

Albania

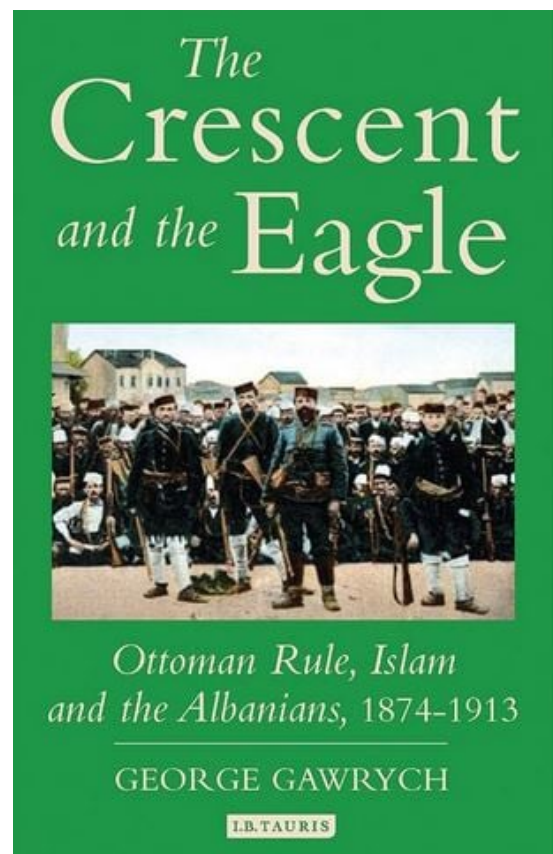
by [Theodore Dalrymple](#) (June 2024)



Gjirokastra– Ksenofon Dilo, 1972

For some reason which I cannot fully explain—but who can fully explain himself to himself, let alone to others?—I have recently been reading books about Albania. The explanation, whatever it is, would have be at the least *multifactorial*, in other words the kind of unmemorable explanation that does not satisfy the mind's desire for simplicity, or at least simplification.

Among the factors are the two visits I have paid to the country and its history as having been one of the countries with the most despotic of all communist regimes. Whatever disservices Enver Hoxha may have done his country (and, apparently, there are many in Albania who believe that the benefits of his rule outweighed the harms done by it), he made it eminently fascinating to many who would otherwise have dismissed Albania as an unimportant Balkan curiosity.



Another of the factors is that I recently came across by chance the sale of a remaindered copy of a book titled *The Crescent and the Eagle: Ottoman Rule, Islam and the Albanians, 1874-1913*, by an American expert on eastern Mediterranean history, George Gawrych.

Even the way in which this book was published was interesting. Although it has a handsome dust jacket, it is not beautifully produced, the print being small and the paper not being of the finest quality. It is not long—211 pages of text—although it has a considerable scholarly apparatus. It was published in 2006, when it sold new at \$160.

Who would have bought it at such a price? Very few private individuals, I should imagine, but perhaps a thousand university libraries throughout the world. This, surely, is a brilliant publishing model for the publishers of academic books. They know in advance roughly how many libraries will buy the book, and which indeed feel that they *must* buy the book, even at a very high price. On a small investment, then,

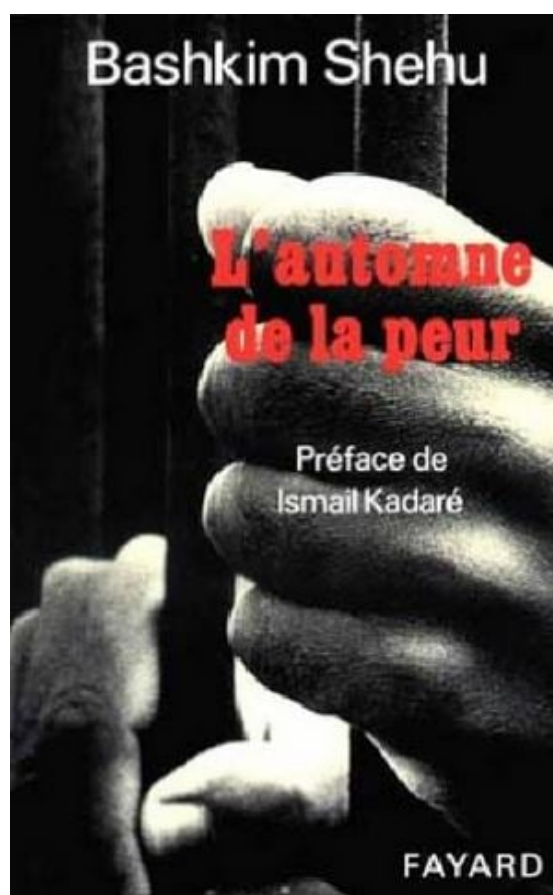
the publishers an all-but pre-established return. Not for them the vagaries or whims of the market, or the tiresome need for the promotion of their wares. Thus is a book that might interest a wider public in effect suppressed, de facto though not legally so. Even at the remaindered price for those few copies that the publisher was unable to offload on to university libraries, it was not such as to attract the casual reader, though the subject was a fascinating one.

I am in great admiration of Professor Gawrych, not to say awe. He had not only mastered the sources in the major western European languages, but Albanian and, most admirable of all, Ottoman Turkish. This alone is the accomplishment of a lifetime. There has been perhaps no more decisive break in the history of any nation than Ataturk's language reform, which within two generations cut off the population from the possibility of studying the nation's history, except through a relatively small, and therefore easily surveyed, number of intermediaries. Perhaps that was precisely Ataturk's intention, for no one believed in decisive breaks more than he; I am told by people whom I respect, but whose opinions I cannot verify, that the Turkish language is in any case better suited to the Latin than the Arabic script, albeit with a few extra diacritical marks.

Professor Gawrych gives the impression of being a completely fair-minded man and, certainly for an ignorant person such as I, he has the ability to overturn certain prejudices. His history of the rise of Albanian nationalism contradicts the notion that the Ottoman empire was nothing but a theatre of oppression and cruelty—though both abounded in it, of course. The Albanians for a long time were largely loyal to the empire and supplied more than twenty of the Sultan's viziers. The Albanian population—those who spoke Albanian as their mother tongue—were not one homogeneous mass longing uniformly to be free of the Ottoman yoke. They were divided into Tosks, Gëgs and Kosovars, and then into three main religious groups, the

Moslems (70 per cent), the Orthodox and the Catholic. The Tosks, the people of the flatlands to the south, had very different traditions from the Gëgs, the people of the mountains, who were divided into tribes which had their own very strong, differing and individual traditions. Albeit part of the empire, much of Albania was impossible to rule, at least with a strong hand. Nor, from the documents and reports from officials that the author quotes, were the Ottomans always unenlightened, at least as far as Albanian was concerned. This is very different from the history I was taught at school sixty years ago, when the Ottomans were still regarded as nothing but torturers, exploiters, ignoramuses, and cruel oppressors. Of course, a different history would have to be written if it were about Ottoman-Armenian relations during this time rather than Ottoman-Albanian ones: nor am I in any position to dispute or contradict any of Professor Gawrych's interpretations either. But I remain in awe of him, and the fact that he is a professor at Baylor University gives me hope that not all is lost in academia.

If it were not for Enver Hoxha, though, I should never have considered reading this book. The one I read after it was about the Hoxha dictatorship, for me endlessly fascinating, in the way that *Macbeth* is endlessly fascinating. The book in question is *L'Automne de la peur*, The Autumn of Fear, by Bashkim Shehu. This related scenes as intense as any in Shakespeare.



The author is the son of Mehmet Shehu, for over thirty years Prime Minister and second-in-command to Enver Hoxha himself. Mehmet Shehu, like a very high proportion of Hoxha's closest associates and supposed comrades-in-arms, ended up being shot, quite possibly as a suicide to evade the inevitable firing squad, accused of treason and all manner of rococo political crimes (though never, of course, the real and terrible crimes they *did* commit). Not for nothing did Hoxha remain faithful to his dying day to his great model and sublunary god, Stalin.

There are few books better than Bakshim Shehu's for entering the contorted world of a totalitarian regime. The author grew up in privileged circumstances, in the small area of Tirana, the capital, known as the *Block*, where the *crème de la crème*, or the scum of the earth, of the regime and their families lived in complete isolation from the rest of the population. Bakshim was torn between filial piety and duty of obedience on the one hand, and awareness of the nature of the government of which his father was second in command on the other.

The book recounts in detail the three months that preceded his father's death, either by murder or suicide. The reason for his father's fall into disfavour (or the pretext, it is always impossible in such a regime to tell the one from the other) was his consent to the engagement of his son, Skënder, to Sylva Turdiu. Her great defect was to have an uncle exiled in the United States, Arshi Pipa, who was a ferocious critic of the Albanian regime. In the paranoid world of Hoxha's regime (and others like his), the relative of an enemy must be an enemy.

At first, the engagement seemed to receive Hoxha's blessing, but nothing that vile man ever did or said could be taken at face value. He came to believe, or to act as if he believed, that the engagement was at the behest of western intelligence services, intent upon replacing his regime with one more favourable to the west.

Why his animus against Shehu, with whom he had been associated so closely for so long, and with whom he seemed to have enjoyed friendly relations?

One possible theory is that Hoxha saw Shehu as his successor, and just as some people do not want to make a will in the superstitious belief that by doing so they will bring forward the very event that makes a will necessary, so Hoxha (who was ill with diabetes) did not want to think of any successor. On the contrary, he wanted absolute power, and he wanted it to last for ever, so much did he enjoy it, and so long had he enjoyed it. He was like Bérenger, the King of a tiny crumbling kingdom in Ionesco's great play, *The King Departs*, who, when told that he is dying, declaims that, after his death, he wants everything to be named after him, all books to be about him, all statues and pictures to be of him, and so forth. Hoxha was like that.



Enver Hoxha

A possible reason for Hoxha to have envied Shehu was that the latter had a much more genuinely heroic military record than Hoxha's—albeit that he, like Hoxha, always fought in a very bad cause, that of communist dictatorship. (Heroism is not, by itself, invariably a good thing.) Shehu had been an active commander in the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil

War; and insofar as Albanian guerrillas played any part in the 'liberation' of Albania from foreign occupation (the liberation followed by something much worse), Shehu played a more genuine part in it than Hoxha, who was completely fixated on seizing power after the defeat of the Italians and Germans, and therefore on the internecine struggles of the various factions of the Albanian nationalists. Everyone knew this, but it could not be said. However, it rankled under the surface of Hoxha's seeming geniality towards Shehu, and he sought a pretext to destroy him once and for all. Envy is an emotion best assuaged cold.

Bakshi Shehu puts forward another possible cause of Hoxha's rancour towards his father, trivial though it might be, and revelatory of Hoxha's fundamentally petty bourgeois view of life. After many years of living in comparative simplicity (though still luxuriously by the standards of most Albanians), the Shehus decided to extend their house in the Block and make it much more luxurious. This they did with the blessing of Hoxha himself, who was doing the same himself (of course, like the billionaires of Silicon Valley, they had no taste, so they were able to build or to make nothing beautiful, only supremely comfortable). But when Hoxha saw, from the Shehus own house, what the Shehus were doing, he was seized by envy, or at least anger that they were doing something on as grand a scale as he was doing. Who did they think they were?

It is likely, at any rate, that Hoxha, for whatever reason, had long decided that Shehu would have to go. When he was told that Shehu had committed suicide, as it then appeared to have been, he raised his fist and said 'Long live the Albanian Communist Party!'—this, after forty years of supposed friendship!

Here it must be remembered that the communists provoked many suicides, they never approved of suicide, thinking of it as a kind of petty bourgeois deviation from orthodox optimism. It must also be remembered that although Hoxha was a scheming,

unscrupulous, vicious, murderous psychopath, he was also a true believer in his own ideology, and to that extent sincere. This is a unique and uniquely horrible combination of traits: ruthless cynicism allied to the most unquestioning sincerity.

When it is clear that Mehmet Shehu that his fate is sealed whatever he does, he utters a most terrible confession to his son: that he has three things he regrets in his life. The first is that, during the war, as a commander of guerrillas, he ordered shot eleven Italian deserters from the Italian army who were living peacefully in Albania and posed no threat to the country; that he ordered to be shot without trial sixty members of a non-communist anti-fascist movement; and that he initially agreed to his son's engagement to a person whose uncle was an anti-communist exile in America. He too was blinded by his adherence to his ideology, faith in which he never lost to the psychopathy of his own actions. He it was, after all, who presided over the imprisonment, torture and murder of untold thousands of people: and he felt guilty that he had made the ideological mistake of allowing his son to affiance himself to the niece of a critic of the regime!

After his death, his wife was arrested and imprisoned for treason, dying in prison; Bakshim was imprisoned for eight years and tortured; one of his brothers committed suicide soon after his imprisonment. The man who replaced Mehemet Shehu as Prime Minister and was complicit in Shehu's downfall was himself soon executed by firing squad. It was as if the Albanian leadership in its entirety had read *Macbeth* (the most popular of Shakespeare's plays in Albania) and taken it not as a warning, but as a model. Shakespeare would not have been surprised.

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Theodore Dalrymple's latest books are [*Neither Trumpets nor Violins*](#) (with Kenneth Francis and Samuel Hux) and [*Ramses: A Memoir*](#) from New English Review Press.

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