Kosovo in the Yugoslav 1980s

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The Ideology and Agency of Kosovar Albanian Marxist Groups in the Demonstrations of 1981

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Abstract: The author explores the ideological underpinning and political goals of Kosovar Marxist-Leninist groups and examines their role in the 1981 demonstrations in Kosovo. She contextualizes these events against the backdrop of theories of revolutionary violence that were prevalent in Kosovar Albanian Marxist groups. Describing the position of Albanians within socialist Yugoslavia, she traces the formation of these groups of dissidents and their support of Hoxhaism—following the political views of the Albanian leader Enver Hoxha. Hoxhaist propaganda shaped anti-Yugoslav dissidence to a certain extent, and the author throws light on the nationalist incentive to support Hoxhaism. She contextualizes Yugoslavia's response to the demonstrations as an act of coercive violence aimed at stemming events that the Yugoslav officials perceived to be both counter-revolutionary and to presage the rise of nationalism.

Keywords: revolutionary violence, Kosovo, Yugoslavia, Marxism, Hoxhaism

Prologue and Theoretical Aspects

The demonstrations that took place in Kosovo in 1981 mark a turning point in the breakup of Yugoslavia. They started out in March as the protests of students demanding better living conditions, but by the end of the month and in early April they had turned into violent demonstrations in which the protestors made clear political demands and displayed antisystemic sentiments. These last pointed to deeper issues permeating Kosovar society at the time. This study focuses on the ideological beliefs and actions of the Kosovar Albanian Marxists—dissident groups holding Hoxhaist views, active from the early 1970s until the early 1980s—and

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examines their role in the demonstrations of 1981. Because revolutionary violence was a central theme within the ideology of these groups, I introduce theoretical considerations about violence used as a political instrument, with a focus on revolutionary violence. But I also explore the justifications the state put forward regarding its own use of violence during the demonstrations, as well as the influence of the Albanian leader Enver Hoxha's policies in crafting the anti-Yugoslav dissident discourse.

All Kosovar dissident groups essentially wanted an improvement in the political status of Albanians living in Yugoslavia. Their political ambitions varied as to whether they supported the creation of a Kosovar republic within Yugoslavia, or whether they preferred a unification of Kosovo with Albania. The degrees to which these ambitions were expressed varied according to the developing political context in Yugoslavia. The formation of a Kosovar Republic was seen as a more moderate view, which even some members of the League of Communists in Yugoslavia endorsed in the late 1960s, whereas unification with Albania presented itself as a good deal more radical.

Most members of the dissident groups adopted some specific ideological platform. The ones that were most active throughout the 1970s were predominantly left-leaning and employed a dialectical-materialist perspective to understand their position within the Yugoslav context. The idea of revolution among Kosovar dissident groups dated back to the 1960s, and more specifically to the Revolutionary Movement for the Unification of Albanians (*Lëvizja Revolucionare për Bashkimin e Shqiptarëve*), which promoted the idea of unification with the People's Republic of Albania. For this movement, the right to unite with Albania was in line with the Leninist principles of the right of self-determination. In the dissidents' perception, Yugoslav socialists were deviating from Leninist principles. The Revolutionary Movement for the Unification of Albanians considered the Yugoslav state to be chauvinist and Slav-centric. The idea of revolution became a recurring theme in the vernacular of Kosovar dissident groups.

In most revolutions, violence has proved to be an indispensable tool. Violence has generated the chaos needed to put an end to a given system and create the necessary space for a new system to arise. It can be defended under the premise that it is a physical means to propel sociopolitical transformation. It also functions as a tool in the hands of the modern state and military (Keane 1996, 26; Mann 2005, 318–9). State power, bound to territoriality in this sense, uses violence as a means to terrorise and demoralise populations in order to prevent resistance (Keane 1996, 31). Revolutionary violence then rises as an antithesis to territorially bound state power, and to the system that keeps the government in power (Keane 1996, 83).

Within Marxist discourse, revolutionary violence is often described as an instrument through the use of which the dictatorship of the proletariat will take over.

In a similar line of thought, revolutionary violence is legitimised if it originates from growing class consciousness. Such social shifts are seen as part of a necessary historical progression (Finlay 2006, 374–7). The Kosovar Albanian Marxists routinely identified themselves as members of the proletariat seeking social change; and the raising of class consciousness was a recurring theme in their writings.

According to Keane, revolutionary violence may be used to raise awareness among uninvolved individuals and to create a shared camaraderie. Violence can persuade actors to participate on the basis that they are “in the same boat” (Keane 1996, 80). This perspective is relevant for this study, as it explicates the rationale on which the Kosovar Albanian Marxists attempted to incite others to join their ranks during the series of demonstrations that took place in 1981. They believed these demonstrations to be revolutionary and part of the overall historical progression they awaited.

Albanians in Yugoslavia and the Kosovar Albanian Marxists

Albanians perceived themselves as people relegated to the lower ranks of the class hierarchy in socialist Yugoslavia. This sentiment was quite prevalent after the Second World War, when the Yugoslav communists began to wreak retributive violence against those who had collaborated with fascists or national socialists during the war, Albanian nationalists among them. The expulsion of Serb colonists from Kosovo during the Second World War had increased the friction between the two ethnic groups and contributed to a fuelling of the retributive violence. The situation was further exacerbated by the agrarian reforms of 1945 and the collectivisation initiatives of the years 1949–1953 (Tochitch 1959, 25–8), which left the majority of the rural population landless, and thus economically deprived (Berisha 2016, 115–7).

The reforms were seen as a strategic disruption of the Albanian peasant way of life deliberately made by the postwar Yugoslav government in an attempt to divert Albanian traditions and cultural values to the new socialist ways. With a high level of illiteracy and beset by the continuous persecution of Albanian nationalists whom the state deemed to be irredentists, the Albanian community was left stagnant and existed on the margins of the new socialist society. This situation contributed greatly to unequal development and widening social disparities between the rural Albanian underclass and the urban classes in Yugoslavia, who, at the time, came predominantly from Slavic ethnicities. Selective political persecution of Albanians continued

well into the 1950s and early 1960s, thus cementing a transgenerational animosity against the Yugoslav state (Vickers 1991, 191).

Indeed, these developments fostered sufficient antagonism to generate a resistance based on the assumption that violence against Albanians was intentional and exercised as a display of quasi-colonial state power. When pressure was exerted on Albanians to emigrate to Turkey, this only confirmed their perception that they were considered so foreign and unemancipatory that they had to be forced out (Mann 2005, 359; Berisha 2016, 191). The implementation of a process of “Turkification” among the local Albanians—registering them as Turks (Kirişci 1995, 71)—was interpreted as a means to assert Serbian domination and to minimise the Albanian presence in Kosovo (Irwin 2016, 140; Lilly 2000, 30; Schmitt 2012, 177). As Ethem Çeku (2016, 10) notes, some Albanians fled to Turkey because the secret service was keeping detailed files on them. The migration process followed the enactment of the Law on Settlement in Turkey, which allowed settlers to migrate to Turkey if they were of Turkish descent or adhered to Turkish culture. According to Turkish data, a total of 182,505 people moved from Yugoslavia to Turkey between 1946 and 1970, a number that also includes those of ethnicities other than Albanian (Kirişci 1995, 71). The process was based on a treaty signed between Yugoslavia and Turkey in 1953, which anticipated the voluntary migration of Muslims as a legal category (Rajkovic 2012, 2–3). This treaty echoed similar attempts initiated by the Lausanne Treaty in 1923 and the 1938 Yugoslav-Turkish convention to settle intrastate issues with regard to ethnic minorities (Rajkovic 2012, 29, 32).

All in all, from the perspective of Albanian dissidents, the socialist Yugoslav oppression of the pre-1974 era amounted to a revival of the protocolonial policies adopted by the Yugoslav Kingdom of the interwar period (Schmitt 2012, 177). It also coincided with the time when the Yugoslav State Security Administration (*Uprava državne bezbednosti*, UDB) operated as the Communist Party’s weapon to eliminate political enemies; and many Albanians were counted as such and persecuted (Radelić 2016, 24; Vickers 1991, 191). Albanian historiography refers to this period as the “Ranković time”, the time when the minister of the interior Aleksandar Ranković headed the UDB and pursued an ethnonationalist policy in Kosovo (Jović 2009, 172; Çeku 2016, 74, 77–8). Thus a narrative of long-term oppression was created, which the Kosovar Albanian Marxist resistance endorsed and enshrined within its Marxist discourse.

After Stalin had expelled Yugoslavia from the Cominform in 1948, Yugoslavia strove to establish its own type of socialism. The programme included a self-managed economy, nonalignment with the bipolar world order, making itself increasingly open to Western culture, and, later on, opening up the borders (Radelić 2016, 10–4). The Communist Party of Albania, however, remained loyal to

the Stalinist branch of Marxism, and after joining the Cominform in 1950, its official position towards Yugoslavia was that the latter represented a “renegade state” led by “Trotskyists” (Çeku 2016, 43; Lalaj 2000, 53–4).

The détente between Tito and Khrushchev established in 1955 did slightly ease the situation for Albanians in Kosovo, who in light of political developments were now viewed as the connecting bridge between Yugoslavia and Albania (Vickers 1998, 156). Despite the relaxation of tensions, however, the older, politically charged labels such as “Informist” and “Cominformist” remained prevalent among Yugoslav socialists, though, together with “counter-revolutionaries”, these were among the main terms used to denounce the 1981 rioters, some 33 years after the decisive rift between Yugoslavia and the USSR had occurred (Syla and Kaba 2017, 64). However, the situation changed for Kosovar Albanians once the Albanian head of state, Enver Hoxha, weakened his relations with Khrushchev, whom he accused of revisionism (Ash 1974, 188–9).

Relations between Albania and the Soviet Union deteriorated severely over time. The final rift came in 1961, when the Albanian Party of Labour accused the Soviet Union of dividing the international communist movement (Vickers 1999, 188). The shift in foreign policy turned Albania into a more isolated country, and this was noticeable in the political relations between Albania and Yugoslavia. Propaganda against one another intensified in both states. Albania drafted a plan to broadcast propaganda through radio shows and articles directed at the Albanian population in Yugoslavia in order to “cultivate fondness for Albania” (Syla 2012, 149).

In his speeches, the Albanian state leader Enver Hoxha put a strong emphasis on the struggle for national liberation within the Marxist-Leninist discourse. This is best illustrated in a speech he gave in 1966, when he declared that

the victory of the people of Kosovo to self-determination must come to being and be organised through a long road, filled with suffering, hardships and sacrifices by the people themselves. The people can be led to this path and win their full rights only through true Albanian Kosovar Marxist-Leninist revolutionaries, in cooperation and co-fighting with internationalists, with the true Yugoslav Marxist-Leninists. (Hoxha 1982, 213; cf. Syla 2012, 171)

According to Hoxha, these conditions were “absolutely necessary for success” (Hoxha 1982, 213; cf. Syla 2012, 171). The support provided to Kosovar Albanians by the Albanian Party of Labour was curtailed slightly when tensions rose again between Yugoslavia and Albania after the student unrest of 1968. Hoxha then declared that the party “is not in favour of establishing the republic [of Kosovo within Yugoslavia], because this would not solve the issue at hand”, yet he claimed at the same time that the “Albanians of Kosovo rejoice to see the righteous, natural and Marxist-Leninist defence that we carry out for their national rights, where we

support their legitimate rights at any time” (Udhëzime nga Drejtoria e IV-të të MPJ, 1968; cf. Syla 2012, 175, 180). When he said this, Hoxha believed that dissident groups in Yugoslavia might be acting under the direction of the secret service (Çeku 2016, 108).

Nevertheless, as Isabel Ströhle notes, by the 1960s and 1970s an established Yugoslav Albanian urban middle class had developed, which was mostly content to take its place in Yugoslavia’s sociopolitical structures; nor, of course, was the rural class composed exclusively of Albanians (Ströhle 2016, 114–5). The socio-economic progress of these decades can largely be attributed to heavy investment in Kosovo’s economy and the development of its industry, which caused a surge in the urbanisation process and increased the employment rate among Albanians. As a result, Albanians had greater chances to participate as both consumers and producers in the Yugoslav socialist market as well as in markets abroad (Schmitt 2012, 206–9; Jović 2009, 179). Kosovar society therefore was not sharply divided into Manichean categories of urban/rural and Serbian/Albanian. The Kosovar Albanian Marxists acknowledged this to some extent, but they still perpetuated a narrative about the majority of Albanians in Kosovo being an oppressed class, and they connected it to an already established argument claiming that this underclass had been created along ethnic lines (Çeku 2016, 79).

Though the 1970s represented a decade of relative stability and economic prosperity for Albanians in Kosovo (Arifi-Bakalli 2015, 116), these were also the years when the second wave of dissident activity against the Yugoslav authorities began (Keçmezi-Basha 2017, 124–9). Enver Hoxha and Mehmet Shehu, the then serving prime minister of Albania, were well informed about dissident groups in Kosovo, and made insistent attempts to sway Kosovar Albanian youth with Hoxhaist propaganda (Syla 2012, 234). Albania’s dogmatic strand of anti-revisionist Marxism-Leninism during the Sino-Albanian split of 1978 came to be known as Hoxhaism. Referring to the Chinese as opportunist capitalists (Hoxha 1979, 146) and refusing to open up to any “imperialist” and “Western capitalist” states, the Hoxha regime turned Albania into one of the most ardent and most isolated, anti-revisionist Marxist-Leninist countries in the world. In a speech to the Albanian People’s Assembly in 1987, Ramiz Alia, who took over as first secretary of the Party of Labour in 1985 after Enver Hoxha’s death, referred to this branch of Marxism-Leninism as the primary doctrine guiding the Albanian political system (Vickers and Pettifer 1997; 15, cf. Pridham 2000, 70).

So, in Kosovo, economic, social, and cultural transformation was accompanied by a general increase in the promotion of Albanian national interests within Yugoslavia. By the late 1970s, the flourishing cultural and educational influences from Albania had paved the way for increased support for the style of socialism in that country. They had also created a channel for the promotion of Hoxhaism,

which raised nationalist sentiments among younger Albanians in Kosovo (Vickers 1998, 193; Arifi-Bakalli 2015, 117).

The Kosovar Albanian Marxists were initially organised as the Marxist-Leninist Group (*Grupi Marksist-Leninist*), which had only a small number of members. The group functioned for several years during the 1970s, and was then transformed into the Marxist-Leninist Organisation of Kosovo (*Organizata Marksiste-Leniniste e Kosovës*). It expanded its membership, both locally and abroad, and began to establish contact with the authorities in Albania (Hajrizi 2014, 12; cf. Hajrizi and Sylaj 2014). At the same time, several other dissident organisations sprang up that operated illegally. The Yugoslav minister of the interior, Franjo Hreljević, claimed that during the years 1979/80 five irredentist groups were active in Prishtina and Ferizaj (Syla and Kaba 2017, 151). By the end of 1980 the authorities had obtained information about yet another active group named the Red Front (*Fronti i Kuq*), which was supposedly composed of citizens of Albanian origin who worked abroad (Gega and Velu 2018, 18). Allegedly, some of its members had connections with the Albanian Secret Service (*Sigurimi i Shtetit*) and acted on its orders. According to Yugoslav officials, they received these orders through various channels, such as consular and diplomatic offices, as well as through the offices of the Marxist-Leninist groups (Syla and Kaba 2017, 151). There was also a Communist Marxist Leninist Party of Albanians in Yugoslavia (*Partia Komuniste Marksiste Leniniste e Shqiptarëve në Jugosllavi*, PKMLSHJ), which later merged with the National Liberation Movement of Kosovo and other Albanian Territories (*Lëvizja Nacionalçlirimtare e Kosovës dhe viseve të tjera shqiptare*, LNÇKvSHJ) to form the Movement for an Albanian Republic in Yugoslavia (*Lëvizja për Republikën Shqiptare në Jugosllavi*) (Xhemaili 2017, 167). A significant number of dissidents were part of the Albanian diaspora. Many of them had been forced to evade the Yugoslav authorities; the daily newspaper *Rilindja* reported that some had emigrated as early as 1968 to escape “chauvinist” and “nationalist” pressure. Others had emigrated for economic reasons (Migrations of Experts a Serious Burden for Kosovo, *Radio Free Europe*, 26 March 1969). Additionally, living abroad made it easier for the dissidents to meet and organise themselves, free from Yugoslav state surveillance (Schmitt 2012, 221–2). As Paul Hockenos observes, the diaspora played an immense role in mobilising the dissident movement against Yugoslavia. Most members of the dissident groups who lived abroad in the 1970s and 1980s would later participate in the organisation of the Kosovo Liberation Army (*Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës*, UÇK), which was financed by Kosovar Albanian bastions in Europe (Hockenos 2003, 250–2).

By mid-1981 the Marxist-Leninist Organisation of Kosovo had evolved once more, and it was transformed into the Popular Front for the Republic of Kosovo (*Fronti Popullor për Republikën e Kosovës*), which attempted to unite all dissident

organisations operating in Kosovo and abroad in a single unit with shared political goals (Komiteti Drejtues i OMLK 1981; cf. Hajrizi and Sylaj 2014, 42). In the following paragraphs I use the term “Kosovar Albanian Marxists” to refer to members of all the organisations mentioned, who now operated under this new aegis, holding to a specific ideological guideline.

The Kosovar Albanian Marxists were, broadly speaking, supporters and promoters of Hoxhaism. In 1980, Jakup Krasniqi, a member of the Marxist-Leninist Organisation, published an article in its official gazette, *Freedom (Liria)*, in which he drew a positive portrait of socialist Albania’s economic and social standing:

Its [Albania’s] century-long dreams for freedom, independence and social advancement became a reality only through the victory of the people’s revolution. Before Albania was liberated, it was the most backward country in Europe in terms of economic, educational, cultural, social and healthcare advancement. People lived in poverty and were suffering, whereas its wealth was being exploited by foreigners and the regime of Zog—and it has been only 36 years since those difficult times have passed. However the transformations that have occurred in socialist Albania can only be measured in centuries. The Albania of oil lamps, disease, and fertility cults has been transformed into a socialist country with a developed and dynamic economy, with an increased educational and cultural level, and with strong and safe defence. (Krasniqi 1980; cf. Hajrizi and Sylaj 2014, 186)

The promulgation of revolutionary propaganda was a task to which the Kosovar Albanian Marxists paid great attention. It was highly important for them to find supporters among the popular masses, and to ensure that these recruits had a proper theoretical preparation: “The members of our Group should be true communists and proper revolutionaries who fight with all their might for the Marxist-Leninist cause, for the revolution of the people, and that they place it above anything else and stay loyal [to the cause, M.L.] until the end” (Hyseni 2014b, 74). A document with a similar message, entitled “Theory and Practice of Revolution”, was issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Marxist Leninist Party of Albanians in Yugoslavia, and was intended to be reading material for the Centre for Marxist Education, established around this time as a body of the Central Committee of the Party (Keçmezi-Basha 2003, 184).

In his discussion of proletarian revolutions—the emergence of revolutions from bottom-up developments—John Keane invokes Georges Sorel’s *Réflexions sur la violence* (Keane 1996, 80–1). He defines a revolution as an act against the state, but this was a point of view that the Kosovar Albanian Marxists clearly did not share. In their foundational dogmatic document, “Theses on the Popular Front for the Republic of Kosovo”, they stated: “For the realisation of its aims, the Front will use all forms of war and organisation [...]. The Front is against reformation and bourgeois legalisation, and on the other hand, it fights against anarchist and terrorist views and methods” (Komiteti Drejtues i OMLK, 1981; cf. Hajrizi and

Sylaj 2014, 41). If for Sorel, the state is the machinery that maintains the “degeneracy” of bourgeois power (Keane 1996, 80–1), for the Kosovar Albanian Marxists, it had its uses. A revolution could be spearheaded by a vanguard party rather than a syndicalist organization per se:

The broad masses have to understand the necessity of our movement, and they must move at the right time, which is why it is so important for us, as a revolutionary cell, to create a strong bond with the masses. In order not to confine ourselves to only working within the cell, we have to engage within the masses, to recognize the spiritual situation of the masses, to act with the masses, and to extend the influence of the revolutionary Marxist-Leninist ideals through propaganda and agitation [...] so that we can draw leading cadres who can lead the masses to war. (Hajrizi 1974, 1; cf. Hajrizi and Sylaj 2014)

Although the Kosovar Albanian Marxists believed in the sparking of a proletarian revolution, they certainly placed great importance on the party as a central part of the state. They believed that the state’s machinery should be under the strict control of the party, a perception modelled on the basis of the Party of Labour of Albania and its role in the People’s Socialist Republic of that country (Hajrizi 2014, 65). In this regard, the Kosovar Albanian Marxists made no attempt to hide their Hoxhaist views, which directly followed various educational materials issued from Albania (Hajrizi 2014, 31).

For the Kosovar Albanian Marxists, the revolution was both a figurative and a literal war for the Republic of Kosovo. According to them, the Popular Front for the Republic of Kosovo could achieve its goal only if it managed to align all the popular masses towards the one cause. Urging the “proletariat” to participate in the struggle, however, entailed the inclusion of progressive elements stemming from the ranks of the “bourgeoisie” (Komiteti Drejtues i OMLK, 1981; cf. Hajrizi and Sylaj 2014, 40). Their idea of revolution and the one posited by Sorel converge precisely on the importance of proletarian violence as a revolutionary tool in overthrowing the system in power (Keane 1996, 81–3). For the Kosovar Albanian Marxists, this system was embodied in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which thrived on “bourgeois” dysfunctionalities: “brotherhood and unity” had never been achieved, and neither had socialism. The “self-proclaimed socialists, who participate in the Yugoslav system and who betrayed the National Liberation War of our people” (meaning the Albanians) were mere revisionists (Hyseni 2014a, 170; cf. Hajrizi 2014, 145–9).

In the “Theses on the Popular Front for the Republic of Kosovo”, it was made evident that the Kosovar Albanian Marxists interpreted their struggle in line with a pure Marxist point of view. Thus what they were fighting for was not merely a matter of ethnic disparities, but one of class distinctions too:

The deep crisis that has gripped revisionist Yugoslavia has brought the working masses into a very difficult situation everywhere in Yugoslavia. Yet, this situation is especially difficult and unbearable in Kosovo and other Albanian territories, where oppression and a savage and multifaceted exploitation of a colonial and capitalist [nature] is exercised upon the working masses [...]. Aside from the capitalist modes of production, the situation of the working masses among the Albanians in Yugoslavia is made more difficult by the savage colonial exploitation that is exercised against them [...]. (Komiteti Drejtues i OMLK 1981; cf. Hajrizi and Sylaj 2014, 37)

However, at this point, dissident Marxist groups did not have any majority. Anti-state resistance began to gather mass attraction only after the demonstrations of 1981, and then, increasingly, after the autonomy of the province of Kosovo was revoked in 1989 (Çeku 2016, 155–7).

The Demonstrations of 1981 – Hoxhaist Influences, Revolutionary Violence, and Yugoslavia's Response

On 11 March 1981, a group of dissatisfied students staged a protest at the University of Prishtina canteen, complaining about the quality of the food, and the poor living standards in the student dormitories. Soon afterwards, a larger group of almost a hundred students got together and went to the city square chanting slogans demanding better living conditions. Some university professors attempted to calm the protesters down. Initially they seemed to manage this, but soon another 200 students joined the crowd. At this point, the protestors shifted their demands from better conditions in the dormitories to the release of political prisoners. Police units began fending off the mob with tear gas, and 18 protesters and two policemen were injured (von Kohl and Libal 1992, 78).

According to some sources, the demonstrations had been planned in advance by the students, some of whom were members of dissident groups, though not necessarily ones related to the Marxist-Leninists (Keçmezi-Basha 2003, 68–9). The following day, the official press organ of the Party of Labour of Albania, *Zëri i Popullit* (The People's Voice), published an article supporting the protests (Syla and Kaba 2017, 198). Meanwhile, the Albanian daily newspaper in Kosovo, *Rilindja*, did not report the event at all. As Çeku notes, this gazette was closely monitored and censored (Çeku 2016, 80).

The protest was not over. Two weeks later, on 26 March, a group of around 40 students blocked the doors of the university dormitories, locking other students in. They persuaded more students to join them, and the group grew. In the afternoon,

the protestors began negotiating with the university rector, but he decided to halt negotiations when the students started making political demands. Eventually, the students decided to march towards the city centre, and they began throwing rocks at the police. The latter retaliated with brutal force. By the end of the day, 23 demonstrators had been wounded, 22 students were under arrest, and 14 policemen had been hurt (Syla and Kaba 2017, 79).

The student protests continued. The most violent riots occurred in Prishtina on 1 April when a lot of people gathered to protest against the political situation in Kosovo more generally. By the afternoon, a crowd of between 6000 and 8000 had gathered in the city centre, where they shouted slogans such as *Kosova Republikë!* (Kosovo Republic!), *Jemi shqiptarë, jo jugosllavë!* (We are Albanians, not Yugoslavs!), *Nuk e duam kapitalizmin, duam socializmin!* (We don't want capitalism, we want socialism!), *Poshtë revizionizmi!* (Down with revisionism!), *Trepça punon, Serbia ndërton!* (Trepça toils, Serbia gets built!), *Duam Shqipërinë e bashkuar!* (We want a unified Albania!), *Republikë kushtetutë, ja me hatër ja me luftë!* (Republican constitution, either with reason or with war!) (Keçmezi-Basha 2003, 63, 66–7). Some of the demonstrators even chanted Enver Hoxha's name (Schmitt 2012, 231). These slogans were quite different from those shouted during the initial riots, which were related to issues of social and economic welfare—for example, *Duam punë, jo fjalë!* (We want deeds, not words!), *Dikush në kolltuk, dikush pa bukë!* (Some [sit] in armchairs, others are without bread!) (Jović 2009, 184). By the evening, the protests had escalated into violent riots, and the police started using tear gas to disperse the crowd. Two people ended up dead, despite police claims that no firearms had been deployed (Syla and Kaba 2017, 80).

After this event, the demonstrations spread to several towns throughout Kosovo, including Vushtrri, Mitrovicë, Lipjan, Gjakovë, Ferizaj, and Gjiilan. The protests in Ferizaj on 2 April became quite violent as, according to the demonstrators and the police, shots were fired by both sides. By the time the wave of demonstrations ended, eight Albanians and one policeman had been killed, while 130 Albanians and 135 policemen were wounded. The events were followed by a string of arrests, during which 956 people were imprisoned (Keçmezi-Basha 2017, 241–3). A memorandum from the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (*Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti*, SANU) that was leaked in September 1986 judged the situation in Kosovo to have been due to “neofascist aggression”, and ironically concluded that the long prison sentences were attempts to incite and deepen interethnic hatred (Milosavljević 2000, 278).

The editorials published in *Zëri i Popullit* throughout April and May took a position against the Yugoslav authorities (Jović 2009, 190–1). This stance was openly supported by other newspapers published by diaspora Albanian dissident groups, such as the *Fronti Popullor Shqiptar* (Albanian Popular Front), which at the

time was calling for an uprising against the “Soviet way of regulating social and national relations”. Members of the Marxist-Leninist Organisation had actively worked towards instigating the riots anyway (Hajrizi 2017, 130).

Jakup Krasniqi (2011, 67), whose positive depiction of Albania has been quoted, later confirmed that some of the organisers of the demonstrations had been members of Marxist groups, but noted that the demonstrations had attracted protestors with other beliefs, who were all essentially fighting for freedom, national rights, and liberation from “colonial occupation” (Krasniqi 2011, 68). Mehmet Hajrizi, like Krasniqi a former member of the Marxist-Leninist Organisation, added that the dissident groups had incited the protestors to rebel by disseminating underground materials, which is why many of the slogans chanted were taken from articles published in the illegal press (Hajrizi 2014, 12–3). However, even though the names of those responsible for organising the demonstrations in the various towns were known, only some of them admitted to be members of any dissident group. It was difficult to confirm their membership as the organisations worked under strict anonymity. For example, while the Marxist-Leninist Group had initially issued membership cards, they changed this to organise in cells of three members per unit, where only one member had contact with any member from another unit—thus making it impossible for all members to know each other (Keçmezi-Basha 2003, 69–73, 107).

The communist leader in Albania, Enver Hoxha, frequently accused the Yugoslavs of being traitors to Marxism-Leninism, and he was aware of how such accusations were perceived by Albanians in Kosovo. Hoxha’s attitude and public voice had an immense effect on Kosovar Albanians, who believed that their anti-state sentiments were legitimised by the Hoxhaist discourse. The Yugoslav state, on the other hand, was at first reluctant to accuse Albania of influencing the demonstrations. However, after observing the Albanian reaction to the protests and the accusations it made against the Yugoslav state, the authorities discussed the matter at the session of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia held on 6 May 1981, where Dobrivoje Vidić, president of the Serbian presidency, accused Hoxha of inspiring the riots (Jović 2009, 191).

While Hoxha’s stance towards the Albanians in Yugoslavia had not always been consistent up to this point, after the demonstrations of 1981 he took on a more decisive position. There were times when Hoxha called “on the Albanian people of Kosovo to join forces with their Montenegrin and Serbian brethren, to damage the traitorous clique of Tito, a renegade of Marxism-Leninism and [fight for, M.L.] the holy cause of the proletariat” (Syla, 2012, 112; Akcali and Sulstarova 2008, 114). Although Hoxha himself never publicly incited the Albanian people to armed insurgency against the Yugoslav government and did not seek to promote the unification of Kosovo with Albania (von Kohl and Libal 1992, 78), he was quite

vocal in dismissing Yugoslav socialism, which he deemed to be heresy to the Marxist-Leninist cause. After the demonstrations of 1981, the official position of the Party of Labour of Albania with regard to Kosovo's political path echoed Leninist principles, claiming that every nation has the right to self-determination (Syla 2012, 257).

The Kosovar Albanian Marxists themselves thought that the effects of the demonstrations were socially and politically transformative. In their discourse, the demonstrations of 1981 were a key event, generating the core of the forthcoming resistance that would achieve the liberation of the Albanian working masses. For the members of the leading committee of the Popular Front:

the spring revolutionary movement of this year is a direct continuation of the never interrupted war of our people for freedom [...]. [...] our freedom-loving people made their requests through peaceful ways [...] the demonstrations became bloody because of chauvinist Serbs and Albanian traitors [...] they are responsible for the blood that was shed [...]. (Komiteti Drejtues i OMLK, 1981; cf. Hajrizi and Sylaj 2014, 38)

Sometimes the Marxists played down the fact that they were as ideologically opposed to Serbia's hegemonic stance towards Kosovo as they were to Yugoslavia's self-management socialism, considering it to be an ideological fallacy within Marxist-Leninist thought (The New School Year in Kosovo Highlights Old Problems, 23 September 1981). However, at other times their stance made it into public records. Gani Sylaj, a member of the Marxist-Leninist Group, said the following during his trial in Macedonia in July 1980 for dissident activity:

We are not enemies of socialism, if [a socialist is, M.L.] he who walks according to the teachings of Marx, Engels, Lenin, but we are against all other socialisms, such as modern revisionism, be this a self-managed one, or any other name [you give it, M.L.]. Yugoslav self-management is nothing new, it is but capitalist theory and practice. We value the people of Yugoslavia as brothers, and we honour them as such, and as we once gave our hand to help each other out against our enemies and traitors who attacked us during the Second World War, so we will help each other today and tomorrow [...]. We are not against brotherhood and unity as taught to us by Marx, but we are against the Yugoslav practice of "brotherhood-unity" which is a fake and a fallacy. (Sylaj 1980; cf. Hajrizi and Sylaj 2014, 166)

In the same speech, Sylaj went as far as to accuse Yugoslavia of genocidal practice against the Albanians.

Exploitation is another recurring theme in the dogmatic writings of the Kosovar Albanian Marxists. They argued that the economic position of the Albanians in Yugoslavia was unfavourable. Most of the pamphlets were illegally printed and distributed as *samizdat* (self-published tracts). They presented a narrative in which exploitation took on a continuous and systemic form (Hajrizi 2014, 359–61), and in some cases the anonymous authors referred to oppression as

being two-fold—exercised both by “chauvinist Serbs” and “Yugoslav revisionists” (Hajrizi and Sylaj 2014, 279). The fact that Kosovo was an underdeveloped Yugoslav province was acknowledged by the Yugoslav officials (The Kosovo Unrest – the Causes and Consequences, 7 April 1981; Jović 2009, 177); but the official narrative excluded the possibility that the marginalisation of Kosovar Albanians was due to their nationality. The Kosovar Albanian Marxists nevertheless perceived Yugoslavia as a state that executed a “policy of violence”, employing police and other agents to terrorise the oppressed (Hyseni 2014a, 171). The Kosovar Albanian Marxists were not opposed to violence per se. They believed that, in order to transform a society and a political system, a violent revolution was indispensable: “We will not wait for anyone to give us our rights. No, no. We will win them with blood, as other oppressed people in the world do. We tell our enemy publicly that victory is certain and [that] it is not distant” (Hajrizi and Sylaj 1974; cf. their later book Hajrizi and Sylaj 2014, 279). There are several more references in their writings that depict violence as a transformative tool. In May 1981 Kadri Zeka, a member of the Marxist-Leninist Group, published an article in *Liria* entitled “The Kosovar workers in the Western countries are uncovering their flag of war”, in which he situated the developments in Kosovo as acts within a broader movement for the liberation of Albanian Kosovar workers: “all these demonstrations and other manifestations portrayed a spirit of battle and a determination to fight against the Titoist occupier and the traitors in the country” (Zeka 2014, 225).

Another pamphlet that was distributed among the Marxist-Leninist movement’s members claimed that “only Marxism-Leninism shows us the true path to liberation”, and the recent demonstrations were seen as an expression of a “century-long fight for liberation” (Hyseni 1981; cf. Hajrizi and Sylaj 2014, 218). The text continued by drawing a parallel between the violence carried out during the time when Alexander Ranković was minister of the interior and the violence exercised during the demonstrations of 1981 (Hyseni 1981; cf. Hajrizi and Sylaj 2014, 219). These quotations could be joined by others from many more pamphlets and articles. They show that the Kosovar Albanian Marxists perceived the system as one that perpetuated the Yugoslav Kingdom’s policies during the interwar period. They depicted the violence that the state exercised against the protestors as oppressive violence against a movement for liberation. For them, the oppressors were not just the Yugoslavs—or, more specifically, the Serbs—but also the Albanian ruling class, whom they depicted as “renegades [...] who call the help and genuine support we receive from socialist Albania an ‘attack’, ‘interference’, ‘chauvinism’, and ‘paternalism’” (Hyseni 1981; cf. Hajrizi and Sylaj 2014, 215).

The Provincial Committee of the League of Communists of Kosovo considered the demonstrations of 11 March to be revolts of a social character that only later developed into an exhibition of nationalism and irredentism. Most members of the political

elite in Kosovo did not support the demonstrations, but it seems that some lower-ranking members of the League of Communists were sympathetic, although they did not go out and protest themselves (Lalaj 2000, 392). Because of the events, Mahmut Bakalli, president of the Provincial Committee of the League of Communists in Kosovo, was forced to resign and was replaced by Veli Deva, who had been a member of the Communist Party since 1942 (Kosovo Party Leader Replaced, 11 May 1981).

Hence, from the Kosovar Albanian Marxists' perspective, the demonstrations were *jus ad bellum* for an ideological and, eventually, literal war to be fought for the liberation of the Kosovar working class. In this perspective, violence was the instigator of the revolution as well as the means to overthrow the existing system. This was very much in line with the materialist doctrine of historical progression, whereby violence is thought necessary to achieve social change and to assist a natural development onward (Finlay 2006, 378). The members of the Marxist-Leninist groups maintained this narrative well into the 1980s and 1990s. After the suppression of dissidents following the demonstrations of 1981, another successor group emerged, the Popular Movement for (the Republic) of Kosovo (*Lëvizja Popullore e (Republikës së) Kosovës*) (Gega and Veliu 2018, 80), which spearheaded armed resistance against the Yugoslav state. This movement is considered to be the political forerunner of the Kosovo Liberation Army, which emerged in 1994 and went public in 1997. By the 1990s a schism was dividing Albanians: while most dissident groups pushed for armed resistance, the supporters of Ibrahim Rugova and his party, the Democratic League of Kosovo (*Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës*), sought to promote resistance by peaceful means. Both strove to create a Kosovar republic, but the latter wanted to achieve their goal through the establishment of a parallel system, a strategy shaped by the sociologist and politician Fehmi Agani (Maliqi 2012, 56).

Meanwhile, the Yugoslav state's response to the demonstrations of 1981 had further antagonised the Albanians. A larger rift occurred within the political circles of Serbia and set the course for the implementation of what were to become visibly oppressive policies towards the Albanians in Kosovo. Jović offers an objective perspective on this by contextualizing the state's response to the demonstrations against the backdrop of the constitutional changes made in 1974, which had further strengthened the republics within federal Yugoslavia. He argues that the Serbian leaders felt that they had been forced into a federation within a federation, since the two autonomous provinces of Vojvodina and Kosovo were considerably elevated under the new constitution. Serbia's inability to exert authority over the provinces created the impression that the Serbian republic was positioned at a disadvantage vis-à-vis the other Yugoslav republics, a concern voiced in a document called the *Blue Book*, addressed to Tito and his second, Edvard Kardelj. In this document, Serbian officials complained that Serbia was the only Yugoslav

republic that did not gain its statehood in the constitutional changes of 1974, and that the autonomous provinces were operating in an alarmingly self-sufficient fashion in the fields of foreign relations, the economy, defence, and education. Simultaneously, demographic changes in Kosovo alarmed Serbian officials, who feared that Kosovo was increasingly taking on an ethnic Albanian character (Jović 2009, 173, 175, 180). Elsewhere, Jović contextualises the drive towards conflict in former Yugoslavia as partly due to the Serbs' fear of becoming a minority (Jović 2001; cf. Milosavljević 2000, 301). Berisha (2016, 285) notes that this discourse had obvious racist overtones.

Jović acknowledges that the demonstrations of 1981 were not primarily motivated by nationalism, pointing out that such an interpretation ignores the social, economic, and ideological dimensions behind the discontent. He argues that, because the demonstrators protested against Yugoslav socialism, they were regarded as counter-revolutionaries. The use of coercive violence to suppress the demonstrations, he thinks (Jović 2009, 184–5), came partly out of fear that the demonstrations might destabilise the whole system, and this fear grew when they took on additional ethnic dimensions coupled with ideological defiance. As he further notes, the Kosovo crisis of 1981 was exploited by five different groups, hoping to gain political leverage. The Serbian leadership argued that the crisis was an unavoidable consequence of the disintegration of the country and the Yugoslav leadership's rejection of the 1977 *Blue Book* initiative. The Yugoslav leaders argued conversely that the real threat to Yugoslavia came from dogmatist forces. The critical intelligentsia in Belgrade used the 1981 events as a justification to revive Dobrica Ćosić's and Aleksandar Ranković's attitudes towards Kosovo. Ćosić, Jović (2009, 46) notes, was one of the first prominent members of the critical intelligentsia in Belgrade who later came to be recognised as the harbingers of the so-called "spiritual rebirth" of Serbian society. Ćosić was elected president of Serbia in June 1992 (Milosavljević 2000, 295). On the Albanian side there were the newly rising leaders in Kosovo, as well as the Albanian nationalists who were receiving stronger support after the demonstrations of 1981 (Jović 2009, 188).

For some Serbian officials, the Kosovo demonstrations marked the point where it became clear that there would be no solution to the economic and political crisis in Kosovo, from either the Serbian republic or the Yugoslav federal state, unless there was a reform of the political system and revision of the constitution of 1974. It seems deeply ironic that oppressive actions against the discontent were seen as a solution to unrest caused by social and political dissatisfaction to begin with. Although nationalism was not the driving force behind the struggle for political transformations in Yugoslavia in 1981, the Kosovo crisis pushed Serbian politicians into a retreat within the nationalist discourse. This was reflected in the shaping of two political blocs within Yugoslavia, one that insisted on revising the 1974

constitution, and the other defending its provisions (Jović 2009, 213–4). By the end of the 1980s, the polarisation of the public discourse took on a nationalist trajectory, and violence recurred as an instrument of propaganda, bringing a feeling of insecurity to both Serbs and Albanians.

Conclusion

The emergence of dissident groups in Kosovo dates back to the end of the Second World War. Most of these groups opposed the Yugoslav regime at first, because they viewed its programme as a continuation of oppressive policies dating back to those of the interwar Kingdom of Yugoslavia, whose oppression they viewed as ethnically motivated. In the 1960s a new dialectical interpretation of the position of the Albanians in Yugoslavia emerged, with dissident groups now endorsing revolutionary action as a means to advance their political ends. The notion of revolution became deeply rooted in the discourse of most of the dissident groups that evolved. It was particularly important for the Kosovar Albanian Marxist groups, who believed that revolution was the only path through which the Albanians in Kosovo could achieve liberation.

The demonstrations of 1981 made the discontent prevalent among Kosovar Albanian youth in Yugoslavia clearly manifest. Following a narrative stressing that Albanians were an underclass within Yugoslav society, Kosovar Albanian Marxists interpreted the protests as the beginning of revolutionary action against the Yugoslav state. Heavily influenced by ideological material from Albania and under the spell of Hoxhaism, they believed that Yugoslav socialism had deviated from the Marxist-Leninist path and looked on the Yugoslavs as revisionists. Although the groups of dissidents were small in numbers, they had an instrumental role in instigating demonstrations throughout Kosovar cities and towns. The Albanian leader, Enver Hoxha, never publicly supported them or incited them to take concrete action, but he was aware of the ideological impact his regime had on his countrymen outside Albania's borders.

The Yugoslav state reacted with coercive violence towards the demonstrating masses, perceiving their protest to be a counter-revolutionary initiative and a serious threat to the political system. The political debate that followed the demonstrations centred around the constitutional changes of 1974. Serbian officials claimed that the Kosovar Albanians acted as though they had a republic rather than as an autonomous province. This debate created a division among Yugoslav officials, with one group defending the decentralising constitution of 1974, and the other opposing it.

Through the events preceding the 1981 demonstrations, and those unfolding in their aftermath, a certain continuity can be sensed in the evolution of the dissident groups active in Kosovo. Despite differences in their political ambitions, most ultimately sought to free the Albanians from what they perceived as Serbian hegemony. The Kosovar Albanian Marxists are often dismissed as mere nationalists, but they developed a narrative with strong Marxist ideological roots in which they framed and legitimised their demand for independence, a demand made all the more pressing from the faith they put in their dialectical materialist argument. This was how they translated the ideological concept of revolutionary violence into practice.

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