

‘Against a Wall’

Albania’s Women Political Prisoners’ Struggle to be Heard

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—MEMORY IN ALBANIA

I first lived in Albania during the period 2003 to 2005, teaching history at the state universities in Tirana, Albania’s capital, and Elbasan, another major city. Before that, (since 1997), I had lived and worked in nearby Romania. There were many similarities between the two former communist states in southeast Europe, culturally and historically, but one striking difference was in people’s attitudes towards their country’s past. In both countries people discussed the recent past with great sadness over long coffees, but in Romania ‘communism’ and the atrocities it had involved seemed separated by a decade of new things and people had discursively distanced themselves from the actions of that time. In Albania in 2003 people remained entirely serious about and close to events that had happened before 1991, when communism had fallen. People understood exactly how the regime had developed in their local area. Communism was not of another time, but of the now; the past and present merged.¹ In Albania, dictatorship was personal. Everybody knew someone who had been persecuted, even if it was just that they

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had seen a neighbour's public trial. Everyone had feared it could happen to their own family.

These differences have created some specific challenges and opportunities for someone carrying out historical research in Albania. Post-communist Romania has opened its government records to scholars and the former politically persecuted. In contrast, Albanian archives are closed to researchers unless they have strong personal contacts with the administrative staff, or know someone even more closely connected with powerful people in various political networks.² Because of stagnation in Albanian academic and publishing hierarchies, there is also a dearth of local studies of the communist period.³ The small but strong community of researchers working from outside Albania on the subject have had the same problems of restricted access to archives.⁴ The greatest sources for historical knowledge about communist Albania, therefore, are the memories of those who lived through the regime, who paid keen attention to what happened around them as a matter of survival.

I returned to Albania for a few weeks every year between 2005 and 2009, and I realised that both people I knew well and strangers wanted to tell me about what they had lived through under communism. I decided to record oral histories of everyday life and, since 2010, I have conducted in-depth interviews of between three and more than one hundred hours with sixty-five different people. I have also spoken less formally with many more, recording their responses in writing. Because I am a foreigner, people know I pose no political or personal threat to them or their families, and people have taken extra care to explain things or relationships that may have been unfamiliar to me. My openness to questions about my (queer) gender and sexuality has given me the chance to demonstrate free conversation in response to respectful and sincerely curious inquiries before I asked people to field my own questions of them. I was unsure what historical texts I would write as a result of the interviews, but I was determined, and remain so, to act ethically; everyone I write about is provided with a copy of anything I write, in Albanian, before it goes to print. In this way, I aim to honour the right of people to control their own life stories, and how, whether and when these stories are publicly told.

In 2010 I met a woman who had been a political prisoner in the women's prison of Kosovë e Madhe të Qarkut Elbasan, located fifty kilometres from Elbasan,

and about one hundred kilometres from Tirana. We have worked together and alongside each other over the last three years, becoming good friends in the process. We have both written manuscripts; hers from personal experience, and mine from the database of oral history I have collected. We have also collaborated to produce an oral history of the women's prison, supplemented by maps drawn from her memory, photographs I have taken on my visits, and material culture (such as poetry and embroidery) that she produced in the prison at that time. This article was to be the first publication of our collaborative work. But as publication time came closer my friend decided that she could not risk being named or otherwise identifiable in the published work. Other Albanians would be able to access the article and there might be repercussions. She 'wants the truth to be told', but feels she is 'up against a wall'.⁵

With this version of the article, then, I honour my friend's struggle to speak and try to document the contours and strength of the wall she is up against. There are many entangled political, social and psychological factors that make it uniquely difficult for Albanian women who were politically persecuted to share their stories with a wider Albanian public. Rather than simply remove the specific identity of my friend from her history, I want to allow her history, if not her name, to elucidate some of those factors and open up the stories of the many women who had similar experiences, which have long been untold. It is an opportunity to locate her experiences within the cultural and national history of Albania rather than let them continue to be ignored or seen only as the trauma of an individual. This article explores one woman's (my friend's) experiences of political imprisonment in communist Albania, and then looks at why such stories are silenced in Albania today.

—ALBANIA UNDER COMMUNIST DICTATORSHIP

Between 1944 and 1990, socialist Albania operated as a Stalinist state with distinct features. From 1944 until 1985 it was ruled by the paranoid dictator Enver Hoxha and his Party of Labor (which was communist in ideology). During these decades, Albania became increasingly impoverished and isolated itself from other Eastern bloc countries, as well as from the West. The ruling regime held power through total state control and continual purges of both common people and those at the heart of

the Party of Labor. Hoxha split ties with Yugoslavia in 1947 and the USSR in 1961. In the 1960s, in alliance with China, he implemented a local version of Mao's Cultural Revolution. The Albanian population was small, increasing from just 1.2 million in 1950 to 3.4 million in 1990, and society and the economy were organised around extended patriarchal families. This meant no one could escape official notice. The regime used attacks on the family unit as a political strategy.⁶ When an individual was accused of being an 'enemy of the people', their entire family was persecuted. This would mean, at the minimum, exclusion from higher education, food queues and the workforce.⁷ It might also mean forced relocation to a rural village.

The secret police of the Albanian communist state were at least as pervasive as the Stasi were in East Germany. From a population of three million, about a quarter of all Albanians were on the part-time informant payroll and there were ten thousand political police. Twenty per cent of the entire population was punished for being 'enemies of the people' and committed to internal exile, forced labour or prison.⁸ Women as well as men were politically persecuted, but the experiences of women in political prisons have never been culturally or politically recognised in Albania—even now, twenty years after the communist rulers instituted neoliberal reforms and called themselves democratic. Women who were persecuted, unlike men, have not been perceived as heroic survivors of the regime's cruellest torturers. Instead, the shame of having been tortured and imprisoned in that time still adheres to the individual and to their family.

Access to Ministry of the Interior files has been blocked by the government, even since the change of regime in 1991. This makes it impossible to calculate the exact numbers of people affected by persecution, but the estimates from files that are available indicate that around twenty thousand people served time for political crimes in forced labour camps. Four hundred and fifty of these were women.⁹ The regime executed approximately six thousand people, many of whose bodies have still not been found. Women were among those who were interrogated, imprisoned and executed. The vast majority of them, like the vast majority of persecuted men, had not committed the political crimes of which they had been accused. The regime kept the entire population terrified, quiet and acquiescent through constant waves of purges justified by fabricated and fantastical accusations. There were no dissident movements at all; whole groups of artists, politicians, students or workers who were

just doing what they had been told by the Party to do were suddenly accused of various crimes against the state and society without predictable rhyme or reason. It was precisely the intensity and absolute randomness of persecution that oppressed all citizens.

By 1990, there was no organised political resistance, very little awareness of alternatives to communist ideology, and people were hungry. As communism fell around Eastern bloc countries, the Albanian communist party elite negotiated among themselves over how best to reform in such a way they would still retain control. They showed no genuine concern for the well being of the majority of Albanians. In the decades since, both the Democratic Party and the Socialist Party (the two currently existing parties that have replaced the Party of Labor) have obfuscated their ideological approaches and instituted neoliberal reforms, as political scientists Arolda Elbasani and Artur Lipinski have noted: ‘Two decades after the fall of communism, Albania still faces the same questions regarding investigation, disclosure and condemnation of perpetrators of communist-era abuses ... and those formerly persecuted have found it virtually impossible to find the means to mobilize.’¹⁰

In 2014, the history of persecution in the communist period is still not a subject of serious research, commentary or reflection in Albania. The history of women persecuted with prison sentences and torture is not spoken of by survivors or those men who represent survivor organisations. It is generally supposed that women were imprisoned as political enemies, but I doubt that the name of a single female inmate from the era is known to anyone other than their fellow inmates, their immediate family and the prison staff who oppressed them on a daily basis.¹¹ With the silencing of this history comes also a denial of the specifically gendered nature of the torture of women in communist Albania.¹² Here, I use the testimony of my anonymous friend to explore the vital ways that political persecution was always gendered, starting with a brief account of what happened before she arrived in the women’s prison in Kosovë.

—FORMS OF PERSECUTION

As mentioned earlier, most men and women who were arrested and convicted of political crimes (as opposed to ‘ordinary’ crimes) had not committed the crimes of

which they were accused. The state routinely fabricated absurd accusations against individuals as a way to maintain high levels of fear—of enemy attack and of sudden denunciation—in the community. Groups liable to attract persecution included families that had been democrats, intellectuals or land-owners before the communist period, families of those who had left for foreign countries, ethnic minorities such as Greeks and Vlach Albanians and those who had simply been accused of dissent against the regime. Different groups were targeted during the various phases of Albanian politics, and those persecuted always included women.

After Hoxha split with the USSR and its allies in 1961, for example, the Russian wives of Albanians were arrested as foreign spies and imprisoned. During the Cultural and Ideological Revolution of the 1970s, the Party of Labor worked to 'emancipate' women from having the sole responsibility for housework and from organised marriages. Both moves were driven by political agendas rather than being primarily about the Party's concern for young women. Women were denounced for wearing 'cosmopolitan' clothes such as short skirts, and for associating with foreign men, such as Kosovar Albanians or the sailors who arrived on ships in Durres.¹³ In the late 1970s and early 1980s, purges of the communist politburo and elite increased, which led to the persecution of the wives and families of the purged communist ministers.¹⁴

The Albanian state followed Soviet tradition. It accused individuals or groups of fabricated political crimes, arrested and interrogated the accused until they confessed or refused to confess—and often wrote the confessions themselves. They held many trials in public buildings equipped with loud speakers so the broadcasted proceedings would 'educate' and intimidate the population. Women were accused of the same kinds of political crimes as men, of which sabotage and espionage (Art.47 in the 1977 constitution), and agitation and propaganda (Art.55) were punished with up to ten years in prison.¹⁵

My friend's family had fled Albania in the late 1940s, becoming refugees in Italy and then citizens in Australia. They returned to Albania in the 1960s, when Albanian spies approached Albanian refugees and deceptively offered them the right of return without punishment. Many Albanians returned at this time, only to be arrested as 'enemies of the people' when they arrived back in Albania. After returning in this way they lived under surveillance, many in prisons and labour camps. My friend's

brother, then aged sixteen, was immediately imprisoned in the labour camp prison of Burrel upon return. He was later sent to the notorious psychiatric hospital of Elbasan, where he died. My friend lived her everyday life known as an 'enemy of the people' for her 'bad biography' (the terms used by both state and society), knowing that colleagues who worked with her at the isolated factory in the north of Albania informed on all her movements to the Party. She could not imagine that revolution or political change was possible; she kept silent and tried to fit in as best she could.

On the morning of her arrest, which had not been preceded by any unusual events or problems, she was taken to a building in the local regional city and shown into a concrete cell that had neither a window nor a bed. For the next seven months, she was deprived of sleep, kept hungry, cold and alone, and was beaten in daily interrogations.¹⁶ She was asked to confess to a range of crimes that she had not committed. She saw the sky just once each day as she was taken to the bathrooms along a corridor that had an iron roof and chain walls. The guards watched her every move, including in the bathroom. She still does not know what the drug was they gave her that made her bleed non-stop as if heavily menstruating for the entire seven months. The guards did not provide her with rags for the blood, and in interrogations they consistently referred to her as miscarrying a bastard child. Sex outside marriage in Albania was so severely frowned on at that time that to accuse a young unmarried Albanian woman of pregnancy interpellated her as, in my friend's words, 'a slut', forever totally outside social boundaries of honourable interaction.

My friend was weak from the constant blood loss, hunger and exhaustion; she understood that the guards could rape her at any time. Rape was considered the worst event possible for a woman. The shame of rape accrues to the victim and her family, not to the rapist. My friend often reflects even now that the fear of rape was more powerful than the actuality of rape would have been, and she knows that her torturers' aim was to treat her as an already dishonoured sexual object.

After seven months she signed the thick pages of her pre-prepared confession. She still doesn't know what exactly was in those pages, as the accusations were many, varied and untrue, and they now are muddled in her memory by exhaustion and pain. She does remember seeing her confession as a failure of will at the time. On the basis of it, she was convicted of agitation and propaganda and sentenced to ten years prison. In 1978, at the age of 31, she was transported in the back of a

prison truck to the women's prison at Kosovë të Elbasan. It was just a few months after the female prisoners who had built the prison had finished the construction and been moved in as the first inmates.¹⁷

—THE WOMEN'S PRISON IN KOSOVË

The prison had two brick double-storey buildings, one for the three hundred or so 'ordinary' criminals, and the other for around thirty-five political prisoners.¹⁸ The two groups worked together in forced agricultural labour, but perceived each other as radically distinct.¹⁹ Political prisoners, according to my friend, considered themselves imprisoned without having committed a crime, while they saw the 'ordinary' criminals in the same way general society did—as thieves, murderers and prostitutes. There were strong negative feelings between the groups.

The political prisoners, however, could not trust each other either. Prison terms could be extended or shortened without trial, and informing on others was a sure way an inmate could gain credit from the regime. The women had been separated from their families, tortured, and thrown together in a prison without privacy. They longed for friendship, but had to distrust other inmates. Some severely beat others, and the guards would not protect the women from these beatings. Women were also beaten by the guards for a range of misdemeanours, including, my friend remembers, speaking to others, writing too much (they were given a small number of sheets of paper to write letters to family), speaking a foreign language in passing to a street dog and losing items of cutlery. Violations of prison rules could be punished with solitary confinement in the dark, locked wooden huts on the prison boundary.

The first level of the prison contained a communal eating area, a communal bathroom, and an office where the belongings of the prisoners—if they had taken any to the interrogation, or been brought any by visitors—were kept. There was a single large room upstairs, where prisoners slept in bunk beds with wire mesh bases and straw mattresses that curved like hammocks. The fifteen Russian women, who were kept in prison for decades, slept together at one end of the dormitory, but they were not separated from the other prisoners by a wall.²⁰ Fatos Lubonja has written that in the most harsh Albanian prisons for men, such as Spaç, the prisoners could discuss politics and even learn languages from each other, but this was totally

prohibited in the women's prison.²¹ There was no hot water, so the women filled metal cauldrons with water and buried them in the sunny hillside ground during the day while they laboured, returning in the evening to find the water warm. Visits from family members were allowed, but visitors first needed Party permission to travel from their places of work and this was not necessarily given. Even if it were, travel was difficult as most had to hitchhike and there were few vehicles to offer lifts on the difficult mountainous roads.²²

My friend was released after the death of Hoxha in 1985. Over the seven years she spent in prison she got to know some women very well. One had worked as a nurse at the psychiatric hospital in Elbasan, so she knew my friend's brother and confirmed that there were drugs given to some people to make them 'feel crazy' and others given to women to make them bleed. Many of these women kept in close contact after they were released, even into the 1990s when people were finally free to live and seek work where they chose. They had shared an extremely painful experience and the bond remained strong between those who had developed trusting relationships.

Prison was a place of great physical and psychological violence against the women, the effects of which stayed with them. One day, as my friend sat with me and drew a map of the prison, she marked a gate in the fence and said 'this is where we came home from the fields'. At this point she broke down, her narrative ruptured by the horrific evidence of how deeply the regime had tortured the women. 'Look what they did to us, that even today I call this place "home", this is what they made us call home', she said. The slip of the tongue, to call such a violent place 'home' twenty-eight years later, highlights how successful the torturers were in encoding and embedding psychological and social punishment into the nerves and muscles of their victims.

—EFFECTS OF IMPRISONMENT ON ALBANIAN WOMEN

Some of the women held in Kosovë prison had experienced intense, specifically sexualised torture in interrogation, which was followed by the less intense but relentlessly controlled and violent environment of the prison. Living in one's body after torture requires a conscious separation of the affective repertoire of the body from the dehumanising, isolating and embedded meanings of the language of

torture, but when the women were released it was back into a society that operated in a similar way to the prison.²³ The homes and workplaces of former prisoners were under surveillance, and they could not confide their experiences or knowledge to anyone for a variety of reasons. Some of the women's husbands had divorced and denounced them while they were in prison, some taking their children with them and others abandoning their children as well. This was a painful but common scenario in a society where the entire family was punished as well as the individual who had been imprisoned. Former political prisoners I have interviewed, both male and female, have agreed that they could not tell their family what had happened to them in prison. They did not want to hurt them with painful details, but they also knew the experience could never be communicated in its entirety. Further, there was no safe place to freely communicate, and no one envisaged an end to the dictatorship, so putting energy into working for the present rather than discussing the past was also a coping strategy.

As well as limited opportunity to heal psychologically through talking about and sharing their experiences with those closest to them, women who had been tortured in Albania had no access to medical services to scan for broken bones or identify other health problems the torture had caused. My friend never discovered what drug she had been given or what it had done to her uterus, even after the fall of the regime. This had ongoing implications for the survivor's social life. One major anxiety for women after being tortured was about whether they were still capable of sexual intimacy and reproduction. Getting married is considered vital to the identity of being a woman in Albania, but it was already complicated by social and political status. Marriage was policed by social and Party control so that individuals could only marry those of the same political status. Thus someone with a 'bad biography' could only marry another person with a 'bad biography', as one 'bad biography' brought into the family by marriage would 'stain' the entire in-law family as well. There were many cases when the Party and the family intervened to prevent someone 'without stains' marrying someone with a 'bad biography'.²⁴ People imprisoned for political reasons had not committed crimes and thus usually refused to marry a former prisoner who had been an 'ordinary' criminal. According to my friend, women who had been in prison were also seen as having lost their femininity (they were referred to as *burrnesh*, as being 'manly') and were suspected of having

lost their virginity and thus their status as honourable. Because of this, if a female former prisoner decided to reintegrate in society through marriage even though she had no access to information about the physical effects of her torture, her dishonourable status would prevent this from happening. Psychological recovery was not possible under the communist regime and neither was a process of putting recovery on hold and progressing within the socially sanctioned structure of a 'typical' life.

In Albania, with its small population, strong culture and pervasive state control, a woman could not escape being interpellated primarily by her political and marital status, and the latter relied upon the former. Spending time in prison for a political crime destined Albanian women to an inescapable, limited and marginalised social position. The women I know who were in this position and chose not to marry have excelled in their chosen professions, but this does not prevent them being perceived as pitiable or strange by most other Albanians; they remain outside Albanian society in some deeply important ways.²⁵

People released from prisons at this time were generally avoided by the rest of the community. The *sigurimi* (*Drejtoria e Sigurimit të Shtetit*, the state security agency) had informers in every neighbourhood, and everyone knew that the number of beers they drank in a bar, or who they met for coffee, would be recorded and passed on. Personal files were kept on every individual, and the informants who passed on details of what the person had said or felt at various moments were often also friends of that person. In the confusion of 1991, as the system was changing, some formerly persecuted people gained access to their personal files from the factories where they worked. They were able to see who exactly had informed on them and the specific consequences the information had had on their lives and careers. Formerly persecuted people sometimes told me in interviews how, having gained this information, they had confronted those who had informed on them. The uniform reactions of those thus accused was to walk away or to deny the accuser's right to be offended by the betrayal. Many informers, as with bystanders, rationalised their actions as forced upon them by 'the system', and thus washed their consciences of responsibility.

Perpetrators both then and now justified surveillance and the imprisonment it led to with the rationale that if you break a law, regardless of whether or not you

agree with the law, you will be punished. In the face of such endemic betrayal, victims found their own ways to explain what had happened to them as systemic rather than personal. Thoma Çaraoshi, whose extended ethnic Vlach family was persecuted from 1956 when one branch of the family from another city escaped across the border to Greece, has a range of sayings that cover the gamut of these explanations. He learnt from his father in the course of World War II that 'the war needs to eat' (meaning to count the personal cost as just part of the bigger requirement of states and people fighting for power) and 'the law groans when it is hurt, and its owner seeks to punish whoever hurt it' (meaning that regardless of the system, there are laws).²⁶ He explained the high number of informants in Albania, which he estimated as one in three, by saying 'the hungry dog barks'. He also often said that Jesus didn't steal because he didn't have children to feed. I then asked him whether that meant he could have done the job of an interrogator. Like other men who had been interrogated and of whom I had asked this question, he said no, that some interrogators might have been good people, but that it was a job that required a 'black heart'.

The ways persecuted people cope with thinking about why they were personally targeted indicates their struggle to come to terms with traumatic experiences for which there can be no real coming to terms. None of the explanations for why they were imprisoned although they had not committed a crime, why human beings like themselves had tortured them, make any sense. But the perpetrators of torture I have spoken with do not seem to be haunted by the same question, of how it was that they could have betrayed and wounded others, even for money and even under duress. Perpetrators are free to posit themselves as victims of the same system as those they wounded. This is largely because of the discursive rationale established by the political rhetoric since 1990, which has been supported by a failure to seriously debate opening the files and consider prosecuting perpetrators.

Until 1992, survivors of torture were unable to physically (that is, medically) address the consequences of their ordeal and they lived in a state and society little different from the prison environment. Many studies that focus on torture survivors with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) recognise that a profound betrayal of trust is encoded on the body in torture. Two factors are essential if healing is to

occur: a safe environment, and the ability to understand and heal the physical wounds of torture. Neither of these factors existed under communism and the environment has remained unsafe in significant ways in the decades after communism.

In Kristýna Bušková's analysis of the experiences of female Czech political prisoners of the 1950s, she refers to the years until 1989, when communism fell in Czechoslovakia, as a 'psychological vacuum' for survivors because they couldn't talk about their experiences or live freely while the communist regime continued.²⁷ Yet, '1989 brought about a relative feeling of security. Suddenly people rid themselves of the ever present feeling of anxiety caused by the omnipresent feeling of threat to their existence.'²⁸

Bušková goes on to argue that 'since public acknowledgement of individual suffering is crucial for successful treatment of trauma related to political violence, we can infer that complete reconciliation will not happen unless individual trauma is expressed on a cultural level as a cultural trauma.' This did not happen after the end of communism in 1991 in Albania. To the contrary, the former communists of the Party of Labor split and became the Democratic Party and the Socialist Party. Members of each party shared a vested interest in keeping the dossiers of the past closed. They have worked hard over the more than two decades since to build a wall against the experiences of former political prisoners. The following section explores how political discourse has worked to prevent individual trauma being expressed and recognised on a cultural level.

—REBRANDING RULE IN ALBANIA

Regime change in Albania was an ongoing negotiation between different factions of the communist party, all aimed at containing any chances of revolution. There was no dissident movement and student protests began only after the leadership failed to implement promised changes in mid 1990.²⁹ Ramiz Allia, who had led Albania since Hoxha's death in 1985, used Sali Berisha, then a 46-year-old Party of Labor member, to try to appease the students. Berisha then split from the Party of Labor and formed the Democratic Party, but at the first multi-party elections, held in March 1991, the Party of Labor won. Fatos Nano became Prime Minister. He renamed and scaled down the national information agency, but nationwide strikes

and dissent paralysed the economy. It was then decided a coalition of all five parties would rule the country until elections in 1992. Under Nano's leadership and in preparation for the 1992 elections the Party of Labor renamed themselves the Socialist Party.

Berisha and the Democratic Party won the election of March 1992, but it remained the case that the leaders of the Democratic Party and most of the Socialist Party were former communists. Leading analysts agree it was a case of 'elite reproduction, not elite replacement'.³⁰ Berisha used strong anti-communist rhetoric to mobilise support, but he railed against the supposed threat of the Socialist Party rather than any ideology. Indeed, the Democratic Party's first de-communisation action was to prosecute the former communist elite for economic crimes, rather than for violations of human rights. As a legal expert in Albania, Kathleen Imholz, wrote, this 'seemed to trivialize the more serious abuses of the Hoxha regime'.³¹ The move 'alienated ordinary people who expected that communists would face real justice for real crimes', and made what happened later appear 'decidedly political in spirit', which it was.³² Robert C. Austin and Jonathan Ellison conclude that in the early years of the Democratic Party there can be discerned 'a group of former prisoners clamoring for justice and the party leadership, which more or less had solid communist credentials, holding them back'.³³

Around this time, my friend moved to Tirana and found work. Like many other former political prisoners, she hoped things would change. She helped people who had been politically persecuted move house, register for pensions and try to find their families. One day she walked past the headquarters of the Democratic Party, and a man in a nice suit walked out of the building. It was her interrogator from the seven months she spent in detention before going to prison. She stopped and looked at him. He looked at her without any sign of recognition, then got into the back of a shiny car with tinted windows and was driven away. My friend began to understand that nothing, in fact, had changed.

Perpetrators of the communist system discursively constructed themselves as 'victims' alongside their former 'enemies'.³⁴ Politicians on both sides had a vested interest in enabling this to happen and they did so by preventing any real discussion about lustration or ideological change. The confusion, uncertainty and great economic difficulties in Albania in the early 1990s meant that even average people

regarded those who had been politically persecuted as a possible threat rather than as morally rehabilitated victims of a shared cultural trauma. The communists had been 'nationalising' private property since 1944. After 1990 people feared that compensation for nationalised property would result in their own houses being taken away as well as costing the state money. The Democratic Party and the Socialist Party, however, were primarily interested in maintaining power and preventing any real public discussion about the crimes of communism. In 2014 land restitution is still being carried out only in haphazard and corrupt ways. Associations for the rights of the formerly persecuted people were and are considered political organisations, and the general public do not trust any discussions that claim to be about justice, seeing them rather as manipulation by and rhetoric from what is known as 'the political class'.³⁵

The Socialist Party under Fatos Nano ruled from 1997 to 2005, the Democratic Party under Berisha ruled from 2005 to 2013 and the Socialist Party returned to power in 2013. The two parties have a monopoly on government and have effectively prevented any serious discussion about how the crimes of the communist period should be treated or remembered. Both parties have prevented the opening of the files, and refuse to recognise the importance of such a process. In 2010, UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial killings, Philip Alston, noted: 'Albania still has not comprehensively dealt with human rights abuses, including torture, disappearances and killings, committed during the Communist regime'.³⁶

Austin and Ellison cite Berisha as saying in 2005 that 'file access no longer has relevance for most Albanians, who would prefer to close that chapter of their lives', and 'the class of politically persecuted, and of former persecutors, is diminishing due to death and emigration'.³⁷ It is painful that he makes these claims, when former political prisoners have consistently staged protests and hunger strikes in front of the Parliament. Berisha was Prime Minister in November 2012 when 51-year-old Gjergj Ndreca and 47-year-old Lirak Bjeko died in a self-immolation protest against the failure of the state to compensate them for their time spent in communist-era prisons, compensation that had been decreed in 2007.³⁸ After the protest, the government demolished the small business of the strike organiser, Skender Tufa. The media presents the hunger strikes as a natural and recurrent spectacle for which there is no reasonable solution.

There is a schism between the former political prisoners who were purged Party members and those who were never in the Party. The loudest voices in the public sphere are the former political prisoners who had cultural and economic capital when they were arrested. For example, I know of only two women who have published accounts of their own persecution, both of which involved exile to the countryside. One had been the wife of a high-ranking Party member, the other the daughter of a similarly ranked member.³⁹ It is as if the discourses of these formerly persecuted people are audible because they provide reassurance that ‘anyone’, even those close to the Party, could have been victimised, rather than challenging those who lived without persecution to confront the many cases of people who were persecuted for absurd reasons. In reality, of course, some people were persecuted much more harshly than others, and these were not the people who were living in the upper echelons of Party society, but normal people who had no political power at all.

—GENDER IN POST-SOCIALIST ALBANIA

In 2012 I visited the three major organisations that purportedly support those who were politically persecuted under communism. None of the directors were able to provide any specific information about women who had been imprisoned. The executive director of the Albanian Institute for the Studies of Communist Crimes, established with Democratic Party funding in 2010, had not heard of the women’s prison in Kosovë. Neither had the research assistant whom he asked to find information for me. No information was found. At the third association, I stood with the director beside the bigger-than-human sized map of Albania, marked with the prisons of the communist era, and asked why Kosovë prison didn’t appear there. He replied that there was no space for it to be marked. The institutional and political reasons the experiences of former political prisoners have not been recognised in Albanian culture are exacerbated for women because of their place in Albanian society. This has enabled it to be forgotten that there even was a women’s prison.

In the communist period, women were considered vital in the public workforce and thus many enjoyed a professional identity outside the home. They could also enjoy political identity, as Albanians who were not Party members but had good biographies were required to participate in collective activities of political

education. After 1991, the social structures for creating significant political and workplace identity painfully dissolved. Factories closed, collective farms were divided and previous political activity was suddenly made useless and absurd. Police and state security disappeared at the same time that poverty and anti-social behaviour increased in response to the sudden freedom. There was high unemployment, and great fear about the redistribution of land and state infrastructure. Young men sought ways to emigrate, and there was a spike in the kidnapping of women and girls for trafficking. According to statistics, approximately one hundred thousand women and girls were trafficked to the West against their will for prostitution and other purposes between 1990 and 1999.⁴⁰

In this chaotic post-socialist environment, the Albanian cultural values which remained fixed and secure were those that had existed long before communism and had survived the regime: the values of family. I would not argue there was a 're-traditionalisation' of family values at this time that resulted in women having less freedom than they had under Hoxha's regime. I would argue, however, that as Albania became seen as less safe for women, it was perceived that more energy was needed to protect women. Women, after all, remained the locus of honour (and shame) for the entire family, as they had been through the socialist period.⁴¹ As Olujic succinctly explains, Albanian 'women's honour reflects that of men's, which in turn reflects that of the nation'.⁴² As Luca further articulates: 'honor and shame are the basis of morality and underpin the three-tiered hierarchy of statuses: husband, family and village. The honor/shame dichotomy is evident in the highly guarded aspects of women's virginity, chastity, marital virtue, and especially fertility.'⁴³

A woman without a husband is a rarity in Albania. A single woman is considered vulnerable to both physical and verbal insult, and thus offers the potential to shame the family.⁴⁴ Women who have survived political persecution and have not married are in fact of great economic value to their families, yet this contribution is not recognised as culturally valuable. Rather, their singleness represents a further kind of shame for the family and the individual, it is a taint on the woman's 'womanhood'.

My friend had to develop a sense of herself as an individual to survive the long years of being an 'enemy'. At the age of thirty-eight, she decided to remain single rather than try to find a man to build a relationship with and marry, knowing it

would be difficult to do this and maintain the independence she was used to. She knew that she would face constant questions in Albanian society, which continue today, about why she was 'without a man'. It is difficult to explain the importance of having (and keeping) a husband in Albania today. In reports about domestic violence in Albania, women explain that while it is shameful when their husband viciously beats them in the street, it would be inconceivably more shameful for them to divorce.⁴⁵ Unmarried women are often reminded, even in middle age, of the 'shame' of their decision. Even though they are well aware of the benefits of their choice, the constant interpellation as a 'failed' woman is exhausting, and is one reason women may want to avoid making their life experiences public.

There have been some changes in Albanian culture around perceptions of women's bodies but these do not make it any easier for women who spent time in communist prisons to share their experiences. Attitudes towards abortion provide a good example. In communist Albania, contraception and having or performing an abortion was illegal, and unwanted pregnancies were common and stressful.⁴⁶ In interviews, men and women of all ages told me they had sought abortions and sometimes gained them, despite the heavy penalty. Most people also had a tragic story of someone they knew or had heard of dying at home from a botched abortion.

Albanian culture puts a high value on the honour that reproduction grants women. Because of this, even though so many people sought illegal abortions they did not see any crime in the regime forcing women to have children. The crime as they saw it was the regime's failure to provide enough food to feed endlessly growing families. By 2010, however, Albania had become one of the countries where sex selective abortions (of female foetuses) skewed the birth ratio.⁴⁷ In this context of post-socialist Albanian society, where sex-selective abortion is widely practiced, a friend told me that her aunt had been in Kosovë prison in the socialist period for conducting an abortion. I asked her to ask her aunt if we could meet to discuss her experience, explaining that I don't see illegal abortions as criminal acts at all, but as acts that helped women who needed it. She told me at our next meeting that her aunt didn't want to talk about it, that it was shameful. I do not know whether her aunt really said that—it could be that my friend spoke to someone else in the family and it was they who told her it was too shameful to meet to discuss such a topic. Despite abortion now being a selective procedure frequently conducted in private

hospitals, people who were imprisoned for conducting abortions in that time are still viewed primarily as law-breakers who brought shame on their family. It is another example of how women's experiences of political persecution (and possibly their dissidence) continues to be silenced in Albania today.⁴⁸

—VIRTUAL SPACES AND THE POLICING OF WOMEN'S IDENTITY

I will introduce a final site of oppression for Albanian women who were politically persecuted: the internet. As a growing number of studies show, the internet functions as a space where memories, honour, shame and the right to speak are contested.⁴⁹ The internet can be a very dangerous place for the psychological well-being of a former political prisoner.

Many politicians and some business owners in Albania have an internet presence, from government websites to individual Facebook pages, maintained either by themselves or by employees. This is standard in many countries, of course, but the act of 'liking' an Albanian political Facebook page is not an entirely voluntary process. People are generally expected to be for either the Democratic Party or the Socialist Party and to make their position visible. It is commonly understood that a person's political allegiance often determines whether they keep their job or not, and at election time people discuss their strategies for 'liking' as a way to retain employment. A former political prisoner who is on Facebook will therefore often have Albanian political pages appear in their timeline. For survivors, this can trigger the psychological anguish of betrayal in the present, not simply the past. It may not be the face of their actual interrogator that appears, but it can be hard to ignore streams of photos of a smiling Berisha walking in the mountains.

The internet also hosts a wealth of visual and documentary evidence of Hoxha's regime as produced by the regime. Contrary to what we may expect in the West, many of these sites are maintained by former socialists who remain loyal to Hoxha and his ideals. Any article about a former political prisoner in the online press is inevitably followed by comments that attack those who were persecuted as traitors and enemies and offer every other kind of slur imaginable. For former political prisoners whose histories are not discussed in the public forums of parliament, academia, the arts or on television, the internet is often the only place where recognition of the past can be found. Unfortunately, pro-communist opinions

dominate, often simply because the voices are so aggressive and intimidating that other, more reasonable, perspectives are bullied out of discussion. The internet, then, rather than being an open forum for individuals to share memories and thus create history, has the capacity to bring an unsafe and socialist-dominated space into an individual's private sphere.

More than this, Facebook itself is a platform that uniquely reproduces and polices the identity of Albanian women as the locus of family honour or shame. Facebook etiquette among Albanian women who lived under communism differs from that in other cultural spheres and societies. Priority is given to family photos, which Facebook friends should not just 'like', but are also expected to comment on in formulaic affectionate ways. Failure to comment indicates bitterness and jealousy, which in turn has superstitious implications of conveying a kind of curse—you can put the evil eye on someone with your jealousy. For the unmarried Albanian woman, keeping up appropriate comments takes time. Her own Facebook posts, about her personal and professional interests, are not considered important because they are outside the sphere of the family. Facebook, and the internet more widely, can thus be a place where former political prisoners are policed in accordance with social norms, their marital status again perceived as their most important feature and their responses to shared material restricted to social platitudes, even as they are made vulnerable to contact from people who acted against them in the recent past.

—CONCLUSION

Contemporary Albanian culture and politics is certainly hostile to women sharing their experiences and memories of imprisonment and torture for political crimes against the communist regime. If my friend's name was visible in print and on the internet, attached to the article we wrote together about her experiences, where she names the men who tortured and guarded her, she would be attacked in public forums, ignored by politicians and 'intellectuals' in Albania and accused of shaming her family. She would also be more afraid for her physical safety, with reason given there has not yet been a safe space in which any Albanian women, let alone someone who was persecuted, can relax.

Because of the place women hold in Albanian culture, a woman who speaks out about sexual violence, whether under communism or now, embodies the shame of the

violence that was enacted against her and this shame extends to her family as well. The virtual sphere expands the space where attacks might occur and brings it into the woman's own present and sometimes into her own home. There are a great many institutional, political, cultural and psychological bricks in the wall that prevents Albanian women communicating their trauma. But some women are recording and writing their own experiences, and as long as they believe there is a reason to tell the truth about the past, there is hope. I also hope that academics and artists can rise to the challenge and discuss ways to facilitate the safe communication of traumatic experiences. We need to take seriously the walls former political prisoners are up against and refuse to scaffold them with our own work.

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¹ Shannon Woodcock, 'The Absence of Albanian Jokes about Socialism, or Why Some Dictatorships Are Not Funny', in Caroline Hamilton, Will Noonan, Michelle Kelly and Elcine Mines (eds), *The Politics and Aesthetics of Refusal*, Cambridge Scholars Press, Newcastle, 2007, pp. 51–66.

² Elidor Mëhilli, '25 Vjet Heshtje (25 Years of Silence)', *Shekulli*, 6 May 2009, p. 1.

³ A noteworthy exception is the journal *Perpjekja*, founded by Fatos Lubonja, <<http://www.revistaperpjekja.org>>.

⁴ Julie Vullnetari and Russell King, 'Women Here are Like at the Time of Enver [Hoxha] ...': Socialist and Post-socialist Gendered Mobility in Albanian Society', in Kathy Burrell and Kathrin Hörschelmann (eds), *Mobilities in Socialist and Post-Socialist States*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2014, p. 10. Accessed online at

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⁵ Personal conversation, 1 July 2014.

⁶ Anton Logoreci, *The Albanians: Europe's Forgotten Survivors*, Gollancz, London, 1977, p. 181.

⁷ Interviews with Thoma Çaraoshi, 2010.

⁸ Robert C. Austin and Jonathan Ellison, 'Post-Communist Transitional Justice in Albania', *East European Politics & Societies*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2008, pp. 373–401, p. 377; Agim Musta, *Prisons of the Prison State*, Toena, Tirana, 2000, p. 1.

⁹ Musta, pp. 13–14; J. Zegalli, *Rrëfime nga burgu i diktaturës komuniste* (Confessions from the Prison of Communist Dictatorship), Koha, Tirana, 1999, pp. 21–2.

¹⁰ Arolda Elbasani and Artur Lipinski, 'Transitional Justice in Albania: Historical Burden, Weak Civil Society, and Conflicting Interests', in Olivera Simic and Zala Volcic (eds), *Transitional Justice and Civil Society in the Balkans*, Springer, New York, 2013, pp. 105–21.

¹¹ For short written pieces by a number of women who were political prisoners see Anonymous (ed.), *Anthology of Wounds: A Terrific and Artistic Testimony of the Hell of the Living*, Albanian Rehabilitation Centre for Trauma and Torture survivors, Tirana, 2004, <<http://www.arct.org/pdf/81.pdf>>.

¹² Recorded interviews are in the author's possession and have been verified by the editor.

¹³ Interviews with DD, 15 May 2010, SC, 10 March 2012, Luljeta Ikonomi and Shannon Woodcock, 'Imoraliteti në Familje: Nxitja e Ankesave të Grave për të Përforcuar Pushtetin e Partisë në Revolucionin Kulturor Shqiptar' (Immorality in the Family: Eliciting Women's Complaints to Further Party Power in Albania's Cultural Revolution), *Perpjekja*, vol. 32–3 pp. 155–82.

¹⁴ Austin and Ellison, p. 376.

¹⁵ *Collection of the Codes of The Socialist People's Republic of Albania*, Mihal Duri Publishing House, Tirana, 1982.

¹⁶ This was common to both male and female detainees throughout the duration of the regime. Albanian torture styles throughout the entire regime are similar to those used between 1945 and 1964 in Romania on political prisoners, after which Romania did not 're-educate' political prisoners in the same Soviet style. Claudia Florentina Dobre, 'Women Remembering Communism in Romania: Former Political Detainees' Perspectives', in Kristina Popova and Nurie Muratova (eds), *Women and Minorities Archives: Subjects of Archiving*, vol. 3, undated, pp. 42–58; Theodora-Eliza Văcărescu, 'Women and/in the Communist Political Prisons. The First and the Second Circle of Suffering: Romania 1947–1965', *Romanian Journal of Society and Politics*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2003, pp. 7–45; Gratian Cormoș, *Femei în infernul concentratar din România (1945–1989)* (Women in the Romanian Prison Hell (1945–1989)), Casa Cărții de Știință Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 2006.

¹⁷ The conditions at the previous women's prison in Qyteti Stalin were overcrowded. See Rexhep Gashi, 'Types of Prisons and Labour Camps and the Position of Convicted Persons in Albania during the Communist Dictatorship', *Thesis*, vol. 1, 2012, pp. 33–50, p. 133.

¹⁸ The website of the current General Directorate of Prisons says there were 450 prisoners, but Gashi's figures are different and fit closer to my informant's memory. General Directorate of Prisons, <<http://www.dpsh.gov.al/newweb/?fq=brenda&gj=gj1&kid=25>>.

¹⁹ The prisoners worked for the Agricultural Collective of Kosovë, walking up to ten kilometres to work. Interviewees have spoken about seeing them in the fields and never speaking to them. One interviewee recalled a woman grabbing a child and kissing her close to the gates of the prison one day. She was terrified then, as she believed they were murderers and criminals, but she also felt sorry for them knowing that woman must have had children. Interview with AM, 4 July 2010.

²⁰ See Vera Isaku, *Libër I Hapur: Ruset në Shqipëri* (Open Book: Russians in Albania), OMSCA-1, Tirana, 2008. Also see the documentary film by Adela Peeva, *Divorce Albanian Style*, Adela Media, 2007.

²¹ Fatos Lubonja, in an interview with Pawel Smolenski, 'O czym marza Albanczycy', *Wyborcza*, 27 June 2002, p. 15. Both my friend and one of her guards recall that prisoners were not allowed to speak foreign languages in the prison, or run small tuition groups among themselves.

²² Vullnetari, p. 10 .

²³ To make this point, Agim Musta called his book 'Prisons of the Prison State'. For more information about desomatization as vital for recovery from torture, see B.A. Van der Kolk, A.C. McFarlane and L. Weisaeth (eds), *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society*, The Guilford Press, New York, 1996; Babette Rothschild, *The Body Remembers: The Psychophysiology of Trauma and Trauma Treatment*, W.W .Norton & Co, London, 2000; Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, Harper Collins, New York, 1992.

²⁴ Ikononi and Woodcock.

²⁵ Interview with MD, 24 April 2010.

²⁶ Over six months in 2010 I interviewed Thoma for four hours every week, and he repeated these sayings because he considered them vital.

²⁷ Kristýna Bušková, 'Women in Communist Prisons in the 1950s in Czechoslovakia: Understanding Psychological Effects of Political Imprisonment and Ways of Coping using Oral History', *Political Prisoners.eu* website, <<http://www.politicalprisoners.eu/women-in-communist-prisons-in-the-1950s-in-czechoslovakia-understanding-psychological-effects-of-political-imprisonment-and-ways-of-coping-using-oral-history.html>>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Aleks Luarasi, 'Legal and Institutional Reform in Albania after the Democratic Revolution 1991–1997', May 1997, <<http://www.nato.int/acad/fellow/95-97/luarasi.pdf>>.

³⁰ Austin and Ellison, p. 378; Lavinia Stan, 'Witch-hunt of Moral Rebirth? Romanian Parliamentary Debates on Lustration', *East European Politics & Societies*, vol. 26, no. 2, May 2012, pp. 274–97, 276.

³¹ Austin and Ellison, p. 381.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., p. 382.

- ³⁴ Stan; Aleksandra Bogdani, 'Secrets and Lies: Victims of Albanian Communism Denied Closure', *Balkan Insight*, 7 December 2012, <<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/secrets-and-lies-victims-of-albanian-communism-denied-closure>>.
- ³⁵ Blendi Kajsii, 'Down with Politics! The Crisis of Representation in Post-Communist Albania', *East European Politics & Societies*, vol. 24, no. 2, May 2010, pp. 229–53.
- ³⁶ 'Albania can do more to eliminate blood feuds and domestic violence, says UN expert on extrajudicial killings', United Nations Human Rights website, 23 February 2010, <<http://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=9839&LangID=E>>
- ³⁷ Austin and Ellison, pp. 327–401.
- ³⁸ Amy Lori, 'Unresolved Histories: The Case of the Formerly Persecuted in Albania', Scholar Research Brief, IREX website, October 2013, <http://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/Amy_IREX_ResearchBrief_October2013.pdf>.
- ³⁹ Liri Lubonja, *Larg dhe mes njerëzve (Kujtime internii 1973–1990)* (Far and Between the People: Memories of Internment 1973–1990), Marin Barleti, Tirana, 1995; Vera Bekteshi, *Vila me dy Porta* (The House with Two Doors), K & B, Tirana, 2009.
- ⁴⁰ Barbara Limanowska, UNICEF-UNOHCHR-OSCE-ODIHR report, *Trafficking in Human Beings in Southeastern Europe*, June 2002, p. 125, <http://www.iom.md/materials/1_traff_human_beings_se.pdf>.
- ⁴¹ Nicola Nixon 'You Can't Eat Shame with Bread': Gender and Collective Shame in Albanian Society', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, vol. 9, no. 1–2, 2009, pp. 105–21.
- ⁴² M. Olujic, 'Embodiment of Terror: Gendered Violence in Peacetime and Wartime in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina', *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, vol. 12, no. 1, March 1998, pp. 31–50, 38.
- ⁴³ Nita Luci, 'Endangering Masculinity in Kosova: Can Albanian Women Say No?', *Anthropology of East Europe Review*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2002, pp. 71–9.
- ⁴⁴ This is not to say that families do not love their daughters or care for their safety, but that their actions also function within the social norms of shame and honour.
- ⁴⁵ Amnesty International, *Albania: Violence against Women in the Family: "It's not her shame" How the State Fails Women*, 2006, <<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/EUR11/002/2006/sq/02116dd3-d458-11dd-8743-d305bea2b2c7/eur110022006en.html>>.
- ⁴⁶ Until 1977, abortion was punishable with up to five years imprisonment, which changed to two years in 1977. Carrying out abortion as a profession or carrying out a prohibited abortion that caused death or severe health problems was punishable with three to ten years under the 1952 Criminal Code and up to eight years under the 1977 Criminal Code.

⁴⁷ UNFPA and World Vision, 'Sex Imbalances at Birth in Albania', Tirana, 2012,

<https://www.unfpa.org/gender/docs/UNFPA_report_Albania2012.pdf>.

⁴⁸ Maria Bucur-Deckard influentially argued in 2008 that Romanian women who underwent illegal abortions were dissidents. Maria Bucur-Deckard, 'Gendering Dissent: Of Bodies and Minds, Survival and Opposition Under Communism', *Oxford Slavonic Papers*, vol. 7–9, 2008, pp. 9–26.

⁴⁹ I am most influenced in my limited analysis here by Adi Kuntsman, 'Webs of Hate in Diasporic Cyberspaces: The Gaza War in the Russian-language Blogosphere', *Media, War and Conflict*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2010, pp. 299–313; 'Online Memories, Digital Conflicts and the Cybertouch of War', *Digital Icons: Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media*, no. 4, 2010, pp. 1–12.

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