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**The situation before and after deportation among
the survivors from Hoxha dictatorship
regime in Albania**

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Special Issue

**Face Up. Faces from the past. The fight
for freedom and democracy in Albania
during the regime of Enver Hoxha**

A cura di / Edited by

Michele Rabà - Gaetano Sabatini

RiMe 14/V n.s. (June 2024)

Special Issue

Face Up. Faces from the past.
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The situation before and after deportation among the survivors from Hoxha dictatorship regime in Albania

Situata para dhe pas deportimit mes të mbijetuarve nga regjimi i diktaturës Hoxha në Shqipëri

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Riassunto

È stato condotto uno studio qualitativo per descrivere la situazione di queste famiglie prima e dopo la deportazione in due periodi contrastanti. L'analisi delle loro risposte è stata collegata a tre momenti importanti: la vita prima della deportazione, la vita durante il campo e la vita dopo la deportazione. I risultati hanno mostrato che la maggior parte dei partecipanti ha notato il periodo del campo come il periodo peggiore della loro vita, in cui hanno perso se stessi e la maggior parte delle loro famiglie.

Parole chiave

Regime di dittatura; campo; deportazione; sopravvissuto.

Abstract

A qualitative study was carried out to portray the situation with these families before and after deportation in two contrasted periods. The analysis of their answers was connected with three important moments: life before deportation, life during the camp, and after the deportation. The results showed that most participants noticed the period during the camp as the worst period in their lives, where they lost themselves and most of their families. In contrast with these, they have found new mechanisms to survive and collaborate.

Keywords: dictatorship regime; camp; deportation; survivor.

1. Introduction. - 2. Literature Review. - 3. Methodology. - 4. Results. - 5. Conclusion. - 6. Bibliography. - 7. Curriculum vitae.

1. Introduction

The establishment of the communist regime in Albania and in other European countries have many similarities and differences. There is no doubt that almost all communist countries in Europe and Asia copied the Soviet model of communism. In Albania, as in Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Hungary and beyond, communist regimes were established which produced more or less the same consequences for their peoples. Albania implemented the Soviet model of government, but unlike other communist countries in Europe, it built it largely with the direct assistance of Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia was the first country after the war that officially recognized the Albanian government and established diplomatic relations with it. This means the influence that this state had further on Albania's leadership style.

Communism, in the viewpoint of those who promoted it, was destined to reform human society around the world according to a model that emphasized equality as well as its permanent antagonism. In political systems built based on this ideology, essentially totalitarian, reconciliation was impossible between those who believed in the principles of this ideology and among those who sought another pattern of governance. The will to perpetuate communist regimes and leadership at their head created a system of violence and repression. Denial of fundamental freedoms and social and political rights to individuals of a category of society was argued by official propaganda as a small price to be paid to touch the unfeasible dream of a society without class, without property and without poverty (Pryce-Jones, 1995).

The beginning of the transitional period in Albania and the former Yugoslavia, characterized by war, conflict and mass migration, reinforced this dichotomy. For Western onlookers and participants, the wars and genocide committed in the Yugoslav territory and the political unrest in Albania could be seen as a continuation of the violence and repression of a generalized idea of socialism. Thus subsumed into the frame of trauma, the vastly different transitional periods in the Yugoslav successor states and in Albania could be treated together as a cautionary tale that could justify the long-term political influence (Aleida, 2015).

A transparent representation of what happened in Albania during the communism of Hoxha was dramatically changing the life of many people. It is about time to dig into that history which should be a memory not only for the Albanians but for all the EU citizens. That dictatorship left no room for democratic values, which helps explaining why Albania became so chaotic after the end of that period. No trace of opposition was left as at the dead of this cruel dictator. Because

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he allowed no alternative voices to exist, no one was waiting to step in once he had gone, once the party relinquished control. No nascent “civil society” was there to assume its responsibilities. There was just a vacuum and a great deal of lawlessness. There was no justice for the victims and no persecution for the persecutors. This chapter of history was never fully discussed but it is about time to come to terms with the past. The number of people killed or imprisoned during 41 years of dictatorship were equivalent to more than one thirtieth of Albania’s population at that time. In today’s Albania there is an absolute need to know the facts and the faces of the people, among which many intellectuals and many women, that have sacrificed their life to free Albania from this totalitarian regime. The project by revealing the story and the faces of some of the victims and persecutors aims at creating a case-study for all the European citizens. The research on facts and people shall inform about the diversity of European recent history and the threats represented by totalitarian regimes.

2. Literature Review

The communist regime in Albania, in addition to denying many human rights, created an extensive system of persecution and imprisonment for all political opponents of the regime. Camps and prisons located in different cities of Albania became places of multiple suffering for thousands of families for years during the 45 years of the regime of the former dictator Enver Hoxha. The sufferings and persecutions for this category of Albanian society left their traces in the 23 prisons and 48 concentration camps spread throughout Albania. People were taken in masse and sent to internment camps, where they experienced extreme suffering, where in certain cases there was even death as a result of starvation and other harsh conditions.

The Russian researcher, Andrei Sakharov, has described the ‘gulags’ or labour camps as “places where human life had no value and everything human ceased to exist” (Bergman, 2009).

Communism, in the view of those who promoted it, was destined to reshape human society everywhere in the world (Pryce-Jones, 1995). It was seen as a coercive force that was imposed, and if opposed by the will of the individual was punished in the form of exile, persecution, imprisonment, and execution.

The free will of man no longer existed, and every action would be done under the orders of the People’s Party. For about 45 years, from 1945 to 1990, Albania

went through a difficult period that a society, nation, and state can go through without losing its independence or its existence. It is a known fact that one of the most successful methods to solve a problem is to 'face the problem'. The transformation of the national economy from private to state and centralized became visible (Saraci, 2012).

The violation and sacrifice of every human value by this repressive structure would perpetuate the dehumanization it brought about over the years, becoming an essential process of study. The experience of such events is reflected even today by the people who are descendants and sufferers even after the end of the period of communism. This clearly shows the suffering this period has caused in the families of these people.

Some rules were forced to be used after the decisions made in December 1944 by a certain category of people where landowners, merchants, and former politicians had to leave the main cities of Albania. This resulted in many people being denied the right to return to their homes, which were confiscated and used to house officials of the new regime and families of martyrs of the National Liberation Movement.

Initially, in 1945, private Albanian and foreign companies, with the help of state commissioners, were tasked with directing and collecting information about their activity until liquidation and passing into the hands of the state and the monopolization of the private sector using the sequestration, confiscation law, and the nationalization of private assets and after the centralization until the creation of the joint state property (Saraci, 2012).

From 1945, exile began to be used as another punitive measure against political opponents. Isolation resulted in the creation of a general feeling of superiority by Albanian citizens at that time. However, this psychological illness or superiority complex turned very quickly and radically into an inferiority complex after the fall of the communist regime.

Communist systems are regimes where life has no value and everything human ceases to exist affecting the psycho-emotional aspect of man. During these 30 years after the fall of the communist regime in Albania, public discourse has focused on the need for a balanced history where Albanian communism is given in all its colours.

The denial of human rights, the history of State Security, communist repression, and the system of prisons, internment, and labor camps have begun to find a place in historical studies and research to strengthen the memory of this painful and

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unenlightened part of the world: the history of Albania. Psychological bipolarity is characterized in Albanian society since the dominant political and social generation in Albania was born under the mentality propagated during the communist period.

The worldview of these people was formed according to an illusory reality. A completely different mentality from the one that characterizes the 'western' international community, of which Albania aspires to be a part. The unexpected contact with the rest of the world made the Albanian people realize that they were superior to anyone. On the contrary, they were not leading the race of world progress and prosperity as preached by the communist leadership, but it was the Albanians themselves who just entered the race and had many objectives to fulfill.

The dark side of the communist regime and recovery in the internment camps

The communist regime, which was established immediately after liberation, was based on a two-pillar dictatorship. The first was propaganda, and the other was violence. Which was based on laws that violated every kind of individual right, as well as a system of prisons and concentration camps. Internment means to put a person in prison or some other form of detention, generally in wartime. Existence in the internment camps means the picture of a classless society, based on joint ownership of all resources and all the elements that characterize democracy (AQSH, F. 14/AP (Str), V. 1945, D. 215, fl. 31. Urdhër i Mehmet Shehut, komandanti i Korpusit III, Shkodër për shtabet e brigadave I, XI, XXIII, XXIV, 12 shkurt 1945).

For many years there was a system of internment camps surrounded by barbed wire, very similar to the concept of concentration camps. The internees in the internment camps led a miserable life where the apartment was a shack with abnormal living conditions.

In the camp located in Lushnje, the internees were initially isolated and forced to work in agriculture. They lived in barracks where the dirt, the heavy wind, and the head and body parasites constituted torture in itself. This was for all categories of people, including pregnant women, for whom the allowance was the same.

The internees were listed daily for the appeal at certain times and were forbidden to move outside the village where they lived. For movements outside the village, they had to obtain the operator's permission. Their jobs were the hardest on the farm and deprivations from social life were always present (<<https://kohajone.com/historia-e-patreguar-e-kampeve-te-lushnjes/>>).

These camps were not built to accommodate families, but they were quickly adapted as concentration or concentration camps, where basic living conditions, food, sleep, and hygiene left much to be desired (Dervishi, 2015). Directly guilty people were not sent to these internment camps, but the relatives of people unwanted by the regime: those who escaped abroad, those who were from the mountains and were organizing resistance against the regime, political prisoners, or partisans who deserted from the communist army.

After 1954, it was no longer a question of closed areas like concentration camps, but of villages from which internees could not leave without permission. Every day the internees had to appear to sign a register at the Security or police office. The most popular areas were the villages in the districts of Fier, Lushnja, Vlora and Berat, but in fact there were villages all over Albania that were used for this purpose. The general criterion continued to be that northerners were exiled to the south and vice versa, thus eliminating contact with the territory of origin and old friendships. The internees mainly worked in agricultural cooperatives, but they often engaged them in public constructions or reconstructions as they also did with political prisoners. The siege was then lifted, but the internees had limited space for movement, and territorial had to appeal in the morning and at dinner, and were never to leave their country without permission (<<https://kujto.al/1954-te-internuarit-ne-kampin-me-tela-me-gjembra-te-lushnjes>>).

3. Methodology

Purpose of the study and its importance.

The purpose of this study is to bring the knowledge of the young generation some historical facts of the totalitarian regime of Hoxha, through the stories of the survival victims. Regarding the main purpose, the study collected some reliable and comprehensive information from survivors of the labour camp in Savër, Lushnje, comparing their lives in different periods. These terms/notions, as the main variables of the study, will serve as a direct contribution for future generation to better know their past and history.

Based on a qualitative perspective we used semi-structured interviews to access the experiences of survivors from the labour camp in Savër, Lushnje. Also, the second objective is to describe what they have in common during two different periods.

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Regarding the purpose of the study, the working group conducted 27 in-depth interviews with labour camp survivors who were located in Albania or abroad. The interview was designed for the purpose of the study and contained questions aimed at gathering as much data as possible about all aspects of life. After reviewing the questions by domain experts belonging to the working group, all partners agreed on a final version. It was then reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee for Research at the La Sapienza University, Rome, adhering to all norms and rules of scientific research. In the first part of the interview, all participants were introduced to the purpose of the study and their roles. For this reason, consent to participate in the study was given in simple and understandable language. The final version of the interview was culturally appropriate and understandable for the survivors.

Interview Guideline

The study was part of a research project “Faces from the past: The fight for freedom and democracy during the regime of Hoxha”. The interviews were divided into four parts, covering four main themes: survivors’ perception of their life in general, survivors’ own experience, survivors’ life narrative and survivors’ current identity, and the last part that included questions about different characteristics of participants such as: gender, age, city, marital status, education level, years of education during the camp, etc. Our study focused mostly on exploring the situation before and after deportation in two contrasted periods including questions comparing these periods – i.e., “How was your life before and during the camp?; Please say how you continue life including your education, partner, children, work, and so on; How was your life after the fall of dictatorship regarding relationships, family, children, work and reintegration?”.

Participants and Procedure

The sample was composed of 27 participants from Albania who have been part of a labour camp in Savër, Lushnjë. Out of them, 30% (N=8) were females, and 70% (N=19) males. The age of 40% of participants (N=11) varies from 70 to 85 years old, whereas 60% of them (N= 16) were from 50 to 69 years old. The marital status of participants, their level of education and years of education within and after leaving the camp, the reason for being part of the camp, years they lived in the camp are some of the other additional questions that were part of the interview. These questions were

included to make different comparisons by integrating more factors and to see if any of these factors play a particular role or effect on the variables of the study.

The participants were contacted before conducting the interview by the working group and familiarized themselves with the aims and methodology of the study. After they agreed to be part of the study, an in-depth interview was conducted with each of them. The interviews were conducted by clinical psychology students, after training they received from the group of experts. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in the city where the participants lived (Lushnje, Tirana, Vlorë, and Durrës) as well as via the zoom platform in cases when they lived outside Albania (Italy and USA). Semi-structured interviews lasted on average more than two hours. They were fully recorded on camera and transcribed with the participants' consent, and pseudonyms were used to protect their identities.

Analysis

Analyses were carried out following the thematic analysis procedure through five stages: familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing potential themes, and defining and naming themes in a codebook. The research team was composed of researchers from Albania and Italy. Analyses were also informed by the consensual qualitative research recommendations to ensure that results reflect the research team members understanding.

So, step by step the procedure went through the following steps:

Transcription. The interviews were transcribed word for word in a narrative way. All the interviews were recorded and after that delivered in a format to be accessed on a laptop or computer. The interviews were transcribed in Albanian language and for each of them was a summary in English.

Coding. The transcripts were analysed to identify key themes, concepts, or patterns regarding their lives before and after deportation. This process involved identifying and coding different words, phrases, or sentences that described their emotions, feelings, situations, etc. The interview was organized regarding different perceptions of their life.

4. Results

The presentation of the results is organized into four parts. First, we address their lives and their perception in general including family, education, and work namely the proportion of people who would continue living in those conditions and the conditions under which they stayed many years within the camp. Second, we present their lives before deportation regarding the reason, family status, their reaction, and so on. Third, we address the situation during the camp with all the difficulties and challenges they faced to. Last we explored their lives after deportation and chose two cases that described better the integration after leaving the camp.

General perception and experience

The participants tell their stories full of emotions, full of suffering, and negative memories. Some of them state that they have not been able to recognize their father, and the family has been incomplete. Their lives have been full of stress, and they have all shown a desire to stay together. Meanwhile, there have been many inequalities regarding education. As interned families, they did not have the opportunity to choose the school they wanted, they felt discriminated. Only a small part of them had the opportunity to continue their education after leaving the camp.

Their perceptions regarding commitment and dedication to children were almost the same. The children in these families lived in very difficult conditions in the camp. Some of them had come at a very young age and did not understand why they had to suffer there. There were also cases when children were born in the camp. They had no rights compared to other children outside the camp. All these experiences caused some of them to have difficulties reintegrating later in life.

Another matter discussed with them was related to the work in the camp. The participants remember it as a very difficult job in agriculture, no one taught or guided them. If things did not go as they should, it was always their fault, and they had punitive measures.

If we do a brief analysis of these results, we see that the general perception of the situation they went through is almost the same. They have stayed mostly alone with their mother in the camp since the father has either left or been killed/convicted by the regime. The families have been denied the right to

schooling and education of their children, they have lived and worked in very difficult conditions.

Table 1. *Categories covering the answers to the perception of general situation question*

Categories	Participants	Categories	Participants
Main descriptions of their lives: regarding family, education and work		Main descriptions of their lives: regarding family, education and work	
<i>Description 1 - family</i>		<i>Description 2 - education</i>	
Stay together wherever they go	16	Not continue education	17
All the family suffered	19	Have not chance to choose	22
Everyone felt stressful	18	Feel unequal with others	24
Family destroyed	23	Feel discriminated	23
The father was not with us most of our lives	16	Have the chance to continue education after the camp	10
We felt the family was not completed	18		
<i>Description 3 - children</i>		<i>Description 4 - work</i>	
Taking care mostly alone, the husband in the prison	15	Agriculture in the camp	25
Lived in hard conditions	23	Very hard work	25
Very difficult to integrate after	16	No one stimulated and orientated them	23
Children not same condition	22	Everything wrong belonged to them	19

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Life before deportation

In the second part of the interview, the study aimed to gather information about their lives before the deportation. They say that they had a normal life, full of problems and difficulties like every Albanian family in that period. They were well-integrated families in a society that enjoyed a relatively high status. The main reason for exile was related to the departure of a relative outside of Albania or in some cases the participation of male members of the family in the war. According to the participants in the study, these were the reasons why their families had the misfortune of being part of the camp in Savër, Lushnjë. The moment of receiving the notice of deportation was filled with anxiety, uncertainty, fear, destructive feelings and surprise as they thought they were families with strong positions. The reactions of friends and relatives have been interesting. They left immediately, they were afraid to talk and communicate with them. In some cases, they wanted to help but felt insecure. They found other forms to communicate through the letters they sent to each other.

Table 2. *Categories covering the answers to the perception of life before deportation*

Categories	Participants	Categories	Participants
<i>Life before deportation</i>		<i>Reason of deportation</i>	
Normal life, working regularly	21	Someone in the family went abroad	19
Well know family	17	Being part of the war	8
Well integrated social and political life	18	<i>Reaction of friends, cousins</i>	
<i>Their reaction when they knew for deportation</i>		Tried to help them	13
Felt not safe	18	Afraid to speak with them	20
Got angry	22	<i>Reaction of community</i>	
Surprised because they were in good positions	18	Wrote letters to each other	
		Good relation in the camp	18

Categories	Participants	Categories	Participants
			19
Everything destroyed	23	They helped us	10
Family was separated	22		

From all the answers given, we understand that their families mostly belonged to the middle class, led a normal life, and enjoyed a good status in society. Immediately their life changed negatively after the exile, having consequences and problems in all aspects.

The situation during the camp

An important part of the interview focused on their life while in the camp, taking into consideration family relationships, work, education, health and communication with others. The participants call the time of their stay in the camp as the darkest period of their lives but filled with many memories that they had created together. Despite the discomfort, anxiety, boredom, and difficult conditions, the families found the strength to live.

They encountered many difficulties in the economic aspect and the conditions of the house where they lived for many years. The buildings were roofless, and they slept together with other people. Hunger and lack of food prevailed to extreme levels where they did not even have the opportunity to buy basic food. Except all, they also encountered many beautiful things, such as: learning new languages, being surrounded by the most intellectual people of the time, socializing with others, attending each other's weddings, and even family members who were outside the camp, despite the difficulties they faced. They described their lives and education as difficult and that they were deprived of the opportunity of high school or the education they wanted. They were constantly involved in various and difficult works which shows that not everyone behaved well, especially people with authority, some of whom exceeded their duty.

Life after deportation

The last part of the interview focuses on their life after leaving the camp, considering the possibilities to reintegrate in all aspects. For a significant part of the participants, this was a difficult process. They had lost all connection and

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contact with life outside the camp. Some of them left the country and have not returned, and some others have found different ways to fulfil their dreams and desires. Meanwhile, some could no longer find their way, as the experience they went through had great consequences. Among the main emotions they shared during the interview were: feelings of pessimism and loneliness, everyone had created their own life, had difficulties understanding how they could fit into society, having to start everything from the beginning. Despite the challenges, some of the families managed to follow their dreams and today are well integrated into society. There were also those families who did not get what they expected and face difficulties even nowadays.

Among the 27 persons interviewed, we chose two participants: one who had a better life after leaving the camp and one who have not changed his situation, to better explain the reintegration of them.

The person with better life: pseudo, age, description of the situation

Interview number 18, 77 years old. After being released from the camp, he graduated from the Faculty of Law and in '93 was employed in the archives of the Ministry of Interior and was told that if he finished the school of the Ministry of Interior, the law exams would be recognized, as well as some 3-4 subjects in the field. He also enrolled in the school of the Academy of the Ministry of Interior. Since the law exams were recognized, he completed it in two years, in 1998 he graduated and received the academic degree. He worked from '93 until 2002. Then, in 2002 he was elected General Director of the Institute for the Integration of the Former Persecuted. Of course, like all former persecutors, he also feels nostalgia for those memories but prefers to use intellectualization to protect himself from re-experiences.

The person who has not changed the situation: pseudo, age, description of the situation

Interview number 25, 60 years old. He reported high poverty making living difficult. They have had the support of other camp individuals but not that of state employees whom he describes as harsh, violent and unjust. He enjoyed the right to go to weddings and funerals of people inside the camp but movements outside it were monitored and most of the time impossible, especially when the relatives

were too far away. He had the right to marry and raise a family, however the class struggle had made it possible for marriages to take place by chance. The war of the classes and especially of these persecuted individuals had been felt since the education system, so he was raised in such a way that he was despised, discriminated, and not allowed to take part in the dance evening.

5. Conclusion

Communism, in the view of those who promoted it, was destined to reshape human society everywhere in the world according to a pattern that was frustrating and violent. The denial of basic, social and political freedoms and rights to individuals of a category of society was argued by official propaganda as a small price to pay to touch the unrealizable dream of a society without classes, without property and without poverty. The persecution of any individual deemed dangerous to the power of the communist leadership and the indoctrination with Marxist ideology and its derivatives of the rest of society is one of the main legacies of communism.

After 30 years, it seems quite impossible to recover the pain of thousands of Albanians who suffered the communist dictatorship as the horror of the concentration camps continues to be a dark stain in the history of Albanian communism.

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7. Curriculum vitae

Eralda Zhilla is a full-time professor in the Faculty of Social Science at the University of Tirana, specializes in clinical psychology. She has 17 years of teaching and research experience in the fields of education and psychology sciences.

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