

Stalinism lives in Albania

Revolution may be sweeping away East Europe's communist regimes, but in little Albania, old-time Stalinism is alive and well. What's more, as party boss Ramiz Alia stressed in a speech this past weekend, Albania is not about to change. So far, there have been no hard signs of unrest in this mysterious nation known as "the Tibet of Europe."

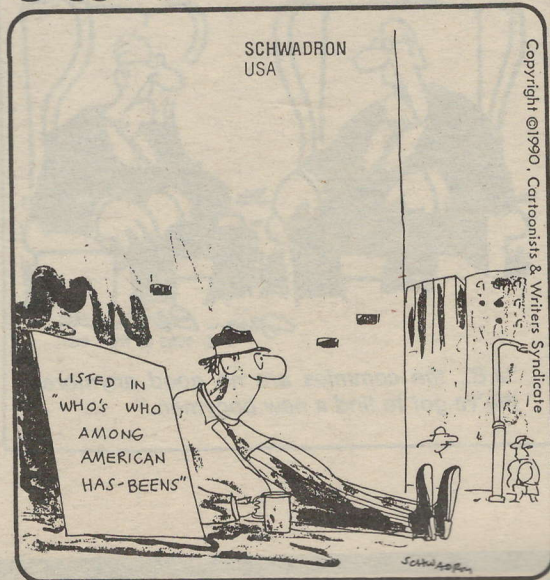
Actually, mountainous Albania, which is located on the Adriatic opposite the boot of Italy, is even more remote than Tibet — as I saw a decade ago when I was one of the first western journalists allowed in. Albania's three million people live in total isolation from the outside world, cut off by mine fields, electrified barbed wire and a dreaded secret police, the Sigurimi, for whom one in six adult Albanians reportedly works or informs.

When Enver Hoxah, Albania's first communist leader, died in 1985 after 39 years of iron-fisted rule, most observers believed Albania would end its self-imposed isolation and rejoin the modern world. The new leadership dashed such hopes by sticking to Hoxah's Stalinist fundamentalism.

In fact, the ghost of Hoxah still guides Albania. The senior leadership reportedly read out the proceedings of their recent party congress to Hoxah's gravestone.

According to the party line, Albania has made enormous social and economic progress because it alone follows "genuine socialism." Revisionist states such as the USSR, China, and East Europe's crumbling Marxist regimes are now paying the price of their folly, gloat the Albanians.

Forty-four years of Marxist rule have changed Albania from a colorful, but dirt-poor feudal backwater under the late King Zog into a gloomy, collectivized workshop. Hunger and illiteracy have been eliminated; so has religion. Albania now has a higher per capita income than Portugal — Europe's poorest nation. Albanians are also rightfully proud that they have absolutely no foreign debt to keep them in thrall to foreign bankers.



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"Better to eat grass than borrow abroad," tough old Hoxah used to say.

Yet in spite of rich deposits of chromium and oil, life in Albania is very, very hard.

Stalinism, of the type that made Romania's Ceausescu look like a liberal, keeps its grip on Albania for two reasons: First, the ubiquitous secret police; second, and equally important, to the deep fear that any weakening of the internal order could invite a foreign invasion.

Albanian is Europe's oldest spoken language and the Albanians, or Shkiptars, are non-Slavs descended from the early Aryan invaders of the Balkans. Since gaining independence in 1912, Albanians have been at daggers drawn with their Greek and Slav neighbors.

Serbia, then Yugoslavias, claimed northern Albania and the port of Shkoder (Scutari). Greece pretended to southern Albania, with its highly strategic port of Vlore (Valona). The communist regime incessantly warns Albanians that invasion is imminent, either from its neighbors or the Soviet Union. Every village, town and beach is fortified and garrisoned.

Greece has recently dropped its claims to Albania's south. Relations with Yugoslavia, by contrast, have gone from bad to awful. The seething revolt by ethnic Albanians in Yugoslavia's southern province of Kosovo has brought the two bad neighbors into a dangerous confrontation.

The Yugoslav blame Albania for the uprising, without any real evidence. A major explosion in Kosovo could easily draw Yugoslavia and Albania into a war.

This nasty feud and the anti-communist tidal wave in East Europe came just when Albania was gingerly improving relations with West Germany, Italy and France. Interestingly, constant attempts by Moscow to restore relations that Albania broke in 1961 have been most rudely rebuffed. China, a one-time "big brother" of Albania, is shunned.

Albania's Stalinists long warned East Europe's regimes that reform would bring disaster. They were, of course, correct. Now, Albania's leaders can be expected to hunker down behind their mine fields and try even harder to keep out the world. Short of a coup from the army, chances that the last of Europe's Stalinist regimes will fall remain slim. Enver Hoxah taught his heirs well how to hold on to power.

Having said all this, I must add that Albanians are fiercely independent and have a long, glorious tradition as mountain warriors. A people whose ancestors fought the mighty Ottoman Empire to a standstill might still rise up against the communist regime. If revolt does come, it will be ugly.

Albania is the home of the blood feud — and there are many old scores to settle. But the Shkiptars are also very stubborn, and they may just decide to remain Europe's last die-hard Stalinists.