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## DEFINING THE INTERNAL ENEMY: DETENTION CAMPS IN EARLY COMMUNIST ALBANIA, 1945–1950

### INTRODUCTION

Albania is one of the former communist countries that has attracted little attention over the years. A few books<sup>1</sup> and studies have been published on the development of communism in Albania. One of the reasons has been its peculiar position within the socialist camp. The establishment of the regime was more a consequence of a combination of internal dynamics and the rapid degradation of its former rule from 1943 onward. Its communist party was taken under the wing of the Yugoslav one, yet it remained in the periphery of early communist Europe. It was not until the Tito-Stalin split that the country became a full member of the communist block. Yet, in what later became a fixture in the Balkans,<sup>2</sup> Albania left the Communist block disputing the Soviet Union's ideological purity of the communist doctrine. Its ideological alliance with China and later its isolation made it difficult for scholars to position it within the general frame of the Cold War in Europe. The aim of this paper is twofold, first to position early communist Albania within the general frame of communist Europe and second to analyse some of the features of the communist regime's establishment in the country, mainly looking at its repressive institutions like the labour and concentration camps, a normal fixture in post war Eastern Europe. As for the first part, the paper will provide an overview of the establishment of communism in Albania and the Stalinisation process. Following it will take to account post war relations

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<sup>1</sup> E. Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World* (Cornell University Press, 2018); B. Fevziu, E. Hoxha, *The Iron Fist of Albania* (I.B. Tauris, 2016); *Albanian Identities: Myth and History*, ed. S. Schwandner-Sievers, B.J. Fischer (Indiana University Press, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> On Albanian-Yugoslav relations see L. Krisafi, *Shqipëria dhe Jugosllavia 1945–1948. Mitet, faktet dhe dyshimet* (Naimi, 2017); on the Tito-Stalin split see I. Banac, *With Stalin against Tito* (Cornell University Press, 1988); on the Sino-Soviet and Albania split see E. Biberaj, *Albania and China: An unequal alliance* (Tirana: AIIS, 2015).

with Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. The second part will embark on explaining the camps system, trying to place them in the above-mentioned process. In doing so, my intention is to consider them as part of the repressive repertoire of the new regime trying to secure its power in the country and also to analyse them in the light of similar models elsewhere in Eastern Europe. In this sense the initial analysis of the communist regimes' expansion in Eastern Europe is useful not only in providing a comparative outlook, but also in seeking the peculiarities, such as in the Albanian case, each regime had in terms of repressive institutions. Moreover, the analysis we provide here covers what can be termed a transition period from the post war to the establishment of the communist regime. This is true when we take to account the Soviet military presence/liberation/occupation of the area, but also its absence as in the Yugoslavian and Albanian case, who despite it were able to establish communist regimes and where Soviet presence was limited, at least in the period we cover, 1944–1950. In short what we are trying to find out is to what degree did a country like Albania understand and absorb the Soviet model? Were its repressive institutions like forced labour and concentration camps part of Stalinisation or were they an internal feature of the indigenous communist regime? According to van der Gritt,<sup>3</sup> in post war Eastern Europe there was no master plan by the Soviet Union to implant its model. The period of transition between 1944–1945 and 1948 was an open struggle between the communist parties and several resistant sectors of Eastern European societies. In fact, as in the Albanian case the new regime presented itself under the guise of a National Front capable of rounding up several segments of the society, under the banner of anti-fascism. That meant, that the communists somehow shared power with other segments of the society while consolidating their grip on the country. That said it is important to note that this did not signify that there were no manifestation of the communists' intent to monopolise power, as mass arrests, political murders or show trials were a common feature of the post war Eastern Europe, but they entered in the logic of retribution rather than in that of a typical revolutionary model. The same logic applies to detention camps which were a common feature in early communist period.<sup>4</sup> Yet the discourse on the communist past only recently started thanks to the work of ISKK<sup>5</sup> (Institute for the Study of Crimes of Communism), the AIDSH<sup>6</sup> (Authority for the Information of Former Sigurimi Files in Albania).

<sup>3</sup> L. van der Gritt, "Political Transitions and Institutional Change: The Cases of Romania and the Soviet Zone of Germany, 1944–1948", *Comparativ. Zeitschrift für Globalgeschichte und Vergleichende Gesellschaftsforschung* 2014, vol. 24, pp. 35–49.

<sup>4</sup> Studies on forced labour camps include T. Todorov, *Voices from the Gulag: Life and Death in Communist Bulgaria*, trans. R. Zaretsky (University Park, PA: Penn State Press: 1999); C.E. Murdock, "A Gulag in the Erzgebirge? Forced Labor, Political Legitimacy, and Eastern German Uranium Mining in the Early Cold War, 1946–1949", *Central European History* December 2015, no. 47, pp. 791–821.

<sup>5</sup> The ISKK has published series of books containing interviews with former political detainees, including memories of former camp prisoners in the series as "Zërat e Kujtesës" [in:] *Zërat e Kujtesës*, vol. 1–4 (ISKK, Tirana, vol. 1, 2014, vol. 2, 2015, vol. 3, 2016, vol. 4, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> The Autoriteti për Informimin mbi Dokumentet e Ish-Sigurimit të Shtetit (hereinafter: AIDSSH) has also been active in organising several exhibitions and conferences on the matter which has culminated with the publication of a book of memories of former survivors from the Camp of Tepelena in "Kampi i Tepelenës: Dëshmitë e të Mbijetuarve", vol. 1 (Tirana: AIDSSH, 2018) and "Të Mohuar nga Regjimi: Burgjet dhe sistemet e internim-dëbimeve dhe puna e detyruar në Shqipëri në 1945–1990" (Tirana: AIDSSH, 2020).

Local researchers have also studied the camp and prison system in Albania. Sufaj<sup>7</sup> has written a comprehensive book on the prisons in Albania, since the foundation of the state, framing the communist period as part of the political history of the country. Dervishi on the other hand has focused his study specifically on the communist period in his book *Kampet dhe Burgjet në Shqipërinë Komuniste* (Camps and Prisons in Albania). While the book has the merit of being the first extensive research on such facilities, it lacks a concrete analysis either regarding existing theoretical research on the matter or a more detailed one in the specific case study. On the other hand, few contributions in English exist on the analysis of the memories of repression in Albania; here we can mention Lory Amy's<sup>8</sup> and Shannon Woodcock's<sup>9</sup> work on post traumatic memory in Albania.

Several efforts have been made to collect and propagate the memory of the victims<sup>10</sup> but yet no study has gone further than denouncing them as mere crimes, often absurd and unjustified, or the exercise of naked force. Indeed post-communist memory has stressed this aspect of the camps, often without making any periodisation or distinctions between historical periods and conjectures.<sup>11</sup> Early labour and concentration camps are seen as a mere beginning of an uninterrupted path to terror, attributing to the communist regime in Albania extensive capabilities to exercise power, while in the same time this regime depended heavily on external support and aid to keep itself afloat. Wrapping both arguments, the adoption of the Soviet model and the existence of the camps it is important to say that indeed the Albanian regime had the same problems as other communist ones in Eastern Europe. Camps, as we will see, were part of the system in the sense that they had several functions related to the path toward consolidation of the communist regime but also as instruments of transitional retributive justice.

## RETRIBUTIVE JUSTICE IN POST-WAR ALBANIA

Unlike in other countries in Eastern Europe, the communist path to power in Albania was not marked by any kind of foreign intervention, namely the Red Army. Indeed during World War II, the communists in Albania accomplished something that appears extraordinary in terms of speed. From scattered groups numbering a few members and with the help of Yugoslav experts, they transformed into a formally fully fledged party

<sup>7</sup> F. Sufaj, *Historia e burgjeve të Shqipërisë* (Tiranë: Albin, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> A. Lori, "Re-Membering in Transition: The Trans-National Stakes of Violence and Denial in Post-Communist Albania" [in:] *History of Communism in Europe*, vol. 1: *Politics of Memory in Post-Communist Europe* (Bucharest: Zeta Books, 2010), pp. 205–222.

<sup>9</sup> S. Woodcock, E. Cela, "Postmemory and Women's Displacement in Socialist Albania: Historical Methodologies as Response" [in:] *Women's Narratives and the Postmemory of Displacement in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. S. Mitroiu (Palgrave, 2018); S. Woodcock, *Life is War* (Hammeron Press, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> See for example "Kampi i Tepelenës: Dëshmitë e të Mbijetuarve, Edhe Muret kanë Veshë", vol. 1 (Tiranë: AIDSSH, 2018)

<sup>11</sup> Dervishi's book is the most extensive book to have covered the camps. While he makes some distinctions between structures, he does not provide an analytical account on the matter (K. Dervishi, *Kampet dhe Burgjet në Shqipërinë Komuniste* [Tiranë: ISKK, 2015]).

in November 1941.<sup>12</sup> From that point on they were able to herald the military opposition to Italian and German armies as well as crushing the opposition of the nationalist forces (Balli Kombëtar dhe Legaliteti).<sup>13</sup> Favoured by their inevitable opposition to the Axis, they became the main recipients of war aid from the allies, which gave them a considerable edge on their adversaries. The end of the war saw an apparent united front, dominated by the communists who followed the retreating Wehrmacht forces. Historians of Eastern Europe consider both Yugoslavia and Albania as the only countries where the communists gained power without foreign assistance, maintaining the internal origin of the later established dictatorship. While this is formally true, the Albanian regime was informally reliant on Yugoslav assistance. Delegates from the Yugoslav Communist Party were instrumental in establishing and assisting over the war period the Albanian Communist Party.<sup>14</sup> Post war Albania moreover gave up its pretensions over Albanian-inhabited Kosovo, which had been formally been part of it from 1941 to 1944. The alliance did was not simply one among fellow antifascist countries, but it developed also in the fashion of a quasi-protectorate by which the Yugoslav communists were able to exert enormous power in Albania. Thus the very first period of communist establishment coincided with what can be termed a Yugoslavisation or rather a Stalinisation distilled via the Yugoslav experience. Indeed the period was extremely short, but somehow it determined the course and venues of repression and foreign relations as well as the way the Albanian communists related to their domestic environment. Thus the labour and concentration camps were inevitably linked with the internal position of the communists and their relation vis a vis their political protector, Yugoslavia. Thus the repression of and the elimination of the nationalist elite was not simply determined by internal reasons but rather than by the process of Yugoslavisation, of which the final objective would have been the integration of the country in the frame of a post-war Federal Yugoslavia. Yugoslav instructors and constant contact with Belgrade placed the track over which the later, and more incisive Stalinisation process came into being. The Tito-Stalin split of 1948, led to a power struggle and a purge, which saw Koçi Xoxe, second in command to Hoxha, and a staunch ally of the Yugoslav communists succumb. From that moment on, Albania would enter into the fold of the Soviet Union, applying at best the Stalinist model. While as mentioned, there was no clear plan of how to implement the Sovietisation model, local elites in Europe, and especially in Albania were willing to comply with Moscow's directives. Thus the detention and labour camps inevitably supported the implementation of the Stalinist model. Rees for example makes a distinction between sovietisation and communisation,<sup>15</sup> whereby the first element is related to the ideal to be realised and the second the practical ways of implementation. The process of

<sup>12</sup> K. Frashëri, *Historia e lëvizjes së majtë në Shqipëri dhe e themelimit të PKSH-së (1878–1941)* (Tiranë: Ilar, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> B.J. Fischer, *Shqipëria gjatë Luftës 1939–1945* (Tiranë: Çabej, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> K. Dervish, *E vërteta e fshehur e një procesi: gjyqi i Koçi Xoxes, lidhjet e tij me Enver Hoxhën* (Tiranë: Shtëpia Botuese 55, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> E.A. Rees, "Introduction: The Sovietization of Eastern Europe" [in:] *The Sovietization of Eastern Europe: New Perspectives on the Postwar Period*, ed. B. Apor, P. Apor, E.A. Rees (New Academia Publishing, 2008), pp. 4–6.

sovietisation<sup>16</sup> would have meant the Party's complete and unchallenged control of the state apparatus and all spheres of life, the elimination of the private and the public sphere, the pivotal role of ideology and economic centralism. Sovietisation denotes a process which was introduced with various success in Eastern Europe, depending on the receptivity of political elites, social conditions and internal dynamics.<sup>17</sup> In Albania the process of sovietisation was implemented with varying degrees of success and over a lengthy time span. The total control of the state apparatus was completed by the communists after the crushing of the legal opposition in 1946<sup>18</sup> while full territorial control was achieved only by the mid-fifties. The total control of the society was partially achieved<sup>19</sup> while the regime counted inevitably on a fair degree of legitimacy among the general population, yet repression was a constant feature of early communist Albania. To this point, and despite the peculiarity of coming to power with "its own forces", the partisan communist forces used terrorist means to engage those who they thought could be tomorrow's political opponents.<sup>20</sup> While in Eastern Europe, they were a negligible minority, in Albania they grew steadily and exponentially from 1941 onward, reaching their peak with the disruption of the Italian occupation in 1943. Indeed, the new regime, despite securing power via war, and having the full support of the liaison of allied missions, pursued relentlessly terrorism as a mean of not only securing power but also in preventing any kind of opposition in the country. Post World War II Albania was still a terribly poor country, with an overwhelmingly agrarian economy and a few urban areas. Moreover, with civil war looming in Greece, Albania found itself, unwillingly at the border of a newly divided Europe.<sup>21</sup> Adding to this, in 1948 the Albanian regime shifted its intra communist alliance from Belgrade to Moscow adding another layer of insecurity to the general situation. Moreover, the Corfu Canal incident shattered the already fragile relations with the Western Allies, leaving the country in a precarious security condition. By 1948 on, the Cold War was in full swing<sup>22</sup> and Albania was one of the countries to feel the burden of the bipolar confrontation. The missing direct link with Moscow added other layers of insecurity both at a national and international level. At national level, different regional actors, sought help from the Western Allies to topple the regime. The political émigré diaspora in Italy provided substantial manpower to be used in covert operations in the country, given the

<sup>16</sup> For a general panorama of post war Eastern Europe see A. Applebaum, *Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe 1944–1956* (Anchor Books, 2013); as for Albania see B. Meta, A. Krasniqi, H. Bello, *Indoktrinimi Komunist Përmes Kulturës, Letërsisë dhe Artit: Dokumenta Arkivore*, vol. 1 (Tiranë: A.S.A & Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2018), pp. 28–49.

<sup>17</sup> J. Connelly, *Captive University: The Sovietization of East German, Czech and Polish Higher Education 1945–1956* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000), p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> *Akte Gjyqësore Politike 1946* (vol. 1–3), Institutit i Studimit të Krimeve dhe Pasojavë të Komunizmit (Tiranë, 2016).

<sup>19</sup> S. Meksi, "Papërshtatshmëria e paradigmës totalitare në përpjekjen për të shpjeguar natyrën dhe dinamikën e regjimit stalinist shqiptar në vitet 1960–1965", Conference Paper, *Qasje Shkencore dhe Kulturore për Totalitarizmin: Rasti i Shqipërisë*, Tirana, 27–28 X 2017.

<sup>20</sup> P. Pepa, *Dosja e Diktaturës* (Tiranë: ISKK, 2017).

<sup>21</sup> *The Balkans in the Cold War*, ed. S. Rajak, E. Botsiou, K.E. Karamouzi, E. Hatzivassiliou (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

<sup>22</sup> AMPJ, V.1947, D.148.

proximity of it to hostile neighbours like Greece, Italy and above all Yugoslavia. While the other communist regimes in Europe lessened the grip or sophistication of their methods of control over their societies, Albania choose to maintain if not deepen Stalinisation. Consciously the communist regime engaged in a policy of self-isolation, thus building up the outside narrative of repression and strict control over society. Terror in Albania was intermittent and an integral part of the repressive preventive or post-factual actions the regime undertook over the years.<sup>23</sup> It was directed both towards different segments of the population “the so-called enemy groups” or toward the enemies within the party, its higher or intermediate echelons. As mentioned above, in this short introduction, terror albeit directed to limited categories such as professional or policy making, has been an integral part of Albanian history. It reflected the delicate equilibriums between regime survival during 1944–1955 and the internal situation due to interstate crisis.

## DETENTION AND LABOUR CAMPS

As mentioned in the earlier part of this paper terror and repression in Albania was not simply linked to the advance to power of the National Liberation Army, controlled by the Communist Party but also with the peculiarities of post-war Albania. In this sense we cannot talk it in terms of the integration of the country into the Soviet block and the logic of the communist idea of state power, as a mere dictatorship of the proletariat. The full process of the Albanian socio-economic system’s transformation was adopted gradually;<sup>24</sup> yet even in the presence of relative social transformations, terror was more present than not in the country. The camps thus began building upon this logic. Dervishi for example mentioned that the new regime begun deporting members of the old elite and administration as early as 1946;<sup>25</sup> a process which proceeded gradually to that of the first show trials against the so-called collaborators either of the Zog regime and also those who had served in the various Italian and German controlled administrations during the war. Labour and concentration camps in Albania, were improvised and very few documents exist on the matter. They responded to the logic of immediate post-war necessities of the new regime, which on one was not faced by an immediate reaction from various opponents but on the other hand faced difficulties in controlling its territory. The situation in post-war Albania looked more like that of a country in a state of emergency and under “self-occupation” conditions. They are seen as regimes of a marked indigenous nature, thanks to their “coming to power” with their own forces, which was a narrative commonly used

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<sup>23</sup> Ramiz Alia, the last secretary of Albania’s Labour Party, maintains that repression ended by 1983 as ever since no other politburo member was arrested or executed (see R. Alia, *Jeta ime: Kujtime* [Toena, 2012]).

<sup>24</sup> Collectivization and industrialization begun gradually. Forced industrialization begun by the mid-fifties and reached its peak only by the late sixties. Yet those reforms depended on foreign aid, respectively from Soviet Union and China. In this sense, albeit considered one of the harshest communist dictatorships, Albania did not deal with the horrors that Soviet Union or China endured respectively in the thirties and fifties of the last century (K. Këlliçi, E. Danaj, “Promoting equality, perpetuating inequality: Gender Propaganda in Communist Albania”, *History of Communism in Europe* 2016, no. 7, pp. 39–61).

<sup>25</sup> K. Dervishi, *Kampet dhe Burgjet në Shqipërinë Komuniste*, pp. 7–8.

by communist historiography in Albania. Of course, the established regime did not come without inconsistency, though the latter was relatively small but with high potential. Tirana's regime was in jeopardy and, by the strong ties between parts of Kosovo and northern Albania, anti-Serb resistance, opposition to the localist or the political elite that remained after post-war emigration. The country's own social, religious, local and developmental composition, as well as foreign intelligence efforts to de-stabilize the regime, raised strong questions about its survival.<sup>26</sup> In 1944–1955, Albania was positioned geographically and again (after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire) at the border between two diametrically opposite camps, the Communist East and the West (if Greece could qualify as such). The above were some of the conditions that favored the emergence of concentration camps and job and internment camps in the country. Their role and function depended on the social category of people there. Logically, the system was to isolate the opposition element, the enemy and potentially similar elements. In forced labour camps, political prisoners and ordinary prisoners were mixed up. This distinction comes to the fore, given that for today's liberal regime, the political prisoner no longer exists as a figure. In the years we are talking about, this confusion was logical. The spirit of the perceived ideology would indicate that work was the main camp activity. The detainees were functionaries of the former war regime, members of the enemy classes or opponents of the regime.

According to Dervishi in Albania, there were about 9 detention or internment camps<sup>27</sup> while the number of forced labour camps is difficult to determine due to their itinerant nature, related to specific working sites. Other sources offer higher numbers of such structures, while failing to make a distinction between forced labour and detention facilities.<sup>28</sup> As such they sprung up in various forms and shapes gradually and especially from 1945 to 1953, when the logic of the camp was abandoned in favour of fully fledged prisons or as in what was labeled as "internment". The second term implied a constant policy or form of repression, reserved for entire families, whose relatives had been imprisoned or committed crimes with some political dimension. This was a softer form of repression. Class enemies and former political prisoners were located in specific areas, not formally enclosed, often within existing, usually rural settlements. That is why the repression in Albania was more of a military than a civil nature. The main challenge of the regime was to control the territory and clean up everything that could create opportunities for armed rebellion.<sup>29</sup> In this sense, the nature of the institutes of repression, concentration camps or forced labour served more as detention facilities rather than reeducation ones.<sup>30</sup> For the regime camps were deemed as an important element of the

<sup>26</sup> N. Bethell, *Tradhëtia e madhe* (Progresi, 1993).

<sup>27</sup> K. Dervishi, *Kampet dhe Burgjet në Shqipërinë Komuniste*.

<sup>28</sup> The Observatory of Memory, an NGO working on memory has a longer list of 50 of such facilities without making a distinction between permanent and itinerant sites, <https://kujto.al/burgje-kampe/>.

<sup>29</sup> Ç. Hoxha, *Krimet e Komunistëve gjatë Luftës, 1941–1945 (Dokumente)* (Tiranë: ISKK, 2014), pp. 276–293.

<sup>30</sup> Sufaj and Sota sustain that in the early post war repression the number of arrested persons sprung up and local facilities, most destroyed and damaged by the conflict, were either unfit or not enough to accommodate the prisoners. Detention and labour camps thus became a necessity to deal with the growing number of prisoners (F. Sufaj, M. Sotaj, "Jeta në kampet e punës së detyruar parë nga vështrimi i raporteve zyrtare" [in:] *Të Mohuar nga Regjimi* (Tiranë: AIDSSH, 2020), pp. 168–193).

repression apparatus. In 1948 a document from the Ministry of the Interior,<sup>31</sup> enumerates among others the opening of four facilities where prisoners would be sent to perform forced labour wherever it was deemed necessary. While not mentioning specifically the categories of prisoners, the task was deemed of primary importance. Both guards and administration were selected from Party members, as the most trusted elements among the police forces. The population of the camps was not composed only of ethnic nationals. Italians, both civilians and former soldiers, were detained until the respective administrations were able to repatriate them.<sup>32</sup> The same fate was reserved even to friends. Greek communists who left the country after the failure of the civil war were treated more like prisoners than unlucky allies.<sup>33</sup>

Zef Pëllumi, a priest, describes how inhuman and terrible the conditions were, when he talks about Beden's camp in Kavajë.<sup>34</sup> The evidence given is that of the terrible working conditions in the camp, and moreover the effects they had on the inmates with emphasis on the inadequacy of the prisoners to the activity. Another facility was that of Maliq,<sup>35</sup> in Eastern Albania, where there were plans to reclaim a vast marshland had been underway for years. Hundreds of prisoners worked in the effort side by side with volunteers recruited by the regime.<sup>36</sup> An imprecise number of prisoners worked in horrific hygienic and living conditions. The absence of moving machines meant that the majority of the work had to be completed solely through human efforts. The number of prisoners who died in this effort is still unknown. While the regime praised the work of the volunteers, prisoners were never mentioned.<sup>37</sup> Works in the site were directed by Albanian, and some Italian engineers who were denied repatriation, and were the scene of one of the most celebrated show trials in early Albanian history. A group of engineers, both Italian and Albanian was accused of sabotage and sentenced to death, a sentence that was carried out on the camp site on 19 November 1946. The trial sparked an international crisis between the allied mission and the Albanian government as the group of engineers was accused of being part of a spy ring directed by an American national, who was the head of a technical school in Tirana. The scene of the execution was filmed in its entirety and shown in newsreels across the country, and up to today is the only piece of filmed execution during communist rule in Albania.<sup>38</sup> Prisoners in the camps thus not only simply carried part of their sentence in the form of forced labour but their activity was subject to repression. The camp of Maliq did not materialise into a permanent facility. Several locations in the area hosted the prisoners which were moved

<sup>31</sup> "Raport informative mujor", Seksioni Politik i Policisë Popullore, 30 IV 1948.

<sup>32</sup> P. Ballinger, "A Sea of Difference, a History of Gaps: Migrations between Italy and Albania, 1939–1992", *Comparative Studies in History and Society* 2018, vol. 60, pp. 90–118.

<sup>33</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, Communist Activities, Forced Labor Camps, 1953, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80-00809A000700160250-5.pdf>.

<sup>34</sup> Z. Pëllumi, *Urno përme tregue* (Hylli i Dritës, 2001), p. 231.

<sup>35</sup> AQSh, F.499, v.1950, D.363, f. 1–15.

<sup>36</sup> Archivi i Ministrisë së Punëve të Brendëshme [Archive of the Ministry of the Interior Affairs] (hereinafter: AMPB), D.111, May 1948, f. 62.

<sup>37</sup> AQSh, Str 14/ap, v.1948, D.293, f. 13.

<sup>38</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gsEbxsNLewk>.



according to the needs and the evolution of the project.<sup>39</sup> Prisoners were thus moved according to ongoing project needs and so the forced labour camps were itinerant rather than permanent facilities.<sup>40</sup> We can also assume that prisoners were removed because of extensive sickness and epidemic outbreaks. Conditions were horrid and the authorities did nothing to improve them. They would rather provide extremely poor living standards for the inmates as a form of punishment.

The second category of camps was those of concentration camps like that of Tepelena. The facility was an odd one in the general panorama of camps in Albania. In fact the population of the camp was composed mainly of women, the elderly and children who were the family members of political refugees, those conducting armed resistance, or of those who fled Albania in the early years of the establishment of the communist regime.<sup>41</sup> Official documents on the camp and the living conditions are missing, thus today's documentation relies mostly on the memory of former residents.<sup>42</sup> According to one of them more than 4300 persons were enclosed in Tepelena albeit the number may have been smaller.<sup>43</sup> Such categories of prisoner could not be considered as enemies in the ideological sense of the word, but they had a different value, that of hostages. The camp was specific to the general panorama of post-war detention facilities in Albania. While forced labour camps, emerged out of a clear logic of both punishment and the reconstruction needs in the country, the aforementioned camp emerged out of fear and security dilemmas in Albania. The Stalin-Tito split, and the subsequent choice of Tirana to lean with Moscow, meant that Albania was isolated from a direct link with its local allies. Moreover and especially in North Albania, political opponents would find some kind of support from Yugoslavia,<sup>44</sup> thus for the regime it was necessary to take extreme steps against its opponents. So thousands of elderly and children were forcefully transferred from North Albania to the southern part.<sup>45</sup> Most of them were from extended families of the regime's political opponents. If in the pre-war years it was common for a family head to undertake political emigration and to leave their family behind without fear of vengeance, this was not the case in the post-war years. Those who undertook political

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<sup>39</sup> AMPB, F.50, V.1950, D.393.

<sup>40</sup> According to a CIA document, prisoners in the Korça area worked in an airfield. As soon as the facility was completed, they would dismantle their barracks and move to another destination. See Central Intelligence Agency, Forced Labor Camps. Airfield at Reze, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80-00810A005700630002-1.pdf>.

<sup>41</sup> Nikollë Dojanaj [in:] "Kampi i Tepelenës: Dëshmitë e të Mbijetuarve", pp. 35–36.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 28.

<sup>43</sup> According to the statistics of the Ministry of Interior, numbers in concentration camps in Albania fluctuated between 1541 in 1947 to 2160 in 1950 (AMPB, V.1946, D.6, f.8 and V.1950, D.391, F.50, cited in K. Dervishi, *Kam-pet dhe Burgjet në Shqipërinë Komuniste*, pp. 13–14).

<sup>44</sup> A CIA document observes that the intensity of repression grew especially after Albania repudiated its alliance with Belgrade. The Yugoslav government begun supporting several elements in the Northern part of Albania, which caused a strong reaction from Hoxha's government. As a reaction to such, the Albanian government increased their repression, which included also the deportation of families whose members were involved in armed opposition in the above-mentioned area (see CIA, Concentration Camps in Albania, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP82-00457R007900810012-7.pdf>).

<sup>45</sup> V. Murati, "Dëshmitari i mbijetuar, Lek Previzi: Enveri do na çonte në Siberi, çfarë ndodhi në kampin e Tepelenës", *Gazeta Mapo* 3 IV 2018.

emigration left behind families who were vulnerable to attack by the new regime. In this sense, the coming of the communists to power and their actions gave a clear and radical signal of change where the forms of persecution extended beyond the individual to their families. Traditionally, the partisan forces had their social base in the South and at the same time eliminated any form of opposition in the region. As they crossed the Shkumbini River toward the North, they entered difficult terrain, and one of the ways of establishing control was to take hostages and resettle the regime's opponents' relatives away from their social base so to discourage any form of resistance. The Tepelena camp is a special case in the panorama of the cases taken in this paper and it corresponds to the country's specific situation and the conditions of the ruling communists' rise to power. In recent years, the victims have given numerous testimonies about the terrible conditions that resulted in the deaths of many of the inmates there. The camp was placed in a makeshift structure, carved up from the abandoned barracks used by the invading Italian army during the Second World War. The location may have been random, depending on the logistic conditions (former WWII army barracks), and the proximity to an area. The area was close to the small city of Tepelena, mirroring thus a clear distinction between those considered as belonging to the political community, and those outside it, the detainees in the camps, the "enemy". Most of the interviews and memories focus on two elements, namely the living conditions and the extreme death rate of the most vulnerable members of the camp, elderly and children.<sup>46</sup> Especially the latter suffered from malnutrition and cold.

In 1953 the camp and other facilities were closed. One reason for this is related to a general easing of repression in Eastern Europe, following Stalin's death and the process of destalinisation started by Khrushchev, another may be related to the inability of the regime to cope with the extreme death rates, especially in the Tepelena camp. A further reason may be related to the general stability and grip over the territory, which increased considerably in the fifties, due to Soviet aid and a closer integration of Albania into the Socialist Camp.

## CONCLUSIONS

Forced labour camps in Albania were part of the communist regime's general strategy to secure its power. While generally the so-called Gulag system has been seen as a means of communist regimes to extract unpaid labour, in Albania their scope was outright repression. Despite a general understanding that the communists in Albania came to power after the retreat of the Wehrmacht and after winning a bitter civil war with the nationalist forces, opposition to the regime was latent, at least in the early years. Other facilities like the concentration camps support this logic. During 1945–1950 and extending into the early fifties, several facilities existed albeit they never became a permanent fixture in communist Albania. They were seen somehow as an emergency measure to sanitize and neutralize possible forms of opposition. In this sense

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<sup>46</sup> L. Progni, "Si u vranë në kampin famëkeq të Tepelenës 33 fëmijë brenda një nate", *Panorama* 30 IX 2017.

the concentration camp of Tepelena fulfilled the logic of outright use of force against civilians, especially women and children. This has been proved by the testimonies of those who survived the camp experience. Moreover the new regime did not fully abide by the pedagogic logic of Marxism, that of education and transformation of those considered class enemies but employed methods of preventative and latent repression. The concentration camps as the one in Tepelena closed after two years of activity because of the high death rate and fear of epidemics. Labour camps instead became part of the prison system. Nonetheless forms of repression existed in the form of internment up to the late eighties. Families of those imprisoned for political reasons were not enclosed in specific areas but placed among the rural population where they become a permanent object of a latent class struggle.

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## Defining the Internal Enemy: Detention Camps in Early Communist Albania, 1945–1950

Albania was perhaps the only country to have more than tripled its population of Jews during the Second World War. It did so by hiding or refusing to hand them over to the

occupying German forces. By the end of 1944 the Communist-led National Liberation Army gained power replacing the Germans and the former political interwar elites. Despite common knowledge, several armed and unarmed attempts were made by opposition groups to overthrow the regime from 1944 onward. Opposition came also as a response to the repressive policies that the communists conducted methodically in the early years of the regime. Repression consisted of arbitrary arrests, terrorist practices conducted by the then-formed State Security, commonly known as “Sigurimi” as well as a series of show trials against people accused of war crimes or collaboration with the enemy. Aside from these typical forms of revolutionary repression, the regime set up a series of detention facilities, in which the new above-mentioned “alien” class and enemy elements were placed. Such structures consisted of forced labour and concentration camps. This paper seeks to analyze the concentration camps, set up by 1945, in which the newly established regime placed families and relatives of those who opposed Communism. Unlike the labour camps, the concentration ones were reserved only for the elderly, females and children. They functioned from 1945 to 1950 and were born out of necessity, due to the inability to control parts of the country, and as a measure to deprive the insurgents of their social base. While in theory concentration camps functioned as a form of policing and social control, in Albania they partly functioned as hostage centers, where the family members of political prisoners or anti-Communist émigrés were placed. Despite their original function, concentration camps turned soon into death camps as their inmates begun to die of hunger, malnutrition and exposure. Such tragedy affected especially the elderly and children, who were the primary victims of such terrible conditions. The paper draws examples especially from the notorious Tepelena Camp. The site was improvised from derelict barracks, which served various occupant armies in WW2 just outside the small town. The paper tries to uncover the rationale of these detention facilities, taking in consideration both the ideological but also mere survival motives of the regime, combining even the inability of its violence apparatus to effectively deal with this population group.

#### KEYWORDS

Albania, Stalinism, detention camps, “Sigurimi”, terror

### **Definicja wroga wewnętrznego: obozy zatrzymania we wczesnych latach komunistycznej Albanii, 1945–1950**

Albania była bodaj jedynym krajem, w którym podczas II wojny światowej potroila się liczba ludności żydowskiej za sprawą ukrywania Żydów przez Albańczyków oraz ich odmowy wydawania Żydów okupacyjnym siłom niemieckim. Do końca 1944 r. władzę przejęła kontrolowana przez komunistów Armia Narodowo-Wyzwoleńcza, która zajęła miejsce wcześniej zajmowane przez Niemców i dawne elity międzywojenne. Pomimo

powszechnej świadomości grupy opozycyjne po 1944 r. podjęły kilka zbrojnych lub pokojowych prób stawienia oporu reżimowi. Opozycja była zarazem odpowiedzią na represje polityczne metodycznie wykorzystywane przez komunistów w początkowych latach po zdobyciu władzy. Represje obejmowały arbitralne zatrzymania, terrorystyczne działania nowo utworzonego wówczas Dyrektoriatu Bezpieczeństwa Państwa, potocznie zwanego „Sigurimi”, a także szereg pokazowych procesów wytaczanych osobom oskarżonym o zbrodnie wojenne lub kolaborację z wrogiem. Oprócz tych typowych form rewolucyjnych represji reżim utworzył także szereg ośrodków zatrzymywania, w których umieszczano członków wspomnianej nowej „klasy obcej” oraz „wrogie elementy”. Obiekty te łączyły pracę przymusową z właściwościami obozu koncentracyjnego. W niniejszym artykule analizuję obozy koncentracyjne utworzone przed 1945 r., w których nowo wprowadzony reżim osadzał bliższych i dalszych członków rodzin przeciwników komunizmu. Obozy te funkcjonowały w latach 1945–1950 i wzięły się z konieczności uzyskania kontroli nad niektórymi obszarami kraju (i zarazem niemożności jej uzyskania), a także jako narzędzie do odcięcia przeciwników reżimu od sprzyjających im kręgów społecznych. O ile w teorii obozy koncentracyjne miały być mechanizmem zapewnienia porządku publicznego i sprawowania kontroli społecznej, w Albanii częściowo funkcjonowały jako ośrodki przetrzymywania zakładników, w których umieszczano krewnych więźniów politycznych lub emigracyjnych działaczy antykomunistycznych. Ze swojej pierwotnej funkcji obozy koncentracyjne wkrótce przerodziły się w obozy śmierci, kiedy osadzeni więźniowie zaczęli umierać z głodu, niedożywienia i chłodu. Tragedia ta dotykała szczególnie starsze ofiary oraz dzieci, czyli osoby szczególnie ciężko znoszące straszne warunki. Większość przykładów w artykule zaczerpnięta jest z owianego złą sławą obozu Tepelena, prowizorycznie utworzonego na terenie nieużywanych koszar niedaleko miasta Tepelena, które wcześniej służyły różnym siłom okupacyjnym podczas II wojny światowej. Artykuł podejmuje próbę odpowiedzi na pytanie o uzasadnienie stworzenia ośrodka, uwzględniając zarówno ideologiczne, jak i praktyczne kwestie przetrwania nowego reżimu, w tym niezdolność państwowego aparatu przemocy do skutecznego radzenia sobie z tą grupą ludności.

#### SŁOWA KLUCZOWE

Albania, stalinizm, ośrodki odosobnienia, 'Sigurimi', terror

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