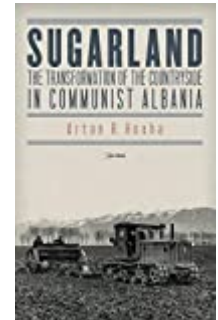


Artan R. Hoxha. *Sugarland: The Transformation of the Countryside in Communist Albania.* Central European University Press, 2023. xi + 293 pp. \$95.00, cloth, ISBN 978-963-386-616-0.



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Examining Communist Albania's Industrialization Through Microhistory

The late Arno J. Mayer said in an interview that “to write a national history of Luxembourg is absurd ... Coming from a small nation forces you to look elsewhere.”[1] This is exactly what Artan R. Hoxha has done to write about his own small nation of Albania in his 2023 book *Sugarland: The Transformation of the Countryside in Communist Albania*. Instead of concentrating on Albania’s intimate national historiography to tell the story of a single sugar factory, Hoxha embraces a globally oriented and century-long view of modernization that uses that Albanian sugar factory and its surrounding agriculture to undermine our assumptions about industrial development and international relations in the twentieth century. Hoxha accomplishes this through an excellent grasp of the power of microhistory while simultaneously drawing on sources from a wide range of periods and contexts, from Estonia to Vietnam, to reinforce his central claim about the similarities between capitalist and communist development

and to undermine the twin Cold War myths of Albanian autarky and an impenetrable Iron Curtain.

At the heart of Hoxha’s work is an uncertainty about modernization and development that is in close conversation with the work of James C. Scott even though the author arrives at different conclusions than the Yale anthropologist. Like Scott, Hoxha turns his eye toward the transformation of rural life through land clearance and the introduction of industry. Like Scott, Hoxha transcends labels of capitalism and communism to discuss a common feature of all forms of state-driven development. Like Scott, Hoxha argues that elite desires to render the countryside “legible” were seen as a euphemism for good governance, summarizing the “Maliq plan” as “an enterprise of internal colonization” (p. 6). But Hoxha critically departs from Scott in showing how land clearance and the creation of a sugar industry in Maliq were welcomed by local inhabitants who would even call for *more* state intervention and that “the technocrats were

not a group that was incapable of reflection and adjustment to local circumstances” (p. 102). Rather than the story of a monolithic bureaucracy imposing itself on the people, Hoxha tells the story of a well-liked enterprise that inspired pride among Albanians in Maliq and across the country (p. 1).

For readers interested in Albanian history specifically, Hoxha does an excellent job of de-orientalizing an Albania that has “attracted more attention for its bunkers that closed it off from the world than for its factories and industries that connected it with this same world” (p. 196). By emphasizing the ordinary, Hoxha opens the door to a three-dimensional view of a communist regime that is best known in unfavorable comparison to present-day North Korea. This three-dimensional view further opens the door to future reassessments of Albanian communism, as Lea Ypi’s memoir has already attempted to do.^[2] *Sugarland*, however, is not about Albania, and prior knowledge of Albanian history is not necessary to successfully interact with the book’s key arguments. The wide range of literature Hoxha is able to cite should demonstrate this work’s value to scholars interested in topics from deindustrialization and Cold War trade to land clearance and rural industry.

In chapter 1, Hoxha argues that Albania’s communist regime was not as great a historical break as we imagine it to be by showing that the Maliq “sugar scheme” was part of a long trend of modernist thinking among Albanian and foreign elites. Using the Albanian state archives to their fullest, Hoxha demonstrates how Ottoman, Albanian, American, and Italian officials and entrepreneurs had all been interested in draining the Maliq swamp since the late nineteenth century. By tracing that growing interest alongside Albania’s ever-changing political situation, Hoxha argues that it was not communist ideology but modernist thinking that made the development of “Sugarland” possible. In making this argument, Hoxha takes the side of historical continuity in the long-

running debates over how different communist regimes were from the regimes they overthrew.

Chapter 2 establishes that the difference between Albania’s communists and the elites that preceded them—concerning Maliq, at least—was that the communists had the political will to drain the Maliq swamp and establish a new rural light industry. The chapter examines Maliq’s place in communist Albania and argues that it was “not merely an economic enterprise” (p. 20) but part of a general attempt to transform Albania (p. 20). While conceptually interesting, the chapter reveals the limits of Hoxha’s microhistorical approach, bogging the reader down in the details of swamp clearance. This decision is not without reason since the chapter argues that the recreation of Maliq’s landscape was meant to mimic the efficiency of industrial organization. Hoxha argues that this was not unique to socialism, citing Dutch and Estonian examples to further the argument that there was nothing specifically “Stalinist” about “Sugarland.”

Chapter 3 continues Hoxha’s discussion of the transformation of space in “Sugarland” by looking at the inequalities that existed within the socialist space of Maliq, arguing that they were similar to those within capitalist spaces. At the heart of this spatial inequality is the divide between rural and urban life. While the standard of living consistently improved in Maliq, the best teachers were still found in urban schools and women still preferred to marry men from the city rather than their own villages. Communist attempts to relieve this spatial inequality were, for the most part, failures albeit not for lack of effort. What is extraordinary about chapter 3 is how ordinary life in Maliq was. By demonstrating the ordinary nature of life in rural Albania, Hoxha strikes at the heart of the myth that state socialism was an extreme experience.

This argument is carried through to the claims made in chapter 4, which are also some of the most impressive of the entire book. Going against

the dominant Cold War narrative of East–West isolation and with particular animosity for the myth of Albania’s extreme isolation, Hoxha argues that Maliq was part of a global network of knowledge exchanges that undermines the entire idea of an “Iron Curtain.” Hoxha demonstrates how the Maliq sugar factory and its surrounding industries always relied on cooperation from both Cold War blocs. Throughout the 1970s and ’80s—often considered the high point of Albanian isolation—Polish, Italian, West German, Greek, Soviet, Yugoslav, and Danish (to name just a few) specialists were visiting Maliq and collaborating with those running the factory! Hoxha notes that even though these foreign specialists were treated with suspicion and kept away from everyday life, “the regime did not interrupt the movement of people. In fact, by the end of the 1970s there was an increase in such exchanges” (p. 175). The movement of people went both ways, exemplified by the Ministry of Light Industry’s decision to send specialists to Turkey for professional qualifications. Hoxha’s overarching point is obvious, despite official rhetoric, Albania was never an autarkic and isolated state; it was always part of international networks on both sides of the “Iron Curtain.”

One unfortunate limit to an otherwise excellent chapter is a tendency to conflate European with global connections. By emphasizing the Albanian use of *bota* (world) to demonstrate Albanians’ awareness of their place in Europe, Hoxha misses the opportunity to more thoroughly engage with emerging studies of the global Cold War and Albania’s place in it. Despite this limitation, chapter 4 holds the promise of future research into communist Albania and its place in global socialism. If Maliq’s international connections are economic proof that Albania was never truly isolated, what does this imply for Albania’s political and cultural connections? Beyond Albania, Hoxha opens the door to a wider reappraisal of state socialism throughout the twentieth century that emphasizes the continuities within various regimes as opposed to their “extraordinary” natures, since

“after all, life under socialism was not that extraordinary” (p. 157).

Chapter 5 looks at Maliq in postsocialist Albania with an eye toward narratives of collapse and deindustrialization in the postsocialist world, tracing the closure of the Maliq sugar factory. While deeply sympathetic to his subject, Hoxha’s final chapter falls firmly into standard narratives of decline, observing how “the town of sugar was stuck in the past, when it used to have a specific economic role, an identity, and its own communitarian culture strongly related to the industry” (p. 224). This, as Hoxha observes, is not too different from the experience of deindustrialization worldwide, reinforcing his argument that there was nothing exceptional about the experience of Albanian socialism. While present throughout the book, chapter 5 also features the most significant use of oral interviews, which have the potential to be interesting but provide questionable value to his overarching arguments and lack the theoretical grounding the rest of the book excellently demonstrates.

Despite this and other minor faults, Hoxha’s work is an excellent example of the power of microhistory in tearing down our wide-ranging assumptions about the past. As a conceptually driven work, Hoxha shows that the local histories of small nations have the power to make big statements about global history. As a piece of Albanian history, Hoxha’s work opens the door to new histories of the infamous Stalinist regime and of the experience of state socialism globally. Hidden behind the transformation of the Albanian countryside is a rich discussion of how we can understand the world around us.

Notes

[1]. André Loez and Nicolas Offenstadt, “Un Historien Dissident? Entretien Avec Arno J. Mayer,” *Genèses*, no. 49 (2002): 123–39, quotation on 127.

[2]. Lea Ypi, *Free: Coming of Age at the End of History* (Allen Lane, 2021).

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