stood the truth about the lack of freedom, about repression, victims, prisons, forced labor camps, and internment villages. Albania had been turned into a cage where nearly three million Albanians assembled the prefabricated socialist homeland. Life under communism was characterized by the standardization of everything: of clothing, construction, home furnishings. The system even tried the standardization of thoughts too, which were engraved, shaped, and locked in a frame according to the "Party line." Whoever tried to get out of the frame broke Law 55 for "agitation and propaganda," and would then have to pass through the ordeal of investigation, imprisonment, exile, and potentially execution as an "enemy of the people." In the name of the people's justice, over 6,027 Albanians were executed, with around 34,135 political prisoners and over 7,000 disappearing into forced labor camps. Over 1,000 political prisoners were never released from prison (27).

The life stories in the book reveal journeys of escalating violence, contempt, lies, brutality, and emptiness, punishments that communism inflicted right until its end. In chapter after chapter the reader is immersed in experiences of trauma, hunger, challenges, and struggles for survival, which contrast with the fake reality of slogans spread across the Socialist People's Republic of Albania. In 1967 the ruthless ruler annihilated religion, demolishing churches and mosques or converting them into sports arenas and warehouses. In 1976 Albania became the first officially atheist country in the world. "The philosophy of Marxism-Leninism was imposed on us," recalls the Catholic Sister Roza, "as people of communism we were all empty" (199).

The borders were shut; along the coastline and on every hillside across the country concrete bunkers were built to protect it against foreign enemies. The country's borders were encircled with barbed wire. Hoxha turned Albania into one "great big cage," proclaiming that "we'll eat grass before we bow to the pressure from foreign powers" (220).

As mentioned previously, even the walls had ears. The perpetrators could bug all houses, recalled Bibika Kokalari, the cousin of the famous Albanian writer Musine Kokalari. Musine was imprisoned in 1946 and suffered the humiliation of a public show trial under the same despotic regime that had murdered her brothers and then went on to keep her under surveillance and in internal exile for most of the remainder of her life. The nightmarish fear of being spied on conditioned Bibika's behavior such that she would be aware of any black car that passed, as it could be spying on her (215).

Rejmer's book, with oral histories on surviving oppression, fear, torture, and lack of freedom under communism, as well as the nostalgia and delusion that became widespread after the fall of communism, provides a detailed picture of how Albania has dealt with its painful past. It has been masterfully written in plain language, with a light touch and without any unnecessary complexity. This lightness of the language makes reading the book straightforward and pleasurable, while it unfolds the story of trauma, shock, and emptiness felt at the end of communism.

Both works reviewed here offer important insights for understanding communist Albania and its lack of freedoms, whether inside or outside prison. While Rejmer focuses primarily on the lives of people who have suffered persecution and the prisons of communism—where trauma, the psychosis of fear, and suffering prevailed—Woodcock's book also reflects the trauma and paranoia of the system through the narrative of gender policies. The socialist state waged war against the old customs and social structures of Albanian society (138) by replacing them with new gender relations and emancipatory policies. The socialist struggle meant gender equality and equal access to education, housing, and professional work for both genders and for everyone regardless of ethnicity (112). Nevertheless, there was a gulf between the reality of everyday life and the ideological rhetoric of equality (90). The state controlled the lives of women and men, courtship was chaste, contraception and abortion were illegal (102), and the deaths of many women as a result of botched abortions were not recorded in relation to childbirth or poverty, but to hemorrhaging or infections (103).

### ◆ About the Author

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### ◆ Notes

1. Maria Todorova, Augusta Dimou, and Stefan Troebst, eds., *Remembering Communism: Private and Public Recollections of Lived Experience in Southeast Europe* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2014), 2.