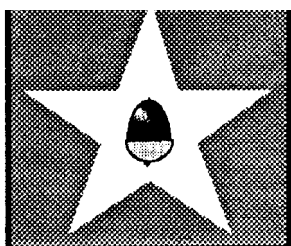


Conflict Studies Research Centre

James Pettifer

**The Greek Minority in Albania
In the Aftermath of Communism**

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This paper examines the history of the Greek Minority in Albania in the light of the development of the Cameria dispute between Greece and Albania and traces the main events as they have affected the Minority since the end of communism. It examines the main trends in Minority politics and social and economic identity, the nature of Minority representation and influence in national governments and politics, the attitudes of different Albanian political parties towards the Minority, and the likelihood of the Minority becoming a cause of conflict between the two countries.

Introduction

Bilateral relations between Greece and Albania have often been severely strained since the demise of communism in Albania, with breaks in diplomatic relations, violent border incidents involving military fatalities, and the expulsion of tens of thousands of Albanian migrant workers from Greece. At the heart of these growing tensions is the fate of the sizeable ethnic Greek community in southern Albania. This paper examines the historical basis of this national minority, its status and political behaviour during the communist period, and the current factors contributing to ethnic tension in post-communist Albania. The dynamic interplay between Greek-Albanian bilateral relations, the sub-national divide among ethnic Albanians themselves, and domestic inter-ethnic politics, it will be argued, hold the key to determining the ethnic Greek minority's ability to pursue and achieve its interests, and thus to the development of a stable Albanian polity.

The emergence of ethnic tension, it should be noted, stands in sharp contrast to traditional western understandings of Albania. During the communist period, Albania was generally viewed from abroad as an ethnically homogeneous state (although its Balkan neighbours were well aware of the existence of the ethnic Greek minority within the country).¹ Even insofar as it was involved in international bodies under the isolationist communist regime established after 1944, this view was nonetheless maintained by an international community generally ignorant of most aspects of Albania's history and political development. As a small, relatively obscure country with neither a strong tradition of statehood nor a well-known and independent culture, the perception encouraged by Enver Hoxha's regime thus effectively structured foreign understandings. These assumed, in essence, a united country freed from the Turks by its hardy mountain people, who then emerged into nationhood as a homogeneous society with a strong national culture underpinned by shared traditions. Albanian political integration was further seen to be reflected in, and reinforced by, the struggle to free the country from Axis occupation during the Second World War and the partisan struggle which brought Hoxha and the

Communists to power.² And, while the outside world regarded the country as a grim, poverty-stricken *gulag* ruled by the world's most hard-line communist regime, a European equivalent of North Korea under Kim Il Sung, the prevailing view nonetheless presupposed that rigid political uniformity implied the absence of cultural and ethnic diversity.

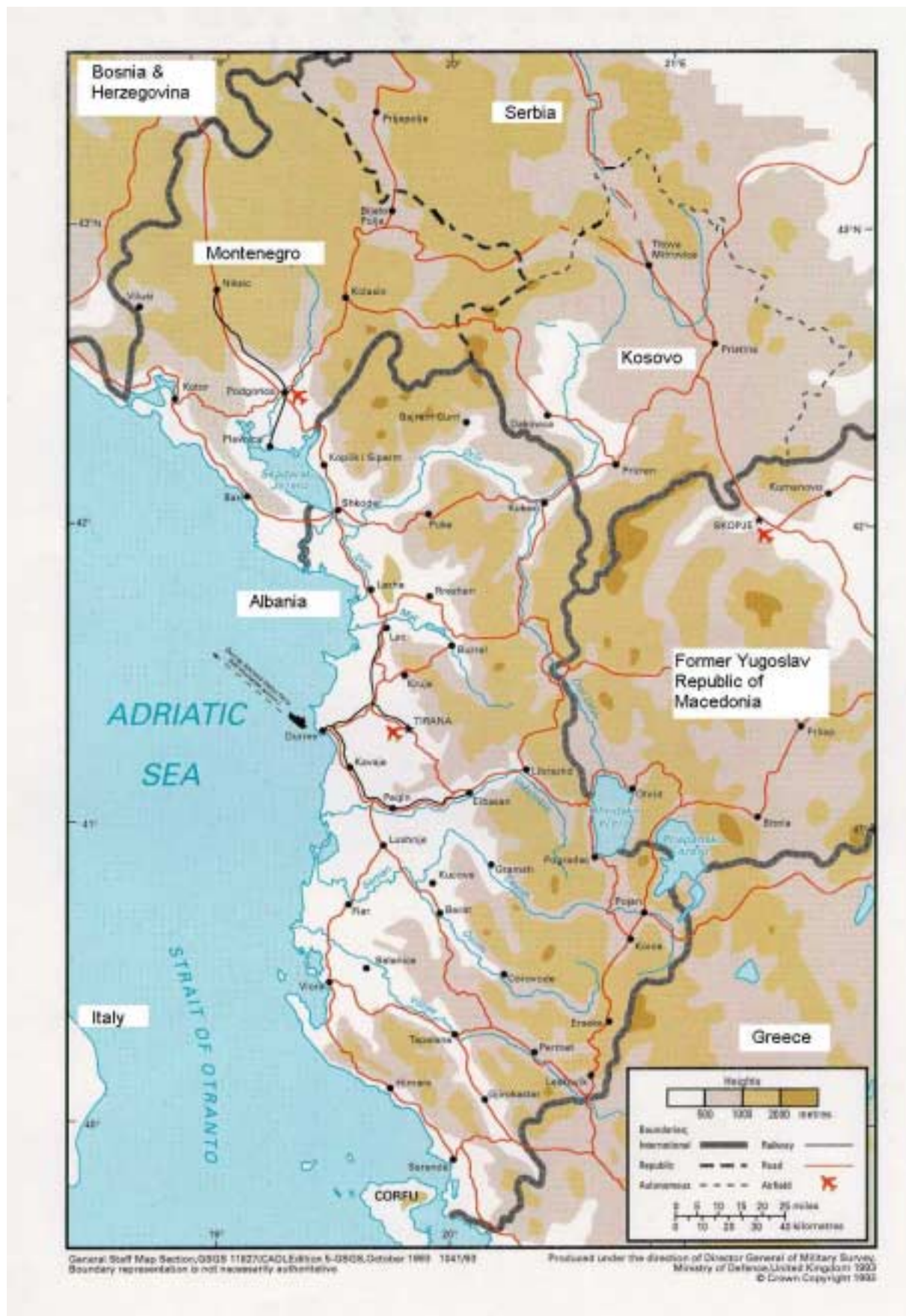
Both images were misleading. First, while Albania did experience a growth of national consciousness in the late nineteenth century, it was quite slow in throwing off the Ottoman yoke, becoming in November 1912 the last Balkan state to declare its independence, which was formally recognised at the London Conference of Ambassadors in 1913. Achievement of national statehood had been impeded by the Ottoman authorities' strategy of dividing the Albanians among four imperial provinces and blocking the establishment of an Albanian-language educational system, with no common written alphabet being developed until 1908. The result was a lingering heritage of cultural differences and political divisions, particularly between the two regionally-based sub-groups of the Albanian people, the Ghegs and the Tosks, whose relations were marked by only limited cooperation during the national renaissance and in opposing Ottoman rule.³ In fact, until the 1930s, large areas of northern and central Albania had no relationship with the capital (Tirana) as a legitimate state centre in the modern sense, and still lived according to the feudal code of *Kanun i Lek Dukagjinit*, the medieval body of lore and convention regulating the operation of the blood feud.⁴ This code remains influential in the north up to the present day.

The absence of cultural-territorial unity was again reflected politically within the anti-Axis resistance movement in 1943 and 1944, with bitter conflicts between communist and non-communist groups corresponding for the most part to the geographical divide between the distinct Albanian communities in the north and south of the country. In the south, the Tosks generally supported the left-wing National Liberation Movement organised and dominated by the Communists following the party's establishment, under the leadership of Enver Hoxha, in 1941. The northern Ghegs divided their support between the Balli Kombetar, composed of right-wing pro-republican nationalists, and the royalist Legality Organisation. The latter, supported by the northern Mati tribe, sought the restoration of fellow Mati Ahmet Zogu, who had established a monarchy in 1928 and ruled as King Zog I until he fled the country when Italy invaded in April 1939.⁵ Significantly, beneath the external uniformity imposed by the communist regime that Hoxha established in 1944 and led until his death in 1985, such regionally-centred patron-client relationships persisted, with the main difference being that the social base of the new regime shifted to the south. Kinship, tribal links, and the rigid friend-foe distinction central to the *Kanun* were retained as key elements of the system, accounting for many serious political and economic conflicts in the post-war years, including within the communist establishment itself.⁶

Second, in addition to the division among ethnic Albanians, there was, and remains, a substantial Greek minority, as well as a number of smaller groups of Vlachs, Roma (Gypsies), Jews, Armenians, 'Macedonians', Serbs, and Montenegrins. In political terms, the Greek minority is by far the most consequential group. But, while culturally and politically more integrated within Albanian society, the other groups have some importance, if only to the extent that their persistence calls into question the universalist assumptions propagated by the communist regime, and, to a significant extent, by post-communist Albanian governments.

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Albania



The Demographics of Albania's Ethnic Minorities

Most members of the Greek minority live in the south of the country and in Tirana and are estimated to comprise 3% of a total population of about 3.4 million, although this is a highly contentious question.⁷ Two thousand Serbs and Montenegrins live predominantly in the villages north of Shkodra, around Vraga, adjacent to Montenegro. The 15,000 Macedonians, who speak a mixed dialect with Bulgarian and Serbian elements, live either in the Peshkopi area in northeast Albania, or around Lakes Prespa and Ochrid in the southeast. The number of Albanian Roma is unknown, but may be as high as 75,000. Their settlement is scattered throughout the country, with all main towns having a Roma quarter, most of which are long-established and appear to date from early Ottoman times (if not before). The 80,000 Vlachs generally live in the southern mountains, with particularly large concentrations in the south around Korca, Selenitsa and near Vlora, although the latter group has been seriously affected by industrialisation and has become almost entirely assimilated into Albanian urban society. The Jewish community of about 800 people, lived mainly in Tirana but emigrated to Israel *en bloc* in 1991, although some families have since returned. The Armenian community, of similar size, exists in Tirana and Vlora, and is made up of well-qualified professionals, some of whom seem to have emigrated from Albania in the last two years, casting doubt on the general future of this group. There are also a number of individuals of direct Turkish descent. None of the communities of Soviet citizens and Chinese that existed temporarily in Albania under communism have remained, and there has been no evidence to date to suggest that they have had a lasting influence on patterns of ethnic minority settlement.⁸

The Politics of History: The Greeks of Southern Albania

Census figures from the communist period do not provide accurate information about ethnic minorities in Albania, and in any case controversy over the size of the Greek minority long predates communism. While historical memory and collective myths are always and everywhere of considerable importance in framing cultural identity and its political expression, in the case of Albania and its ethnic Greeks, ancient history is especially important in this respect. The ancient Illyrian tribes from which the modern Albanians claim descent occupied most of the territory of the present state of Albania, as well as adjoining parts of the Balkans, until the Roman conquest. Before, however, there had been ancient Greek colonisation of the coast, beginning in the fifth century BC, with the establishment of important ancient Greek settlements at Dyrrachium (modern Durrës), Apollonia (near modern Fier), and Butrint (near Saranda). In addition to this colonisation, in southern Albania, south of the river Shkumbini, there were large numbers of people known to the ancient geographer Strabo (writing in the first century AD) as Epirot. These people spoke and wrote mostly in Greek, although he recorded that some tribes, such as the Bylliones, were bilingual.

While most ethnic Greeks claim direct lineal descent from the ancient Epirot tribes, Albanian historians argue that all of these tribes were Illyrian in origin, even if they had begun to speak Greek as a result of coastal colonisation. In contrast, Greek nationalists claim that most of Albania in the Tosk-dominated area south of the Shkumbi River is *Vorio Epirus* (northern Epirus) and essentially Greek from ancient times, and that it should therefore ultimately be regarded as a part of Greece itself. Albanians claim that the minority as it currently exists is the result of population

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movements under the Ottoman empire, and that the great majority of the Greeks arrived in Albania as indentured labourers in the time of the Ottoman *beys*.⁹

In the modern period, as the struggle for Albanian independence developed under the disintegrating Ottoman empire, many parts of southern Albania were subject to violent inter-communal conflict, as Greek irredentists attempted to integrate parts of what is now southern Albania into a "Greater Greece". Given its large Greek-speaking population, the city of Gjirokastra (in Greek, Agyrocastro), in the Vjosa (Aoos) River valley, only twenty miles from the Greek border, was a particularly active centre of irredentist ambition. Outbreaks of ethnic violence in the area were particularly serious immediately after Albanian independence was declared and during the Second Balkan War, as some Albanian-speaking villages in Epirus fought on the side of the Turks against the Greek-speaking villages. In February 1914, a Pan-Epirote Association was founded in Gjirokastra, and the town and its vicinity were proclaimed a part of Greece. In May 1914, the Great Powers signed the Protocol of Corfu, which recognised the area as Greek, after which it was occupied by the Greek army from October 1914 until October 1915. Greece's administration under the Protocol was short-lived, however, and collapsed after the Italian invasion in 1915.¹⁰

Northern Epirus reverted to Albania under Italian protection, a state of affairs that was formally ratified in 1925 by the delineation of Albania's southern border under the December 1913 Protocol of Florence, which Greece still has not officially recognised. Under King Zog, the Greek villages suffered considerable repression, including the forcible closure of Greek-language schools in 1933-1934 and the ordering of Greek Orthodox monasteries to accept mentally sick individuals as inmates. During the Second World War, the Greek minority supported the anti-Axis resistance, and when the Partisan campaign was started under Communist leadership, a separate battalion of ethnic Greek partisans (the 'Thanas Ziko' battalion) was established.¹¹ During the national liberation struggle in the later stages of the war, the Albanian Communists were able to prevent contact between the Greek minority and the right-wing *andartes* of Napoleon Zervas (EDES) in southern Epirus, who sought to unite northern Epirus with Greece. In 1946, with Hoxha's regime already in place, Greece attempted to reincorporate northern Epirus into its territory at the Paris Peace Conference, but failed.¹²

Thus, southern Albania and its Greek-speaking population have represented a chronic point of contention - continuing to the present - in Albania's post-independence history, manifested mainly as a territorial dispute between Albania and Greece, but also as a struggle to define a distinct Albanian ethnicity and national heritage. And, as has been common throughout the Balkans in the twentieth century, central to these struggles are the ongoing historiographical debates that suffuse history, whether ancient or modern, with nationalist meaning. Indeed, as Albanian communism would clearly demonstrate, where nation- and state-building have been the order of the day for successive generations of political elites, the definition of minority status, crucial in reflecting and altering the balance of political power within multiethnic states, transcends the regime types according to which that power is exercised.

The Ethnic Greek Minority Under Communism

An inquiry established in 1922 by the League of Nations to study the question of the Greek population in Albania concluded that there were about 25,000 Greek-

speaking people in Albania. However, the area studied was confined to the southern border fringes, and there is good reason to believe that this estimate was very low.¹³ At present, organisations in Greece pursuing issues concerning northern Epirus claim that the number is as high as 400,000 in Albania as a whole. The figure used by Greek governments in public statements and documents is generally lower.

In contrast, Albanian governments use a much lower figure of 58,000 which rests on the unrevised definition of "minority" adopted during the communist period. Under this definition, minority status was limited to those who lived in 99 villages in the southern border areas, thereby excluding important concentrations of Greek settlement in Vlora (perhaps 8000 people in 1994) and in adjoining areas along the coast, ancestral Greek towns such as Himara, and ethnic Greeks living elsewhere throughout the country. Mixed villages outside this designated zone, even those with a clear majority of ethnic Greeks, were not considered minority areas and therefore were denied any Greek-language cultural or educational provisions. In addition, many Greeks were forcibly removed from the minority zones to other parts of the country as a product of communist population policy, an important and constant element of which was to pre-empt ethnic sources of political dissent. Greek place-names were changed to Albanian names, while use of the Greek language, prohibited everywhere outside the minority zones, was prohibited for many official purposes within them as well.

Although some Greek-language education existed under communism, pupils were taught only Albanian history and culture, even in Greek-language classes at the primary level. In general, some secondary-level provisions for Greek-language education existed, but, again, only for towns and villages within the designated minority areas and with the additional proviso that there was a majority of Greek-speakers in each class in the school. Because school curricula in the Greek language in the designated minority areas were *de facto* identical with the standard Albanian-language curriculum, efforts to study many of the greatest works of ancient Greek literature were rendered impossible. Nor, with the exception of archaeology (which flourished during the communist period), was it possible to study other aspects of classical Hellenistic culture once opportunities for travel abroad to Moscow State University ended following Albania's 1961 break with the Soviet Union.

At the same time, even the formal obligation to provide Greek-language education was often evaded by the regime's continuous efforts to transfer ethnic Greeks to other parts of the country from villages containing a bare majority of Greek-speakers. Much of the knowledge that we have of this process necessarily relies on anecdotal evidence, as no official records of population displacement exist from the communist period and the number of people involved was quite small. Nevertheless, the process appears to have left considerable political and cultural traces in the remaining Greek-speaking areas, while the continuous threat of arbitrary administrative action by Tirana has sown a heritage of distrust that underlies some of the contemporary problems affecting relations between post-communist governments and the Greek minority.

The repression of minority culture and education (with the exception of some independent cultural activity, such as folk dancing) was continuous with the policy pursued by the Royalist regime of King Zog, under which Greek-language education had been attacked and eventually virtually eliminated in the 1930s. However, this process was steadily intensified in the post-war years under communism,

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particularly with the onset in 1967 of the campaign by Albania's communist party, the Albanian Party of Labour (PLA), to eradicate organised religion, a prime target of which was the Orthodox Church.¹⁴ Many churches were damaged or destroyed during this period, and many Greek-language books were banned because of their religious themes or orientation. Yet, as with other communist states, particularly in the Balkans, where measures putatively geared towards the consolidation of political control intersected with the pursuit of national integration, it is often impossible to distinguish sharply between ideological and ethno-cultural bases of repression. This is all the more true in the case of Albania's anti-religion campaign because it was merely one element in the broader "Ideological and Cultural Revolution" begun by Hoxha in 1966 but whose main features he outlined at the PLA's Fourth Congress in 1961.¹⁵

While the inability to draw such a clear line makes it difficult to assess the full contemporary political implications of previous policies, their unambiguous impact on ethnic survival explains why the definition of "minority" remains highly controversial. If a minority member is defined as someone who speaks Greek at home and at work, actively practises Greek Orthodoxy, and lives in a Greek-speaking town or village, then the figure put forward by both communist and post-communist Albanian governments may have some coherence. But there are undoubtedly much larger numbers of people who are in general Hellenist in their descent, cultural identity, and beliefs. This number has increased in recent years owing to acculturation of numerous Albanian migrant workers in Greece. Generally, members of the Greek minority in Tirana and other cities appear to have been much more closely linked to the Communist regime than were the rural majority of ethnic Greeks, who remained in the minority's heartland around Dervician and Gjirokastra. The latter have generally remained culturally conservative, anti-communist and Orthodox. For some, a private adherence to the old ideal of unity with Greece must have remained alive, and, although there are no records of oppositional political activity during the communist period that would demonstrate this definitively, individual minority members were occasionally arrested and tried for "anti-state" offences.¹⁶

Assessing the consequences of the old regime's repressive measures is further complicated by the difficulty of arriving at an exact view of the role and status of ethnic Greeks within the PLA and the Democratic Front, the two main popular organisations officially sanctioned under communism. As with the rest of the population, most ethnic Greeks belonged to the Democratic Front, the umbrella organisation, but the PLA's membership records did not register ethnicity. It is likely that the number of ethnic Greeks in the party, along with the size of the Greek minority as a whole, was augmented by the wave of refugees fleeing Greece following the end of the Greek civil war in 1949. In the main, these were leftists, and some were active Communists who rose to important positions in the Albanian regime.¹⁷ Their orientation was secular and anti-clerical, and they appear to have played little part in activities opposing the regime. At the same time, however, apart from a few prominent figures, it appears that many ethnic Greeks did not feel secure with their cultural identity as Greeks within the party, often adopting Albanian names and severing any remaining links with the Orthodox Church during the period in which it remained legal. Indeed, with no provision for higher education in Greek at Tirana University or travel abroad for such purposes after 1961, entrance to elite cadres for the nearly two-thirds of Albania's population born after the Second World War was restricted to those who affirmed, at least outwardly, an entirely Albanian cultural identity.

It is in the light of this legacy of state treatment of Greek-speakers in pre-communist and communist Albania that contemporary Greek demands must be understood. Moreover, this legacy serves to influence aspects of present-day Albanian government officials' understanding of how problems concerning the Greek minority should be managed. To be sure, the assertion of ethnic minority demands is partly a consequence of the opportunities for political entrepreneurship afforded by the fluid domestic context of post-communist politics. Most importantly, however, in the case of both the pre-communist and communist regimes, policies designed to impede the maintenance or growth of a distinct Greek ethnic identity within Albania were implemented within, and were powerfully shaped by, an environment of official irredentist claims by Greece. Following a brief *rapprochement* in the post-communist period, contemporary ethnic relations and official treatment of the Greek minority within Albania have been somewhat conditioned by the sub-national division among the ethnic Albanian majority as well.

After Communism: Positive Developments in Inter-Ethnic Relations

With the communist regime's collapse in the winter of 1990-1991 and its replacement by a democratically-elected National Unity government the following spring, independent ethnic minority organisations were quickly established. For example, the Vlachs formed the National Vlach Association, with offices in Tirana under the chairmanship of Themistocles Cule, the Armenians organised the Armenians of Albania, and so on. The Greek minority formed the Omonia organisation in February 1990. In all cases, these were originally loosely-organised human rights associations established with the aim of winning ethnic minority rights within a functioning multicultural civil society operating along Western lines.¹⁸ In general, they came into being as a result of popular movements imitating those seen across Eastern Europe on Italian and Greek television broadcasts. Thus, there were no established leadership structures; instead, prominent individuals who had some knowledge of politics gained a more or less spontaneous following of friends, neighbours, and acquaintances within the community. Conceived within a political context in which the one-party state was at least formally still in existence, even if its coercive powers had collapsed, their chief priority was the establishment of genuine cultural and political independence for their members.

In fact, many of the new leaders of the Greek minority in the south had at one time been part of the old political establishment, with the important consequence that the duration of Omonia's initial organisational disarray was relatively short. As has been noted, some ethnic Greeks achieved considerable prominence in the post-war years under communism, particularly ex-partisans from towns in the south such as Saranda, Himara and Vlora who had fought alongside Hoxha against the Germans. And, as has been true throughout Albania, long-time Communists, whether at the local, regional, or national level, were able to metamorphose successfully and retain their positions within the political elite after the regime's collapse - often through a nationalist "switch in time" that has benefited elites in much of Eastern Europe. At the same time, defence of Greek rights appears to have led in many cases to expulsion from the Party for promoting "nationalism" or "separatism", particularly in the late 1980s, while subsequent links with the opposition rendered the political past of these ethnic Greek leaders entirely unimportant. On the contrary, during the popular turmoil and street politics from 1989-1991, it appeared as though

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burgeoning political pluralism would usher in a new dawn both for minority identity and those political elites who sought to capitalise on it.

Given the centrality of Orthodoxy to Slavic and Greek ethnic identity, the restoration of religious rights played a large part in the activities of several groups. The ferocity with which the communist regime repressed religion, particularly in the years until Hoxha's death in 1985, meant that much of the country's religious infrastructure was decimated by the time the ban on religious observance, codified as Article 37 of the 1976 constitution, was rescinded in early spring 1989. For Omonia, the restitution of Church property lost during the forced appropriations of the late communist period became a clear priority. Thus, almost immediately after Omonia's formation in 1990, a delegation of ethnic Greeks met the Albanian government to discuss religious issues.

Because the early leadership of Omonia was in some part composed of former communists, they were often well connected in Tirana and able to bring effective pressure to bear on the government. On the whole, their demands, as well as similar objectives on the part of other groups, were accomplished without much difficulty or official obstruction. Title to Church property was clearly delineated in the localities, with few of the competing ownership claims that have complicated the restitution process throughout Eastern Europe. Under the chaotic conditions prevailing in Albania at the time, most local communities simply seized back their old church or mosque buildings from the state without official sanction.¹⁹ In most cases, the buildings had been used for agricultural storage purposes, and villagers simply removed their contents and began to restore them for religious use with makeshift altars and furnishings. For a time, there was a significant degree of inter-religious cooperation in these developments, as in 1989 and 1990 in the northern city of Shkodra, where Muslims, Catholics, and the region's few Orthodox Albanians combined forces to bring pressure on the local and national government to reopen religious buildings for worship.

In fact, most religious groups found that they were pressing at an open door with respect to the 1989-1991 Tirana governments. Despite the constitutional ban, relaxation of official repression of religion as such, not merely Orthodoxy, had begun in 1988-1989, exemplified by improved relations with the Catholic Church, which culminated in Mother Theresa's visit to Albania in February 1989. Reformist Communist leaders such as Fatos Nano and Ramiz Alia, who led the PLA's successor, the Socialist Party, after its decisive victory in the 1991 elections, were well aware of the gross human rights violations that had occurred during Hoxha's effort to make Albania an atheist state in the 1970s. They viewed generosity towards the various religious groups and churches as both a morally and politically desirable policy, one also likely to win approval from the international community. Indeed, foreign investment was being courted not only from the West, but also, increasingly, from Islamic countries, making a clear policy of religious tolerance essential.

This liberalising trend with respect to religion was accompanied by an initial extension of formal national minority rights in political institutions. Faced with a multitude of pressing economic, social and political problems, the last communist government in 1989 and the first National Unity governments in 1990 and 1991 had little difficulty in agreeing to such demands. In the south, Greek minority representation already existed, in a tenuous form, through many local decision-making bodies. Ethnic Greeks who were Communists, or who, if not, were prepared to work with the one-party system, were often involved in local administration in

the southern minority areas and were thus able to assist with the projection of wider minority demands in Tirana. Indeed, Omonia's early success was greatly facilitated by the fact that already at this early stage, as in most later political debate, it acted as a united body with a clear and well-supported local and national leadership (who, given the geographical concentration of the minority, were often the same people). As a result, a generally agreed-upon agenda of human rights demands, in addition to those concerning religious exercise, quickly emerged. One of the most important demands, the right to travel, was immediately secured, thereby allowing ethnic Greeks, often after a fifty-year hiatus, to visit relatives in Greece.

Rising Tensions in Albania's Ethnic Relations

Despite Omonia's early achievements in the immediate aftermath of communism's collapse in 1990 and 1991 - a period culminating in the March 1992 election of the first completely non-communist government under Dr Sali Berisha - problems for the Greek minority soon began to surface. While such basic human rights as freedom of religious worship, publication and travel had quickly been secured, hopes on the Greek side for sustained progress in institutionalising harmonious relations with the ethnic Albanian majority were not realised.

This reflected a change in atmosphere that was partly linked to the Albanian economy's growing dependence on income from migrant workers in Greece. Following the removal of border controls in December 1990, large numbers of poor Albanians fled to Greece as illegal migrant workers, contributing to increased tension between the two countries.²⁰ Within Albania, the economic status of many Greek communities quickly began to rise above that of ethnic Albanian communities, as minority members found work and residence rights in Greece easier to obtain. This disparity in treatment by Greece led to conflict, first, over ethnic Greeks' demands for greater Greek-language educational provision. While ethnic Greeks perceived a continuing absence of teachers and resources, as well as little interest at the national level in altering the communist-era definition of minority areas entitled to Greek-language schools, ethnic Albanians regarded Greeks as having access to financial aid from Greece and the Greek diaspora that were unavailable to them, as well as medical treatment and other benefits in the northern Greek town of Ioannina. In 1991, Greek shops were attacked in the coastal town of Saranda, home to a large minority population, and inter-ethnic relations throughout Albania worsened.

There was also a widespread view among ethnic Albanians that the Tirana government disproportionately favoured the Greek minority in the process of land privatisation. This perception was in turn nurtured by the underlying division within the ethnic Albanian majority. Berisha's newly elected anti-communist government, dominated by northern Ghegs, was viewed as attempting to buy off ethnic Greek radicalism while providing few benefits to ethnic Albanians in the Tosk-dominated (and historically far more pro-communist) south. In fact, the Greek minority was regarded by the Berisha government as being highly susceptible to extremist Orthodox revivalist propaganda broadcast from expanding irredentist organisations based in northern Greece. However, while religious differences among Albanians, who adhere to Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Sunni and Bektashi Islam, have historically played little role in shaping domestic political conflict, Tirana's suspicion embraced Orthodox Albanians as well, as they, too, have often been influenced by anti-government propaganda from northern Greek

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bishops. With very few Orthodox Albanians whatsoever in the north, the Berisha government, composed almost entirely of Sunni Muslims, demonstrated its lack of sympathy for either Orthodoxy in general or the Greek minority - all of whose members are Orthodox - by proposing in 1994 a requirement that all heads of religious groups be Albanian born. While the constitutional draft containing this provision was voted down in a referendum in November 1994, an important reason for its rejection was that the Albanian Orthodox Church had invited Archbishop (*Eparch*) Anastasios Giannulatos, a Greek citizen, to lead it temporarily in its effort to rebuild.²¹

Thus, what many southern Tosks perceived as an alliance between the Greek minority and the Gheg north could be (and for many Orthodox Tosks evidently was) interpreted as Gheg power exercised with a view to asserting northern interests over those of the south as a whole. With respect to the Greek minority's demands for recognition of cultural difference, this meant that ethnic Albanians' deep-seated suspicion of Greek irredentism, which could be expected under any government, was exacerbated by the sectionally-based Gheg hegemony - justified partly in terms of hostility toward residual Communist influence - extended throughout its region of settlement.

The most visible focus of the Berisha government's fear of Greek irredentism was the Northern Epirus Liberation Front (MAVI), which claimed responsibility for the car bombing of Albania's ambassador to Greece in 1991 and was accused in 1994 and 1995 of orchestrating attacks on Albanian border posts and military personnel.²² However, the MAVI threat could be magnified only after relations between ethnic Albanians and Greeks had already deteriorated following the attempt by the Socialist-led government to prevent Omonia's participation in the 1992 elections on the grounds that it represented exclusively ethnic interests and was therefore illegal. Following strong protests by the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Council of Europe, the United States, and other powerful international actors, this decision was reversed. However, while Omonia ultimately did participate, under the name of the Party of Human Rights, and won seven seats in the 140-seat Assembly, the episode was extremely damaging to inter-ethnic relations. The government attempted to improve matters with the mixed electoral system introduced by Vilson Ahmeti's interim government prior to the 1992 elections: 100 seats are allocated on a majority basis in single-member districts, with the remaining forty seats divided proportionally among parties receiving at least 4% of the popular vote.²³ The concentration of ethnic Greeks in and around centres of Hellenism such as Saranda and Gjirokastra could guarantee their election there, but nowhere else in the country is success for an Omonia-based candidate possible. While it has been possible for the overwhelmingly ethnic Greek villages along the Aaos River valley stretching toward the Greek-Albanian border to secure majorities on municipal councils, the same electoral calculus generally applies at the local level. Faced with their inability to secure significant representation in national bodies, disagreement began to arise within Omonia, and among the Greek population generally, as to the surest means toward amassing the political power necessary to secure their demands, particularly expansion of Greek-language education to areas outside the old Communist-designated minority zones. This debate over means rapidly developed into a debate over ends.

As the internal debate that accompanied Omonia's evolution from a human rights association into a political party became marked by the formal emergence of moderate and radical wings, the absence of either Albanian or Greek government support for their agenda quickly put party moderates at a serious disadvantage.

The moderate wing has campaigned for ethnic Greek interests within a modified framework of the current Albanian state, while Omonia's radical wing calls for border revisions and *enosis* (union with Greece). An important turning point came in April 1992, when Omonia's chairman, the moderate Sotir Qiriazati, wrote an open letter to the Greek Prime Minister, Constantine Mitsotakis, calling for an autonomous region to be established in southern Albania and requesting substantial Greek government support for the region's social and economic development. These proposals were rejected not only by the Albanian side, which unanimously views ethnic territorial autonomy as tantamount to eventual secession, but also by Athens. This failure resulted in a transfer of the political initiative within Omonia to the radicals, who, entirely un beholden to Albanian government support, argued that only a strategy guided by *enosis* would secure the necessary commitment from Athens.

The moderates' view of the Greek minority's position within the Albanian polity has been weakened further by the highly constitutive role of religion in ethnic Greek identity. Indeed, disputes between Omonia's moderate and radical wings have been subsumed in the complex history of the autocephalous Albanian Orthodox Church, with religious leaders playing a central part in defining alternative conceptions of the ethnic group's political status.²⁴ The radicals were supported by the influential Orthodox bishop of Konitsa in Greece, the late Metropolitan Sevastianos, whose diocese includes parts of southern Albania, while Archbishop Giannulatos is a leading moderate who has attempted to mitigate irredentist claims. However, while the lack of trained clerics led Albanian Orthodox authorities in 1990 to invite the Patriarchate of Constantinople (Istanbul), with Albanian government approval, to appoint ethnic Greeks to senior positions in the Church, many Albanians view this as part of a Greek effort to gain lasting control over Albanian Orthodoxy. Thus, given that the Albanian Church's establishment in 1929 and independence (recognised in 1937) represented a key element of state-building in interwar Albania, and that Orthodoxy alone underpins the Greek conception of southern Albania as northern Epirus, Archbishop Giannulatos's mere presence in his religious role has served to emphasise the ambiguity of his political position.

Against this background, it is not surprising that the first substantial open conflict in the Gjirokastra region, in the spring of 1993, occurred after the expulsion of an ethnic Greek Orthodox priest, Archimandrite Chrysostomos Maidonis, for allegedly taking part in subversive, anti-Albanian activities. He was accused by Tirana of abusing his ministry by preaching separatism and *enosis* among the Greek minority. In widespread unrest in the Greek villages, local leaders were arrested and there were well-attested accounts of human rights violations in the area, including the sentencing of the mayor of Dervician, a minority village, to six months in prison for raising the Greek flag on Greece's national day.²⁵ This was followed by a noticeable expansion of surveillance of the minority by the reformed secret police in the minority areas, as well as a revival of the population movement controls that originated under the Communist regime. The Greek government's response was swift: it stepped up deportation of Albanians working illegally in Greece and cancelled three official visits to Tirana after pro-Maidonis demonstrations outside the Albanian embassy in Athens led the Berisha government to recall its ambassador.²⁶ Thus, the increase in the level of Albanian repression, and the Greek government's reaction to it, demonstrated how porous boundaries between politically salient organisations and actors at the sub-governmental level in the "home state" and the "kin state" can shape official behaviour in ways dangerous for inter-ethnic, and inter-state, peace.²⁷

Bilateral Politics, Emigration & Domestic Ethnic Relations

Since the end of communism, there has been a considerable increase in Albanian-Greek trade, with the very large illegal migrant work-force in Greece representing a major factor in bilateral ties.²⁸ Greece is the second largest source of foreign investment in Albania, after Italy. Road links with Greece have expanded rapidly, particularly with the improvement in the Ioannina/Kakavia border route and the rebuilt road connection to the southeastern frontier post at Kapstica. These link the Korca region with the northern Greek region around Kastoria and offer good road connections to the economic centre of Thessaloniki.²⁹ A new border post has been opened in the Timfi mountains, north of Konitsa, in 1999.

This represents a major change over the past decade. There was virtually no trade at all between the two countries until 1976, when an economic agreement between Tirana and the Karamanlis government was signed. Even then, a formal state of war, dating back to the Italian invasion of Greece from occupied Albania in 1940, remained in effect until 1981. In the years between 1976 and 1989, electricity imports from Albania were integrated into the Greek national power grid and a number of smaller-scale bilateral relationships developed. Recently, plans have been proposed for a new major hydroelectric scheme on the Aaos River, although the proposals have been strongly opposed by environmentalists and it remains to be seen if they will come to fruition.

In the period since the end of communism, these economic ties have been augmented by a new and central relationship: the very large sums of money remitted to Albania by the migrant workers. While accurate official data is not available, independent analyses have estimated that as much as one-third of Albania's total hard currency earnings emanate from this source, with as many as 300,000 workers active in the Greek economy at any one time. This amounts to \$400 million per year and contributed significantly to the stability of the Albanian lek for much of the post-communist period. (Smaller sums are remitted from Italy, the USA, Germany, and Switzerland, as well as from other countries with a sizeable Albanian diaspora.)

The Greek remittances have given Greece a great deal of leverage over the Albanian economy, as was demonstrated following the expulsion of Maidonis in 1993 and again in the autumn of 1994 with another mass expulsion of Albanian migrant workers by Greece after five OMONIA activists were charged with espionage and arms possession in connection with a MAVI raid on an Albanian army barracks in which two Albanian soldiers died.³⁰ At the same time, the pattern of migration in search of employment has extended this leverage over Albanian governmental policy to the Greek minority to a much greater extent than its relative size would indicate, significantly affecting Albanian domestic politics. The centrality of emigration and employment policy at the meeting between Greek Foreign Minister Karolos Papoulias and his Albanian counterpart in March 1995, for example, is a clear indication of how Greek diplomacy has focused on balancing both visas and economic aid against issues affecting the Greek minority.

At the same time, however, emigration patterns into Greece have proven to be a source of disruption and increased ethnic tension for many of Albania's Greek communities. With the demise of authoritarian rule and the advent of freedom of movement, a substantial number of ethnic minority Greeks, too, immediately began to work in Greece as part of the estimated 100,000 Albanian nationals in the current Greek labour force. Greek Prime Minister Constantine Mitsotakis appealed

to the northern Epirus villagers in 1991 to remain in Albania in order to preserve the area's "Hellenism" but this had little effect. As a result, some villages have suffered from severe depopulation, with quite serious consequences for the social structure of many localities, particularly those on the coastal fringe between Saranda and Himara, where an absence of able-bodied young men has caused additional burdens to fall on women and the elderly.³¹

These developments became politically salient to the extent that they structured controversy surrounding the land privatisation process around the ethnic divide. While accurate statistics are unavailable, visual inspection confirms that large areas of fertile privatised land in and around ethnic Greek villages lie derelict and uncultivated due to ethnic Greek migration, whereas neighbouring ethnic Albanian villages, whose inhabitants find it difficult to obtain visas to work in Greece, are clearly land-hungry. Indeed, in addition to the belief that ethnic Greeks benefited from a political alliance with the Gheg-dominated government, the slightly higher birth-rate within the Albanian villages, has exacerbated the communal relative deprivation that fuels perceptions among ethnic Albanians in the south. Moslem towns near Greece like Konispol remain impoverished, while Greek minority towns nearby like Saranda are enjoying good economic development. Thus, inter-ethnic relations have been affected not merely by political developments at the national level, but also by the local-level politics of resource scarcity. While decisions made in Tirana regarding the treatment of Albania's Greek minority have clearly shaped these relations, the politicisation of ethnicity must also be viewed in terms of the operation of economic forces and social change driven by the opening of an often unruly border.

The Uncertain Political Future of the Greek Minority

Since the demise of one-party rule, the Greek minority has thus far been the only ethnic minority in Albania to pursue independent political participation. In all other cases, minorities are either very small and have confined their activities to cultural and human rights campaigns, or have failed to overcome internal obstacles to collective action (particularly the Roma and, to a lesser extent, the Vlachs). Others, such as the Jews, have left the country altogether, while, given their economic acumen, external links and cultural cohesiveness, the ethnic Greeks' position corresponds in many ways to that of the Jews in Hapsburg (or Armenians in Ottoman) society, attracting similar political distrust. Unlike these groups, however, the acute climate of anti-Greek feeling in Albanian politics and society produced by the Greek minority's assertiveness is linked to deep-rooted problems in bilateral relations.

Although there are no significant explicitly racist or chauvinist political parties in Albania, there are many individual politicians who adhere to very strong anti-Greek views, which in turn affects the orientation of virtually all ethnic Albanian political parties.³² In fact, problems concerning the minority have been manipulated by the widespread use of xenophobic stereotypes on both sides of the border. Even quality newspapers in Greece often discuss Albania as though it were a protectorate, while many well-educated Albanians appear tacitly to believe that their country will become one if Greek minority demands are met. Yet, again, it is important to bear in mind that such anti-minority prejudices are manipulable in the post-communist period and serve to politicise religious, cultural, and economic cleavages along ethnic lines precisely because they are entrenched in the irredentism of the post-

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independence and inter-war periods and the national division among Albanians reinforced during the wartime resistance.

These factors have combined not only to make Omonia's inclusion in any governing coalition in Tirana in the near future unlikely, but also call into question whether Omonia will continue to participate in the electoral process at all. Greek policy may well be influenced by the probably irresistible demand of ethnic Albanian dominated Kosovo for independence and possible eventual union with Albania. In such a scenario, the demands of Kosovar Albanians for independence may well reinforce those of the Greek minority in Albania. While neither Greek leaders within Albania nor their protagonists in Greece have ever called for reconsidering the Greek minority's position as part of a wider Balkan settlement involving Kosovo, the Berisha government's 1992-1997 period of intermittent repression should be understood in part as a reaction to Greek minority demands for an autonomy arrangement similar to that enjoyed by Kosovar Albanians prior to Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic's own crackdown on the province.³³

In these circumstances, it is likely that government pressure to restrict Greek aspirations will continue, even if some of the more extreme methods of surveillance and control adopted by the Berisha government were defeated by internal opposition in 1997 or modified by international pressure. This is true despite developments since late 1996, when serious strains linked to the growth of high interest "pyramid" investment schemes began to appear in the Albanian financial system. By December, a financial collapse, beginning in Vlora and Tirana, but soon affecting the entire country, had become imminent. After a period of chaotic street protest, anarchy overtook many southern cities. The Berisha government's attempts to restore order failed, and an armed population took control of most towns.³⁴ The Greek minority played a significant role in these events, with some of the strongest oppositional activity focused in the most densely Greek-populated areas.³⁵ Although allegations of Greek involvement in the leadership of the uprising were made by the Berisha government, there was no evidence of ethnic conflict between Greeks and Albanians in the popular struggle leading to early elections and the return of the Socialist government in June 1997. On the contrary, while many of Berisha's right-wing supporters (particularly ex-émigrés) had their property ransacked, ethnic Greeks were left alone.³⁶

Nevertheless, there may be some truth in the view held by many Berisha supporters, including Kosovar Albanians, that the victory of the Socialist Party - with its predominantly southern support base - was a victory for Greece and Greek regional influence. During the transition period between the Berisha government's resignation and the election of the Socialist government, the emigration question re-emerged to dominate the bilateral agenda, with the Greek government promising to make available to Albanians an extensive work permit scheme that would legalise tens of thousands of guest workers. However, although relations between the two Socialist governments appear amicable, there has been significant parliamentary and public opposition to the proposals in Greece, and it is doubtful that real progress will be made on other traditionally divisive issues.³⁷ Revealingly, an agreement on improving Eparch Athanasios Giannulatos' status and position, concluded during Greek Foreign Minister Papoulias' visit to Tirana in 1995, has done virtually nothing to diminish controversies concerning the appointment and influence of Orthodox Church personnel.³⁸

At the same time, it seems unlikely that the Greek minority in Albania will be able to insulate itself from the wider fate of the country, which is bound to be uncertain

and fraught with social and economic tensions for the foreseeable future. Even prior to the outbreak of widespread civil unrest following the collapse of the investment schemes in early 1997, the attack on the United States Embassy in Tirana by over one thousand youths in March 1995 provided a strong indication of the very high social tension within Albania caused by mass employment and inflation. Such factors may very well aggravate national security concerns whose resolution awaits a wider Balkan settlement. For, while the removal of Sali Berisha's highly confrontational and polarising government has benefited bilateral relations and contributed to regional stability, particularly in terms of economic cooperation, the more fundamental and historically ingrained cultural, religious and social divisions that have shaped Albania's polity and political regimes will remain.³⁹

ENDNOTES

¹ See Enver Hoxha, *Two Friendly Peoples* (Tirana: 8 Nentori, 1985) for a general view of how the Albanian communists viewed the Greek minority issue after 1944 and under communism. It is clear that Hoxha had little information on the early stages of the Greek Civil War and its effects on the Greek minority in Albania.

² See Institute of Marxist-Leninist Studies, *History of the Party of Labour of Albania*, 2nd ed (Tirana: 8 Nentori, 1982) for the official communist view of Albanian history. See also Stefanaq Pollo and Arben Puto, *The History of Albania*, trans Carole Wiseman & Ginnie Hole (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981).

³ See Stavro Skendi, *The Albanian National Awakening, 1878-1912* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967). See also Miranda Vickers, *The Albanians: A Modern History* (London: I B Tauris, 1995), p32-53.

⁴ See Vickers, *op cit*, Chapter 5.

⁵ The history of Albania during the Second World War has been highly controversial, with most of the protagonists in the argument British ex-Special Operations Executive officers involved in the anti-Axis campaign. The best general account is to be found in Sir Reginald Hibbert, *Albania's National Liberation: The Bitter Victory* (London: Pinter, 1991). For a contrary view, see Sir Julian Amery, *Sons of the Eagle* (London: Macmillan, 1948). A good account of an important part of the military campaign is to be found in Brigadier T Davies, *Illyrian Venture* (London: The Bodley Head, 1952).

⁶ For an analysis of how elements of clan-based social organisation and its core principles of unbending loyalty and honour have influenced Albania's post-communist political culture, see Fabian Schmidt, "An Old System Blends into the Present", *Transition*, Vol 2, No 18 (6 September 1996), p50-53.

⁷ The figure of 3% is taken from estimates by the US Central Intelligence Agency, *CIA World Factbook, 1994*.

⁸ Miranda Vickers & James Pettifer, *Albania: From Anarchy to a Balkan Identity* (London: C Hurst, 1997), Chapter 10.

⁹ For a clear and accessible account of ancient history in the area that is now Albania, see the essay by Frank Walbank, 'Albania in Antiquity', in James Pettifer, ed, *Blue Guide: Albania* (New York: Norton, 1996).

¹⁰ For the best account of the destruction caused in Epirus and southern Albania by inter-communal violence during this period, as well as the main diplomatic intrigues which affected this region, see Rene Puaux, *The Sorrows of Epirus* (Chicago: Argonaut reprint, 1963).

¹¹ See Hoxha, *op cit*, p15ff.

¹² There has been very little study of the Northern Epirus issue in this period. For an interesting but highly pro-Greek view, see Pyrrus Ruches, *Albania's Captives* (Chicago: Argo Press, 1964).

¹³ See *Albania* (London: Naval Intelligence Handbook, 1945), p178ff.

¹⁴ For a valuable collection of documents, see Basil Kondis & Eleftheria Manda, eds, *The Greek Minority in Albania - A documentary record (1921-1993)*, (Thessaloniki: Institute of

Balkan Studies, 1994). For important background, see also Basil Kondis, *Greece and Albania, 1908-1914* (Thessaloniki: Institute of Balkan Studies, 1976).

¹⁵ The best account of this period can be found in Peter R Prifti, *Socialist Albania Since 1944* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1978).

¹⁶ See *Albania: Political Imprisonment and the Law* (London: Amnesty International, 1984).

¹⁷ Some important Albanian communist leaders were wholly or partly Greek, like long-serving Politburo member Spiro Koleka, who came from the predominantly ethnic Greek town of Himara.

¹⁸ See Vickers & Pettifer, *op cit*, Chapter 10.

¹⁹ See my report in *The Independent* (London), 6 February 1991. The best account in English of the outlook of the northern Greek bishops on the persecution of the Orthodox Church under communism is to be found in Metropolitan Sevastianos of Dryinoupolis, *Northern Epirus Crucified* (Athens, 1986).

²⁰ See Vickers & Pettifer, *op cit*, Chapter 10.

²¹ See Fabian Schmidt, "Between Political Strife and a Developing Economy," *Transition*, (1994 in Review: Part 1), p8.

²² It is not clear to what extent MAVI was a significant political and paramilitary formation rather than merely a fanatical splinter group. At the time, the Albanian government claimed that Greek army and secret police personnel were involved in the attacks. The name is adopted from the wartime Northern Epirot organisation which fought as a separate resistance group against the Axis in 1943. It was destroyed in vicious fighting with the German occupiers and the Albanian nationalist forces of the Balli Kombetar, and it played no part in the final liberation of the country.

²³ See Fabian Schmidt, "The Opposition's Changing Face," *Transition*, Vol 1, No 11 (30 June 1995), p50.

²⁴ For a comprehensive overview of church history from a Greek perspective, see, in Greek, 'The Albanian Autocephalous Orthodox Church by Apostolis Glavina, Ziti, Thessaloniki, 1992. See also Sevastianos, *op cit*.

²⁵ See Vickers & Pettifer, *op cit*, Chapter 10.

²⁶ Marianne Sullivan, "Mending Relations with Greece," *Transition*, Vol 1, No 15, (25 August 1995), p11-16.

²⁷ Focusing on the role of such organisations as the Orthodox Church thus represents an important qualification and extension of Rogers Brubaker's very useful "triadic" framework for analysing ethno-politics in Eastern Europe, where twentieth-century border movements have left national minorities in "home states" adjacent to their ethnic "kin states." See Rogers Brubaker, "Home States, Kin States, and Ethnic Minorities in the New Europe", *Daedalus* (1995).

²⁸ See Economist Intelligence Unit, *Albania Country Reports* (London: EIU, 1992-1997).

²⁹ See generally Blue Guide to Albania, *op cit*.

³⁰ *Balkan News* (Athens), November 1994. A great deal of other material related to the "Omonia Five" appeared in the Greek press at the time. The Greek police later began their own investigation of MAVI, arresting three Greek citizens and four Greek Albanians following another thwarted border raid in the spring of 1995. Confirming Albania's earlier accusations, the police said MAVI was likely headed by Anastasios Giorgos, a former Greek army officer, while the Greek press suggested that the Greek secret service may indeed have been either involved with the organisation or had overlooked its activities. At the same time, a former Greek government minister, Theodoros Pangalos, admitted that the Omonia Five had "very probably been linked" to MAVI. See Sullivan, *op cit*, p16.

³¹ See Vickers & Pettifer, *op cit*, Chapter 10.

³² Rightist forces such as the group led by Tomas Dosti within Berisha's Democratic Party, for example, played a prominent role in shaping the government's repressive anti-Greek measures from 1994 to 1996.

³³ These themes have frequently been aired in Albanian public debate, particularly in such newspapers as *Rilindja*, in which Kosovar influence is apparent.

³⁴ See Fabian Schmidt, "Pyramid Schemes Leave Albania on Shaky Ground", *Transition*, Vol 3, No 3 (7 March 1997), p8-10.

³⁵ See reports by Antony Loyd and James Pettifer in *The Times* (London), March 7-21 1997. The Greek minority in Saranda scored the first military success for the opposition by capturing a government tank on March 6.

³⁶ For a more detailed examination of the role of the Greek minority in the uprising, see James Pettifer, "The Greek Minority in the Albanian Rising", *Anglo-Hellenic Review*, No 16 (Autumn 1997), p7ff.

³⁷ Indeed, a new problem has emerged, as it is widely believed in Tirana that a large sum of aid money was stolen by the Berisha government, and/or people close to it, and placed in Greek banks. However, given restrictive Greek banking legislation, recovery will likely prove difficult for Fatos Nano's Socialist government even if criminal activity can be demonstrated.

³⁸ For example, conflict over Greek control of the Orthodox Church arose in 1996 in Elbasan.

³⁹ At the time of writing there is also increasing interest in the Cameria issue. For an Albanian view of the subject, see "British Imperialism and Ethnic Cleansing" by N G Zhagu, Tirana, 1995, also "Dokumente per Camerine 1912-1939", ed K Naska, Dituria, Tirana, 1999, and "Cameria Denoncon" by Albert Kotoni, Tirana, 1999. The late C M Woodhouse refers in passing to the Cam controversy in some of his historical and polemical works; see for instance "Apple of Discord", Hutchinson, London, 1948, p93ff for his views of the Cam role as alleged pro-Axis collaborators. Modern Greek scholars tend to differentiate between different groups of Cams, so that the Epirus coast stretching from the Albanian border north of the old Ottoman port of Sagiada down to Preveza is acknowledged as Cam, whereas the inland areas are claimed to be Greek-inhabited. This distinction would have an important effect on the current Albanian property claims. Albanians generally see the town of Filiates as the centre of Cam settlement in the region in modern times.

In the event of the Cam controversy developing internationally, this distinction is likely to encourage discussion of the British role in the events of the World War II period, as it is generally believed that the EDES Royalist militia leader Zervas was acting on Woodhouse's orders in moving against the Cams in 1943-44. Woodhouse has defended his decisions over the Cams by claiming that the interethnic conflict in Epirus, and also fighting between different wings of the Greek anti-Axis movement meant that two divisions of the communist-controlled ELAS popular army were tied up in Epirus and this helped save the British force under General Scobie in Athens from defeat in the Battle of Athens in 1944.

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Fax : (44) 1276 686880

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