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# The Dictator Visits the Studio

## The Vlora Independence Monument and the Politics of Socialist Albanian Sculpture, 1962–1972

Raino Isto

### Introduction

On 9 August 2013 an article appeared in the Albanian newspaper *Mapo* with the title ‘Enver Hoxha, the True Originator of the Independence Monument in Vlora’. The article’s subheading proclaimed, ‘For the first time, the letter written by Enver Hoxha to sculptors Kristaq Rama, Shaban Hadëri, and Muntas Dhrami, describing how the Independence Monument should be realised, has been uncovered. The dictator intervened to overshadow the figure of Ismail Qemali and falsify history.’<sup>1</sup> A brief contextualisation followed, accompanied by a note that the exchange could be found in Albania’s Central State Archive, together with the text of *two* letters: an open letter from socialist Albania’s dictator Enver Hoxha to the sculptors and a response from the artists (dated 26 June and 10 July 1969, respectively). This was by no means ‘the first time’ these letters had been discovered: they had both been published on the front page of the weekly cultural periodical *Drita* (The Light) in July of 1969.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, the exchange between dictator and sculptors was cited in numerous articles and conference papers during Albania’s socialist period, and Hoxha’s letter was collected in a volume of his writings on literature and art.<sup>3</sup> Despite its misleading character – its claim to have discovered a secret history that was not secret at all, but in fact overt – the *Mapo* article is invaluable because it indicates the intricate network of anxieties that characterise contemporary attempts to understand the ways that art, politics and history were interwoven in socialist Albania. Specifically, the *Mapo* article raises questions about the kind of history that was being constructed during Albanian socialism, who was constructing it, and

1 Aida Tuci, ‘Enver Hoxha, Ideatori i Vërtetë i Monumentit të Pavarësisë në Vlorë’, *Mapo*, 8 August 2013. All translations from Albanian to English are by the author, unless otherwise noted.

2 See Enver Hoxha, ‘Në gurrën e pashtershme e jetëdhënëse të krijimtarisë së popullit në do të gjejmë atë frymëzim të madh për të realizuar vepra të bukura e madhështore për popullin tonë’, and Kristaq Rama, Shaban Hadëri, and Muntas Dhrami, ‘I Dashur Shoku Enver’, both in *Drita*, 13 July 1969.

3 Enver Hoxha, *Mbi Letërsinë dhe artin: nëntor 1942 – nëntor 1976*, 8 Nëntori, Tirana, 1977, pp 297–301

how artistic practices were intended to contribute to the narration of that history.

The *Mapo* article appeared less than a year after the one hundredth anniversary of Albanian independence from the Ottoman Empire (on 28 November 2012), an anniversary that included extravagant festivities in the southern port city of Vlora, where national independence had first been declared in 1912. The locus of these festivities was Flag Square, Vlora's central plaza, a public space dominated by the seventeen-metre-tall bronze Independence Monument. The sculpture depicts Ismail Qemali, the Ottoman statesman who headed the assembly that first announced Albania's independence, flanked by a collection of representatives of different cultural and geographic groups, as well as a figure representing an intellectual from the period of the Albanian National Awakening. Rising behind this group is a towering boulder, on top of which stands the massive figure of a flag-bearer, holding aloft the streaming flag of the Albanian nation, with its double-headed eagle. The monument – first officially commissioned in 1962, but not inaugurated until 1972 – has long been a touristic landmark and source of national pride, both for the decisive moment it depicts and for its aesthetic qualities.

There is a great deal to be gleaned from the way history is visualised in the sculpture, and in particular from the way it balances the role of the heroic individual (Ismail Qemali) with the role of the collective (the geographically diverse milieu surrounding Qemali). This navigation between the individual and the collective as agents of history, however, was also an important aspect of the Vlora Independence Monument's conceptualisation and creation. In other words, the Vlora Monument is significant not so much for the way it represents history (in this aspect it is quite similar to many other nationalist monuments created since the late nineteenth century across Europe), but for the way the process of its production modelled the collective effort that supposedly characterised the building of Albanian socialism. As the *Mapo* article would have it, Enver Hoxha's intervention in the monument's realisation was primarily an attempt to obscure Qemali's role in creating an independent Albanian state, presumably in order to elevate the perceived relative significance of Hoxha's socialist state as the agent responsible for consolidating and narrating a shared Albanian history. In fact, the situation was far more complex: the exchange of letters, which followed a visit Hoxha made to the sculptors' studio in the summer of 1969, modelled both the artistic process and history itself as collective endeavours. The publication of Hoxha's letter marked the first time that the Albanian dictator's aesthetic commentary and participation in the creative processes of state artists was made public, and in the ensuing years it was held up as an example of the dictator's concern with the importance of art, as well as his guiding role as cultural critic.

My purpose in this article is to examine the way this exchange of letters – and the studio visit that it made the public aware of – functioned to shape the perception of art's relationship to political power in socialist Albania. I explore the kinds of agency that were attributed to the dictator, to state sculptors and to the monumental work of art, and consider how the narrative surrounding the exchange of letters served to conceptualise the process of creating art in socialist conditions as inherently collaborative. Finally, I consider the way this collaborative model of agency was



Unidentified photographer, 'Through collective work, our sculptors often realize works of value to immortalize the major historical events of the Albanian people', 1969, photo published in: *Shqipëria Socialiste Marshon*, Tirana, 1969, p 178



metaphorically extended to history more broadly, and the ways the socialist present in Albania was framed as the paradigmatic field in which history could be not only represented but also simultaneously enacted in the creation of works of art. Monuments – as artworks that almost necessarily involved co-operation between commissioning committees, groups of sculptors and architects – were sites where the collective and collaborative character of both building socialism and framing socialist history could be emphasised by official discourses. In the current study, I take the Vlora Independence Monument as a key example of the way socialist monuments staged the collective construction of both past and present.<sup>4</sup>

## Beginnings of a Monument

Let us begin by considering a 1969 photograph showing Albanian sculptors Kristaq Rama (1932–1998), Muntas Dhrami (b 1936) and Shaban Hadëri (1928–2010) engaged in discussion regarding an early model of the Vlora Independence Monument. The image appeared in the photo-book *Shqipëria Socialiste Marshon (Socialist Albania on the March)* – also published in 1969 – where its accompanying descriptive caption read: ‘Through collective work, our sculptors often realise works of value to immortalise the major historical events of the Albanian people.’<sup>5</sup> The clarity of the photograph’s visual rhetoric is striking:<sup>6</sup> against an almost completely blank backdrop of a beige studio wall, the dark clay of the model rises to a sharp point that just breaks the top edge of the photo. Arranged in a semi-circle, the bodies of the three sculptors bracket the monument’s base: Dhrami at the centre and Hadëri to the right look on as Rama, on the left, leans forward intently and articulates his speech with an extended hand. The photo captures his gesture at the precise moment when his hand overlays the aggressively worked clay of the model’s base, suggesting the transformation of the artists’ thought and discourse into material form. The trio of sculptors is balanced by a tripartite distribution of the monument itself, which in fact appears in three articulations: two smaller models located at the level of the artists and the larger version towering above their heads. Furthermore, the way the sculptors are grouped horizontally around the base of the model finds a parallel in the grouping of figures in the monument itself, surrounding the flag and flagpole that draws the composition towards its apex. Above all else then, the photograph weaves together the strands and stages of socialist Albanian history and shows this history as a collective event: the present, the sculptors grouped in dialogue, becomes the ground from which the collectivity of past experience achieves clarity, form and metaphysical significance.

The photograph was probably taken prior to Hoxha’s visit to the sculptors’ studio, but in the wake of that visit, it becomes difficult not to read the artists’ engaged conversation as a discussion of the dictator’s aesthetic and ideological suggestions (which I will describe in greater detail below).<sup>7</sup> In either case, however, the photograph reveals the importance of co-operative effort in representing the past. Such collective work became essential to the socialist Albanian cultural industry in the second half of the 1960s, when the country experienced a frenzy of memorialisation aimed at consolidating a shared national historical consciousness.

4 In this aspect, the present study differs from a number of other studies on monuments in socialist and totalitarian regimes, too numerous to list here. The current study is primarily concerned with charting the ways that different kinds of collaboration both amongst artists, and between the state (and the dictator) and artists, were framed to metaphorically represent the kind of co-operative engagement that supposedly also characterised the ongoing construction of the socialist present.

5 *Shqipëria Socialiste Marshon*, Shtëpia Botonjese Naim Frashëri, Tirana, 1969, p 13, translation in original.

6 This clarity also suggests that the photograph was staged, as were many such photographs appearing in official photo books and periodicals under socialism.

7 Muntas Dhrami, conversation with the author, August 2016

During these years, as artist and critic Kujtim Buza would write in 1973, socialist Albania's landscape would be transformed into 'a landscape of stone, of marble, a landscape of bronze'.<sup>8</sup> The country witnessed a proliferation of monuments to counter their relative absence in the Albanian territory prior to the socialist years. This prior absence of monuments can no doubt in part be attributed to the relative political instability of the region in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the infrastructure and resources necessary for large-scale monumental projects were simply not available, or were devoted primarily to creating a modern urban architectural environment. Thus, it was not until well into the socialist period in Albania that monuments (which often served as localised architectural interventions into rural areas, symbolically creating a 'modernised' urban space without the need for larger-scale transformation) were profusely produced.<sup>9</sup>

The inception of the Vlorë Independence Monument predates the surge in monumental construction of the late 1960s. The initial commission in 1962 coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of independence from the Ottoman Empire and the first plans for the work were significantly different than the sculpture that was finally inaugurated ten years later. The most detailed plan for the first version of the project was put forward by Odhise Paskali (1903–1985), one of the few sculptors who had realised works of a monumental scale in Albania prior to the socialist period. Paskali belonged to an older generation of artists than those who, in the early 1960s, were just returning from training at the Ilya Repin Leningrad Institute for Painting, Sculpture and Architecture – the artists who would help establish the forms of Socialist Realism that subsequently characterised artistic production in Albania in the late 1980s. Paskali – trained in Turin in the 1920s – proposed an entire monumental complex that was essentially neoclassical in character: a central stone statue of Albania personified as a mother-warrior, holding aloft a flag in one hand and dangling a golden garland in the other, was to be surrounded by three separate groups of warriors.<sup>10</sup> These groups would represent: 1) the politicians, intellectuals, and militants associated with the Albanian National Awakening, including Ismail Qemali; 2) the soldiers who fought in the 1920 Vlorë War against Italian forces; and 3) the soldiers who fought in the National Liberation War, the struggle to free the Albanian territory from fascist forces during World War II.

Although many aspects of Paskali's concept for the monument would survive in the version ultimately realised, it appears that Paskali himself was never contracted to work on the project. Instead, in 1963, the Central Committee of the Politburo announced an open competition for proposals for the monument,<sup>11</sup> and finally in the middle of 1965 the Politburo approved a concept put forward by Kristaq Rama, Shaban Hadëri, and Muntas Dhrami.<sup>12</sup> The sculptors were contracted to complete the monument within three years. One condition of this contract, however, was the construction of a centralised studio space in Tirana for the purpose of national monumental construction – a fact that reveals the lack of an infrastructure necessary to the construction of monumental sculpture prior to that point. The construction of the new studio was also delayed, and in 1967 the sculptors agreed to complete the Independence Monument by the close of the year 1969 – the year that marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Partisan victory over fascist forces

8 Kujtim Buza, Kleanthi Dedi, and Dhimitraq Trebicka, eds, *Përmendore të Heroizmit Shqiptar*, Shtëpia Qëndrore e Ushtrisë Popullore, Tirana, 1973

9 On this topic, see the state-produced documentary film *Lapidari* (10:27 minutes, 1984–1986), written by Viktor Gjika and directed by Esat Ibro; see: <http://departmentofeagles.org/tag/viktor-gjika/>. For an analysis of the film see Julian Bejko, 'About the Film *Lapidari*', in Vincent W J van Gerven Oei, ed, *Lapidari, Volume I: Texts*, Jonida Gashi and van Gerven Oei, trans, Punctum Books, New York, 2015, pp 125–128.

10 A detailed description written by Paskali together with sketches for several variants on this initial plan for the monumental complex can be found in the Arkivi Qendror Shtetëror (Central State Archives, Tirana; hereafter AQSh), f 490, v 1962, d 992, fl 4–34.

11 Ibid, AQSh, f 490, v 1963, d 979, fl 9

12 Ibid, AQSh, f 490, v 1967, d 521, fl 5

and Albania's subsequent liberation.<sup>13</sup> However, 1969 would ultimately mark not the completion of the Vlora Independence Monument but instead the aesthetic and ideological re-evaluation of the monument's significance in the wake of Enver Hoxha's visit to the sculptors' studio and his comments upon their labours.

13 Ibid

14 On the Albanian Cultural Revolution, see Isa Blumi, 'Hoxha's Class War: The Cultural Revolution and State Reformation, 1961–1971', *East European Quarterly*, vol 33, no 3, autumn 1999, pp 303–326, and Peter R Piffti, *Socialist Albania Since 1944: Domestic and Foreign Developments*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1978, pp 143–149.

15 Elidor Mëhilli, 'Mao and the Albanians', in Alexander C Cook, ed, *Mao's Little Red Book: A Global History*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2014, pp 165–184

16 Ibid, pp 172–175

17 It is significant that the language used treated the policies as a continuation, a 'deepening', rather than an absolute break. Hoxha, *Mbi Letërsinë dhe artin*, op cit, p 241.

18 Miranda Vickers, *The Albanians: A Modern History*, I B Tauris, London and New York, 2014, p 197

19 On the cult of Skanderbeg as a civil religion, and the association of Skanderbeg with Hoxha, see Egin Ceka, 'Muzeu Kombëtar dhe Muzeu i Skënderbeut si Institucione të Religjionit Civil Shqiptar të Komunizmit', *Përpyjekja*, vol 11, no 21, autumn 2005, pp 121–147. The inauguration of the equestrian monument to Skanderbeg (created by another trio of sculptors – Odhise Paskali, Janaq Paço, and Andrea Mano) in Tirana's central square in 1968 was emblematic of the monumental aspect of the construction of this civil religion. The monument displaced the statue of Stalin that formerly stood in the square.

## The Albanian Cultural Revolution, Monumental Sculpture and Collective Artistic Production

To better understand the significance of the collective labour of the three sculptors and the significance of the dictator's visit to their studio, we must understand the political and cultural situation in socialist Albania leading up to 1969. As noted above, these years saw the beginning of a period of heightened industry involved in the construction of monumental sculpture. This commemorative surge – which lasted well into the 1970s – formed part of Enver Hoxha's own Cultural Revolution, partially carried out in conjunction with Mao's, primarily between 1966 and 1969.<sup>14</sup> The 1960s were a tumultuous period in the country's international relations: at the beginning of the decade, Albania broke off relations with Nikita Khrushchev's Soviet Union and gradually shifted towards an alliance with the People's Republic of China. This alliance made it logical for Hoxha to look to Mao's policies as a model for socialist development, but the character of the Cultural Revolution that took place in Albania was markedly different from that of China.<sup>15</sup> Hoxha viewed the transformation of China's politics and culture beginning in 1966 with concern: to him, Mao's Cultural Revolution was too frenzied, too potentially dangerous to merit imitation; a more controlled, top-down method seemed prudent.<sup>16</sup> While Hoxha ultimately lent vocal support to the changes occurring in China, the Albanian Cultural Revolution was characterised by a greater consolidation of state power and national consciousness, coupled with a decidedly different version of the personality cult.

At the Fifth Congress of the Albanian Party of Labour in 1966, Hoxha outlined his model for 'the deepening of the ideological and cultural revolution'.<sup>17</sup> The 'further revolutionisation of life in the country' would manifest itself in many ways. The ensuing years witnessed an intensification of Hoxha's anti-religious policies – especially vis-à-vis the Catholic tribes in the north of Albania, whose loyalty to familial ties presented an ongoing challenge to centralised governmental control.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, the construction of a civil religion centred on the national hero Skanderbeg began, and this civil religion in turn established a link between Skanderbeg's alleged role as medieval unifier of the Albanian people (against the Ottomans) and Hoxha's socialist state.<sup>19</sup> (In this and other ways, Hoxha's cult of personality was constructed obliquely, by first establishing other national heroes such as Skanderbeg and Ismail Qemali, and subsequently associating Hoxha's role with theirs.) The year 1966 saw the inauguration of the Palace of Culture in Tirana, home to the National Theatre of Opera and Ballet and the National Library, and the number and diversity of newspapers in the country started to increase, with local publications overseen by regional Party committees beginning

- 20 Artan Fuga, *Monolog: Mediat dhe Propaganda Totalitare*, Duda, Tirana, 2010, p 59
- 21 Akademia e Shkencave e RPS të Shqipërisë, *Historia e Shqipërisë, Vëllimi i Katërt (1944–1975)*, 8 Nëntori, Tirana, 1983, p 362.
- 22 See the writings in Hoxha, *Mbi Letërsinë dhe artin*, op cit
- 23 One such case involved Hoxha's role in deciding the form of the monument that would grace the Cemetery of the Martyrs of the Nation in Tirana, under construction in the same years. Regarding this monument, see Raino Isto, 'Dynamisms of Time and Space: The Synthesis of Architecture and Monumental Sculpture in Socialist Albania's Martyrs' Cemeteries', *Eesti Kunstimuuseumi Toimetised: Proceedings of the Art Museum of Estonia*, vol 11, no 6, 2016, pp 42–67.
- 24 In the realm of public space, one of the most concrete influences of Mao's Cultural Revolution on Albania was the adoption of the 'big character poster', or *shkronja të mëdha*, as it was called in Albanian. On this phenomenon, see Ardian Vehbiu, 'Me Shkronja të Mëdha', *Përpykja*, vol 20, no 32–33, spring 2014, pp 216–227.
- 25 See Raino Isto, 'Between Two Easts: Albania, the USSR, China, and the Ontology of a Transnational Socialist Reality in Postwar Albanian Visual Art', paper delivered at the College Art Association 104<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference (3–6 February), Washington, DC, 6 February 2016.
- 26 As such, part of socialist Albania's attempt to consolidate national consciousness involved documenting rural practices and gathering ethnographic information on rural populations.

publication.<sup>20</sup> The final years of the 1960s also saw the publication of the first volumes of Enver Hoxha's collected works – a set of writings that would eventually stretch to seventy volumes and would become the single most important reference point for all published criticism and analysis in the later years of Albanian socialism.<sup>21</sup>

Hoxha's own writings on the arts in particular seem to indicate, however, that he was not primarily interested in directly participating in culture. Many of his writings on art and literature (including those from the period of the Cultural Revolution) are quite general,<sup>22</sup> and only in a few specific cases (such as that of the Vlora Monument) did he make concrete suggestions. However, it is clear that Hoxha nevertheless consider it necessary for his involvement in artistic and cultural matters to become public, even if he himself did not emphasise his own artistic sensibilities, and there is documentation of other cases in which his artistic preferences shaped public commissions.<sup>23</sup>

It is difficult to assess the full impact of the – at least partially-shared – Cultural Revolution on the development of the arts in Albania.<sup>24</sup> Many Albanian artists travelled as part of cultural delegations to China and other Asian countries (although such visits began far in advance of the Cultural Revolution). Exhibitions of art from China and Korea toured to Albania (including a replica of the massive sculptural ensemble *The Rent Collection Courtyard*, 1965), and Albanian artists such as Andon Kuqali, Andrea Mano, and Foto Stamo drew on their experiences of China to represent the landscapes and working classes of that socialist nation for Albanian audiences. What is clear, however, is that cultural exchanges during this period allowed Albania to solidify a position as the last truly socialist nation in Europe (holding out against various 'revisionist' neighbouring states), while at the same time attempting to create a socialist art that would be both nationally specific and globally accessible.<sup>25</sup>

Above all else, the model for the arts developed during the Cultural Revolution in Albania was intended to be popular in character and appeal.<sup>26</sup> As Hoxha asserted,

Our socialist art and culture must base themselves firmly upon our ancestral homeland, upon our miraculous people; they must spring forth from the people and be fully in their service, be clear and understandable to them but not in the least 'banal and without ideas'. The Party supports artistic and cultural production in which deeply ideological content and expansive, popular inspiration are brought into harmony with an elevated artistic form: [artistic and cultural production] that touches the feelings and hearts of the people, and inspires and motivates them to do great things.<sup>27</sup>

It seems clear, however, that artistic production was not meant to relate to the masses solely through its content. The process of artistic production was also supposed to mirror the collective efforts that the socialist populace was purportedly undertaking, and such collectivity was ideally manifest in the creation of monumental sculpture. By 1970, Kujtim Buza would survey the plethora of public art projects (chiefly sculptural and architectural) at the time, and write that '*nearly all of our sculptors, no matter their age, have joined together to form collectives*'.<sup>28</sup> While



- 27 The quotation is drawn from Hoxha's speech at the Fifth Congress of the Albanian Party of Labour in 1966, published in Hoxha, *Mbi Letërsinë dhe artin*, op cit, p 255.
- 28 Kujtim Buza, 'Puna Krijuese Kolektive në Fushën e Arteve Figurative', *Drita*, 27 September 1970, (emphasis added). Buza also made clear the centrality of monuments to socialist Albanian life: 'The ideological-aesthetic education of the working masses is an important duty of our artists, painters, and sculptors. Their works play a key role in shaping the masses' notion of beauty, in creating a rich spiritual life [for the people]. Architects and monumental sculptors have a particularly significant role in this process.'
- 29 Relatively little scholarship exists in any language on Albanian monumental sculpture, nor even on Albanian sculpture more broadly. In English, Vincent W J van Gerven Oei, ed, *Lapidari*, op cit, surveys commemorative sculpture from socialist Albania with several scholarly contributions. In Albanian, Suzana Varvarica Kuka is the author of several monographs on Albanian sculptors. On Odhise Paskali's artistic activity, see his memoirs: Odhise Paskali, *Gjurmë Jete*, 8 Nëntori, Tirana, 1986, and Ferid Hudhri, *Arti i Rilindjes Shqiptare: 1883–1945*, Onufri, Tirana, 2000, pp 87–114.
- 30 Suzana Varvarica Kuka, *Andrea Mano. Skulptor i Merituar: 1919–2000*, Ilar, Tirana, 2009, p 123, pp 127–128
- 31 Kristaq Rama, 'Arritje dhe Perspektiva të Skulpturës Sonë Monumentale', *Nëntori*, vol 25, no 1, January 1978, pp 19–20
- 32 Buza, 'Puna Krijuese Kolektive', op cit
- Buza's assessment may be exaggerated, his observation indicates the shift taking place in creative work during the period of increased monumental construction – a shift that the 1969 photograph of the 'Monumental Trio' (as Rama, Hadëri, and Dhrami came to be called) at work on the Independence Monument demonstrates quite succinctly.
- Many of the major monuments produced in the country during the late 1960s and 1970s were the work of multiple sculptors (to say nothing of the collaboration with architects in designing the environments for the installation of the sculptures), including the equestrian statue of Skanderbeg in the main square of Tirana (the work of Odhise Paskali, Janaq Paço, and Andrea Mano, inaugurated in 1968) and the *Four Heroines of Mirdita* in Rrëshen (the work of Andrea Mano, Perikli Çuli, Fuat Dushku, and Dhimo Gogollari, inaugurated in 1971).<sup>29</sup> The collaborative aspect of monument-building in socialist Albania served both a practical and an ideological function. Multiple sculptors were often necessary to complete the works in time for the established inauguration dates and artistic collectives allowed younger sculptors to work with older, more experienced ones.<sup>30</sup> The collective character of the creative process was also seen as vital for the development of artists as creative individuals in the course of building socialism. Collaboration allowed for group discussions of artworks – considered to unlock their full aesthetic-didactic potential – and co-operative work in the studio facilitated the exchange of both experience and ideas out of which individual artistic styles were able 'to crystallize'.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, collaborative artistic effort assured that individual style did not transform into individualism or intellectualism.<sup>32</sup>
- This conflict, between the artist's individuality as evidence of socialism's cultural fecundity and the drive to model a collectivised mode of artistic creation, was never fully resolved in socialist Albania. Albania never really saw, for example, the kind of mass cultural production characteristic of Mao's China, although the move towards collective artistic processes in the late 1960s might certainly be seen as a response to Mao's Cultural Revolution. Thus, there was always a degree of tension between the concept of collaboration – implying individual subjects joining together in the work of creation – and that of an achieved artistic collectivity, in which such individuals would cease to matter as individuals. Thus, although 'collective' creative work was repeatedly celebrated in official discourse, the individual and indeed elite status of artists was retained both practically and to a degree ideologically.<sup>33</sup> However, the imperative to collaborate and to study 'popular' sources of culture attempted (in a way analogous to some of the changes in artistic practices in Maoist China) to place artists in direct contact with social groups with whom they would not otherwise interact.
- By 1969, Rama, Hadëri, and Dhrami were the paradigmatic artistic collective in Albania. Together, they had achieved notoriety as prolific and popular sculptors; indeed, their collective success was such that the three were caricatured as a monument by cartoonist Bujar Kapexhiu in a 1969 issue of *Drita*. All three first studied in the Jordan Misja artistic lyceum in Tirana and later (as was common for artists in Albania during the 1950s and early 1960s, prior to the break with the Soviet Union) in the Ilya Repin Institute in Leningrad. Upon returning to Albania, Rama worked first as an superintendent for the Ministry of

- 33 Likewise, as we shall see, although Hoxha's interaction with the sculptors of the Vlora monument could certainly be termed collaboration, it cannot be said that the dictator's own subjectivity disappeared into the artistic collective – rather, the leader appeared to emerge all the more clearly *out of* his participation in the genesis of the monument.

Art and Culture, then as Director of the National Gallery of Arts (in 1960), and later as a director in the Ministry of Art and Culture (in 1966).<sup>34</sup> Hadëri and Dhrami both returned from Russia to work as professors of sculpture in the Institute of the Arts in Tirana. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Monumental Trio was at work not only on the Vlora Independence Monument, but also on the *Mother Albania* monument destined for the Cemetery of the Martyrs of the Nation in Tirana (also inaugurated in 1972), the *Monument to 1920* near Vlora (inaugurated in 1970), and a monumental relief on the façade of the Prime Minister's residency (completed in 1974).<sup>35</sup> The event that fully solidified the significance of the Monumental Trio's position in socialist Albanian art history, however, came with Enver Hoxha's visit to their studio.

## The Letters

The genesis of the Vlora Independence Monument established that the collaborative aspect of monumental industry did not occur *only* between artists. Enver Hoxha visited the sculptors' studio in the summer of 1969, and the subsequent exchange of open letters between Hoxha and the artists established the paradigmatic involvement of the dictator in cultural affairs, assigning him a role that hovered between enlightened benefactor and educated critic. Hoxha's intervention in the Vlora monument's creation was highly strategic: it not only clearly established the meanings the monument would have upon completion, but it also contributed to Hoxha's own transformation from military leader into a figure of intellectual and socio-cultural authority. As Albania entered the 1970s, Hoxha would wield this authority more aggressively, eventually declaring war on all 'foreign influences' in Albanian culture in 1973.<sup>36</sup> However, he also used this authority to establish himself as the leader of a *culturally and historically* unified people, not merely of a politically delineated state. Coming as it did at a key moment in the political, cultural, and social transformation of socialist Albania, Hoxha's letter to the Monumental Trio paradoxically indicated both the 'correct' interpretation of national history and the degree to which the interpretation of that history was still an open question. Put differently, Hoxha's observations to the sculptors prescribed a set of meanings that the monument was intended to convey, but in so doing it also indicated that those meanings were not self-evident, that collaboration and discussion were necessary between artists, the state and the people in order to fully comprehend (and to *make*) history.

Hoxha made several things clear in his letter. First, he insisted that the Vlora monument should present not merely the events surrounding the Albanian Declaration of Independence in 1912, but the entire history of the Albanian people's struggle against 'centuries-long enslavement and [against] every impediment' to national unity. Second, he emphasised that this historical synthesis should be embodied in an image of ceaseless and violent forward motion: he wrote, 'The whole ensemble of the monument should be on the attack, so that the figures that make it up are not in static positions... independence must be protected, the war must be continued, the revolution must rise.' As a result of these two suggestions,

- 34 Ylli Drishti, Suzana Varvarica Kuka, and Rudina Memaga, *Monografi: me Artistë Shqiptarë të Shekullit XX*, Galeria Kombëtare e Arteve, Tirana, 1999, pp 76–77, pp 92–93, pp 106–107
- 35 These latter two works were created in collaboration with sculptor Hektor Dule (b 1939), who was slightly younger than the other three.
- 36 This declaration was made at what would become the infamous Fourth Plenum of the Central Committee of the Albanian Party of Labour, a meeting where 'liberal' trends evident in the Ninth Albanian Radio and Television Song Festival (December 1972) were condemned. On the effects of the Fourth Plenum in Albanian art, see Fjoralba Satka, 'Albanian Alternative Artists vs Official Art Under Communism', in Corina Pălasă and Cristian Vasile, eds, *History of Communism in Europe, Vol. 2–2011: Avatars of Intellectuals Under Communism*, Zeta Books, Bucharest, 2011, pp 79–89.

Hoxha argued that the monument should present a clear connection between the moment of independence and the ongoing project of Albanian socialism: 'In it we would see our own revolution moving forward, rising up. The people's imagination should see, in the work you will create, that which [they] realised in the glorious National Liberation War, that which [they are] realising today in the building of socialism.' Additionally, and perhaps most significantly, he commented on the role of Ismail Qemali as it appeared in the sculpture: 'I agree with you that the figure of Ismail Qemali should be the central figure, as you have made him, but from the entire ensemble it should be clear that his act is a consequence of the legendary struggle of the people.'<sup>37</sup> That is, Hoxha desired the Independence Monument to reflect not only the past as history but also the *present* as history, and that history was meant to be a collectively popular one; if heroes emerged in this history, they emerged out of the kind of communal effort that characterised the creation of the monument itself, as an exemplary instance of socialist labour.

Hoxha made other concrete suggestions regarding both form and content in his letter, most of which were integrated into the finalised version of the monument. He lamented the absence of a representative figure from the period of the Albanian National Awakening, a movement of intellectual and nationalist consolidation that Hoxha clearly wished to establish as a parallel to his own administration.<sup>38</sup> He also noted that the degree to which the artists had attempted to represent the specific clothing of fighters from different ethnographic regions within Albania, but suggested that the figures should be more generalised in their appearance, since – as he put it – war cast aside the need for costumes and finery. Finally, he remarked upon the flag's rather crestfallen character, suggesting the need for a more dynamic form.

In their letter of response – published on the front page of the same issue of *Drita* in which Hoxha's letter appeared – Rama, Hadëri, and Dhrami for the most part accepted Hoxha's suggestions regarding the monument's content. The sculptors' letter indicates, in many ways, both the possibilities open to and the limitations constraining artists in socialist Albania. On the one hand, the sculptors take issue with none of Hoxha's observations. They praise his incisive sense of both aesthetics and Marxist-Leninist history and describe at length the inspiration that his letter instilled amongst themselves and their colleagues. In short, the letter of response would appear to confirm that the artists themselves had little or no agency in the creation of the monument, that their work was suddenly effaced by the dictator's intervention. However, this interpretation ignores the degree to which the publication of the two letters places the emphasis precisely on the dialogic character of the creative process, the need for discussion and exchange, for debate about history and its proper representation. The dictator's letter published alone would have meant something quite different.

Furthermore, the changes to the monument that Hoxha proposed by no means fully encompass the changes that the sculptors subsequently carried out. First of all, the final monument in fact increases the number of warriors dressed in recognisable (though still generalised) costumes that locate them in various different ethnographic regions within or adjacent to Albania's national boundaries under socialism. As sculptor Hektor Dule – a colleague of the Monumental Trio – wrote,<sup>39</sup> the four warriors

37 All citations in this paragraph are from Hoxha, 'Në Gurrën e Pashtrshme', *op cit*.

38 On the National Awakening period, see Stavro Skendi, *The Albanian National Awakening 1878–1912*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1967.

39 Hektor Dule, 'Një Vepër nga më të Fuqishmet në Skulpturën Tonë', *Drita*, 3 December 1972

flanking Qemali appeared to represent a *malësor* (a resident of the mountainous regions of northern Albania and Kosovo, known to Albanians as *Gegënia*), a *myzeqar* (a resident of the region of southwest-central Albania once known as *Myzeqeja*, around present-day Fier and Lushnja), a *lab* (a resident of *Labëria*, a region in the south of Albania stretching between present-day Vlorë south to Saranda and east to the Vjosa river), and a *tosk* (a resident of *Toskëria*, a historical region in southeastern Albania, east of Myzeqeja and Labëria and south of the Shkumbin River). Thus, the sculptors in fact heightened the ‘popular’ character of the figures in the monument, at once fulfilling Hoxha’s call for an art based upon direct contact with the people and in a sense rejecting his preference for a generalised image of historical Albanian fighters for independence.

Indeed, perhaps the most fundamental change to the model involved the flag form at the centre of the monumental ensemble, a change that affected not only the composition but the meaning of the work as well. In their letter, the sculptors emphasised that one of the most salient pieces of advice the dictator had given had been that regarding the need for the monument’s contemporaneity. They wrote,

[Our] subject also always calls not only for deep historic truthfulness but also a solid connection to the present. Precisely in this connection between the subject of history and that of today, we artists sometimes have difficulties, since we may present the highest achievements of various periods of history as if they were disconnected from [our] present.<sup>40</sup>

To bridge the abyss between history and the present, the sculptors ultimately transformed the crestfallen flag into a sharp upward protrusion of the stony base, crowning this vertical element with a flagbearer – a youth representing the ‘New Man’ of socialist Albania.<sup>41</sup> In this way, the sculptors satisfied both the monument’s historical character and the requirement that the work function as a reflection of the transforming socialist present. That is to say, the contemporaneity of the Vlora Monument lay in the way it brought together diverse times (the age-long struggles of the Albanian people, the emergence of national consciousness in the National Awakening, the rise of the ‘New Man’ of socialism) in the historical present. In this sense, the monument is not simply a representation of the ‘new’, of socialist *modernity*. As Peter Osborne points out, ‘The subject of modernity (and there is ultimately a singular one) has a “collective” dialectical unity; the equally speculative, but differently unitary, subject of the contemporary has a “distributive” unity.’<sup>42</sup> In Albania during late socialism, there was a distinct political and existential clash between the attempt to construct a ‘modern’ subject (one characterised by the dialectical unity achieved through, for example, the nation, the social class, or the ethnic identity) and a ‘contemporary’ subject (one characterised not by dialectical transformation, but defined through its differential distribution across times or geographies). The Vlora Monument’s depiction of a unified history was not merely about the synthesis of that unity, but also about its distribution: it suggested that the warriors of the mountainous north of Albania (who had not yet been fully ‘modernised’), the late Ottoman political and literary elite that helped establish the Albanian state and the socialist youth, all represented instantiations

40 Rama, Hadëri, and Dhrami, ‘I Dashur Shoku Enver’, op cit

41 In some ways, the flag-bearer represented one of the monument’s clearest ideological tensions, discussed above: that between the significance *in its own right* of collective struggle and effort, and the coalescence of that collectivity into an individual figure.

42 Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, Verso, New York, 2013, p 25





Kristaq Rama, Shaban Hadëri, and Muntas Dhrami, *Independence Monument*, inaugurated 1972, bronze, 17 m, Vlorë, Albania, photo: Raino Isto





Kristaq Rama, Shaban Hadëri, and Muntas Dhrami, *Independence Monument*, inaugurated 1972, bronze, 17 m, Vlorë, Albania, photo: Raino Isto





Kristaq Rama, Shaban Hadëri, and Muntas Dhrami, *Independence Monument*, inaugurated 1972, bronze, 17 m, Vlorë, Albania, photo: Raino Isto





Kristaq Rama, Shaban Hadëri, and Muntas Dhrami, *Independence Monument*, inaugurated 1972, bronze, 17 m, Vlora, Albania, photo: Raino Isto





Andrea Mano, Perikli Çuli, Fuat Dushku, and Dhimo Gogollari, *Monument to the Four Heroines of Mirdita*, inaugurated 1971, bronze, Rrëshen, Albania (now destroyed), photo in: Kujtim Buza, Kleanthi Dedi, and Dhimitraq Trebicka, *Përmendoretë Heroizmit Shqiptar*, Shtëpia Qëndrore e Ushtrisë Popullore, Tirana, 1973, p 111



Odhise Paskali, Janaq Paço, and Andrea Mano, *Skanderbeg Monument*, 1968, bronze, Tirana, Albania, photo: Raino Isto

of a historical reality that was being constructed most emphatically in the socialist present. In this way, the monument straddles collective synthesis and the distributive character of socialist contemporaneity.

## Conclusion

Enver Hoxha would never again intervene as directly and publicly in the creative process as he did in the case of the Vlora Independence Monument. Nor would he need to: thanks to the peculiar citational economy of socialist Albanian culture, once introduced into discourse, an event such as the exchange of letters between Hoxha and the artists could be endlessly referenced, removing the need for subsequent interventions. Over the course of the next several years (as the monument was being completed, and after), the letter Hoxha had written to the Monumental Trio became established as a crucial document of socialist art criticism within Albania. Above all else, Hoxha's letter emphasised that the historic moment depicted in the Vlora Monument should be seen as the *collective* struggle of the Albanian people – and his letter also *performed* that function, since it made clear the importance of the mutually reinforcing collaboration between the socialist state and its artists. In 1970, when Kujtim Buza wrote about the significance of collective artistic labour in *Drita*, he insisted that the open exchange of letters was responsible for significant aesthetic and ideological transformations in other monuments under construction at the time, such as the *Four Heroines of Mirdita* monument.<sup>43</sup> When the Vlora Independence Monument was finally inaugurated in 1972, the article published in *Zëri i Popullit* (Voice of the People) – socialist Albania's primary daily newspaper – did not fail to discuss the exchange between Hoxha and the sculptors in the summer of 1969. When Kristaq Rama delivered the keynote speech at the Albanian Union of Writers and Artists' plenum on monumental sculpture in 1977, he stated that Hoxha's letter 'had special importance not simply for the successful realisation of [the Independence Monument], but for [Albanian] art in general'.<sup>44</sup>

Let us, finally, return to the 1969 photograph of the three sculptors published in *Shqipëria Socialiste Marshon*. It may now seem that the *absence* of the dictator from the photograph is all the more striking, even if we know that the image was taken before Hoxha's visit to the studio. Of course, there is a kind of bathetic – and no doubt accurate – explanation: even if Hoxha's intervention was celebrated *within* socialist Albania, the photobook in which the image was published was one of those produced primarily for export to other nations, to demonstrate the successes of Albania's Cultural Revolution. As such it was far more important to emphasise the freedom of Albania's cultural workers, their independent innovation in the creative process. At the same time, however, it seems not entirely accidental that the dictator's visit to the studio was an event that belonged almost immediately to the realm of discourse, that proliferated itself through texts and references rather than through photographic documentation. With its combination of vague ideological suggestions and concrete formal ones, Enver Hoxha's letter to the Monumental Trio was perhaps also an example of socialist Albanian culture as pure text: far from a concrete material instantiation, as

43 Buza, 'Puna Krijuese Kolektive', op cit

44 Rama, 'Arritje dhe Perspektiva', op cit, p 15



the monument would become – as it already appeared in the photograph of 1969 – the letter exchange between dictator and artists was the production of another kind of collaborative structure, a citational one. It allowed the Vlora Independence Monument to serve not only as a concrete aesthetic model to be directly emulated, but also – perhaps even more so – as a loose conceptual framework in which and across which a plethora of histories would unfold.

Understanding the genesis of the Vlora Independence Monument helps us understand the work of monumental sculpture as an agent of history and historical consciousness – not only the ways monuments represent historical events and produce an understanding of these past events through their enduring presence, but also the ways their production models various forms of history in the present. History made in the present in socialist Albania during the late 1960s was intended to be a collective history, and out of this collectivity emerged groups of artists more fully equipped to capture what Shaban Hadëri would later term ‘the monumentality of our socialist life’.<sup>45</sup> It also produced a new image of the state and the dictator as collaborators in the construction of art, history, and collective life. The complexities of this process were far greater than is often suggested by contemporary accounts of Albania’s socialist past, such as the one presented in the 2013 article in *Mapo*, cited at the outset. Such accounts see the art of the socialist period primarily as a tool that political power used to distort history and reality alike. What these accounts omit is the degree to which neither art’s role in relation to history, nor history itself, were unambiguously defined concepts. Rather, they were emergent in particular works and particular situations, and the scale of monumental industry made monumental sculpture a particularly significant field through which these concepts could be configured by artists as well as political figures.

In so many ways, socialist Albania’s cultural scene was unique in terms of art history. The country lacked the neo-avant-garde tendencies that arose nearly everywhere else in the region. It largely avoided the tendencies towards either geometric or biomorphic abstraction that appeared elsewhere, even in monumental contexts, in favour of pursuing figurative Socialist Realism as an aesthetic ideal. Its monumental landscape sought to establish itself not against a long history of sculpture, but against a territory supposedly empty of developed commemoration. And yet, for precisely these reasons, the historical role that monumental sculpture was called upon to play in Albania can assist in showing us the importance of monumentality in the late socialist context. As political structures, international alliances and ideologies began to shift in the 1960s across Eastern and Central Europe, and socialist culture transformed, the role played by artists in relation to history also changed. In monuments, where a sublime vision of the past was intended to be unified with the socialist present, artists often found themselves not only representing history but also participating in its collective significance.

45 Shaban Hadëri, ‘Monumentaliteti i Jerës Sonë dhe Pasqyrimi i Tij në Skulpturë’, *Nëntori*, vol 24, no 5, May 1977, p 246