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Land of Fear

In Stalinist Albania, Rule Is So Strict It Bars Even Singing in Public

Regime Bans Any 'Decadence' As It Harps on the Threat That All Outsiders Pose

Signs of the Slightest Thaw

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GJIROKASTER. Albania — Perched on the battlements of a medieval fortress overlooking this ancient town in southern Albania is an incongruous sight: a U.S. Air Force Shooting Star aircraft, guarded by a soldier, rifle at the ready.

The airplane, captured after making an emergency landing in 1957, stands as a symbol of eternal Albanian vigilance against unseen enemies. In the narrow, winding streets below, there are less-conspicuous guards—the Sigurimi, the country's secret police. Unsmiling and dour, sometimes leaning on umbrellas, sometimes mounted on bicycles, the Sigurimi seemingly miss nothing.

This tiny European country, one of the world's most closed societies, is cocooned in paranoia. Bomb shelters cover the countryside, gun turrets poke up behind distant hills, and all young people are trained in weaponry. The authoritarian regime's aim is to convince its citizens that most outsiders must be viewed with fear, particularly the U.S., considered decadent, and the Soviet Union, considered a betrayer of Marxism-Leninism.

Touring Albania recently on a British passport (few Americans are allowed in), this reporter found a nation where private cars, religion and even singing in public are forbidden. Dominating the landscape are slogans and portraits of Communist Party boss Enver Hoxha, who has been in power since 1944 and worships Stalin. An occasional purge reportedly still sends a party member to the firing squad or to a labor camp.

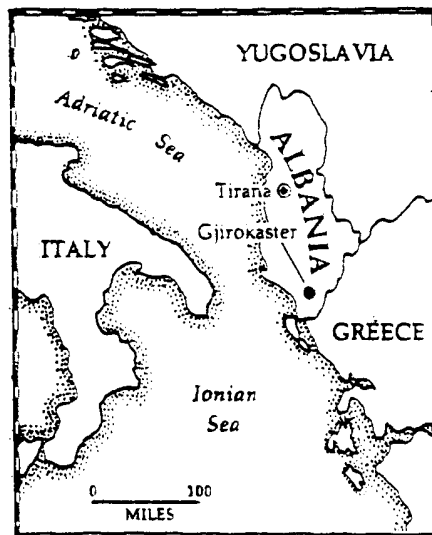
Signs of Thaw

A pugnacious refusal to have much trade or other dealings with the outside world has left Albania as Europe's poorest and least-developed country. But there are signs that

the Hoxha (pronounced HOD-jah) dictatorship is beginning to raise its tattered curtain. It is believed that Albania recently completed a trade agreement with the once-vilified Chinese (also considered traitors to Marxism-Leninism). It plans a ferry service to Italy for the first time since World War II and a link, through Yugoslavia, to Europe's rail network, for the first time ever.

There are also less obvious signs of a slight thaw. A few months ago, Albania relaxed a ban on Western journalists and tourists with beards or long hair. Neil Taylor, a part-owner of an English travel firm that arranges tours here, sees other signs that Albania is becoming less zealous. "This time our guides actually identified for us some of the government buildings in Tirana (the nation's capital), which is quite amazing," he says of his latest tour.

But a nine-day journey through Albania, a country of two and three-quarters million



people about the size of Maryland, still leaves the impression of a bucolic version of Stalin's dictatorship of the 1930s and 1940s, transported through space and time to the Balkans.

"This is the most controlled country I've ever been in," complains a Western diplomat in Tirana. Indeed, Albania is a land of "no's"—most people aren't allowed to own cars, or their homes, or farmland, or, except in a few mountainous areas, livestock.

Everyday 'No's'

Albanians can grow vegetables for their own use, but they aren't permitted to sell them. Western diplomats in Tirana doubt that any black market in food exists, but it is not uncommon to see women sitting on the sidewalk, stealthily proffering an egg to passersby.

The list of "no's" extends into family life. Because the party wants to build the population as quickly as possible, no contraception or abortion is allowed, except on doctors' orders. Nor can families own a washing machine, a refrigerator and a television set at the same time. They must choose just one.

Card playing in public places, such as bars, is banned, as is the sale of playing cards. Says a Western businessman: "I'll tell you how I do business here. I bring everyone gifts of condoms, Playboy magazine and playing cards."

Although the Albanian constitution provides for freedom of speech, the average Albanian clearly takes great risks in discussing either religion or politics. An Albanian tour guide is blunt about it: "All religious services are banned, and family services are criticized."

That is no problem for Albanians, she says, because "religion has been forgotten." However, tourists report seeing women fingering crosses, and this reporter saw several old men crouching on the sidewalk, running Moslem prayer beads through their fingers.

Silent Churches

The state has obsessively tried to wipe out the memory of religion. In 1967, the Communist Party closed all mosques (the country was 70% Moslem) and Russian Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. Today, many churches have been turned into sports centers or movie theaters, and the locked church door is a silent symbol of the party's preoccupation with atheism.

No sign of religious activity is overlooked. Crosses have been scratched from gravestones, people are required to refer to the time before Christ as "before our era."

As for politics, that is a subject safely discussed only by Tirana's small foreign community, which gathers most nights in the bars at the Dajti and Tirana hotels. "Albanians just don't discuss politics openly—there are no political jokes here," says one Western diplomat.

The most sensitive political subject at the moment is former Premier Mehmet Shehu, who was reported a suicide in late 1981. Sometime later, party boss Hoxha announced to the world that his former war-time compatriot had actually been a triple agent, spying for the CIA, the KGB and the Yugoslavs.

There is speculation that Mr. Shehu was executed, another victim of Mr. Hoxha's sporadic purges. He now is officially a non-person, which has involved a painstaking re-writing of the country's postwar history and removal of all evidence of his past from

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