

Conflicting memories and mutual representations: Italy and Albania since 1989

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Abstract¹

This paper explores transformations of collective memories surrounding Italian colonialist policies in Albania during the first part of the 20th century. It does so looking at how the relationship between collective memories and mutual representations formed in both Italy and Albania before and after the Cold War. This paper aims to illustrate how public representations of Italian involvement in Albania in both countries largely converged with the end of Italian imperialism and argues why this is significant. This research draws on both existing literature and various primary sources, including schoolbooks and mass media.

The background

Italian-Albanian relations in the first part of the century were shaped by Italian imperialist drives. Rome played an active role in supporting the creation of the Albanian state in 1912 for its own strategic political reasons and it occupied the neighboring country during the First World War. In 1920, Giolitti's government confirmed its imperial project in the region but was forced to withdraw from the Albanian southern port city of Vlore, a hold that Italy had intended to retain, due to social unrest at home.

When Italy's Fascist government came to power, Italy gradually reestablished its grip on Albania, establishing it as an informal protectorate that later gained full protectorate status. During the '30s, Rome established near full control over the Albanian economy, its foreign policy, and military matters. As a consequence, Tirana stood little chance of spurring Rome when Mussolini decided to occupy the country in 1939, declaring Albania part of the Italian Kingdom. Despite these

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circumstances, Albania avoided bloodshed and even the later German occupation of Albania, according to Fischer, was, generally speaking, a 'benign' occupation as Hitler considered Albania 'to be the last wild corner of Europe and Albanians as a vital warrior mountain race' (Fischer 2002b: 134). Furthermore, during the Axis occupation of Albania, Tirana gained control for a few months of almost all Albanian-populated areas in neighboring countries, thereby, for a short time, realizing the national dream of a Great Albania.

In 1943, with Italy's signing of the armistice with the Allies, disbanded Italian soldiers in Albania, like disbanded Italian soldiers elsewhere, either deserted the army, were taken as war-prisoners by the Germans, or joined the new Nazi-Fascist alliance. Fugitive soldiers were often protected by Albanian families and, on occasion, joined the Albanian partisans in the fight for national liberation. Albanian communist partisans, with Allied logistic and material support, liberated Albania in 1944 and quickly took control of the country.

The Cold War

In Italy, the political coalition that brought the country out of the Second World War built the Italian Republic around its democratic constitution, reshaping national identity around the values of the anti-Fascist liberation movement. Public memories that contrasted with the country's new identity were marginalized and, in some cases, transformed, as was the case with Italian colonial experiments, or suppressed, such as with the crimes against humanity committed by Italian officials during the country's various military campaigns. As pointed out by historians of Italian colonialism, the dominant anti-Fascist public collective memory left no space for a critical review of colonialism. Instead, a reassuring narrative of the Italian soldier, who was never brave but had a human face, replaced the memories of Italian expansionist policies in the region. While imperial justifications minimized Italy's colonial role in Albania, that country's

experience was nonetheless narrated from the angle of individual experiences of the tragedy of war. Interestingly, among the most famous book of the genre recalling the tragedies of Italian soldiers during World War II was Rigoni Stern's *Quota Albania* (1971).

The take-over of the communist regime in postwar Albania broke the close relationship between the two sides of the Adriatic for the second time since the Ottoman conquest of Albania. The iron curtain became, in the Albanian case, almost impenetrable and Enver Hoxha's fight against revisionism only deepened Albania's isolation further. The Hoxha regime's faithfulness to Stalinism meant that, generally speaking, Albania did not represent an interesting political laboratory for the Italian left. This only contributed to Albania's isolationist drift. While Yugoslavia always found supporters in Italy, only small groups of Italian Marxist-Leninists maintained connections with Albania.

Eventually, not only Italian memory of colonialism in Albania but the neighboring country itself gradually disappeared from Italian collective representations. Only the Albanian-Italian minority, the *Arbëresh*, kept hold of some ties with the other side of the Adriatic, mainly for its own genealogical purposes, by participating in common cultural initiatives such as congresses on the Albanian language. In fact, by the time of the regime change in Albania in 1991, Italian public opinion had almost completely forgotten the neighboring country.

At the institutional level, Italy had almost no foreign policy towards Albania. Only during the '80s did Italy eventually make some efforts to undermine the Hoxha regime, but these were weaker than those of other western countries. While Italian TV came to have an important role in Albania only circumstantially, for years American, British, and German efforts engaged in informational campaigns in Albania with the broadcasting of media programs such as Radio Free Europe, BBC Albanian service, Deutsche Welle and the like with an aim at undermining the communist regime.

As for Albania, there too the memory of the glorious national liberation war from Axis power occupation became central after 1945. However, the creation of an official narrative around this memory was shaped to serve the interests of the new authoritarian regime. Memories that differed from the one imposed by the national-communist regime were violently suppressed, just as those who referenced these divergent memories – Albania's monarchists and republic nationalists – were also physically repressed. In this way, personal memories that contrasted with the official historical reconstruction were censored in the public sphere and, even in the private realm, they could only be articulated with extreme caution.

Albania's tragic experience of Italian expansionism before and after World War II constituted the only encounter with Italy that most Albanians ever had. Besides the direct experience of war and the Italian occupation, Albanians, a majority of whom in the 1950s were illiterate, acquired their knowledge of “capitalist” Italy through the newly-introduced universal school system that, under highly ideological schemes, allowed for widespread literacy for the first time.

In this context, the narrative of Albanian heroic resistance against Nazi-Fascists was perpetuated throughout the decades with minor transformations. This narrative formed the *topos* of Albanian historiography which, emphatically presented to every Albanian student for decades, was also reiterated in literature. Kadare, the most eminent contemporary Albanian writer, helped keep alive, at home as well as abroad, the memory of both the Second World War and Italian expansionism and their impact on Albania with two stunning novels: the *Chronicle in Stone* (1971) and *The General of the Dead Army* (1980). The refined prose of the first book narrates, through the eyes of a child, the experience of war and foreign occupation. The later book's celebration of generous and heroic Albanian hospitality towards Italian defectors during WWII had even more resonance and its plot was adapted to an acclaimed Albanian film.

During Hoxha's regime, the Italian Fascist-era occupation's re-unification of Albania with Kosovo was generally not mentioned and, in certain cases, was interpreted as a fascist strategy to deceive the Albanian people. Ultimately, other than superficial rhetoric about Albanian "brothers" living outside the motherland, Enver Hoxha never substantially questioned the status quo concerning the borders of the country.

Among the representatives of the Albanian elite who joined the communist struggle for national emancipation against imperial powers, many had spent time in Italy for training, education, or business purposes during the inter-war period. However, the great majority of the Albanian population had to wait until the early Eighties to get any information about the neighboring country of Italy. It was then, when fatigue and disaffection towards the failed promises of the revolutionary project had grown uncontrollable, that Italian public television came to constitute Albania's most important window to that forbidden, external world. At that point, even the most rudimentary antenna allowed everyone to access this alternative source of information and transformed Italy into a symbol of freedom from oppression and poverty. Italian TV images of a prosperity unknown to Albanians appeared at a time when Albania was facing a devastating economic crisis and, at the beginning of the Nineties, made the regime's narrative of the "misery of capitalism" seem like a terrible farce.

Even though what had become the paranoid rhetoric of foreign siege had an historical rationale, Albanians' experience of oppression at home discredited in their eyes any state propaganda about danger from neighbors. In any case, the "capitalist enemy" of Albanian patriots turned out to be the people's own aspirations. It was Italy, in particular, that acquired a connotation opposite to the one proposed by the regime: it came to be seen as the promised future. There were high expectations for help from Italy. Albanians believed that as much as Albanians had assisted Italians during the war, Italians would surely return the favor. This expectation met with eventual disappointment and Western

governments, who had promised unconditional support to Albania in the time of Hoxha, were forgotten as soon as the communist Hoxha regime collapsed.

The first few years: la mémoire retrouvée?

In 1990, as most Italians had forgotten Albania and their 'common' past, Italians were totally unprepared for the disintegration of the Hoxha regime in Albania. The first refugee flows into Italy that resulted from Albania's regime disintegration crystallized collective representations of Albanians in Italy. Initially, Italian citizens mobilized to provide help to the newcomers as the images of desperate 'boat-people' escaping the regime dominated the media. At the level of foreign policy, the "Pellicano Operation" was organized to provide emergency aid during the winter of 1990/1991.

Once the regime had collapsed in the Balkan country and after a long period of isolation, people were finally granted freedom of movement and the situation in Albania changed radically. At that point, Albanians in Italy were downgraded from refugee status to economic migrant status. How things would evolve was made clear in Bari during the summer 1991 when an infamous episode of mass forced repatriation of Albanians to Albania took place after some days of detention in the city stadium. Solidarity towards Albanians in Italy seemed unlikely after that. On the contrary, as described by Vehbiu and Devole (1996), Albanians came to constitute the first source of fear among Italians. They became synonymous with violence, brutality, ignorance, and backwardness in Italian public perception.

At this point, the old refrain of Albania as "the unknown" mingled with narratives representing its citizens as the real "other" and newly-formed prejudices consolidated in the Italian public opinion. As Italy lacked a memory of its neighbor, public representations of Albanians easily became representations of needy but highly unwelcome people. Italians, on the other hand, were largely represented as generously responding to the emergency, but substantially

menaced by these 'uncontrolled' flows of people. Various publications on Albania and its inhabitants played to these two ideas: they focused on the aid that was being provided to Albanians while aiming to depict the reasons why Albanians were so attracted to Italy. The end result was a montage of the naiveté and primitivism of the Albanian Other.

At the political level in Albania, a right-win coalition, dominated by the Democratic Party (DP) of Sali Berisha came to power in 1992. The political climate in the aftermath of the collapse of the Hoxha regime, after years of devastating oppression, was very tense. For a while, a sort of anti-communist witch-hunt was conducted by the new political powers towards internal enemies responsible for the past "tragedy of the nation". Together with other small parties, although divided between pro and anti-monarchists, the DP did make use of nationalist rhetoric in relation with the Kosovo issue and toward Greece. Berisha's foreign policy was a rather eclectic one: sometimes he played the "Islamist" card, occasionally the nationalist card, and often the "friend-of-the-west" card. Italy, in this context, was always presented as an important ally without referencing Italy's past domination of Albania. At any rate, the DP-lead government held good relations with Italian emissaries, even if it always privileged contacts with the USA.

With the collapse of the regime in Albania, it was finally possible to rethink the past free from influence of dogmatism and police control. This gave space to the articulation of private memories. However, academic circles in the country were heavily hit by the hardship of the economic transformations and had limited space for new scholarly research. It was rather the Albanian émigré community, generally speaking a carrier of nationalist ideology, that contributed most to the new market in books and literature on Albania. In reviewing the communist historiography, new books on national history remained focused on political history and international relations, adding a new nationalist perspective.

At home, almost only mass media occupied the space of historiographical

discussions and, in this framework, the republican nationalist Balli Kombëtar's cooperation with the Axis powers and King Zog's alliance with Rome occasionally were re-evaluated. In this context, however, a review of the Italian-Fascist occupation of Albania was not undertaken. Revising the King Zog figure, negatively depicted by the communist regime, aimed instead at underlining his patriotism and engagement against the Italian-Fascist occupation.

After the fall of the Hoxha regime, the story of Albanians providing help to Italians after the capitulation of the Italian military in 1943 was also revived. The first wave of Albanians migrating to Italy carried with them the stories of Albanian farmers giving shelter to Italian soldiers fleeing from Nazi forces. The invocation of these stories probably not only revealed Albanian expectations in the first years after the collapse of the regime, but was probably also an attempt to interpret the initial welcome of the Italian people as reciprocation for Albanian hospitality almost five decades earlier. However, as mentioned above, Italian hospitality was short-lived and here there was no collective memory of the unpleasant involving Italian soldiers in Albania so many years before.

There was no reference to the Italian role in the construction of Great Albania on the part of the Albanian communist regime, but after the regime's collapse, Albanian history textbooks began to emphasize the positive consequences of Albania's then-re-unification with the other Albanian communities. Having said that, it should be noted that no social movement of a nationalist nature appeared in the Albanian public sphere. In this, Albania is certainly an exception in the political developments of the region during the Nineties. Besides Berisha's verbal declarations about Kosovo's national fight and some political support to the neighboring province's leaders, there was media attention to the issue but no politically concrete engagement. Austerity and sacrifices in the name of the nation were issues of the past. Now, Albanians were mainly concerned with improving living standards, enjoying a personal dimension of freedom from police control, and getting a taste of once-forbidden consumer

culture.

Italy incarnated the model of the Western quality of life and its stereotypical features were imitated. New boutiques in Tirana used Italian names in their marketing strategies with a bar in central Tirana even opening with the name 'Berlusconi'. Italian food became fashionable in the new night life of the capital city. Italy was no longer the imagined paradise of the years before, it was simply considered a wealthier and technologically more advanced country that had already reached a lifestyle that Albanians strived for. For those that experienced migration, the 'Italian myth' had left space for a new awareness of the hardship of the migrant experience, yet it was still a necessary one for many.

While during these years most Albanian immigrants in Italy faced the hardship of integrating into the Italian economy, a few found considerable sources of income in the new market of illegal trafficking. This opportunity generated new representations of Italy as the country whose system had loopholes to be exploited and offered the opportunity to get rich quick. Car smuggling, speedy boat service for aspiring migrants, and even human trafficking boomed in the Nineties. Albania's relationship with its affluent neighbor generated images of a new potential Eldorado for those who had the courage to risk a life 'out of legality'. The implication of such a context has been socially disruptive in many areas of the country heavily hit by economic transformation. Many destitute areas in the country were targeted by various kind of illegal trafficking and some places, such as the southern port of Vlora, saw much of their economies growing around the informal sector.

Mutual representation after 1997

In Italy, political and military engagement with Albania's second major crisis in 1997 was conceived as a burden that the country had to face. The center-left wing government presented its choice to intervene as an assumption of

responsibility and gained widespread political consensus in favor of a military operation. In the media, a common complaint was that Italy had been abandoned by its European partners and that the EU had once more shown its failure to formulate a common foreign policy. A 'coalition of the willing' was set up and "Operazione Alba" was undertaken after a UN resolution endorsed it. Once it was over, it was interpreted with general satisfaction as an accomplishment of a new Italian foreign policy. Italy's imperialist past was barely recognized in public debates as the democratic Italian Republic had rejected its connection with previous historical experiences. Instead, after the first Albanian refugees reached Italian coasts in 1997, a new invasion paranoia dominated the Italian media. Italian television, broadly viewed in Albania as well, this time broadcast clear messages of rejection to Albanian migrants during the whole crisis.

Italy's oblivion of the past, and/or dis-association from it, was manifest in Italian public representations of policy-making towards Albania. It was rather on the occasion of the third military operation carried out by Italy in Albania in the framework of the NATO war on Yugoslavia in 1999 that some Italians protested against military intervention. Demonstrators pointed at Italy's violation of an article in the Italian republican constitution that refers to the 'repudiation of war as a tool to solve international disputes', one of the pillars of anti-Fascist Italian democracy. By and large, they did not point to the history of Italian relations with Albania nor did they establish a clear historical connection between present and past foreign policy-making.

Conversely, supporters of the NATO intervention argued that it had a humanitarian character and that it was compatible with a generous, just, and democratic Europe. The European public's exaltation of its own magnanimity, according to Pandolfi (2002), shaped the new relationship that the West entertained towards the Balkans after the Cold War and should be regarded as a 'supra-colonial project'. Thanks to hundred of stories in the national media, the 'Missione Arcobaleno', the Italian humanitarian aid delivered to Kosovar refugees

who fled Kosovo during the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, was presented as if it covered almost the entire burden of assistance of the 500,000 refugees to Albania. In fact, almost 80 percent of Kosovar refugees were hosted by Albanian families on a voluntary basis without external assistance.

One should consider that Italian policy-making towards Albania has been predominantly of a crisis-management kind. The Italian fear of Albanian migration flows can serve as the main lens through which to analyze most of Italy's official initiatives there. Not by chance, the most widespread Italian collective representations of Albanians during the Nineties were related to their nature as migrants. But from the summer of 1998 onwards, Italian national papers were forced to make a detour from coverage as usual. As Italy was involved in the NATO war, Italian papers reported that Italy had intervened to save those 'wretched and harmless refugees' that, just a few weeks before, had been presented as 'dangerous immigrants' menacing Italian coasts. Immigrants were mostly called Kosovars and not Albanians in order to further distinguish between them. Media representations of Albanian refugees from Kosovo had changed, together with Italian policy towards Yugoslavia. In any case, at that point as much as in 1997, the main reason for Italian support for relief operations was to help Albanians to remain at home. As long as Albanians did not cross the sea, the majority of Italians were happy to show solidarity with Albania in the framework of the contested Operazione Arcobaleno.

Becoming objects of constant negative stereotyping has been humiliating for Albanians abroad and at home. The experience of mis-recognition, however, did not entail denunciation of presumed Italian neo-colonial projects. Today, the Albanian public opinion, of its two most important EU neighbors –Greece and Italy- generally fears the former more than the latter. Italy constitutes a problem in as far as it does not allow the free movement of Albanian citizens and its public opinion generally displays racist attitudes toward Albanians. Greece contributes to this by instituting policies such as sudden collective massive expulsions of

Albanians. Greek public opinion is fairly uniform in arguing that southern Albania is nothing other than North Epirus and that all Albanian Orthodox are actually Greek.

Even if Italians no longer question Albania's territorial independence, they are nonetheless frequently reproached by Albanians for their 'scandalous ignorance' of their neighbor's context. In contrast, the Albanian public sphere takes a strong interest in its neighboring countries and its media provides meticulous accounts of the position of their governments on Albanian issues. The media also often frequently comments on the pro-Greek or pro-Italian affiliation of the main Albanian political representatives.

The Italian trend of maliciously ignoring the reality of its neighboring country and deliberately humiliating it with negative portrayals has only one exception: the film *Lamerica* by Gianni Amelio. The film constituted a rare example of questioning the 'otherness' of Albanian migrants in Italy by intertwining the history of the two countries, highlighting their common experiences of migration, and recalling the Fascist invasion of Albania. The film also highlights the predatory nature of Italian businesses in Albania in the post-communist context. However, due to film's grim depiction of an impoverished Albania in the months following the collapse of Albania's Hoxha regime, director Amelio's portrayal of Albania was perceived as insulting in Albania. The film-maker, in his book chronicling the experience with the film and its reception in the country, explains how he realized later the extent to which, contrary to his intentions to problematize the Italian gaze of Albania, the film could represent a new invasion of Albania (Amelio 1994).

The Italian national media has recently down-toned its negative representation of Albania and Albanian migrants to Italy. Some newspapers in Tirana expressed a certain optimism concerning this transformation of the image of the Albanians in Italy, underling that, on Italian TV, some Albanian characters were gaining popularity. On the other hand, the positive image Italy enjoyed in Albania as the first-choice destination for emigration in 1992 has slightly changed.

In 1999, Italy ranked only third as an emigration destination as most Albanians stated a greater preference to emigrate to the USA or Canada.

In Albania, the impact of the devastating experience of 1997 encouraged the emergence of 'anti-nationalist' narratives. As Albania's historic experience of independence had been catastrophic after 1945, and afterwards, the transformation into a capitalist country a difficult one, the newly-elected prime minister in 1997, Fatos Nano, publicly commented on the possible eventuality of Albania becoming an Italian protectorate. Violent debates followed his declarations but, judging from the number of people who fled Albania that year, Nano's 1997 comments might be interpreted as reflecting a new, widespread feeling of hopelessness among Albanians regarding the country's future.

In the Albanian political sphere, it has been the Democratic Party (DP) of Sali Berisha to incarnate the populist wing. Their socialists have redesigned their image as a technocratic modern left whose communist past should be forgotten since they were the only ones who could bring the country back on track. Since the 1997 crisis, the already-limited sovereignty of the country has further declined and the socialists have had no reason whatsoever to come up with strong nationalist rhetoric as they have been in need of Western financial and political support. During an interview conducted by one of the paper's authors, a high-ranking representative of the Socialist Party in power commented that Italians left many positive signs of their presence in Albania: 'look at the architecture of Tirana, the best buildings were built by Italians'. Whether the comment was made for reasons of *captation benevolentiae* or rather out of sincere convictions or both, what this reveals is that the collective memory of repeated Italian menaces to Albanian national sovereignty did not bring about an explicit condemnation of Italy's colonial past, at least no longer by those currently in power.

According to Vehbiu (2003) Albanian public opinion is fuzzy in regard to the period of the Italian-Fascist domination of Albania. This period is identified with

the years of occupation (1939-1943) even though this constitutes only the last phase of the Italian-Fascist presence in Albania. In a sort of revisionist wave, many in Albania underline the economic progress experienced by the country under Italian hegemony. In this respect, Vehbiu, in the columns of the Albanian weekly *Java*, recalled that reforms which occurred under Italian control cannot not be analyzed without considering Mussolini's expansionist aims in the region. In Vehbiu's view, Albanian public opinion's widespread appreciation of the years of Italian-Fascist domination is a sign of the regression of the Albanian collective conscience.

After 1999, EU policy towards Albania has become a concrete though demanding possibility. The EU project holds the aura of a promise, not only of prosperity but also of security from regional hegemonic projects. At this point, Albania's relationship with Italy has become a priority. Broad support for the European project in Albania is accompanied by the widespread belief that the way to the European Union passes through Rome. Political alliances with the neighboring power no longer follow ideological affiliation, as evidenced by the Albanian socialist-led government's enthusiasm for cooperation with the Berlusconi-led Italian government since 2002. Nor has Rome's engagement in support of Albanian EU membership changed with the election of a right-wing government.

The post-Cold War context shaped memories and mutual representations of the two polities in different ways. The triumphal rhetoric of the Cold War winners affected the Italian public capacity for self-reflection. Not much emerged in the post-Cold War Italian public sphere's perceptions of Albania other than self-identification as the country's savior and a fear of foreign menaces. As for the Albanian public sphere, the devastating experiences of the past and the hardships of the post-communist transformation dulled the opportunities offered by the recent the opening up of the country's public sphere. Building a space for re-thinking the past and imagining a common future for Albania and Italy beyond

hegemonic relations and drives to control remains a challenge that will hopefully be confronted in the near future.

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