

A CONCISE HISTORY OF ALBANIA

A Concise History of Albania charts the history of Albania and its people, within their Balkan and European contexts. It shows the country's journey from its ancient past, still shrouded in mystery and controversy, through its difficult progression from a particularly brutal form of communism to an evolving form of democracy and a market economy. Bernd Fischer and Oliver Schmitt challenge some of the traditional narratives concerning the origins of the Albanians, and the relations between Albanians and their Balkan neighbours. This authoritative and up-to-date single-volume history analyses the political, social, economic, and cultural developments which led to the creation of the Albanian state and the modern nation, as well as Albania's more recent experience with authoritarianism, war, and communism. It contributes to our understanding of the challenges facing contemporary Albanians, as well as the issues confronting the region as a whole as it attempts to grapple with one of the last remaining significant ethnic issues in the Balkans.

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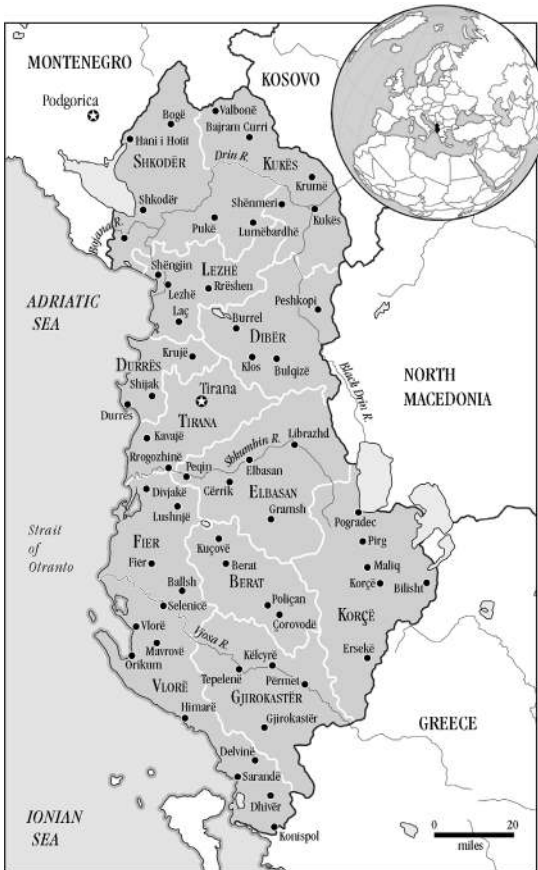
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PREFACE



Contemporary Albania

Preface

Visitors to Albania typically arrive at the modern Mother Teresa airport in the capital city of Tirana. A thirty-minute taxi ride brings one to Skanderbeg Square, the heart of the metropolis of over 850,000 people. Twenty-three miles from the coast on a lowland plain underneath mount Dajti to the east, modern Tirana is, on the surface, just another Balkan capital choked with traffic, shoddily constructed apartment buildings, cafes and restaurants – overwhelmed by the modern. Yet, in and around the city it is still possible to at least catch a glimpse of the remnants of some of the different civilizations that have over the centuries contributed to the creation of the modern Albanian state and nation.

In the distance some eighteen miles to the north is the ancient hill town of Krujë with its imposing citadel used by Illyrian tribes as early as the sixth century BC. The bastion later became the stronghold of the Albanian national hero Skanderbeg who fought off the Ottomans there in the fifteenth century. Some eleven miles to the south of Tirana on a hill above the Erzen river are the ruins of the Petrelë castle, a fortress from the Byzantine period built around a much older central tower. The castle was used by the Byzantines to forestall Norman invaders from the coast in the eleventh century. Twenty-three miles to the west is the port town of Durrës, founded by the Greeks in 627 BC, which then became an Illyrian settlement, then a Roman town, the terminus of the Via Egnatia from Byzantium. The town contains the largest Roman amphitheater in the Balkans, and eventually developed into a Byzantine fortress city with still existent imposing walls, only to fall to the Normans, the Venetians and finally the Ottomans, all of whom left their imprints.

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Tirana itself boasts a veritable riot of different historical traditions. Just off Skanderbeg Square are the remnants of the sixth-century Fortress of Justinian, although all that is left are the Ottoman walls and parts of an Ottoman road built by the powerful land-owning Toptani family. The five-century Ottoman period is very well represented with Ottoman houses, mosques, Bektashi *tekkes* (monasteries) and Ottoman public architecture, including sections of road, and the small Tanners bridge, a fine example of a classic arched Ottoman bridge. Directly on the square is the small, exquisite mosque of Et'hem Bey with its unique exterior wall paintings. Completed in 1827, it is one of the best examples of late Ottoman architecture in the country. Next to it stands a distinctive Ottoman clock tower built in 1830, an architectural symbol of the city that can be found on most travel brochures and postcards. Many of the fine nineteenth- and early twentieth-century villas have survived, including one behind the Fortress of Justinian that serves as the residence of Crown Prince Leka II, the grandson of King Zog who ruled Albania in the interwar period.

The period of Zog is also well represented, and indeed much of the center of Tirana was laid out by Italian engineers and architects during the reign of the king. Just behind the communist-era Skanderbeg statue is a collection of fine Italianate government ministries built in the 1930s that have been carefully preserved, with the exception of the fascist decorations, which were finally removed after the collapse of communism. Just outside of town we find the Palati Zogu, the king's palace built for him by the Italians but finished only following his ouster by Mussolini. Today it serves as the residence of the president of the republic.

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The communist period is also well represented by Skanderbeg Square itself, which the dictator Enver Hoxha laid out as a typical communist parade ground. On the square we find several large communist-era buildings including the imposing Palace of Culture, whose cornerstone was laid by Nikita Khrushchev in 1959, and the National Historical Museum with its massive socialist realist mosaic depicting Albania's fight for freedom from the ancient Illyrians, through the nineteenth-century Albanian nationalists, to the anti-fascist partisans during the Second World War. Between the clock tower and the Et'hem Bey mosque is Bunk'Art 2, a former secret bunker system built for the Ministry of the Interior during the communist period, which is now a museum depicting the history of Albania's security services.

Hoxha's residence, known as Villa 31, still sits somewhat awkwardly in the so-called block area, which during the communist period was the heavily protected quarter reserved for the highest level of party leadership. Today it is the trendiest restaurant, bar and nightclub zone in the city. Hoxha was originally buried with honors in the Martyrs' Cemetery just outside of the city across from the Palati Zogu, in the shadow of the massive socialist realist statue of Mother Albania. Just east of the block on the main boulevard we find perhaps the most gauche of Tirana's monuments celebrating the Hoxha cult of the personality, the so-called pyramid, designed by Hoxha's daughter meant to serve as a memorial to the dictator. The pyramid, certainly the oddest structure in the country, is now virtually abandoned and deteriorating, but was saved from complete demolition and is slated to become an education center.

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Since the collapse of communism in 1991 when the population of Tirana was approximately 250,000, the city has grown exponentially and is now home to over 30 percent of Albania's population. Many of the fine Ottoman villas have been demolished to make way for high-rise flats, with some of the dreariness painted over in bright colors by Edi Rama, who was mayor from 2000 to 2011. While many lament the loss of the villas, their destruction was often the only way to deal with a myriad of competing property claims. The city, then, is dominated by modern construction, including the futuristic new National Stadium opened in 2019 designed by Italian architects, on the site of an earlier one built during the Italian fascist occupation. There are, of course, modern shopping complexes, such as the Toptani Center across from the villa which houses the Albanian Academy of Sciences, built during the Zog period and used for royal functions.

But even some of the modern architecture speaks to Albania's past and its diversity, and here religious architecture serves as an appropriate example. The Hoxha dictatorship declared socialist Albania to be an atheist state and thoroughly suppressed organized religion of every stripe. With the collapse of communism in 1991, Albania experienced a resurgence of religious adherence and a boom in religious construction, often financed from abroad. Tirana's St. Paul's Catholic cathedral was one of the first new, large religious constructions, built under the direction of the Albanian archbishop Rrok Mirdita, who is himself immortalized in the stained glass, in a panel with his arm around Pope John Paul II, who laid the foundation stone in 1993. The Orthodox community answered with the much larger Resurrection of Christ Cathedral,

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built across the street from the House of Leaves, the former surveillance center of the communist-era secret police. The cathedral is the third-largest Orthodox church in Europe. Not to be outdone, the Sunni Muslim community built the yet-to-be-completed, hulking neo-Ottoman style new Great Mosque of Tirana. The mosque, funded by the Turkish government, towers over parliament next door, and with its four minarets is the largest mosque in the Balkans, accommodating some 5,000 faithful. The Albanian intellectual Fatos Lubonja reacted by suggesting that “skyscrapers are the symbol of our new religion.”

In a way, Tirana serves as a microcosm of Albania’s complexity. It is the purpose of this book to provide some context for the complexity one encounters in the capital and elsewhere. There are myriad challenges in such an undertaking. Because much of Albanian history remains unclear, while we attempt to provide some explanations, the available evidence does not yet allow for definitive answers in all cases so inevitably we raise some questions as well. In reviewing Albanian history, we also discuss how others see the Albanians and how the Albanians see themselves, which is often not the same. Given the complexities reviewed above and the significant gaps in our knowledge concerning various periods in Albanian history, there is much room for interpretation and conjecture. Some historians and nationalists have attempted to simplify the complexities with myth – Albanian history, as with the history of all nations, is permeated by myths and mythical narratives that often serve political purposes. We attempt to deconstruct prevalent political and historiographical myths concerning Albania’s past and present

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and bring to light the ways in which Albanian myths have functioned as components of identity and as weapons in the struggle of conflicting political and historical claims, how they have served to buttress political power and contributed to internal cohesion.

The eminent Oxford scholar Sir Noel Malcolm has usefully defined what in his view constitutes the principal Albanian myths, some of which are shared by Albania's Balkan neighbors. Those that we will encounter in this review of Albanian history include the myth of ethnic homogeneity and cultural purity, the myth of permanent national struggle and the myth of indifference to religion, the basis of the oft-repeated notion, which originates with a nineteenth-century Albanian nationalist thinker, that "the religion of Albanians is Albanianism." Perhaps most central to regional struggles then and now is the myth of origin, which establishes a claim to priority in order to demonstrate that the Albanians were the original people of the Balkans, there before the coming of the Slavs in the late Roman Empire, but also before the Romans, and even before the Greeks. This narrative is used not only to solidify claims of historic right to territory, but it also enables its proponents to suggest that some of the best-known elements of ancient Greek culture actually had Albanian origins. As Sir Noel points out, such derivations exhibit some of the classic features of myth-style thinking; most notably they omit the difference between the ancestral past and the present identifying ancient people as Albanian and assuming that they spoke a version of the modern Albanian language.

These myths and narratives provide Albanian nationalists with the arguments to support a basic linear view of

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Albanian history, one that was neatly summed up in a 1918 headline in the *New York Evening Sun* as quoted by Sir Noel. Referring to the beginning of the First World War, the headline read:

Ancient Illyrians in Entente: After 2000 years of Solitary Struggle Albanians join forces with Soldiers of Democracy – Dusk of a Picturesque Nation.

This view certainly informs the communist-era mosaic on the facade of the Museum of History in Tirana. But does it comport with the rich historical traditions found in the rest of Tirana, the rest of Albania and among the Albanians living in modern Kosovo (the second Albanian state) and elsewhere in the Balkans and the eastern Mediterranean? An examination of this question in many ways forms the basis of our book, *A Concise History of Albania*. As the title would indicate, the central focus of our book is Albania, the state and nation. But Albanian history does not, of course, begin with the creation of the state of Albania in 1912. Indeed, without an extensive review of the origins of the Albanians and the development of the region where they were and are found, the creation of the Albanian state, and the nation, after 1912 cannot be fully understood. It must also be noted that the Albanians living in the modern Albanian state constitute just one part of the history of the Albanians. Since 2008, a significant percentage of those Albanians who in 1912 were left out of the national state have developed their own model of statehood, the independent state of Kosovo. Despite its multiethnic political model, which was imposed by the international community, Kosovo today is de facto a second Albanian state whose citizens do not any longer consider Albania as their motherland.

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To facilitate an understanding of the Albanians we have divided the book into two parts, first the story of the Albanian people in the western Balkans, and then the story of the development of the first Albanian state and the formation of the nation on its territory. Part I is titled “Between Regional Self-Will and Imperial Rule,” a reference to the Turkish term *inat*, which is roughly translated as “persistence” – in this case, a certain Balkan stubbornness, which explains the survival of the language and identity of a community without common institutions and an administrative sacral language. In this section, we address questions of origin, which remain difficult. But the study of language has provided some clues that in turn have led to the development of theories concerning the derivation of the earliest Albanians. The space where these earlier Albanians were found presents yet another challenge, but again language helps us. We deal with these issues at some length, as they are fundamental to understanding Albanians then and, perhaps more importantly for the nonacademic reader, they are fundamental to understanding Albanians today. Once these early Albanians came in contact with the surrounding political world, the picture becomes somewhat clearer. The Romans, the Byzantines, the Kingdom of Naples and Venetians have, as we have seen, all left their traces and their influence. With no centralized medieval political system of their own, we must rely heavily on the records of these empires, kingdoms and maritime republics (such as Venice and Dubrovnik) for our knowledge of the Albanians.

With the century-long Ottoman conquest, the Albanians and the area in which they lived (which the

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Ottomans called *Arnavutluk*) are described in much greater detail. As elsewhere, the Ottomans ruled through a co-opted local elite, and, in part because of the sheer length of their rule, impacted all aspects of Albanian society including legal doctrines, social organization and, in particular, religious developments, creating a predominantly Sunni Muslim society, a feature which has, of course, endured. The nineteenth century saw the Ottoman empire's decline, as its principal competitors in the West industrialized and modernized. With aid from either Russia or the West, other Balkan nations became states, but the Albanians lagged behind in part because of their favored status in the Ottoman empire. But here, too, national activists accelerated the forging of an Albanian identity in anticipation of either an autonomous region within the empire, or in the advent of the empire's collapse, as an independent state. The western part of *Arnavutluk* was slowly transformed into modern Albania, while the eastern sections were conquered and annexed by Serbia in 1912 and later became part of Yugoslavia.

Part II, the bulk of this work, "State and Nation Construction," begins with the Ottoman collapse during the Balkan wars and the First World War and the foundation of an independent Albania. Born as a result of these external forces, the new state, unlike other Balkan states, was created prior to the creation of a modern Albanian nation. State and nation construction becomes the central focus of the various "Albanias" created during the twentieth century, a process that proves to be difficult in light of the various divisive factors that must be overcome or at least circumvented. These factors include religious division, regional differences and significant social

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differences. Albania's first political system, a rather unstable principality system imposed by the Great Powers, evolves into an authoritarian regime dominated by Ahmet Zogu, a local chieftain who elevated himself to the position of King of the Albanians. While this development removed one of the divisive factors standing in the way of nation and state construction, that of politics, the Zog monarchy proved unable to successfully deal with a myriad of seemingly insurmountable social and economic challenges. The process is interrupted and further complicated by the Second World War, which witnessed the ousting of Zog, who was replaced by a series of puppet regimes following an Italian and then a German invasion.

The war proved to be a defining moment for Albania, and in a way continues to inform domestic politics to this day. It also had profound effects and was immediately followed by the virtual destruction of the prewar political, social and economic order, replaced by a communist regime that claimed legitimacy by virtue of the fact that partisan units had constituted the most effective resistance to the invader. The communist regime under Enver Hoxha, which ruled until 1990, proved to be one of the most brutal of the Eastern European regimes, instituting and maintaining Stalinist policies for some thirty-seven years after the death of Stalin himself. But this regime too, like others in Eastern Europe eventually succumbed to overcentralization, overcrowding in the countryside, increasing unemployment, widespread corruption, constant shortages and growing access to Western media. While the change itself was peaceful, the powerful legacy of the communist period has made the process of establishing the next "Albania" anything but smooth.

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The post-communist period began with euphoric hope. The first democratically elected leader proclaimed, “Hello Europe, we hope we find you well.” And despite the economic disaster that faced Albania in 1992, significant social change was rapidly instituted. Almost overnight, Albanians were released from one of the most restricted and isolated social structures in Europe. But the old ways have lingered. Politics quickly degenerated into creeping authoritarianism, as Albania’s new leaders prioritized power over progress. Much of the population as a whole remains poverty stricken, while oligarchs and crime lords flaunt their wealth and extend their influence into all aspects of the media, the economy, politics and the administration. A fully functioning rule of law remains a distant goal. Albania’s population continues to shrink as the best and brightest emigrate. But there have been many positive steps. As Albania becomes more thoroughly integrated into Europe in general, the hope is that progress will continue and even accelerate and that some of those who fled in despair will return and commit their energy and talent to a new Albania. And we in turn hope that this brief introduction to the fascinating and complex story of the Albanians and the modern state of Albania may contribute to a better understanding of a part of the Balkans that remains insufficiently known.