

8-2020

State-Sponsored Atheism: The Case of Albania during the Enver Hoxha Era

İbrahim Karataş

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree>



Part of the [Eastern European Studies Commons](#), [Policy History, Theory, and Methods Commons](#), [Religion Commons](#), and the [Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Karataş, İbrahim (2020) "State-Sponsored Atheism: The Case of Albania during the Enver Hoxha Era," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 40 : Iss. 6 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol40/iss6/8>

This Peer-Reviewed Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

STATE-SPONSORED ATHEISM: THE CASE OF ALBANIA DURING THE ENVER HOXHA ERA

By İbrahim Karataş

İbrahim Karataş graduated from the Department of International Relations at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara in 2001. He took his master's degree from the Istanbul Sababattin Zaim University in the Political Science and International Relations Department in 2017. He subsequently finished his Ph.D. program from the same department and the same university in 2020. Karataş also worked in an aviation company before switching to academia. He is also a professional journalist in Turkey. His areas of study are the Middle East, security, and migration. ORCID: 0000-0002-2125-1840.

Abstract

This study analyzes how Enver Hoxha tried to abolish religions in Albania during the communist era. I argue that if atheism is not politicized and not exerted by force, its materialist damage is less. Yet, when atheization becomes a state policy and the government executes clergy, oppresses pious people, and destroys mosques and churches for the sake of atheism, irreligion then becomes a matter of state security. The study contends that when atheism is applied by force, atheist fundamentalism, which is no different than the religious version, emerges. Thus, irreligion becomes a threat to people's lives and destroys society as in the case of Hoxha's Albania. The study aims to shed light on the oppression stemming from adherence to non-belief.

Keywords; Albania, Atheism, Enver Hoxha, Security, Religion

Introduction

Literature is full of studies about the role of religion in state affairs, private life, social life, economy, international relations, revolutions, conflicts, wars, and so on. Indeed, religion plays a great role in lives and relations. Leaving aside other aspects, there is no doubt that religion influences politics. From the Crusades to Sharia law, the traces of faith can be found in most political incidents, state structures, and law. This is perhaps because religion addresses individuals and society, including the state. Studies and personal experience show that a person's faith inevitably affects his/her position in society and at the state level. It can be argued that the more people are religious, the more the state will be under the influence of religious

rules. Yet, the fact that sometimes a religious minority succeeds to impose its views upon state structures should not be underestimated. On the other hand, not every politician or society is religious since there are also secular, agnostics, and atheists that rule states. How much is the absence of religious faith reflected in politics then? We know that some prominent leaders and ideologies, specifically Marxism, had distanced themselves from religion and even tried to abolish it from state affairs and social life. In today's world, except for a few socialist countries, Marxist-communist ideology is no longer adhered to by states, but oppression on religious communities and religion itself continues. Nevertheless, as they have mechanisms of covering their crimes, it is hard to measure the degree of oppression. Fortunately, the suppression of former atheist regimes on religion is still alive in memoirs of elders who witnessed the abandonment of religion and torture of pious people, particularly clergy. Besides, confidential documents disclosed by the replaced regimes shed light on the atheist administrations' fight with faiths.

This article analyzes how Enver Hoxha of Albania abolished religion during his communist reign between 1945 and 1985. Not raised as a pious child, Hoxha adhered to atheist thoughts of the Marxist ideology. Enver Hoxha saw religion as opium, like other communist leaders, and undertook the duty of 'curing those poisoned by religion.'¹ To this end, once he took power in Albania, he demolished religious buildings, confiscated property of the church and Islamic groups, persecuted clergy, and punished people practicing religion. The process of irreligion became a vital matter of state security for Albanians until 1990, when the communist regime collapsed. Not only worshipping, but even believing in God was declared to be a crime by the Hoxha regime. Therefore, the faith of Albanians became a threat to the regime and *vice versa*. This study aims to reveal what happens when there is no religious belief outside of state atheism via analyzing Albania during the Enver Hoxha era. It will try to prove that, when taking power and when it is politicized, atheist fundamentalism is perhaps even more brutal than some other types of fundamentalism—since atheism has rigid ideology, including hatred of religion. As it will be discussed below, fundamentalist atheism is as dangerous as radical religionism—oppressive, brutal, and mortal. Overall, it is a matter of domestic and international security that needs to be tackled.

Methodologically, a literature review of articles, books, surveys, reports of rights groups, and the news was reviewed. More specifically, Enver Hoxha's views about religion

¹ Valbona Bezati, "How Albania Became the World's First Atheist Country," *Balkan Insight*, August 28, 2019. <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/08/28/how-albania-became-the-worlds-first-atheist-country/#gsc.tab=0>.

published in his books and interviews were analyzed. The research was limited to Hoxha's era, excluding the era of his successor Ramiz Alia. This study is expected to contribute to the literature of international security by elucidating political irreligion by examining the abolition of religion in Albania and its consequences. Enver Hoxha's views about religion will be surveyed, followed by abuses of human rights, religious freedom, and persecutions emanating from prohibitions on religion and its practice. Finally, the consequences of state atheism on the development of Albania will be discussed.

Enver Hoxha and His Irreligionist Policies

Enver Hoxha tried to make Albania an atheist state throughout his reign.² Indeed, Albania was announced as the first atheist state in 1967 after a long atheization process starting from his taking power in 1945. Several reasons are suggested for his religious hatred. First, Albanians growing during the King Zog era did not get enough religious education, nor did Hoxha.³ There are rumors that he was affected by his uncle Hysen (Hussein) Hoxha, who was Hoxha's inspiration. Uncle Hysen was an atheist and patriotic man teaching Enver Albanian nationalism and how to struggle with enemies⁴. Second, he adhered to Marxist ideology, which saw religion as 'opium that anesthetized people.' While his sympathy to Marxism emerged when he was studying at a French *lycee* in Albania, Hoxha became a staunch communist when he was at the university in France, where he met prominent French communists such as Paul Vaillant-Couturier.⁵ He got involved in communist meetings and wrote articles for Marxist publications. His scholarship was withdrawn while studying in Paris, and he was later fired from his job at the Albanian Embassy in Brussels due to his communist ideas. He had become a staunch communist when he returned to Albania in 1936.

Third, he was a great fan of Stalin, who was also hostile to religion. When he met Stalin in November 1949, the Soviet leader told him to take a stand against religion and the clergy and claimed that Vatican was a center of reaction, a tool in the service of capital and world reaction⁶. It seems that Hoxha looked at religion with eyes of his idol Stalin.

² Thomas P. Melady, "Albania: A Nation of Unique Inter-Religious Tolerance and Steadfast Aspirations for EU Integration," *Ambassador's Review*, Fall (2010): 12.

³ Ali Özkan, "Religion and State Relations in Albania During the Enver Hoxha Period," *History Studies: International Journal of History* 4, No. 4(2012): 298.

⁴ Elez Biberaj, *Albania-A Socialist Maverick* (San Francisco: Westview Press, 1990), 16

⁵ Blendi Fevziu, *Enver Hoxha: The Iron Fist of Albania* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 23.

⁶ Enver Hoxha, "Memoirs of My Meeting with Stalin: Third Meeting," *Marxists*, November 1949. <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hoxha/works/stalin/meet3.htm>.

Fourth, religion meant foreign influence and colonization for Enver Hoxha, so as it was for Stalin. For him, religion was a divisive force representing interests of foreign powers such as Italy (Roman Catholicism), Serbia and Greece (Orthodoxy), and Turkey (Islam).⁷ Hoxha thought that Albania was colonized by the Ottoman Empire via Islam; Greece had its hands in Albania via the Orthodox creed; and the Vatican was in his country through Catholic monks, priests, and nuns. What is more, Albania was invaded by Italy during the Second World War, and Hoxha and his communist comrades were fighting against Italians. Hence, when he took power in 1945, he assumed the Catholic Church of Albania was an extension of the Vatican. Finally, Hoxha's character was problematic. His daughter-in-law later revealed that he was reading vampire fictions and watching videos of murder and torture of his opponents.⁸

Hoxha claimed that since Albanians did not need religions and they were, moreover, dangerous for Albania, something else should replace them. Thus, he promoted 'Albanianism,' which was formulated in the 19th century by Vaso Pasha, an Albanian poet. According to Bernhard Tonnes, the real motive behind the struggle against religion is not socialism but nationalism.⁹ Tonnes' argument is a bit exaggerated, but it can be argued that since Hoxha's socialist ideology saw religions as exploitative, he tried to replace them with a national and man-made religion, i.e., Albanianism. Overall, the role of his socialist ideology as a motive to abolish religion(s) cannot be underestimated.

Hoxha's speeches provide more details about his views concerning religion. When he launched the battle to abolish religion in 1967, he stated in a letter that "Religion is the opium of the people. We must do our best so that everyone can understand it, even those who are poisoned (which are not few). We need to heal them. This is not an easy task, but not impossible."¹⁰ Here, he agrees with other Marxists who see religion as a tool of exploiters to take the loyalty and consent of people. Also, like other Marxists, he deems religion as an apparatus of the superstructure. His views are quite similar to those of Karl Marx and are reminiscent of Antonio Gramsci's *hegemonia*.

In addition, during a speech he gave to the Central Committee of the Party of Labor of Albania, Hoxha said:

⁷ Arben Kullolli, "Proselytization in Albania by Middle Eastern Islamic Organizations" (Master's Thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, 2009), 27.

⁸ Will Nicoll, "The Bane of Albania," *The Spectator*, May 14, 2016. <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-bane-of-albania>.

⁹ Bernhard Tonnes, "Religious persecution in Albania," *Religion in Communist Lands* 10, No. 3(1982):254, DOI: [10.1080/09637498208431032](https://doi.org/10.1080/09637498208431032).

¹⁰ Bezati, *How Albania Became the World's First Atheist Country*.

Was not the crushing blow dealt to religious dogma, that ancient plague, that poisonous black spider, in our country the most heroic, the most daring, the wisest, the most well-considered and the most skillful [sic] act? Was the abolition of the power of religion, along with its apparatus and personnel, an insignificant, conservative act? That was a centuries-old, spiritual and material structure. Our Party and people destroyed this structure within a few decades, but the fight to eradicate this cancer from the mentality of the people is still far from ended. A cure for cancer has not yet been discovered, but for religion it has been, and if a struggle is waged in this direction, consistently and with conviction, the cure will no longer take centuries but a few decades, a few generations. The fight against religious ideology is closely connected with the fight against imperialism and revisionism, with the fight for socialism and communism.¹¹

As can be seen, while Hoxha insults religion with ugly words, such as poisonous black spider and cancer, he praises Albania with nice attributions. Moreover, religion has already been securitized in his mind, since he mentions fighting religion and associates it with imperialism and revisionism. In other words, for Hoxha, religion is the enemy that Albanians must fight and eliminate. He also said in one of his books,

We hated religion with all the power of our reason because the revolutionary practice of our people had brought to light the profoundly reactionary and anti-popular role of religious doctrines, which supported the feudal-bourgeoisie of the country and the foreigners who oppressed us.¹²

Thus, for Hoxha, religion is backward, anti-popular, supports the feudal-bourgeoisie and foreigners. As per Hoxha's words, the only solution then is to fight 'evil' religion. Finally, in another book, he defines religion in his own words and explains why he hates religion:

We Marxist-Leninists always understand clearly that religion is opium for the people. In no instance do we alter our view on this and we must not fall into the errors of 'religious socialism'.... The revolution disperses the religious fog... The principal aspect is the ideological and scientific work of the Party. The poison of religion is not being fought against by means of orders from the state, but through an endless work, with perseverance and continuously on the part of the Party.¹³

In the above words, he continues to target religion as an enemy of his regime and ideology and indicates his firm stance against it. His Marxist ideology seems to be a pseudo-religion that he and his followers worship. Overall, Hoxha has a deep hatred against religions and securitizes them with his self-accepted views. He also underlines in almost all relevant speeches that they are in an eternal fight with religion.

¹¹ James S. O'Donnell, *A Coming of Age Albania Under Enver Hoxha* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 143.

¹² Enver Hoxha, *Selected Works IV* (Tirana: Nentori Publishing House, 1982), 616.

¹³ Enver Hoxha, *Reflections on the Middle East* (Tirana: Nentori Publishing House, 1984).

State-Sponsored Atheization Process during the Enver Hoxha Era

Albania has generally been praised for its tolerance to the practice of religion. The state generally did not intervene in religion and worship, and it was neutral to all religious institutions and faiths, except during the Enver Hoxha era. This was the case for centuries in the history of Albania. When Albania gained its independence from the Ottoman Empire, the population was overwhelmingly Muslim at 70%, while the rest was Christian. This percentage has not changed since then.¹⁴ Although there was no census after Communists came to power, it was estimated that of the total population of 1,180,500 at the end of World War II, about 826,000 were Muslims, 212,500 were Orthodox, and 142,000 were Roman Catholics.¹⁵ The Muslims were divided into two groups: about 600,000 were adherents of the Sunni branch and more than 220,000 followers of a Sufi dervish order known as Bektashi, which was an offshoot of the Shia branch.¹⁶

During the reign of King Zog, the relationship between the Albanian state and religion was codified by the Constitution of 1929. Article 5 stipulated that: "The Albanian State has no official religion. All religions and creeds are respected, and freedom of worship and religious observances are guaranteed. Religion cannot in any way constitute a legal defense. Religion and creeds shall never be used for political purposes."¹⁷ In addition, Article 203 reads: "Freedom of thought and conscience is guaranteed, but the expression of thoughts in one way or another must be in conformity with the Law."¹⁸ However, like Hoxha, King Zog also had a fear of foreign influence. Thus, Article 20 of the constitution stipulated: "(Religious) Communities are not allowed to receive aid from foreign countries (and citizens) in any form and in any way, except the cases the Government allows as humanitarian aid."¹⁹ In general, the Albanian state had no problem with religion and kept itself away from religious affairs before Communists came to power. Even the 1944 Constitution of Albania noted that all citizens were guaranteed freedom of opinion and belief, and all religious communities were free in matters concerned with their faith, as well as in its practice and outward expression. Nevertheless, the Communist party, as soon as coming to power, breached this article and launched an anti-religion campaign.

¹⁴ Miranda Vickers, *Islam in Albania* (Shrivenham: Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, 2008), 1.

¹⁵ Eugene Keefe, et al, *Area Handbook for Albania* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971), 95.

¹⁶ Raymond Zickel and Andrew Iwaskiw, *Albania: A Country Study* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1994), 82.

¹⁷ Constitution of Albania, 1929. <http://licodu.cois.it/?p=376&lang=en>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

The Communist Party of Albania (or Albanian Party of Labor-APL) came to power in November 1944. The Party's new Constitution, similar to those of other CEE countries, separated church and state and assured the right to freedom of belief. Yet, despite assurances, all religious communities were soon attacked. As time passed, "these attacks grew from subtle forms of discrimination to outright and blatant attacks where church property was taken without compensation, and many clergies were imprisoned and/or killed."²⁰ The reason for these attacks was that religion was seen as an ideology of the exploiting classes that were assumed to be hostile to socialism. In addition, religion was seen as a divisive force, threatening the unity of Albanian national identity. Communists argued that since there were two religions with various sects, it was not possible to unite the Albanian people as they were divided according to their faiths. Being so divided was not in favor of religions either. Kullolli argues that they could not withstand against onslaughts of Hoxha's regime, as they did not unite against the regime.²¹ The division also shows the high degree of Hoxha's intolerance to religion(s). Normally, if there was a single religion, e.g. Islam, foreign pressure on Hoxha's regime would be limited. Yet, by targeting Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity and Islamic sects, he got more enemies but did not step back.

The first attack on religious groups was to confiscate and nationalize their properties, including monasteries, mosques, dioceses, etc., via the Agrarian Reform Law of 1945. While their lands were redistributed to end these groups' land ownership, religious institutions were not allowed to possess more than 20 hectares of land²². In addition, while monks, priests, and nuns of foreign origin were expelled, local ones were tortured, imprisoned, executed, publicly vilified, humiliated, and asked to declare their loyalty to the People's Republic of Albania. In 1949, a new decree on religious communities was issued to force them to comply with laws of the state, prohibit the appointment of clergy by religious authorities, and even approve or disapprove letters sent by clergy. In addition, the activities of the Jesuit and Franciscan orders were terminated, as their headquarters were outside of Albania.²³ Moreover, like in other communist countries, religious institutions were forbidden to conduct charitable activities, educate children, and own real estate. Religious groups opposed the decree, but the regime oppressed them more in return. While the government's fight against religious groups was clandestine in the early years of the regime, it became overt and intensified in the 1960s. The

²⁰ O'Donnell, *A Coming of Age Albania Under Enver Hoxha*, 137.

²¹ Kullolli, *Proselytization in Albania by Middle Eastern Islamic Organizations*, 29.

²² Zickel and Andrew Iwaskiw, *Albania: A Country Study*, 40.

²³ Keefe, et al, *Area Handbook for Albania*, 97.

irreligious government led to the destruction of places of worship, cessation of religious activities, and more imprisonment, torture, and execution of clergy, as well as pious people. A state of fear prevailed in Albania in that decade. Yet, it was the year 1967 when the Hoxha regime peaked the atheization process, as he declared Albania to be the first atheist state in the world. This announcement was also the beginning of a harsher phase, since all religious buildings were demolished or converted to museums, gymnasiums, or used by the government. All previous religious decrees were nullified, and the practice of religion was forbidden with the new decree number 4337, outlawing religion.

Yet, Hoxha's anti-religion regime and its supporters did not stop here. Particularly, party journals were not satisfied with reforms, claiming that religion was still effective in disguised forms. For example, they were complaining about religious rituals, such as the wearing of a bride's veil, religious feasts, and circumcision.²⁴ On the other hand, Hoxha was complaining about older men and religious people.²⁵ He and his successor Ramiz Alia complained that older men (and women) were helping religion to survive as they knew the former 'bourgeoisie society,' and not imitating as much as the youth, who were more adherent to atheism.²⁶ Thus, they continued to use penal legislation as a weapon against religion and religious people.²⁷ Some provisions of the 1976 Constitution and the Criminal code of 1977 exacerbated the lives of Albanians, specifically pious people. Particularly, some decrees outlawed religion, propagated atheism, and allowed harsher sentences to the Albanian population.

For example, Article 37 of the 1976 constitution declared that the state does not recognize any religion and supports atheist propaganda for the purpose of inculcating the scientific-materialist worldview in people. In addition, Article 49 made parents obliged to give communist education to their children. Article 55 forbade the creation of any type of organization of a fascist, anti-democratic, religious, or anti-socialist character.²⁸ Finally,

²⁴ Stephen R. Bowers, "Stalinism in Albania: Domestic Affairs under Enver Hoxha", *East European Quarterly* 22, No. 4(2019): 448.

²⁵ Ksefano Akulli, "Education and the Individual: An Exploration of Enver Hoxha's Philosophy of Education", (Ph.D. Thesis, The Ohio State University, 2018), 148.

²⁶ Enver Hoxha, *Veprat 1* (Tirana: Nentori Publishing House, 1983); Esmeralda Xheraj and Denis C. Fejzaj, "The Effects of Cultural Revolution of 1963 on Human Rights and Education Perspectives," *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 2, No. 4(2013): 271; Peter Prifti, "The Current Situation of Religion in Albania," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 3, No. 3 (1983): Article 2.

²⁷ Amnesty International, *Albania Political Imprisonment and the Law* (London: Amnesty International Publications, 1984), 3.

²⁸ Constitution of Albania, 1976. <http://bjoerna.dk/dokumentation/Albanian-Constitution-1976.htm>; Barbara Frey, "Violations of Freedom of Religion in Albania", *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 9, No. 6 (1989): 8.

Article 55 of the 1977 Criminal Code clarified what was meant in Article 55 of the constitution. It stipulated that any activity weakening or undermining the State of the dictatorship of the Proletariat are punishable by imprisonment of between three and 10 years. If actions occur in the time of war, or if their consequences are serious, they will be punished with imprisonment of no less than 10 years or death.²⁹ By the aforementioned new codes, atheism replaced religion in the constitution. What is more, the Albanian state undertook the decision to disseminate atheism and indoctrinate people with a materialist worldview. In association with this goal, the regime forced parents to de-religionize their children. As will be explained in the next section, it also used children to spy on their parents. In addition, criminal codes codified those not adhering to atheist-socialist ideology as fascist, warmongering, and threatened people with three to 10 years' imprisonment or death. In other words, the communist regime of Enver Hoxha viewed his population as enemies and a imposed atheism as a matter of security.

Ruining Lives with State Atheism

Witnesses, investigations, and related surveys show that Enver Hoxha's biggest enemy was not foreign countries but the Albanian population who did not accept atheism and the communist regime. Embracing an atheist and communist ideology, Hoxha was a totalitarian hardliner who denounced the revisionism of Josip Broz-Tito of Yugoslavia in 1948, cut ties with Khrushchev of the Soviet Union due to his de-Stalinization campaign in 1968, and distanced himself from China when the latter began to pursue more liberal policies in 1978.³⁰ As Harden argues, whenever a communist state granted new rights to its citizens, Hoxha cut relations with it and pursued his harder line.³¹ Hoxha broke up with Tito as the latter distanced himself from Stalin and allegedly pursued revisionist policies. Hoxha had good relations with the Soviet Union until Stalin's death but when Khrushchev de-Stalinized the Soviet politics, he split with 'Khrushchevites' in 1960 and accused them of betraying the international communist movement.³² Regarding relations with China, he blamed Chinese policies for being vacillated, opportunistic, changing as per circumstances and lacking a Marxist-Leninist spinal cord³³.

²⁹ Ibid., 9.

³⁰ Wolfgang Saxon, "Enver Hoxha, Mastermind of Albania's Isolation," *The New York Times*, April 12, 1985. <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/04/12/world/enver-hoxha-mastermind-of-albania-s-isolation.html>.

³¹ Blaine Harden, "Albania is Shedding Its Stalinist Shackles," *The Washington Post*, March 31, 1991. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1991/03/31/albania-is-shedding-its-stalinist-shackles/59795150-8b39-4263-a809-76a8409c995e/>.

³² Enver Hoxha, *The Party of Labor of Albania in Battle with Modern Revisionism* (Tirana: Naim Frasheri Publishing House, 1972).

³³ Enver Hoxha Archive, "Imperialism and Revolution", Marxists, 1978. https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hoxha/works/imp_rev/toc.htm.

His stubborn stance towards other socialist states was also felt inside Albania where he tortured, persecuted, and executed the Albanian people. Hoxha was fearing clergy, religious Albanians, ordinary Albanians, and even his comrades. Hoxha targeted clergy most since they were assumed of being foreign agents, challengers to the regime, a divisive force, a parallel authority, and *de facto* leaders of the population. Before the communist era, there were 141 native and 62 foreign clergy, 16 native and 16 foreign monks, and 73 native and 60 foreign nuns.³⁴ While foreigners were deported, natives were imprisoned or executed. For instance, Archbishop Gasper Thaçi of Shkodër succumbed to death in a concentration camp in 1946. In 1948, four bishops were executed. A Catholic priest was executed because of baptizing a child in a concentration camp in 1973. Only 14 Catholic priests were left, 12 of whom were in concentration camps and two at large in 1971.³⁵ On the other hand, all Orthodox clergy were in prison in the 1970s. Regarding Muslim clerics, the number of *muftis* declined so dramatically that sometimes people could not find somebody that could become *imam* during prayer times, as many of them were compelled to do other jobs. Those not obeying the regime's order were severely punished. For example, Sabri Kochi, *Mufti* of Albania, was put into prison when he was 26 years old and got out when he was 64. He spent 21 years of his life by breaking stones. Albanian *Catholic Bulletin* published names of 164 Catholic priests and bishops killed by the regime by 1985. The bulletin also listed the name of 28 Muslim and seven Orthodox clerics.³⁶ In addition, 2,169 churches and mosques (740 mosques, 608 Orthodox churches, 157 Catholic churches, and 530 *turbe* (Ottoman mausoleums) and *tekke* (Sufi religious sites)) were destroyed or closed until 1971.³⁷ The number of destroyed churches and mosques are estimated to be 1,300.³⁸ Besides worship places, all properties of religious groups were confiscated by the state. On the other hand, almost 800,000 bunkers were constructed across Albania, which are now used as toilets or for making love.³⁹

The communist regime even interfered with the private life and joy of people. According to the 1967 Constitution, people were restricted in imitating Western culture. Thus, listening to foreign music, and having long hair and beards were forbidden. Besides, since private property ownership was forbidden, nobody had a private car, home, cow, shop,

³⁴ Tonnes, *Religious Persecution in Albania*, 4.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 5.

³⁶ Finngeir Hiorth, "Albania: An Atheistic State? *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 10, No. 5 (1990): 15.

³⁷ Bezati, *How Albania Became the World's First Atheist Country*.

³⁸ "Albanian Catholics Killed Under Hoxha Beatified", DW (Deutsche Welle), November 5, 2016. <https://www.dw.com/en/albanian-catholics-killed-under-hoxha-beatified/a-36277085>.

³⁹ Karin Myhrberg, "Heritage From the Communist Period in Albania: An Unwanted Heritage Today?" (Master's Thesis, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, 2011), p. 11.

passport, etc. There was a barber at the Tirana Airport cutting the hair and beards of foreigners in the 1970s.⁴⁰ Even football/soccer teams coming to Albania for matches were ordered to cut their hair longer than 4 cm. For example, the Scottish football team, Celtic, was not allowed to enter Tirana as some of its players had beards.⁴¹ Mr. Ballem Aliu, born in Albania in 1957, explained the situation of religious communities under the Hoxha era in an interview he gave to the Turkish magazine *Dünya Bizim* as such:

When I was born in 1957, few women were wearing *charshaf* (a wide woman cloth covering the whole body) and headscarves, and again quite few men were wearing skullcap and *shalwar* (wide men trousers) since they were all banned in 1950. When I was a child I saw nobody wearing them. We had four mosques in our countryside during my childhood but all were demolished in the course of time. All mosques were destroyed in 2-3 days in 1967. Only three mosques, Begar mosque in Berat, Ethem Bey mosque in Tiran, and Kursun mosque in Shkoder were left. Churches were also demolished. Only one Catholic and one Orthodox church were left but converted to museums. Qur'an copies were burned. If you had one, you would be jailed for 8 years. I had a neighbor wearing a *shalwar*. When it was banned in 1950, he had said "I prefer to die but not take it off." He did not go out of his home till dying, i.e., 12 years, in order not to take it off. There was a great *hodja* called Hafiz Ibrahim Daliyov. He was nailed to the ground from his feet. *Mufti* of Durus had been nailed to a wall. Also, the *Mufti* of a great city was hanged to a *minaret*.⁴²

Public life was also not bearable during the Hoxha era. Tombstones with religious symbols such as the crescent, cross, or writings with Arabic alphabets were destroyed. No religious symbols, like the cross, were allowed to be worn, and those wearing them could be sentenced to 10 years in prison. Muslims could not use religious words like 'inshallah' and 'mashallah'.⁴³ In addition, religious days could not be celebrated, and praying or fasting was not allowed. Muslims were deliberately given food during Ramadan. Nevertheless, some people continued to perform religious rituals in fear. Frey met some Albanians who escaped from the regime. One of them said they used intermediaries to access the priest in order to say prayers for their deceased relatives. Some people also washed the corpses of their relatives in the bath. People caught with a Bible were sentenced to 10 years in prison.⁴⁴ Those having a typewriter had to register and give a typing sample to the police.⁴⁵ Relatives of those imprisoned or executed were humiliated in public by being called 'sons of traitors,' 'enemy of

⁴⁰ Mirjan Suleimani, "Beard and Haircut Restriction During the Enver Hoxha Regime in Albania (1945-1990)". *Heritage Times*, November 3, 2016. <http://heritagetimes.eu/beard-haircut-restriction-enver-hoxha-regime-albania-1945-1990/>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Esad Eseoğlu, "Arnavutluk Ahvalini Balım Amca ile Konuştuk," *Dünya Bizim*, May 11, 2012. <https://www.dunyabizim.com/soylesi/arnavutluk-ahvalini-balim-amca-ile-konustuk-h9811.html>.

⁴³ Kullolli, *Proselytization in Albania by Middle Eastern Islamic Organizations*, 28.

⁴⁴ Frey, *Violations of Freedom of Religion in Albania*, 13.

⁴⁵ O'Donnell, *A Coming Of Age Albania Under Enver Hoxha*, 131.

the people,' etc. Moreover, besides media propaganda demonizing religion, a film studio named *Shqipëria and King* produced films for the anti-religious campaign.⁴⁶ All people were monitored by the secret service called *Sigurimi*, which had 13,000 personnel.⁴⁷ Since the regime was also irritated by people's names, it enacted Decree No. 5339 by which 'inappropriate names and offensive surnames from a political, ideological, and moral standpoint' were ordered to change to national ones. In line with this law, a dictionary with 3,000 names was published. Besides people's names, city and village names were nationalized, too. Regarding deaths, according to a United Nations report published in 1955, there were 80,000 men, women, and children (some of them were below the age of 12) in labor and internment camps, 16,000 of whom died there.⁴⁸ As many as 2,100 of these people were killed due to their religious beliefs during the Hoxha regime.⁴⁹ As per studies and reports reviewed, there were between 10,000 and 15,000 political prisoners at any given time during the Enver Hoxha era.

While the regime was torturing adults, it was also investing in children to spread socialist culture and atheism. Besides rooting for the regime, children were also used for the espionage of their parents. The fear of being denounced caused many parents to be hesitant to teach their children about religion. Therefore, they were praying secretly for their security. However, some of them were still caught since those children who informed about their parents were awarded with higher grades.⁵⁰ Particularly, small children were not aware of the results of this subtle game, thus some of them denounced their parents. Akulli also adds that Enver Hoxha paid a special focus to 'liberate' women from men's hegemony, religion, and traditions.⁵¹ He forced women to be educated and join the workforce. When his views about women are read, it can be seen that they comply with the thoughts of Marx and Trotsky. As in the case of other socialist leaders, whether Hoxha was sensitive about women's status in society is dubious since others just wanted more workforce or militants for their states or non-state organizations.

Meanwhile, Hoxha's terror destroyed the lives of not only religious and ordinary people but also fellow communists. All of Hoxha's Ministers of the Interior were executed in the

⁴⁶ Bezati, *How Albania Became the World's First Atheist Country*.

⁴⁷ Özkan, *Religion and State Relations in Albania During the Enver Hoxha Period*, 181.

⁴⁸ Amnesty International, 1984: 33.

⁴⁹ Andrea Gagliarducci, "Girl's Christmas Letter to Atheist Dictator Shows Plea for Peace," Catholic News Agency, September 20, 2014. <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/girls-christmas-letter-to-atheist-dictator-shows-contrasts-58474>

⁵⁰ Frey, *Violations of Freedom of Religion in Albania*.

⁵¹ Akulli, *Education and the Individual: An Exploration of Enver Hoxha's Philosophy of Education*, 148.

course of time.⁵² Five of the six co-founders of the Albanian Party of Labor were either killed or imprisoned. Half of the members of the Central Committee appointed in 1948 were executed in the following years.⁵³ According to Hiorth, Liri Gega, a member of the Party's Central Committee, was executed in 1956. So were the commander of Albania's naval forces, rear-admiral Teme Sejko in 1961, Bequir Balluku, Minister of Defense, and a number of other persons in mid-1975. Fecor Shehu, former Minister of the Interior, and Kadri Hazbiu, a former defense minister were also executed in 1983.⁵⁴ Among them, there was also the top comrade Prime Minister, Mehmet Shehu, who allegedly committed suicide in 1981. There were rumors that he was killed since he could not stop his son's engagement with the daughter of a US-based dissident.⁵⁵

When the communist regime collapsed in 1990, 70,000 people tried to leave Albania by boats, while some people took refuge in foreign embassies.⁵⁶ Albania was poorer than ever due to the communist era. For example, there were only 2,000 cars in the whole of Albania, most of which were too old.⁵⁷ A CIA report noted that Albania was in primitive standards in 1912, and there was no change when Hoxha died.⁵⁸ Narayanswamy also notes that Albania was the most backward country in Europe before the Second World War, and it remained the poorest country in the continent during the communist regime.⁵⁹ Thus, whereas Hoxha was accusing religions, religious people, and anti-communists as backward and obstructionist, he did not leave behind a developed country with a wealthy population. In fact, if he could have liberalized the Albanian economy as much as Yugoslavia and China did, Albania would probably not have fallen to the starving level. In addition, religious freedom is not harmful to state development as Hoxha and radical socialists claimed. For example, socialist Yugoslavia respected religions, and the regime did not collapse or get damaged due to this policy. However, it seems that state atheism and the communist system ruined not only lives but also the state itself.

⁵² Özkan, *Religion And State Relations in Albania During the Enver Hoxha Period*, 182.

⁵³ Saxon, *Enver Hoxha, Mastermind of Albania's Isolation*.

⁵⁴ Hiorth, *Albania: An Atheistic State?*, 18.

⁵⁵ Jonathan Steele, "Enver Hoxha: The Iron Fist of Albania," *The Guardian*, April 30, 2016.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/30/enver-hoxha-iron-fist-of-albania-blendi-fevziu-review>.

⁵⁶ Harden, *Albania is Shedding Its Stalinist Shackles*.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ CIA, "Enver Hoxha, 1985. <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP88-01070R000301660005-9.pdf>.

⁵⁹ Ramnath Narayanswamy, "Albania: Economic Disequilibrium and Political Instability," *Economic and Political Weekly* 25, No. 35/36 (1990): 1943.

Conclusion

This research has explored state atheism applied during the Enver Hoxha era in Albania from 1945 to 1985. Such a study is necessary because literature mainly focuses on religious fundamentalism. The study tried to find out what happens when there is no religion but state-sponsored atheism in politics. It concludes that when a totalitarian atheist regime executes clergy, oppresses religious people, and destroys mosques and churches for the sake of atheism, as in the case of Hoxha's Albania, irreligion becomes a matter of security. Enver Hoxha did not tolerate religious freedom for various reasons stated above and tried to abolish religion from Albania. In 1967, probably believing that religion was eradicated in his country, he declared Albania to be the first atheist state in the world. Some or even many people indeed became atheist, but those resisting openly found themselves in concentration camps, prisons, or graves. Since Hoxha saw religion as backward, divisive, and a tool for foreign influence, he abolished religions altogether with their institutions; but his regime did not bring prosperity, wealth, freedom, and development. In addition, securitizing religion did not help him to maintain economic and social development. What he left behind was a poor country and ruined lives. Therefore, attributing backwardness to religion and exalting irreligion as in the case of Hoxha's Albania do not mean a wealthy and free country. Conversely, it shows that the freer a society is, the more it is likely to live in prosperity. In conclusion, it can be argued that the politicized and forced irreligion is as dangerous as politicized religion, if not more, when it culminates in fundamentalism.

References

Akulli, Ksefano, "Education and the Individual: An Exploration of Enver Hoxha's Philosophy of Education." Ph.D. Thesis, Ohio State University, 2018.

Albanian Catholics Killed Under Hoxha Beatified," DW (Deutsche Welle), November 5, 2016. <https://www.dw.com/en/albanian-catholics-killed-under-hoxha-beatified/a-36277085>.

Amnesty International, *Albania Political Imprisonment and the Law*. London: Amnesty International Publications, 1984.

Bezati, Valbona, "How Albania Became the World's First Atheist Country," *Balkan Insight*, August 28, 2019. <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/08/28/how-albania-became-the-worlds-first-atheist-country/#gsc.tab=0>.

Biberaj, Elez, *Albania-A Socialist Maverick*. San Francisco: Westview Press, 1990.

Bowers, Stephen R., "Stalinism in Albania: Domestic Affairs under Enver Hoxha," *East European Quarterly* 22, No. 4(2019): 441-457.

CIA, "Enver Hoxha, 1985. <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP88-01070R000301660005-9.pdf>.

Constitution of Albania, 1976. <http://bjoerna.dk/dokumentation/Albanian-Constitution-1976.htm>

Constitution of Albania, 1929. <http://licodu.cois.it/?p=376&lang=en>.

Enver Hoxha Archive, "Imperialism and Revolution", *Marxists*, 1978. https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hoxha/works/imp_rev/toc.htm.

Eseoğlu, Esad, "Arnavutluk Ahvalini Balım Amca ile Konuştuk," in *Dünya Bizim*, May 11, 2012. <https://www.dunyabizim.com/soylesi/arnavutluk-ahvalini-balim-amca-ile-konustuk-h9811.html>.

Fevziu, Blendi, *Enver Hoxha: The Iron Fist of Albania*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2016.

Frey, Barbara, "Violations of Freedom of Religion in Albania," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 9, No. 6 (1989): 1-19.

Gagliarducci, Andrea, "Girl's Christmas Letter to Atheist Dictator Shows Plea for Peace." Catholic News Agency, September 20, 2014. <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/girls-christmas-letter-to-atheist-dictator-shows-contrasts-58474>

Harden, Blaine, "Albania is Shedding Its Stalinist Shackles," *The Washington Post*, March 31, 1991. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1991/03/31/albania-is-shedding-its-stalinist-shackles/59795150-8b39-4263-a809-76a8409c995e/>.

Hiorth, Finngeir, "Albania: An Atheistic State?" *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 10, No. 5 (1990): 14-21.

Hoxha, Enver, *Reflections on the Middle East*. Tirana: Nentori Publishing House, 1984.

Hoxha, Enver, *Veprat 1*. Tirana: Nentori Publishing House, 1983.

Hoxha, Enver, *Selected Works IV*. Tirana: Nentori Publishing House, 1982.

Hoxha, Enver, *The Party of Labor of Albania in Battle with Modern Revisionism*. Tirana: Naim Frasheri Publishing House, 1972.

Hoxha, Enver, "Memoirs of My Meeting with Stalin: Third Meeting", *Marxists*, November 1949. <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hoxha/works/stalin/meet3.htm>.

Keefe, Eugene, et al, *Area Handbook for Albania*. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1971.

Kullolli, Arben, "Proselytization in Albania by Middle Eastern Islamic Organizations." Master's Thesis, Monterey: Naval Postgraduate School, 2009.

Melady, Thomas P., "Albania: A Nation Of Unique Inter-Religious Tolerance And Steadfast Aspirations For EU Integration," *Ambassador's Review*, Fall (2010): 12-17.

Myhrberg, Karin, "Heritage From the Communist Period in Albania: An Unwanted Heritage Today?" Master's Thesis, Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg, 2011.

Narayanswamy, Ramnath, "Albania: Economic Disequilibrium and Political Instability," *Economic and Political Weekly* 25, No. 35/36 (1990): 1943-1945.

Nicoll, Will, "The Bane of Albania", *The Spectator*, May 14, 2016. <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-bane-of-albania>.

O'Donnel, James S. I, *A Coming Of Age Albania Under Enver Hoxha*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.

Özkan, Ali, "Religion And State Relations in Albania During the Enver Hoxha Period," *History Studies: International Journal of History* 4, No. 4(2012): 293-316.

Prifti, Peter, "The Current Situation of Religion in Albania," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 3, No. 3 (1983): Article 2.

Saxon, Wolfgang, "Enver Hoxha, Mastermind of Albania's Isolation," *The New York Times*, April 12, 1985. <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/04/12/world/enver-hoxha-mastermind-of-albania-s-isolation.html>.

Steele, Jonathan, "Enver Hoxha: The Iron Fist of Albania," *The Guardian*, April 30, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/30/enver-hoxha-iron-fist-of-albania-blendi-fevziu-review>.

Suleimani, Mirjan “Beard and Haircut Restriction during The Enver Hoxha Regime in Albania (1945-1990).” *Heritage Times*, November 3, 2016. <http://heritagetimes.eu/beard-haircut-restriction-enver-hoxha-regime-albania-1945-1990/>.

Tonnes, Bernhard, “Religious persecution in Albania,” *Religion in Communist Lands* 10, No. 3(1982):242-255, DOI: [10.1080/09637498208431032](https://doi.org/10.1080/09637498208431032).

Xheraj, Esmeralda and Fejzaj, Denis C., “The Effects of Cultural Revolution of 1963 on Human Rights and Education Perspectives,” *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 2, No. 4(2013): 269-272.

Vickers, Miranda, *Islam in Albania*. Shrivenham: Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, 2008.

Zickel, Raymond and Iwaskiw, Andrew, *Albania: A Country Study*. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1994.