

YEARS OF TURBULENT TURNING POINTS: NATIONAL PROJECTS IN KOSOVO BETWEEN ALBANIAN NATIONALISM AND COMMUNISM (1943–1948)

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Abstract: This paper examines the complex political and ideological dynamics in Kosovo during the period 1943–1948, focusing on the antagonism between the project of Albanian nationalists and that of Albanian communists aligned with the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY). While in most parts of Europe during these years the war against the Axis powers was approaching its end and geopolitical interests were stabilizing — peace was being established and the reconstruction of societies devastated by war had begun — in Kosovo the conflict did not cease. On the contrary, it resumed in a context marked by political uncertainty and contradictory demands, particularly between the aspiration for national affirmation and self-determination of Albanians and Kosovo — promised within the ideological discourse of Yugoslav communism — and the subsequent disappointment resulting from Kosovo's remaining within Serbia/Yugoslavia.

One of the primary aims of this paper is to argue that the anti-communism of this political, military and clandestine movement at that time was directed against communism as an ideology in general — both against communism in Yugoslavia and against communism in Albania. This dualist character would not remain present for many decades afterward, neither in Albanian political thought in Kosovo, nor among illegal organizations and groups, nor among Albanian communists in Yugoslavia.

Consequently, as demonstrated through a comparative analytical approach, the findings of this paper suggest that Albanian political thought of that time exhibited a particularly high level of functional religious tolerance, perhaps among the most developed in modern Albanian history. At the same time, the geographical scope of anti-communist activity at that scale would never again be repeated in later periods among other Albanian movements.

The paper also attempts to answer why, during this period, no other political alternative emerged for Albanians and Kosovo beyond the two dominant projects: communism and fascism. The lack of international support for the Kosovo question had a long-term impact on the development of Albanian political thought. For a long time, political thought among Kosovo Albanians would be influenced both by Yugoslav communism and by the Albanian communist model under Enver Hoxha. As a consequence, the liberal-democratic reforms that later spread across most of Eastern Europe were delayed in Kosovo.

Keywords: Albanian nationalism, anti-communism, Yugoslav communism, political thought.

1. INTRODUCTION

The period 1943–1948 represents one of the most significant phases in the political history of Kosovo. During this time two political projects confronted one another: Albanian nationalism and Yugoslav communism. These developments directly influenced the determination of Kosovo's political status after the Second World War. The aim of this study is to analyze the role of these political projects in shaping the political reality of Kosovo both during and after this period. These years remain insufficiently studied. Much of what has been written and the assessments made regarding the events, developments, decisions and personalities of this period were for a long time repeated as a single uncontested truth and were heavily burdened with ideological and partisan interpretations. At that time, the foundations of the communist state were laid and, according to Yugoslav ideologues, this foundation was built through a struggle for freedom, through sacrifices and the shared goals of peoples and nationalities. The legitimacy of the state itself was conceptualized on this foundation, which has made shedding light on this period even more problematic.

Another dilemma addressed in this paper concerns whether the pro-Western orientation of Albanian political thought at that time and the demands and aspirations derived from it were supported by the Western world, or whether they were instead instrumentalized by fascist ideology. Furthermore, the major geopolitical turbulences in the Balkans at that time significantly distorted, even deforming, Albanian political thought. The characteristics that produced such distortions remain one of the objectives of this paper to illuminate.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodology of this paper combines descriptive, juridical-dogmatic, and comparative methods.

The descriptive method is used, on the one hand, to examine and analyze the existing literature of various authors on the Kosovo issue during the period under review, particularly concerning communism as an ideology in Kosovo, its

main characteristics, national and class demands, and, on the other hand, anti-communism and Albanian nationalism in Kosovo, their pro-Western orientation, and their connections with anti-communist forces in Albania and beyond. Considerably less literature exists regarding these latter issues, which for a long time were unofficial and often appeared in the form of individual reflections, memoirs, publicistic publications, or interviews.

The juridical-dogmatic method is used to examine various archival documents that help clarify the legal and historical context under consideration, as well as to analyze records and judicial decisions related to sentences during the Yugoslav period, particularly immediately after the end of the Second World War.

Meanwhile, the comparative method is employed to analyze the differences and similarities between communism and anti-communism in Albania, as well as communism and anti-communism in Kosovo, and to compare the influence of fascism in these two contexts and the position of nationalists toward the fascist occupation.

3. COMMUNISM AND RE-OCCUPATION

Immediately after the war, the year 1945 would be remembered by the Albanian population as the bloodiest year in the history of Kosovo, as several tens of thousands of people were executed, many others disappeared without a trace, more than 30,000 were imprisoned and placed in camps, while hundreds of thousands were forced to leave the country (to Turkey, Greece and other countries), and many others were killed outside Kosovo. All of this occurred under the illusory slogan of “brotherhood and unity” (Keçmezi-Basha, 2017). This slogan was always imposed and was not the result of free will (Schöpflin, 2000). Certainly, the demands of Albanian communists outside Albania who had embraced communist ideology and fought against fascism were not prioritized, and they did not engage sufficiently or appropriately in efforts to separate Kosovo from Yugoslavia, specifically Serbia, in order to unite it with Albania. In fact, the opposite occurred. For example, as evidence of this, within the framework of consolidating the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY) and implementing organizational measures, in July 1937 the Provincial Committee of the CPY for Kosovo and Metohija was established, which actively engaged in implementing CPY policies in this region (K. Salihu, p. 9). This was not accidental, which was further confirmed when the Provincial Committee of the CPY for Kosovo and Metohija was directly linked to the Central Committee of the CPY. Between 1937 and 1940, delegates from Kosovo and Metohija participated directly in several consultations organized by the CPY Central Committee, for example in 1939 in Šmarna Gora (K. Salihu, p. 10).

A similar or even weaker stance was present among communists within Albania, particularly within the Communist Party of Albania and its leader Enver Hoxha. According to Keçmezi-Basha (2022), for example, the Mukje Agreement signed on 2 August 1943 between the communists and the Balli Kombëtar revealed a disagreement regarding the status of Kosovo. While Balli Kombëtar proposed that the struggle should include the unification of Kosovo with Albania, communist representatives strongly opposed this proposal. Ultimately, a compromise was reached whereby the issue of Kosovo would be decided through a referendum of its population after the end of the war.

The agreement was considered counter-revolutionary by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, whose delegate to the Communist Party of Albania, Svetozar Vukmanović Tempo, had significant influence over the Albanian communists, particularly over their leader Enver Hoxha. As a result, the agreement was officially condemned by Enver Hoxha at a meeting of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Albania.

4. FACTORS INFLUENCING THE ALIGNMENT OF ALBANIAN COMMUNISTS

The factors that led Albanian communists across the Balkans toward such an alignment can be found, among others, in the following circumstances.

First, the historically strained, and at times deeply hostile, relations between Albanians and their Slavic neighbors, particularly the Serbs, who had embraced communism earlier and in much larger numbers.

Second, the relationship with the Axis powers, particularly Nazi Germany under Hitler. In other countries, fascists divided and fragmented nations in order to rule them; however, Albanians were already divided and exposed to violence within the Yugoslav state. For this reason, any attempt by fascist forces to approach Albanians, unite them within a single state, and halt the violence directed against them created hesitation toward embracing communist ideology.

Third, the relatively low level of national consciousness among those who embraced communist ideology cannot be understood without considering the general level of education among the population at the time, which was extremely low. The rate of illiteracy in Kosovo and other Albanian territories within the Kingdom of Yugoslavia exceeded 90 percent (Hadri, 1971).

Fourth, the alternatives of the time communism or fascism proved to be an unfavorable choice for Albanians. In the short term, fascism and Nazism dominated, while in the long term communism prevailed. Neither of these ideologies ultimately proved just or beneficial for Albanians.

Some Albanian authors from Kosovo argued that Yugoslav communism had resolved the national question in the most appropriate manner possible without harming the class dimension. They emphasized that during the second session of AVNOJ in 1943 the national question in Yugoslavia had been resolved according to Marxist-Leninist principles and that the Yugoslav Federation had been created. During this meeting a special decision recognizing the national rights of minorities was also adopted. According to this interpretation, the Albanian question in Yugoslavia had been implicitly resolved according to Leninist principles, and the ideological foundations for Kosovo's autonomy had been established (Hoxha & Popovci, 1984).

Even though the communist leader Tito promised that the situation for Albanians would no longer be the same as before, reality did not change significantly. For example, during a meeting held on April 7, 1945 with Mehmet Hoxha and Dushan Mugosha, Tito declared:

“We are creating an equal state where no one will be able to oppress the Albanians; the Albanian people are proud, hardworking and honest, and for these reasons they can and will become an important factor in the construction of the new Yugoslavia.” (Dedijer, 1984)

Although a meeting took place between the Yugoslav leader Tito and the Albanian leader Hoxha in Belgrade in 1946, during which the Kosovo issue was also discussed and Tito acknowledged in principle that Kosovo had the right to unite with Albania, he emphasized that the internal situation in Yugoslavia and the international circumstances at the time did not favor the unification of Albanian territories under Yugoslavia with Albania (Kaba & Çeku, 2011).

However, Hoxha's request came too late to be taken seriously by the Yugoslav leadership and by Tito, since decisions regarding Kosovo had already been made earlier. On the other hand, Hoxha's request was weak and was not supported by international mechanisms or intergovernmental institutions. Any possible promises by Tito regarding Kosovo were therefore merely verbal and informal, typical of the complex nature of Balkan politics, lacking formal decisions of the higher Yugoslav party structures, official seals, signatures, or serious agreements. Even though the situation might have been expected to be different, particularly considering the decisions of the Bujan Conference (Elshani, 2018), Albanian communists outside Albania also did not oppose the continued inclusion of Kosovo and other Albanian territories within Serbia and Yugoslavia. In practice, this decision cost Albanians dearly, particularly during the period 1945–1966, which was characterized by a colonial-type regime led by Interior Minister Ranković and the secret police in Kosovo (Schöpflin, 2000).

While the rest of Europe had ended the Second World War and the great powers had reached agreements regarding spheres of influence and new geopolitical alignments establishing peace and focusing on reconstruction and development Albanians, left against their will under communist Yugoslavia, were compelled to strengthen their resistance and decided not to stop their struggle but rather to continue it with even broader participation.

Under these circumstances the need arose for the reorganization of nationalist and anti-communist forces. With the assistance of British diplomatic and intelligence missions, the foundations for the formation of the Albanian National Democratic Organization were laid in Gjakova in November 1943 (Lita, 2009).

However, Yugoslav communists and Albanian communists within Yugoslavia reacted immediately in order to formalize and legitimize the continued inclusion of Kosovo within Serbia. In this context, from July 8–10, 1945, the Prizren Assembly was held, which legitimized the annexation of Kosovo by Serbia and Yugoslavia.

This was a gathering of an organ that had not been elected by the people. A total of 137 delegates and other invitees participated, of whom only 32 were Albanians. During this assembly it was decided that Kosovo would join Serbia, and a Resolution was adopted that can be considered the first official document legitimizing the annexation of Kosovo by Serbia.

The resolution declared that the population of the region desired Kosovo to join the federal state of Serbia as an integral part of it (Keçmezi-Basha, 2017).

4.1. Organization of the Nationalist and Anti-Communist Movement

Unlike Albanian communists in Yugoslavia, who accepted the new political reality after the Second World War, nationalist forces began to organize themselves into new clandestine structures. In Kosovo, organizations such as the Albanian National Democratic Movement (LNDSH) operated as a continuation of the ONDSH led by Ejup Binaku and Halim Spahiu. Other organizations included “Besa Kombëtare”, led by Professor Ymer Berisha, as well as Organization No. 2 of Ajet Gërguri and other structures (Keçmezi-Basha, 2022).

The Albanian National Democratic Movement represented a union of Albanian patriotic and political organizations that operated in the spirit of the struggle for national liberation and the unification of all Albanian territories into a single state (Gërguri, 2007). In both its program and operational character, LNDSH simultaneously embodied democratic and nationalist dimensions (Shatri, 1997).

Another indicator of the high level of organization was the creation of a military structure. The core of the nationalist forces intended for the formation of the Albanian Democratic Popular Army was established around

November 1944. At the same time, the Second Congress of LNDSH established a War Headquarters, composed of intellectuals and individuals prepared from various professional fields (Keçmezi-Basha, 2022).

The clandestine organization ONDSH was the largest organization after the National Liberation War. During the years 1945–1947 it had approximately 30,000 members, while the Communist Party of Yugoslavia in Kosovo had only 8,800 members, of whom approximately 6,000 were Albanians. This ratio clearly indicates the position of the Albanian population toward the authorities and the Communist Party (Keçmezi-Basha, 2022).

Nevertheless, according to official communist sources of the time, the number of fighters from Kosovo in partisan brigades by May 1945 had reached approximately 50,000 individuals, including military support structures (Salihu, 1984).

The international and regional geopolitical circumstances were entirely unfavorable for such efforts by Albanian anti-communists. The main factors that made the situation extremely difficult were the following:

- Albanian communists in Kosovo had accepted the continued inclusion of Kosovo within Yugoslavia and Serbia without organizing serious resistance.
- The communist leadership of Albania did not oppose the re-annexation of Kosovo.
- Major international powers, particularly the Soviet Union and its leader Stalin, had decided to support communist Yugoslavia within its existing borders and to include it within the Soviet bloc.

4.2. Albanian Anti-Communism in Yugoslavia and Albania

One distinctive characteristic of Albanian anti-communism during this period was the fact that it was not directed solely against Yugoslav communism, but against communism as an ideology in general. This means that Albanian anti-communists simultaneously opposed communism in Yugoslavia as well as communism in Albania. In this way, their front was twofold: against communist Yugoslavia and against communist Albania, with the aim of creating an Albanian state in the Balkans within ethnic borders. This dualistic anti-communist characteristic among Albanians would not last for long. In later decades, illegal groups in Kosovo would embrace Enverist communist ideology while opposing Yugoslav communism, even though their fundamental demands for an independent Kosovo would remain the same.

4.3. The Geographical Scope of the Movement and the Question of Religion

Ymer Berisha, one of the main ideologues of the anti-communist nationalist movement, “worked persistently and decisively to establish connections among all leaders of the resistance, both in Kosovo and in Albania. He achieved this goal by contacting Pashkë Bibë Mirakaj (July 1945), who was one of the most influential leaders of the resistance movement operating in Northern Albania. This contact was established in order to coordinate activities for the participation of all illegal groups of the time in the ‘Dobërdol Assembly’ in August 1945” (Šotra, 1990).

Specifically, on August 24 a large illegal assembly began, attended by 19 groups with their representatives, including delegates from Rožaje and Novi Pazar, with a total of 158 participants (Božović & Vavić, 1991).

One of the largest illegal organizations of that time, “Besa Kombëtare,” aimed to establish as many new committees as possible throughout the territories of Kosovo and the Sanjak (Archive of the District Court – Prizren, 1946).

Skopje also served as one of the centers of anti-communist clandestine activity at that time. For example, when the Central Committee of ONDSH could no longer operate safely in Prizren for security reasons, it was divided into two parts and one of them was relocated to Skopje. For a certain period, the Central Committee of ONDSH operated entirely from Skopje (Bislimi, 2006).

The activity of ONDSH also extended into the Preševo Valley (Lita, 2011). In 1945, the Central Committee of NDSH in Orizare served as the main link between Skopje and the regional committees in Kosovo and the Preševo Valley (Lita, 2011). A distinctive characteristic of nationalist and anti-communist forces during and after the Second World War was that, unlike many other political movements, their ranks included a considerable number of Christian Catholic believers. In Kosovo, many Catholics joined NDSH and other anti-communist structures early on. This broad participation of Catholics contributed to strengthening cooperation between Albanian anti-communists in Yugoslavia and those in Northern Albania.

Religious diversity among Albanians was not in contradiction with Albanian nationalism or anti-communism. A clear illustration of this during the period in question can be found in the oath taken by members of NDSH. Initially, the oath was taken before the flag, a revolver, and the Qur’an, and had the following content:

“I swear on the Qur’an, on the national flag, and on arms that I will work with loyalty and sacrifice, even at the cost of my life, for the Albanian nation and for the liberation and unification of Albanian lands into Ethnic Albania.” (Pirraku, 1995)

Later, with the arrival of Gjon Serreçi within the ranks of NDSH, the text of the oath was modified and shortened to the following form: “I swear on the flag, on my kin, and on the revolver that I will remain loyal to the NDSH organization.” (Pirraku, 1995)

4.4. Pro-Western Orientation

Albanian nationalist and anti-communist forces in Kosovo, in other parts of Yugoslavia, in the Sanjak region, as well as in Albania and in the diaspora, were considerably more active, better organized, and more willing to continue the struggle than many other anti-communist movements in the Balkans after the Second World War.

The willingness of Albanians to cooperate with Western European states in order to achieve their political and national goals was far greater than the actual interest of the West in directly supporting these national-democratic and anti-communist movements.

In this regard, Great Britain was more active than other Western countries. Viewing Albanian communists as being supported by the Soviet Union, British diplomacy considered Albanian communist policy to represent an extreme leftist policy under Russian influence. For this reason, Britain attempted to draw Albania into the Western bloc by emphasizing the benefits that the country would gain from such an orientation (Culaj, 2023).

4.5. The Untold Truth

What was officially declared in Yugoslavia regarding these military formations and these nationalist and anti-communist clandestine organizations in Kosovo was widely known and remained unchanged. This “absolute truth” promoted by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia and Serbia was produced and disseminated for a long time through ideological propaganda throughout Yugoslavia, including various studies, field activities, literature, cinematography, media, and other forms of public communication.

Two circumstances particularly influenced this situation.

First, following the military and clandestine activities of these groups and organizations, as well as the continuation of the struggle by Albanian nationalists and anti-communists, freedom did not come for Albanians. Kosovo was not liberated and did not become independent, nor was it united with Albania. On the contrary, discrimination continued. Second, while many other countries after the fall of communism created liberal and democratic conditions for the study of history ending the official party interpretation of the past and opening archives for new research in Kosovo the situation was far more complex. The brutal dictatorship of Milošević, the destruction of the educational and institutional system, the war of 1998–1999, and the period of post-war reconstruction meant that this historical period remained for a long time outside of in-depth studies and critical analyses.

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5. CONCLUSIONS

The period 1943–1948 represents a decisive moment in the political history of Kosovo and in the development of Albanian political thought in the Balkans. The analysis presented in this study demonstrates that the confrontation between the Albanian nationalist project and the communist project linked to the Communist Party of Yugoslavia was not merely a political struggle for power, but a broader confrontation between two different concepts regarding the political future of Albanians in the region.

While communist discourse promised national equality and the right to self-determination, the political developments following the Second World War demonstrated that these promises largely remained unfulfilled, leading to deep political disappointment and the continuation of organized Albanian resistance.

The study highlights that Albanian anti-communism during this period had a distinctive dualist character, as it was directed simultaneously against Yugoslav communism and against communism in Albania. This distinguishes this phase from later developments in Albanian political thought in Kosovo, where opposition to communism focused primarily on the Yugoslav dimension.

At the same time, nationalist and anti-communist organizations achieved a considerable level of political and military organization, with a wide geographical reach and participation from various social groups.

Another important element emerging from the analysis is the fact that Albanian political thought during this period demonstrated a high level of functional religious tolerance, integrating different religious elements organically within the national project. This shows that Albanian national identity at that time was conceptualized on inclusive rather than exclusionary foundations.

Overall, the study of this period contributes to a critical re-examination of the traditional historiographical interpretation of the Second World War in Kosovo and provides a deeper understanding of the political, ideological, and geopolitical processes that shaped Kosovo’s political status and the evolution of Albanian nationalism in the second half of the twentieth century.

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