Urban Places and the Narrative of the Supreme Power

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Abstract

During the totalitarian era (1944–1991), urban space was used as an “arena” in which to demonstrate the absolute power of the communist regime. Some important structures were built; others were destroyed; new names were given to streets or even cities, to create a new identity for the urban areas. Urban locations (the Pyramid of Enver Hoxha, the Dajti hotel, the building of the Central Committee, etc.), became symbols of fear and admiration, because of their strong association with the supreme political power. Contemporary novels such as Ferri i çarë (The Hell is Broken), Në kohën e britmës (In the Time of the Scream) by Visar Zhiti, The Successor, The Daughter of Agamemon by Ismail Kadare, Loja, shembja e qiellit (The Game, the Fall of the Sky), etc., make urban places the epicenter of a dramatic relationship between man and the totalitarian power. The main goal of this paper is to analyze the correlation between transformations that happened in urban spaces during the communist era (1945–1990) and the implementation of the ideological project of the “New Man”. A thorough text analysis of Albanian novels is used to interpret the re-designation of the cities, as part of a political program, by which urban landscapes, literature, and art were transformed into mere ideological means through which the communist new word was proclaimed. These transformations became symbolic signs of a tragic time, where man became God (in the new atheist context), and the urban space became the temple, and where fear and obedience were sowed together with fake narratives related to urban identity.

Keywords: Urban space, fake narratives, propaganda, communist regime

Introduction

Albania fell under one of the cruelest totalitarian regimes after World War II. Immediately after the communists took full political control, a long process to re-designate the urban landscapes started. The infrastructural elements became signs of symbolic discourse, which represented an explicit ideological approach to the urban landscape. The re-designation of urban areas occurred due to the urge of the totalitarian regime to demand unlimited power regarding the ideological use of the urban space because communists needed a new urban
“world” to fabricate the “New Man” (completely detached from his natural roots). This unfortunate project involved activating propaganda not only in political discourse, but also in architecture, art, literature, textbooks, etc. The main goal was to succeed in all individuals having a similar decoding of the symbolic discourse, to create a new world “where all men have become One Man” (Arendt, 1962, p. 487).

In such a political context, the landscape became a medium to convey totalitarian communist ideology, because as Foucault highlights, “the space in today’s language is the most obsessive with metaphors [...] in space language unfurls, slips on itself, determines its choices, draws its figures and translations” (1967, pp. 407–412). Architecture has a very strong potential to support and promote ideological propaganda, because as Doordan emphasizes: “In many ways, totalitarian architecture represents the regime that builds it” (Doordan, 2002, p. 122). Unfortunately, Albania had to suffer a swift transition from one totalitarian regime (Italian fascism) to another (communism), accompanied by large-scale demolitions and enormous construction projects, which aimed to give the city a new identity.

During communist totalitarianism, urban space was considered a large canvas where ideological principles were portrayed. The city became the landscape where totalitarian symbols of power were projected. These symbols did not only demonstrate the authority of the state, but also the projection of overall rules and regulations that would not only prevail in urban landscapes, but in the arts and human life as well. These dramatic changes (which were especially evident in the capital area) legitimized the ideological usage of urban space, through which the state could control the symbolic discourse. As Gill and Angosto-Ferrandez (2018, p. 429) highlight, “Given that it is impossible for state elites to control their populations, they make symbols univocal (to ensure that everyone understands the symbols in exactly the same way).”

This is the reason why immediately after the communists took power in 1944, they began a large number of architectural transformations, starting with the eradication of the political symbols of the previous totalitarian regime. During the Italian invasion, political symbols of fascism sprouted all over the country. The communist regime radically erased the tracks of the past through drastic changes in the urban areas, making alterations which damaged the earlier Ottoman, monarchic, and Italian architectural and infrastructural heritage. Tirana was previously designed to have the shape of Liktor’s ax by Italian architects during the fascist occupation (World War II). Once the communists came to power, they made sure that the drafting of the new plan took over the erection of the previous architectural structures. The municipality hall built in the 1930s was demolished and the National Museum of History constructed in its place. On the other hand, the building which used to be the National Parliament during monarchic times (1928–1939) was converted into a children’s theater.

Special attention was paid to manifesting the communist ideology in the new architectural concept of the city. The city itself became a sign of power, a temple of communism, and the giant monuments shadowed people’s lives, making them feel weak and insignificant. The Soviet influence became evident in the urban plan of 1957. The Palace of Culture was built over the old Bazaar of Tirana and the first brick was placed by former Soviet president Nikita Khrushchev on June 3, 1959. Vast and epic constructions were built for the main state institutions, such as the “Albania today” Film Production Studio (1950–1952), the Palace of Congresses (1986), the Pyramid, the museum dedicated to the dictator’s life (1988), etc. Moreover, after the communist state declared the beginning of the atheist area (1976), religious buildings (even ancient churches and cathedrals or medieval mosques) were converted into cinemas, theaters, and many of them even granaries. In addition, vast boulevards and massive monuments re-dimensioned the space of the cities. “These
architectures are generally described as united by using the megalomania to portray a sense of power, majesty, and virility” (Ward, 2015, p. 35). The symbolic presence of absolute power in Tirana’s architecture was deeply reflected in the perception of urban inhabitants who inevitably decoded the political symbols univocally; they were subjugated to the new world which had arrived. “The fetishization of space in the service of the state, philosophy and practical activity were bound to seek a restoration of time; hence Marx’s vigorous reinstatement of historical time as revolutionary time” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 21)
The same happened in Albania; after the propagandistic message that the country was the “lantern” of communist ideology worldwide, people discovered the real face of the political system through fear, terror, pain, etc. This correlation between the political usages of urban space for ideological purposes with the univocal symbols of the supreme power and the subjugation of man will be analyzed through a close reading of novels that deal with the totalitarian past of Albania. They will be the primary source for discovering through the third-space perspective (Soja, 2006, p. 97) the reasons why the space in totalitarian Albania was ideologically used as a means of manipulation.

Methodological Approach

This paper uses a combination of methodological approaches, of which the semiotic method, close reading, and text analysis play the most crucial role. This research deals with the study of symbolic ideological signs in real life and literature. The symbolic discourse as one important ideological means of communication in totalitarian countries “distinguishes between ‘denotation’ (what the sign stands for) and ‘connotation’ (other signs associated with it); between codes (the rule-governed structures which produce meanings) and the messages transmitted by them; It speaks of ‘meta-languages,’ where one sign-system denotes another sign-system” (Eagleton, 2008, p. 88). The literary texts are thus seen as a complex form of discourse, an amalgamation of numerous systems – each containing its inherent tensions and harmonies, which interact with them all. Furthermore, symbols of ideological power found in literary books do not have a closed meaning which is consumed only through the text. Instead, the meaning largely opens up because of the correlations between literature and other systems of meaning like ideology, urban landscape, philosophy, sociology, landscape, history, etc. Through these correlations, a network of relations hidden between the lines inside each literary book is discovered, due to which literary works are considered mirrors where the ideological use of the urban landscape to attain the total submission of human beings was reflected. The paper also combines descriptive analyses as well as comparative ones to create a systematic approach to the phenomena.

Renaming the City as Part of the Symbolic Discourse

Whenever a political system changes, the main symbols of power are placed on the streets and the key institutions of cities. Space has great power, which politicians seek to exercise, because of the important connection that exists between the individual and the environment to which they feel they belong. Mark Nepo, in an interview given to Renee A. Levi in The Powers of Place: An Inquiry into the Influence of Place, Space, and Environment on Collective Transformation (2008), highlights that the cooperation between space and the people is very strong: “It’s not just a one-way relationship with people inhabiting places. Places also inhabit people. It’s giving and receiving – they influence each other”. The same connection is stressed by Healey, who states that “Places are as social nodes as physical sites, evident in the meanings given to them as much as in the interactions which take place within
them [...]. It is impossible to avoid the intense conflicts that routinely surface when planning interventions aimed to improve particular place qualities are initiated” (Healey, 2005, pp. 5–6).

From this point of view, by changing the physical aspect of the landscape, totalitarian systems aim at the social metamorphosis of the inhabitants, through new cultural narratives. The concept of dividing the city from the past, its history, and its values through ideological changes that occur first in function and second in naming is a typical phenomenon of totalitarian systems. As Arendt states:

While the totalitarian regimes are thus resolutely and cynically emptying the world of the only thing that makes sense to the utilitarian expectations of common sense, they impose upon it at the same time a kind of super sense which the ideologies always meant when they pretended to have found the key to history or the solution to the riddles of the universe. (Arendt, 1962, p. 477)

Emptying the landscape of the symbolic values that the architectural elements used to hold is associated with imposing new symbolic meanings on the inhabitants. Both phenomena are noted in literary works:

a) New names – new symbolic values given to urbanistic and architectural units;
b) New functions of the previous architectural works.

The communist regime took sufficient care not only to build new architectural constructions but also to make the existing ones part of the hegemony of the symbolic discourse. Rinia Park (Kongoli, 2007, p. 83), Barricades Street (Shehu, 2015, p. 94), “The Steel of the Party” State Factory, and “Marsel Kashen” Boulevard (Kadare, 2009, p. 35) were part of the new designations, which were closely related to the ideological life of totalitarian Albania. This metamorphosis of names was closely related to the ideological projection that politics place on space. This process is particularly important when regime change occurs, and the new regime seeks to consolidate itself in power. Replacement of the former symbolic discourse is the aim because this will help the totalitarian state to consolidate its control. However, Graeme Gill highlights that this is not easy to achieve, because the multivocality of symbols is rooted not only in the personal experiences of society. “Nevertheless, regimes do seek to achieve this, principally through the generation of a narrative that will organize and integrate the symbols into a compelling story” (Gill, 2018, p. 429).

In the novel The Game, the Fall of the Sky by Bashkim Shehu, the character’s journey in Tirana is portrayed as a transition in time, through the changes in the names made by different political systems. “After a while, he was located on Barricade Street […]. He entered the alleys again, then exited into the illuminated space of a boulevard, the former Stalin Boulevard, which is now called the Martyrs of the Nation, while later it will be called First Zog Boulevard” (Shehu, 2013, p. 27).

The first to detach from the hegemony of symbolic discourse after the fall of the dictatorship was the architectural units that involved the concept of trade. New European names, such as Vienna Café, Atlantic Café (Kadare, 2009), and Motel Europe (Zhiti, 2004) signified the eager transition of the individual from the totalitarian regime to the democratic one. These names accomplished the process of transforming living spaces into family businesses. Moreover, another element related to the spread of ideological discourse is closely related to the alienation of institutions, among which religious ones hold the most important place.
Additionally, place quality is largely conceived in terms of physical structures and morphology (and the implications of these for social and economic activities), rather than meaning and cultural attachment. “Yet it is these meanings and attachments, often deeply embedded in local histories and cultures, which ‘insiders’ care about” (Stephenson, 2010, p. 9). Catholic and Orthodox churches, due to their acoustic features, were turned into theaters or cinemas, but in some other cases even warehouses. The destruction of historical memory was fundamental to the creation of the new communist world. The dramatic transition into atheism left deep scars on people who suddenly woke up in a world without a God. The chaos of the new world became unbearable. Writing about the new insensitive world communists were building, Shehu (2013, p. 82) evidences the process of religious uprooting during totalitarianism. The narrator in *The Game, the Fall of the Sky* claims:

Its inhabitants, not wanting the church to be turned into a warehouse or a stable, have secretly made a deal according to which, ostensibly to destroy the church out of hatred, they would take its stones for their homes, whoever repaired or strengthened the steam, with the hope of God that one day the church would be resurrected, and they would thus preserve the stones for this blessed day. (Shehu, 2013, p. 90)

In the same novel, the narrator affirms: “We are in 1967. Churches, conventions, mosques, and any other religious or sacred institution have just been closed, even though this contradicts the Constitution” (Shehu, 2013, p. 94), and later “The communists are converting churches into cinemas” (Shehu, 2013, p. 101).

Most Italian architectural designs had the same fate, such as, for example, the Palace of Princesses (which became the National Library), the Royal Palace (which became the Palace of Brigades; Zhiti, 2004, 2009), etc. The legacy of dictatorship continued, but it formally changed the ideological meanings of the symbolic discourse. The communists’ utilization of previous architectural designs was made to manifest their supreme power in the collective psychology of their people. Their political strength was measured by their ability to unroot any traces of the past to create their new world, a world in which the ideological curtain hid the terror and pain.

**Supreme Power and the Symbolization of the Leader’s Body**

*The Successor* by Ismail Kadare, published in Tirana in 2003, is based on the mysterious death of Albania’s 23rd prime minister (1954–1981), Mehmet Shehu, who had been handpicked to succeed Enver Hoxha. After the official declaration of suicide, the family members tried to read the messages of their destiny (exile, imprisonment, or still belonging to the state elite), through symbolic behavior toward the body of the victim. Homages of the dead body meant a good omen for the destiny of the Shehu family. Otherwise, dark times were ahead. The National Martyrs Cemetery is mentioned in the work of Kadare (2003, p. 19), when the escort to the last residence of the “suicidal” successor (according to state authorities) is narrated. At first glance, it seems that no details are important in this process. But in reality, the place of burial of a senior member of the state is closely related to the fate of his family. The National Martyrs Cemetery symbolizes the reverence for the departed, because of his loyalty to the communist ideal; the respect for the dictator determines at the same time the relationship of communist power to the family of the departed. If death is considered the end of everything, this is not the case in totalitarian systems, whose hate may pursue the individual even after his death.
In the same novel (Kadare, 2003, p. 40) the fate of another individual associated with communist power is presented:

A few weeks ago, from the Martyrs’ Cemetery was exhumed Kano Zhbira, a former member of the Political Bureau, who had committed suicide many years ago. It was the third time they had taken him out of the grave. Every change in the political line, before the economy felt it, was felt by his bones. (2003, p. 54)

Following the same patterns, the National Martyrs Cemetery functions as a political “heaven” in which only those who are considered ideologically “clean” can retain their “immortal” status after death. Man’s relationship with power is not limited to the actions he takes in life, but through the devotion and loyalty shown. Due to the rapidly changing political climate, this relationship shifted rapidly not only in life, but also in death. This approach to man made the National Martyrs Cemetery both solemn and macabre, due to the inability of the dead to “rest in peace”.

Figure 1. The National Martyrs Cemetery, retrieved from www.aprtirana.al

The National Martyrs Cemetery of Albania was built in 1971, designed by the architect Besim Daja, and was located on a hill overlooking Tirana. The Mother Albania statue (the work of the sculptors Kristaq Rama, Muntaz Dhrami, and Shaban Hadëri) proudly stood in the cemetery, symbolically representing the country as a mother, guarding the eternal slumber of those who gave their lives for the country. The tomb of Enver Hoxha was placed at the base of the statue, symbolically connecting the figure of the leader with Mother Albania. Both of them were inevitably one.

The National Martyrs Cemetery became a symbol of violence and terror that used to haunt individuals during their life and after it. Erected in a prominent place in the capital city, it was a symbol of the missing peace that unfortunately even death could not provide. This symbolic rape was related to the totalitarian regimes’ attempt to use the latter as an ideological structure for achieving the hegemony of the symbolic discourse. This hegemony implied more than an influence and more even than the permanent use of repressive violence.

Due to the atheistic climate in which such systems are set up, the leader takes on the attributes of God. This also explains why the grave of Enver Hoxha, in contrast to every other one, marked only the birthday of the deceased, but not the day of death. This is because totalitarian leaders do not die; their symbolic life goes on as long as there are followers of the ideology.
The symbolization of the leader’s body to convey messages of supreme power was a common phenomenon in totalitarian Albania. Monuments to important political leaders, such as the Pyramid (the tyrant mausoleum), signified the importance of the spatial presence of the symbolic body of the leader. Built three years after the death of the dictator (1988), the Pyramid was originally conceived as a museum dedicated to the leader’s political life (1944–1985). The Pyramid became one of the most discussed architectural works, during and after the fall of communism, with the debates ranging from its evaluation as the first modern work designed by Albanian architects to the request to demolish it, after the fall of the dictatorship.

Figure 2. The Pyramid, photo by Gent Shkullaku

The structure was designed by Pranvera Hoxha (the daughter of Enver Hoxha), her husband Klement Kolaneci, Pirro Vaso, and Vladimir Bregu. The Pyramid functioned as a mausoleum for only a couple of years (1988–1991) and for several decades its functions were completely different: from conference and fair center (1991) to a humanitarian center when the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) established its headquarters during the war in Kosovo (1999), the headquarters of the most important private television company, Top Channel (2001), etc. Although the Pyramid had a short life under communism, the symbol it represents is so strong that it still provokes debate over its demolition. What usually happens after the fall of dictatorships is that the hegemony of the symbolic discourse is destroyed. However, in the case of the Pyramid, this did not happen. It had the same fate as its siblings (the museum – tomb – Pyramid), which bear the shadow of the body of the dead leader. The building was superstitiously despotic (Hatherley, 2015, p. 25), similar to the grandeur and haughtiness of other architectural units which had strong ideological purposes. The Albanian Pyramid, although it never housed the dictator’s body, retained in the same form as Lenin’s mausoleum the solemn character of death itself. “It became the perfect example of architecture promoting the communist political religion” (Lozanova & Tasheva, 2018, p. 16). Thus, the Pyramid was inextricably linked to the figure of the leader, and it also symbolized the extraordinary destructive power of a system that exterminated, condemned, or exiled almost 1/3 of the population. For this reason, the Pyramid continued to carry symbolic meanings of death and destruction even after its function completely changed. As an absolute symbol of evil, it is mentioned in
many literary novels. In the *Guiding Dictionary on the Mystery of the Dossiers* by Bashkim Shehu, the Pyramid is referenced several times, each time with different meanings. It sometimes appears as a financial pyramid and elsewhere as a geometric figure symbolically associated with fire, suddenly turning into a multitude of pyramids that are the false tombs of powerful people or gods. Although it changes in terms of representation, it still signifies a connection with the totalitarian past. The narrative of supreme power is still active and disturbs the subconscious of Albanians because the landscape of totalitarianism has not been fully retouched.

![Image](image.jpg)

**Figure 3.** The monument of Mother Albania in the hall of the Palace of Congresses, photo by Marisa Kerbizi

Figure 3 depicts the image that stands in the front hall of the Palace of Congresses, with the communist star above the symbol of Mother Albania still present today. Even the communist nominations of some important buildings remain the same (such as the Palace of Brigades, the Palace of Congresses, the Block, etc.), as a reminder that the totalitarian past still contaminates the narrative of democratic Albania. This is because Albania, unlike other communist countries, had a very long transition from communism to the new democratic system. It was only 16 years after the dictator’s death (1985) that his bronze monument was toppled by protesters (1991). This was a time of great changes in Europe, with the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989), and the collapse of totalitarian systems in other Eastern countries, which inevitably conveyed the echo of change in Albania. However, this was a dramatic moment for many Albanians who had been indoctrinated for years with love and admiration toward the supreme leader.

The trauma associated with this process appears in many Albanian contemporary novels. Kadare (in *The Successor*) remarkably delineates the moment when the leader’s statue fell and the emptiness it left, not only in the landscape of the capital, but also in the psyche of Albanians:

> The resounding echo from ‘Skenderbe’ square was coming in waves. Among the tumultuousness was visible the truck behind which the newly overturned bronze was tied […] Oh incredible… The God, the Leader, the dictator, at the feet of the crowd […] his body was turning and tossing deep underground, while its statue was being humiliated. (2003, p. 99)
The strong connection between the body of the dead leader and his monument creates the image of a frightening creature that magnified its dimensions, the body deep-rooted in the earth and the monument towering high in the sky. As the symbolic presence of the tyrant expanded, the existence of human beings was diminished through violence, torture, fear, and ideology.

The Institutions of Terror and Power

The hegemony of the symbolic discourse was violently maintained through institutions of terror, like prisons, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, surveillance institutions such as the “House with Leaves”, etc. These institutions aimed to achieve the loss of identity of human beings, to turn them into a single being (a mass of people who decode reality in exactly the same way). Through this process, the hegemony of symbolic discourse would become complete. Regarding this process, Hannah Arendt (1962, p. 462) states: “Totalitarian systems attempt to achieve this goal, both through ideological indoctrination of the elite formations and through absolute terror”. What could not be achieved through persuasion, or the unconditional surrender of man, was accomplished through violence, terror, and surveillance.

The surveillance system turned into a frightening structure of totalitarianism, through which every human value was devalued. Friendship, family, and human privacy all crumbled at once. “Surveillance, in any land where it is ubiquitous and inescapable, generates distrust and divisions among its citizens, curbs their readiness to speak freely to each other, and diminishes their willingness to even dare to think freely” (Dorfman, 2014, p. 74). Surveillance affected totalitarian Albania in every element of personal and social life. Everyone was a victim; the inability to trust anyone made the individual shrink their identity until they became invisible, and consequently harmless to the state. In Albanian literature, some important institutions related to surveillance like the “Flora” café, Dajti hotel, and even the “House with Leaves” are mentioned. “There was no resident of the capital city who did not know that after “Dajti”, the second bar where the tables had hidden microphones was ‘Flora’ café”, writes Kadare in the novel A Girl in Exile (2009, p. 103). The protagonist of the novel is a successful playwright whose life is about to change because of his potential involvement in a romance with a young girl, a member of a family sent in to exile and accused of being a state enemy. The plot of the novel deals with two love stories hiding mysteries and enigmas that are only solved through the involvement of the Party Committee. The surveillance system, after deeply instigating the issue, brings to light the fact that these love stories are strongly connected. Stefa is summoned for questioning by the Party Committee, and while he is alluding that his ex-lover (Migena, a university freshman in literature studies) is possibly a spy, the interrogator reveals the identity of the person he thought he was asking Stefa about: this “girl” (Linda B.), who came from a former bourgeois family connected to the old Albanian royal court, was recently found dead as a result of suicide. While in exile, Linda had fallen deeply in love with the playwright Stefa and as she was unable to meet him (she could not get permission from the authorities to travel to Tirana), she had beseeched her friend to replace her.

A Girl in Exile reveals a tragic context in which the destiny, life, and death of human beings are strongly related to the political structures of the totalitarian state. That is why the surveillance institutions and their physical signifiers (buildings) were transformed into a complex mental structure that was used to connect the danger, premonition, and fatality of the individuals with them. The Dajti hotel was one of the most infamous symbols of the totalitarian system in Albania because it became one of the most important institutions of
surveillance, a structure of the state intended to strip the individual, observe their existence with their ideological lens, and then decide on the fate of the latter. Although the individuals did not know what was cooked in the state laboratories (there were only rumors related to it), they felt the energy released by the edifice, which used to stand like a “beast” peeping to find mistakes that happened during the day or the night dreams:

He found himself on the Grand Boulevard, in front of the Dajti hotel. The thought of drinking a coffee there, among foreign customers, seemed more inappropriate than ever […]. When you do not even know if you feel calm or not inside, go in front of the Dajti hotel. Acknowledge that you have lost your security, not to say a heavier word, he thought. (Kadare, 2009, p. 79)

The totalitarian state used to penetrate the depths of human consciousness to be sure that there was no “seed” of any idea of rebellion against political order. In order to do so, “The communists made use of all forms of control and manipulation” (Pătraşcu, 2013, p. 2), against which the individuals were completely unprotected.

Another important symbol of surveillance in totalitarian Albania is mentioned in the novel Vjeshta e ankthit (The Fall of Anxiety) by Bashkim Shehu, which notes the presence of “a two-storey building near the Telegraph Post, a building with walls completely covered with creeping leaves and flowers, which made it look like the fairy tale houses […] that had once been the center of telephone tapping of Ministry of Interiors” (Shehu, 1997, p. 132).

Figure 4. The Museum of Secret Surveillance, photo by @bxh.photography

The House of Leaves (now the Museum of Secret Surveillance) even today continues to bear the mystery, fear, and even the horror of the past. So strong are the shadows of such institutions that the confrontation of the individual with them turns into a complex process through which the greatest fears of being, the relationship of the individual with the state, the insecurity of life, the endangerment of freedom, etc., are understood.

However, of all the above institutions, State Security was the most frightening. The surveillance institutions (Flora café, Dajti hotel, the House of Leaves) used to stay in the shadows and darkness, while State Security was the heart of the functioning of the totalitarian regime. Each despotic system heavily relies on secret services. State Security legitimized its existence only through the pursuit and surveillance of individuals. It functioned as an institution of extermination because the fate of the surveyed individual was clear: imprisonment, exile, or even execution. The presence of this institution is found not only in A Girl in Exile by Ismail Kadare but also in The Hell is Broken, In the Time of the Scream by Visar Zhiti, The Game, the Fall of the Sky by Bashkim Shehu, etc.
In addition to the surveillance institutions mentioned in these works, some political structures with an entirely ideological character are strengthened, such as the Party Committee (Kadare, 2009, p. 9), Internal Branch (Shehu, 2013, p. 74), the Ministry of Internal Affairs and its archive (Shehu, 2015, p. 10), and institutions involved in the destruction and extermination of human beings such as the Prosecution Office (Zhiti, 2012, p. 87) and prisons (Zhiti, 2012, p. 13; Shehu, 2013: 74), etc. The prison was certainly the most important institution of terror in totalitarian Albania. Life in totalitarian Albania was spent trying to escape prison. Therefore, rather than an institution, in totalitarian regimes the prison turns into a mental structure, which defines the individual’s fear of power. Albania, totally isolated from the rest of the world, set up a whole system of prisons, such as in Gjirokastra, Tepelenë, Vlorë, Korça, Berat, Elbasan, Durrës, Tirana, Burrel, Shkodra, Peshkopi, Puka, Mirdita, etc. During the dictatorial regime, Albanians spent a collective 914,000 years in prison and 256,146 years in exile. Although some of the most infamous prisons were located outside urban areas, city prisons did not only remain active but were mainly used for political opponents.

Almost the entire Albanian elite was sentenced to special trials. According to a study supported by Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, in 1950 two prisons in Tirana (which had a capacity of 448 prisoners) held 1,800 prisoners, most of them political ones. The prison appears often in the works of contemporary Albanian writers, sometimes as a symbol of the danger that threatened the dissidents, who acted contrary to what was considered to be acceptable in the totalitarian communist regime. It is associated with a series of institutions used to create a map of the nightmare of totalitarian life. As in a complicated game of chess, the state plays with the individual, and in case of loss, the latter may suffer imprisonment, internment camp, or even execution.

The mechanisms of the functioning of the state are such that they inevitably create a vicious circle in which the unpaid work of prisoners, mainly political, is turned into money intended to provide better surveillance of the individuals and consequently greater numbers of prisoners:

Copper (extracted from pyrite) went (partly) for export, then the income from the export of copper, in dollars, was poured into the budget of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which used (among other things) to buy abroad pieces of equipment of eavesdropping, based on which files were (partly) used to kill other enemies. (Shehu, 2015, p. 18)

In this catch-22, the individual finds himself in a situation where the game with the state is lost, due to the very characteristics of the functioning of totalitarian regimes. These systems need terror as their everyday food to lengthen their life over decades.

Conclusions

To sum up, the totalitarian system in Albania used architecture as part of its ideological system. The space was transformed into a huge arena where socialist realism principles were applied. The construction of vast buildings, the institutions of surveillance and terror, the glorification of the leader’s body through the installation of Bronx monuments, the construction of the Pyramid and the National Martyrs Cemetery, and the process of renaming the city were altogether part of an overall plan which aimed at making the human a shadow of the self. Urban space was used to portray an extensive sense of power, majesty, and virility, which was ideologically utilized to create the hegemony of the symbolic discourse. The destruction of the latter happened only after the fall of the totalitarian system, through
art and literature which brought the focus back to the totalitarian time to rediscover a new reality, the one hidden after the propagandistic manipulation of the receiver. The totalitarian symbols were brought into the spotlight once again; this time, without the veil of ideology, the receivers saw the dramatic truth of pain and terror that totalitarianism brought. After the grandeur of monuments and virility of the totalitarian architecture, a mega-mechanism working against human lives was discovered: ideological superstructures, institutions, and political apparatuses that failed to bring social changes and became ghosts of the past after totalitarianism declined.

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