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Ismail Kadare’s Idea of Europe

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ABSTRACT The aim of this article is to reconstruct and pinpoint the peculiarities of Ismail Kadare’s idea of Europe. Kadare’s idea of Europe, it is argued, differs from the ideas of Europe embraced or presumed by intellectuals like Paul Valéry, Georg Simmel, Danilo Kiš, Václav Havel, Adam Michnik, or Milan Kundera, or from that of the European Union. For Kadare it is literature rather than the polis or its particular ideology that is the guardian of European values. Thus the European legacy, in his view, is primarily Homeric rather than Socratic. I suggest first that the persecution of writers and the repression of literature in totalitarian regimes underlies Kadare’s idea of Europe. I then further characterize Kadare’s theme of persecution as a dialectic between regime and culture. Finally, I reconstruct Kadare’s narrative of Albania’s “return to Europe” as the struggle for recognizing Albania as the birthplace of European culture.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the works of Albanian writer Ismail Kadare have received widespread attention. Many scholars have taken an interest in Kadare’s attitude to Enver Hoxha’s Stalinist regime in the period 1961–90. Arshi Pipa, for instance, questions Kadare’s integrity, claiming that many of his novels bear “Hoxha’s imprimatur,” which would explain, he argues, why Kadare was able to survive as a writer, unlike so many of his fellow Albanian intellectuals. Piet de Moor, on the other hand, sees in Kadare a majestic artist who has skilfully engaged with Hoxha in a silent duel. For Peter Morgan, Kadare is the Aeschylus of Albania, who has protected its culture from the noxious influences of the Hoxha regime and other imperialist forces. Ani Kokobobo expresses great appreciation of Kadare’s surrealist portrayals of oppressive regimes as swinish worlds built on dreams and omens, driven by the unrestrained personal ambitions of politicians. Like De Moor and Morgan, and in contrast to Pipa, Kokobobo considers Kadare’s surrealism as a powerful critique of Hoxha’s Stalinist realism. For Rebecca Gould, Kadare is the master of allegory. She argues that Kadare’s continual recourse to allegory in his fiction is, in fact, a resistance to, and criticism of, a cruel regime.

What has tended to be underexplored in Kadare’s work is the peculiar nature and significance of his idea of Europe. Scholars like Morgan, Gould, and Kokobobo have
recognized the centrality of the idea of Europe in his work and have characterized it as post-colonial, Eurocentric and orientalist. Some have traced his idea of Europe to the Rilindja, the Albanian renaissance narrative, which, since the nineteenth century, has been embraced by many Albanian writers. These readings are correct. However, Kadare’s conception of the relationship between literature (in particular Homer) and Europe is in need of further elaboration because it reveals an atypical understanding of the roots of Europe and the origin of European values. I propose to show that Kadare’s idea of Europe should be understood as an Albanian idea of a “rebirth” of Europe in the context of Ottoman and Stalinist annihilations of European culture. This Rilindja idea differs from the more commonly endorsed non-Albanian ideas of Europe. Paul Valéry formulated the widely accepted idea of Europe as “all race and all territory that has been successively Romanized, Christianized and submitted, as far as the mind is concerned, to the discipline of the Greeks.” According to this “classical” view, the roots of Europe and the origin of European values can be found in the polis, primarily in the Athenian polis and in Socratic reasoning. For Kadare, on the other hand, literature is the guardian of European values which is why the origins of the idea of Europe should be sought in Homer rather than in the Athenian polis. The European legacy, in his view, is primarily Homeric rather than Socratic.

In the first section of this article, I shall discuss the ambiguous relationship between literature and the political regime. I argue that, for Kadare, as Pipa has noted, there is in the beginning not politics or a particular regime, but the word, the book, the writer—Homer. Kadare, Albania’s bard, holds that the legends recited by Illyrian rhapsodists have been more influential in shaping Albania than any regime, which is why those who tried to conquer Albania considered these legends as highly dangerous. Given the constant persecution of writers under Stalinist regimes, Kadare’s own works reflect a compromise between his loyalty to the artistic demands of literature, his vocation as a writer, and the need to survive under an oppressive regime. The silent duel between Kadare and Hoxha, the dangerous struggle between the power of the pen and the power of the sword, is further worked out in the second section. In the final section I reconstruct Kadare’s Rilindja narrative of Albania’s “return to Europe.” According to this narrative, Albanians are the heirs of Homer, the guardians of European culture who have been betrayed and unduly cut off from Europe by being imprisoned in anti-European regimes for more than half a millennium. Kadare’s lifelong endeavour, I argue, has been to gain wider recognition of Albania’s ancient European identity and thereby to enable its re-inclusion in European society.

**PERSECUTION AND THE ART OF WRITING**

The Hoxha regime (1941–85) can be defined as a totalitarian regime with distinctive Albanian features, such as its clan structure. A totalitarian regime, as Czeslaw Milosz explains, is characterized by the “rule over men’s mind,” that is, the control over the thoughts, dreams, consciousness, imagination, memory and forgetfulness, and language of its people. Since freedom of expression was a threat to the Hoxha regime, literary freedom was almost totally absent. The regime exercised total control over language and communication and, as Morgan emphasizes, tried to dislocate and reorganize the...
imagination itself. All aspects of culture, including consciousness, morals, speech, science and art, were regulated by the regime. Writers who did not comply with the official literary style or content were always in grave danger, and many were imprisoned or killed. Totalitarian regimes are all too well aware of the power of literature, of its potential to shape people’s identity and consciousness, which is why writers are seen as deadly enemies. Milosz has compared the condition of writers under totalitarian regimes to living in a concentration camp. Despite their relatively privileged position as writers in the totalitarian regime, a misplaced word can be a fatal error. Kadare too has drawn parallels between living under a totalitarian regime and life in a concentration camp as narrated in the Holocaust literature of writers like Imre Kertész.

Kadare, I suggest, should therefore be seen as a privileged yet persecuted writer of a Stalinist dictatorship. The novels and essays that he wrote following the death of Hoxha in 1985 and the fall of Albanian communism in 1990 recreate his experience of persecution and, I would argue, his particular style of writing is its product. For Leo Strauss it was the philosopher, as epitomized by the trial and death of Socrates, rather than the artist or Homeric bard who was the object of the regime’s persecution and the creator and guardian of the European legacy. By his close reading of philosophical texts, Strauss traced the hidden ideas that could be (mis)construed to undermine the established regime. He claimed that while their esoteric writing on fundamental matters of truth enabled philosophers to express their thoughts, their thoughts could not be deciphered by the rulers of the state but only by the very few—by their own fellow philosophers. The case of writers in totalitarian regimes differs from that of the ancient Greek philosophers who were persecuted in that they generally write for the oppressed rather than for fellow intellectuals. They write for the oppressed, the dehumanized subjects of totalitarian statehood, in the belief that literature provides a sphere of inner freedom, preserves the conscience, and reawakens a crushed sensibility and commitment to higher cultural aspirations. Thus writers like Boris Pasternak and Anna Akhmatova in Soviet Russia, and Kadare under the Hoxha regime were fully aware of their duty and privilege to influence society. These writers identified with the oppressed, sharing their hopes, fears and dreams, and became their voice in denouncing totalitarianism. Such writers, accordingly, could never write in a foreign language, but had to use the language of the oppressed so as to grant them access to their literature – and thereby to a condition of inner freedom. As Kadare retrospectively defined his role under the Hoxha regime:

[T]he Albanians had in me a writer who connected them with the world. I dominated our cultural life and I was safeguarding Albanian culture with my work. ... What I was trying to do was to give a chained people a certain nourishment—a cultural richness comparable to that of the free peoples of the world.

The task of writers in totalitarian regimes, in other words, is to provide the vision or ideal that can make the life of the oppressed bearable. In Kadare’s novels, everyday existence is gloomy, cruel and sterile. It reminds one of death. But in Kadare’s idyllic Albania of the past – a heroic past – there is life, humaneness, real European culture. Kadare’s idyllic Albania is the opposite of, and the alternative to, the contemporary, modern Albania under Hoxha’s Stalinist rule.
Kadare argues that literature and totalitarianism are intrinsically at odds with each other. Writing can be understood as obeying what Pierre Bourdieu calls the laws of the “literary field.” In novels like *The Shadow* (1986) and essays like *Invitation à l’Atelier de l’Écrivain* (1991), Kadare argues that such laws include the artistic liberties of a writer to deliberately misrepresent historical “facts,” manipulate chronology, creatively misread or misquote other writers or scientists, and so forth, for the purposes of the story. Like Ivo Andrić and Danilo Kiš, or Gustave Flaubert, among others, Kadare uses para-literary and documentary material for writing fictionalized history.

The literary field is an autonomous universe endowed with specific laws of creative work, free of political and ideological influences (including censorship). Totalitarian regimes invade this universe, either destroying literature or turning it into a tool of propaganda. Hence, under the regimes of Stalin and Hoxha there could be no alliance between literature and the regime. To be a writer, a “real” writer, the laws of literature have to be obeyed and these laws necessarily contradict the “laws” of totalitarian regimes. Stalinist regimes attempted to crush the literary field by turning writers into regime writers, by subjecting them to the regime doctrine of socialist realism. Some writers, like Aleksey Tolstoy in the Soviet Union, indeed became regime writers and enjoyed many of the state privileges the regime conferred on its elite, while others, the “real writers,” resisted and upheld the rights of literature in their struggle against the regime. Exile is no option for such writers for it would mean escaping the struggle. Like Pasternak in the Soviet Union, Kadare lived under the sword of Damocles of the secret police. Like Pasternak, Kadare too had his “Albanian Bukharin,” as he put it, which enabled him to survive the struggle with the authorities. Todi Lubonja, director of state broadcasting and television, defended his writings, until Lubonja fell from grace with Hoxha during the purges of the early 1970s. Kadare’s life, both as a writer and as a person, was in danger.

Kadare’s survival and that of his wife, Elena Gushi-Kadare (the first woman writer to have had her work published in Albania), has been attributed to his compromising with Hoxha to avoid persecution. Pipa sees their “gentleman’s agreement” as an “unholy alliance between dictatorial power and literary talent.” There may be reasons for thinking that Kadare did indeed benefit from the tyrant’s protection. Hoxha and Kadare, as well as another important writer who survived, Dritëro Agolli, were from the same town of Gjirokastra. Hoxha was known to be an admirer of Kadare’s works, but this did not prevent him from suddenly condemning Kadare’s antisocialist realism at a Party Congress in 1967, and publicly warning him. To ward off persecution, Kadare promised to write an epic novel on Hoxha and of his break with the Soviet Union in 1960–61, which Kadare interpreted as the Albanian leader’s heroic battle against an overwhelming Asiatic force. Three years later, in 1971, Hoxha and Kadare met for the first and only time in person, and Hoxha enquired about the promised epic. In the autumn of 1972, Hoxha demanded Kadare to deliver the manuscript, later published as *The Great Winter*. Hoxha is said to have liked Kadare’s flattering literary portrait, even though it was officially denounced and censored, and was later republished in 1977. Thus Kadare survived as a writer, though many of his novels continued to be banned, while other Albanian writers were more cruelly persecuted.
The Attack on Literature

Persecution and the regime’s relentless efforts to “re-educate” its prisoners and attack its writers is a recurrent theme in Kadare’s novels. In *The Twilight of the Steppe Gods* (1978), Kadare’s autobiographical novel on his student years in Moscow during the Pasternak Affair, and in *The Palace of Dreams* (1981), for example, the totalitarian regime is depicted as a reality of arcane mysteries, secretiveness, crimes and unknown rules, an Orwellian realm characterized by surveillance of thoughts and dreams. The main actors—inmoral sultans, pashas, viziers, pharaohs, dictators, ministers, party officials, Kafkaesque bureaucracies, Musilian men without character, censors and secret police agents—shape the dark, almost unimaginable hell of totalitarianism. The destiny of the regime typically depends on the brutal sexual lusts of those who rule or on state secrets entrusted to their courtesans. By presenting this kind of everyday existence in absurd and satiric images and metaphors, Kadare, like Danilo Kiš in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (1976), conveys at once the stark contrast between the ugliness and falsehood of totalitarian regimes on the one hand, and aesthetic beauty and European values, on the other. Kadare affirms that nothing is more catastrophic for European culture than oppressive regimes, Stalinism in particular, yet he also stresses that literature is at its best when it opposes oppression, when it is engaged in a Promethean duel with Zeus. The best literature, Kadare suggests, is written in a life-and-death battle between the pen and the sword, when the tyrant holds the absolute power to torture and kill the writer.

The fate of literature and hence of culture, as Kadare shows in his novels, depends on whether writers obey and defend the laws of their art against other laws. Totalitarian regimes destroy the cultural roots of a people by crushing the laws of the literary field, thereby destroying its “real” literature and its very (“authentic”) language. Milan Kundera, Vladimir Nabokov, and Joseph Brodsky wrote, as exiles in a foreign language. Kadare, like Andrić and Milosz, holds that for a writer to renounce his native tongue is a violation of the laws of literature and signifies a victory of the regime. The native tongue, for Kadare, is a cultural gift that cannot be thrown away: as the writer’s core value it should be protected at all costs, if the native culture is not to dry out in apathy, indifference, mediocrity and forgetfulness. In *Agamemnon’s Daughter* (1985), Kadare shows how oppressive regimes always sacrifice the language and the values that literature embodies—love in particular—on the altar of political fantasy. Agamemnon sacrificed Iphigenia, his own daughter, to please Artemis and to sail off to Troy. Stalin sacrificed his own son for political ends. In *The Palace of Dreams*, Mark-Alem Qyprilli denies his literary roots and mother tongue (in the Ottoman Empire, Albanian was forbidden) to have a public career only to eventually to suffer from a deep melancholy and nostalgia for his lost homeland. Likewise, in *The Shadow* (1986), a colourless and faceless bureaucrat, an agent of the regime, dreams of escape, but, devoid of any cultural roots, does not dare to step outside the party line. Thus Kadare implies that the disrespect and contempt for the laws of literature, including writing in a foreign language, leads to a meaningless, regime-centred world.

Morgan suggests that Kadare’s “defence of Albanianness has its origins in Herderian conceptions of language and culture, which aim to conserve, maintain, and consolidate identity.” For Kadare, indeed, the cradle of European civilization is to be
found in Homer’s *Iliad*, which he mythologizes into an Albanian epic. In *The File on H.* (1981), he introduces the *Iliad* as an edited collection of ancient Albanian epic verses, which, in his fictional account, circulated in the highlands of northern Albania. In Albania, ancient orally transmitted epics such as *The Highland Lute*, Albania’s national epic, unlike other European epic poems, such as *Beowulf*, the *Song of Roland*, or the *Nibelungenlied*, had never been set down in writing. Kadare explains how, throughout the millennia, Albanian epic verses (e.g., the legend of Constantine and Doruntine, or the Albanian reaction to Slav migrations to the Balkans since the sixth century and patriotic folklore continued to be orally transmitted by rhapsodists, who upheld the ancient tradition of reciting poetry. In *The File on H.*, Kadare suggests that Homer might not have been an original writer but an editor of ancient Albanian verses. If so, it would mean that Albania’s ancient oral tradition forms the very foundation of the European legacy, with the Homeric imagination retaining its full vibrancy and relevance. In his reflections on the Balkans, Kadare interprets the conflict between the Albanians and Slavs as an *Iliad*. In *The Monster* (1965), the legends of Troy become the archetypes of totalitarian terror; and in the *Great Winter* (1977), Nikita Khrushchev’s revisionism is a Trojan horse, a strategy to make “satellite states” conform as subject colonies to the new Soviet version of communist doctrine.

The Homeric rhapsodist with his lute thus plays an important role in Kadare’s novels. He is the pre-Aeschylean forerunner of the writer and accordingly the original rival of oppressive regimes. He too is persecuted, for the rhapsodists, more than states or clans, symbolize the threat to the stability of the regime. In *The Three Arched Bridge* (1978), Kadare tells the story of the deceitful capture and murder of Albanian rhapsodists, allegedly invited to sing a ballad on the occasion of the inauguration of a new bridge. In *The Palace of Dreams*, two Albanian rhapsodists are again assassinated when, on the eve of Ramadan while performing in the mansion of the esteemed family of the Qyprillis, the sultan’s willing executioners suddenly intrude and summarily execute them and thus silence the Albanian epic, which represents the Ottoman nightmare of national awakening. For Kadare this violence against writers and artists along with the Sultan’s ban on Albanian culture, its language, names, proverbs, rites, and ballads, are part of the regime’s strategy of “disinculturation,” which was systematically applied under both Nazi and Communist regimes. The Nazis burnt thousands of books on the Bebelplatz in 1933, and Stalin punished Mandelstam for his Epigram, and made sure that novels that displeased him, such as Fadeyev’s *The Young Guard*, were publicly disparaged. The KGB seized manuscripts like Solzhenitsyn’s *The First Circle* and Grossman’s *Life and Fate* because they were considered to be even more damaging to Soviet interests than Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago*. In other words, by vividly narrating the fate of the persecuted rhapsodists in the Ottoman Empire, Kadare is in fact telling the contemporary story of their descendants under tyrannical regimes.

So the Ottoman regime, for Kadare, as for Andrić and other writers, incorporated all the mechanisms of brutal oppression invented by the ancient Persians, Romans, Mongols and Byzantines. For him, it is the prototype of a Stalinist regime. Stalin’s anti-Semitic terror of 1949–53, his deportation of the Kalmyks, Crimean Tartars, Balkars and Chechens, also occurred in the Ottoman Empire, with the Kosovar Albanians suffering a similar fate of ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia. In novels like *The
Siege (1970) and The Caravan of Veils (1980), Kadare portrays the Ottomans as obscure invaders of Europe. With the sword, the Ottomans violently establish their anti-European regime, characterized by their Arabic script, religion, sheiks, veils, harems, minarets, and so forth. In The Siege, inspired by The Siege of Shkodra (1504), written by the Albanian priest Marin Barleti, Kadare narrates the slow, tedious invasion of Albania from the point of view of an Ottoman chronicler, who speaks with contempt about European culture, including its unveiled and shameless women. In Elegy for Kosovo (1998), written in response to the 1998–99 Kosovo War, Kadare has his sultan Murad, who was killed in the historic Battle of Kosovo in 1389, say that “Europe is like a bad tempered mule” that must be brought to its knees. The recent Kosovo crisis, he suggests, is a result of the Turkish yoke. The fatal defeat in the Battle of Kosovo, the original historical trauma, has sown discord among the Albanians, Greeks, Serbs and Macedonians who had been unified in “Christian Europe.”

Kadare typically uses the Ottoman regime as an allegory for Stalinist regimes. At times, he parodies the excesses of these regimes, albeit to a far lesser extent than his Russian counterparts, Mandelstam, Grossman, or Solzhenitsyn. In Kadare’s novels, the past, mostly but not exclusively the Ottoman past, reveals the cruelties and irrationalities of present-day despotic regimes. In The Great Winter, he portrays the Kremlin under Khrushchev as the hell where, like a Shakespearean ghost, Stalin is still present. Likewise, the Hoxha regime, with its Stalinist terror, is styled as Dante’s inferno where there is neither law nor humaneness. In The File on H., the Serbian regime resembles that of the Ottoman Empire he had earlier parodied in The Palace of Dreams. This regime also attacks the Albanian epics: when two Irish scholars from Harvard University discover that Homer was not the original poet but the editor of ancient Albanian verses, the Serbian monk Dusˇan, an agent of the Yugoslav regime from the Patriarchate of Peć in Kosovo, destroys their sound recordings and the files they collected in the highlands. For Kadare, then, the Ottoman Empire, the Soviet Union, Hoxha’s Albania, and Yugoslavia are “Europe’s Other,” representing all that is contrary to Europe’s values and cultural legacy, which its writers seek to preserve and transmit.

The Rilindja Narrative of the “Return to Europe”

In the last decades of the twentieth century, dissident writers, like György Konrád and Václav Havel, often used the motto of the “return to Europe” to promote the reunification of a divided Europe and to justify EU membership after the Soviet Union had, in Milan Kundera’s words, “kidnapped” Central Europe. Kundera blamed the Western Europeans for forgetting their common history, for betraying Central Europe and leaving it defenseless in the Eastern bloc. Central Europe, like any myth, is a highly controversial notion, but, being “the truest home of Continental intellectuals,” it has certain features that set it apart from “Western Europe” and “Eastern Europe.” Kundera, like Joseph Roth, sees Central Europe as a complex of small nations (Kundera includes the Jews as one of these small nations), characterized by their fragile independent existence, cultural pluralism within a predominantly Roman Catholic and mostly (post-)Habsburg sphere, and powerful humanist traditions of
critical thinking and irony. Men like Jan Patočka, Václav Havel, Adam Michnik and Karol Józef Wojtyla personify such traditions. Eastern Europe, according to Kundera, is a different cultural complex, in that it has been shaped by Byzantine and Czarist legacies, Orthodox Christianity and, particularly, by Russian culture and pan-Slavism. The Western European trajectory, on the other hand, has been influenced by a transatlantic orientation, the shared experience of the Reformation, the rise of the sovereign state and the Enlightenment.

Kadare too claims that Albania has been “kidnapped” by an invasive, anti-European Empire and should “return to Europe.” But his source of inspiration differs from that of Central European writers. His idea of Europe is inspired by the Rilindja (Albanian renaissance) movement, which has tried, since the 1850s when Albania was still part of the Ottoman Empire, to bring Albania back to Europe. Rilindja writers, including Girolamo De Rada, Sami Frashëri, and Naim Frashëri (Albania’s national poet), struggled to liberate Albania from Ottoman orientalism, for example, by basing the modern Albanian alphabet on Latin letters. Influenced by Herderian, Romanticist conceptions of language and culture, as Morgan observes, the Rilindja idea of Europe is a literary idea that emphasizes Albania’s original European language, literature and culture. In contrast, according to Kundera, Central Europe was formed over the past millennium with the arrival of different peoples from the East—Slavs, Magyars, Avars, Jews, and so forth—who in time shook off their Eastern legacies and became culturally European, even though they may have retained their (originally) non-European languages. In Kadare’s Rilindja idea of Europe, on the other hand, the Albanians, together with the Greeks and the Romans, are the original, pre-Socratic Europeans and form the ancient cultural heart of Europe. Rilindja writers, including Fishta, Faik Konica, and Ernest Koliqi, and, from Kosovo, Rugova, Eqrem Basha, and Azem Shkreli have actively attempted to reform Albanian culture by emphasizing the ancient European identity of the Albanians and by endeavouring to inculcate it. Claiming their historic rights and Homeric literary tradition, they have relentlessly sought Europe’s recognition and Albania’s re-connection with Greece and Italy and Western Europe.

Hence Kadare’s Rilindja idea of Europe not only differs from the idea of Central Europe as constructed by intellectuals like Kundera and Konrád, but also differs from the visions of Europe promoted by Yugoslavian writers. Kiš discovers in Yugoslavia the embodiment of the idea of Central Europe, pointing out its cosmopolitan, transnational and multicultural character, and its union of small nations. Andrić, in his The Bridge over the Drina and Bosnian Chronicle, identifies Yugoslavia in general, and Bosnia in particular, as a transnational and multinational space that could, given its Habsburg, Slavic and Ottoman legacies, act as a Central European bridge between East and West. Likewise, Qosja, in his 2006 debate with Kadare, defines Albanian identity as a synthesis of East and West, with certain Ottoman features, religion in particular. In contrast with these writers, Kadare’s Rilindja narrative offers no vision of Central Europe as cosmopolitan or as a bridge between East and West. Located at the heart of Europe, Albania is, with ancient Greece and Rome, the cultural heartland of Western Europe and thus cannot act as a bridge between East and West. In direct opposition to Qosja, he insists that the Eastern world, including its Slavic and Ottoman legacies, is fundamentally alien to Albania’s European identity, to its language and literature. The Eastern world was imprinted on Albania by external, and fundamentally illegitimate, force.
Rilindja writers thus claim that the Albanians, oppressed and living on the fringes of Europe, are the oldest nation in Europe. Albania stands in contradistinction to the East (Russia or Turkey). In novels like *The File on H.* and *Aeschylus, or the Great Loser* (1985), Kadare insists that Albanians are not “hardly Europeans,” “strangers” to Europe, or threats to its values, as they are usually portrayed. Like Andric in his *Bridge on the Drina,* and like postcolonial theorists like Edward Said, Kadare bemoans Western Europe’s orientalist stigmatization that identifies the Albanians, along with the other Balkan peoples, as occidental, primitive and unenlightened. Albanians were “always already European,” the twin sister of ancient Greece and Rome, and as such they were the true guardians of the European legacy. Kadare emphasizes that the Albanians, as descendants of the Illyrians, were the original Europeans from whom Homer, father of European culture and legislator of its literary tradition, drew his inspiration. In *The File on H.*, he rewrites the story of the West by making two Irish Harvard scholars acknowledge Albania’s cultural achievements on the publication of the first Albanian epic verses in the 1920s. In *Doruntine* (1980), the heroine, living in France, is criticized for adopting a French identity, seeing that it is not France—the French culture Hoxha admired so much—but Albania that is the original culture of Europe. In *The Three-Arched Bridge* (1978), he expresses his hopes for Albania’s reintegration in Europe and Europe’s recognition of its own Illyrian origins.

Like Andric, Kadare presents the East, particularly the Ottomans, but also the Russians, as fundamentally anti-European. Everything European is dangerous and hateful to the Ottomans, just as it is to the communists. In *The Palace of Dreams,* he asserts that Ottoman forces tried to silence the Albanian epic by persecuting its rhapsodists, in their attempt to crush the Albanians’ European identity. Thus for Kadare the end of the Hoxha regime and Kosovo’s independence from Serbia signify that the time has come for Albania to shake off its Ottoman and communist legacies and to reassert its authentic European identity. As a writer with a Muslim background, he sees the religion of Islam in Albania as the imprint of the Ottoman regime, just like “socialism” and “atheism” under Hoxha’s regime. Most Albanians had converted to Islam during the eighteenth century for mercenary reasons, in the wake of the continuing impoverishment of Albania’s leading clans, like the Qyprillis. Kadare suggests, however, that Christianity, more than Islam or atheism, best fits the Albanian temper, as personified, for example, by Gjergj Kastrioti (Skanderbeg), Fishta (a Franciscan monk) and Mother Theresa. Under the Hoxha regime, it was the Catholic priests, who were brutally persecuted, who acted as the main defenders of Albania’s rhapsodist tradition by transforming it into a written literature. Several Rilindja writers, including Konica and, more recently, Rugova, have converted from Islam to Roman Catholicism to affirm their European identity by breaking with the Ottoman past. In other words, Rilindja writers, including Kadare, evoke the Albanian identity primarily as a European identity vis-à-vis non-European “others,” rather than as an ethnic identity amongst other ethnicities. Kadare sets Albanians apart from Ottomans, Chinese, Yugoslavs, Slavophiles and Russians because of their anti-European identity, but he does not evoke it against the Greeks or the Italians.

Albania’s undeserved isolation from Europe frequently appears as a veritable tragedy in Kadare’s novels. In *The Siege,* published in 1970, two years after the Prague Spring, the Ottoman invasion of Albania is narrated as a catastrophe. The Ottoman
chronicler sees the besieged Albania as an isolated castle that has to be brought down by whatever means. Although the Ottomans have at their disposal a variety of military means, including biological warfare, they fail to conquer Albania because of the skilful leadership of Skanderbeg and the Albanian spirit of resistance, so much celebrated by Rilindja writers. Skanderbeg, Albania’s national hero, who has not forgotten his cultural origins, tries to reintegrate Albania into Western, Roman Catholic Europe, but he fails for lack of European support. Kadare insists that by abandoning the Albanians, the original Europeans, to the Ottoman Empire, Europe “shirked its responsibility.”

He thereby voices an old Balkan grudge (shared by Andric) against Europe’s betrayal and forgetfulness—the “Christian Europe” that the Balkan peoples, including the Slavic peoples, had rescued from the Ottoman fate. Similarly, he regrets that many Albanians, most explicitly like Mark-Alem Qyprilli in The Palace of Dreams, chose to trade off their European identity, including their Christian religion and Albanian language, for the security and honours of the regime, and thereby ended up as “soulless” characters in his novels.

Western Europe’s betrayal of Albania, Kadare implies, deepened its isolation during the Cold War, which he calls “a second Yalta.” In The Great Winter, he provides a flattering portrait of Hoxha, who, in Skanderbegian style, manages to stand up against the evil empire and break with Khrushchev, to fight off Soviet influence in the Adriatic in 1961—thereby reducing the Soviet presence in Europe. Elsewhere, he tells how, after his break with Khrushchev, Hoxha was ready to turn to the West, as Josip Tito had done with Yugoslavia. However, while the West chose to help Tito after the Tito-Stalin split in 1948, it failed to help Hoxha in 1962. Once it was rejected by Europe, Albania’s writers lost their political motivation to act, to appeal to Western public opinion, or even to resign to their fate, which option was still somewhat open to Central European dissident writers. Hoxha turned to the East, to China’s Mao, with catastrophic consequences for the Albanians, and mainly so for its writers. In 1966 Mao’s Cultural Revolution swept into Albania, Hoxha then declared Albania to be an atheist state in 1967, and all remnants of European culture were purged.

In his Kafkaesque satire The Concert (1988), Kadare paints a gloomy picture of China’s Cultural Revolution in Albania, where Mao, filled with contempt for European culture, takes part in the Asiatic uprooting of Albania’s cultural heritage by banning the books of Shakespeare and Tolstoy.

In Kadare’s Rilindja narrative, moreover, the West also disregarded the brutal persecution of the Kosovar Albanians in Yugoslavia by the Serbian nationalists, particularly under Alexandar Ranković and Slobodan Milošević. He criticizes Andrić, who not only welcomed pan-Slavism but was also identified with the Yugoslav state, for remaining silent on Ranković’s terror. In The File on H., Kadare, like Kiš, who was pro-Yugoslav but not identified with the regime, expressed his dismay at the renewed Serbian persecution of the Albanians after Tito’s death. Kadare expresses his support for the 1981 Kosovar revolt as the legitimate attempt to reassert its ancient European roots. In The Wedding Procession Turned to Ice (1986), Kadare narrates two days in the life of a Kosovar surgeon who realizes that her allegiance to her own Albanian culture outweighs her duties to the Serbian republic. Gould notes that, in his Rilindja narrative, Kadare engages in “a postcolonial conversation,” which is certainly correct regarding the condition of the Kosovar Albanians under Milošević, “a classic example
of colonialism, worse than South Africa under apartheid.” Hence, Kadare’s idea of Europe is complemented with his condemnation not of West European imperialism, but of Europe’s failure to defend one of her own nations.

The West, in Kadare’s Rilindja narrative, with its memory and shame of the Holocaust, its promise of “Never Again,” finally did intervene to save the Albanians in the Kosovo War and to prevent another genocide on European soil. The 1991 NATO military campaign—seventy-eight days of bombing Serbian targets—was proof that Europe had finally, after 600 years, assumed its responsibility for the Albanians. Kadare thus welcomed Kosovo’s independence from Serbia in 2008, which in his postcolonial jargon, was a form of de-colonization: “the fact that a nation lived in colonial conditions was a huge scandal in Europe.” Kosovo’s independence, for him, was the liberation of a nation from an alien regime, whose claim on its history, as in his Elegy for Kosovo, was ideologically distorted – a historical product of Ottoman divide-and-rule. The Serbian regime had created its own regime epic of the Battle of Kosovo, written by regime writers, which showed no respect for the laws of literature. Kosovo’s independence, for Kadare, was thus the victory of European culture over a tyrannical Serbian regime, and thus the fulfilment of Rilindja ideals.

In his 2012 meeting with EU representatives, Kadare once again evoked the “return to Europe” and repeated the Rilindja narrative, stressing its Europeanness. He saw Albania’s and Kosovo’s “return to Europe” as the opportunity for the Albanians to reassert their cultural roots, their language and literature, in their “great common home.” In 1991 Albania joined the OSCE and the CoE in 1995. It signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU in 2006, became a member of NATO in 2008, and submitted its application for EU membership in 2009. Kadare insists (along with other Albanian writers such as Fatos Lubonja) that, with Kosovo’s independence from Serbia, “it is time for another epic,” which, as he hinted in the Elegy for Kosovo, would tell a different tale than the one told in the Iliad. The new epic, 600 years after the Battle of Kosovo, would celebrate the reconciliation of the Albanians, Greeks and Slavs under their new regimes in the European Union. It would no longer be based on the dictates of the regime, the persecution of writers, ethnic nationalism and segregation, but, in line with the EU’s European values, it would be based on human rights, peace, mutual understanding and European integration in the Balkans. The Battle of Kosovo would no longer divide the Balkan peoples, because, in this new epic, in obedience to the laws of literature, they would have unconsciously fought for their true cause, namely, Europe.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Writers have often invoked the idea of Europe whenever they sensed that its culture was withering away before their eyes. William Blake and Novalis, for instance, feared modernity would usher in a period of decadence. When the Great War broke out, Thomas Mann in his Thoughts on Wartime still had high hopes that the war would be fought for a less suffocating Europe, only to find out, with Paul Valéry, Robert Musil, and Roman Rolland, that European culture was impotent against barbarous regimes. In his World of Yesterday, completed in 1942, Stefan Zweig announced that
anti-European brutality had triumphed and that Europe was lost, torn to pieces. Klaus Mann, in his *Europe’s Search for a New Credo*, published in 1949, noted that Europe was being squeezed between two world powers, which left no room for European culture and intellectual integrity. In such a squeezed and ideologized Europe, the laws of the literary field were crushed and, accordingly, there was no longer space for real writers. In Central Europe, dissident writers invoked the idea of Europe in their resistance to the Soviet Union, which they saw as profoundly anti-European. In Western Europe, the Council of Europe and the European Coal and Steel Community, predecessor of the EU, were set up in an attempt to resurrect Europe from the ashes of the Holocaust. Konrad Adenauer, Chancellor of postwar Germany, clearly understood that this was not merely a question of economic rebuilding: “Europe is only possible if a community of the European peoples is restored, in which each individual people renders its irreplaceable contribution to the European economy and culture, to Western thought, literature and creativity.”

For Kadare, similarly, the reconciliation between literature and politics in Albania is only possible in a Europe in which the laws of literature are recognized and obeyed. Totalitarianism, as he repeatedly shows, does not recognize the poet’s rights and duties. Caught between totalitarianism and his artistic calling, his stories depict a reality of shadows, ghosts, nostalgia and mourning, the everyday absurdities that elude those in power while providing solace and food to the people, the oppressed. His Rilindjia idea of Europe inevitably conjures up Plato’s dispute with the poets on the relationship between truth (Socratic philosophy) and art. Plato, whose primary concern was the good, faithfulness to what is true and beautiful, wished to banish the poets from his ideal regime in which Socrates rules. The poets and rhapsodists, following Homer and the laws of the literary field, did not distinguish between lies and truth, since this distinction was irrelevant to their art. They seduced their readers into an imaginary world of magic and illusions, feeding their emotions instead of their love for the truth. In Kadare’s idea of Europe, “Albania” and “European” are the artful creations of the writer’s rich imagination. His conception of Europe, as suggested earlier, is Homeric and thus quite different from the ideas of those, like Jan Patocka, who follow Plato’s path, whether they are poets, political activists, or the leaders and ideologues of the European Union.

Notes

1. Arshi Pipa, “Subversion vs Conformism: The Kadare Phenomenon,” *Telos* 73 (1987): 73. Pipa adds that “Kadare is, no doubt, a very talented writer, the only Albanian to stand comparison with contemporary representatives of the narrative genre. One only wishes him a decent attitude” (77).


12. De Moor, Een Masker voor de Macht. In Ismail Kadare, Morgan points out that the relationship between the writer and the regime is like the relationship between Prometheus and Zeus. Zeus has power over life and death, but Prometheus, the alter ego of the writer, has knowledge that renders him both dangerous and a potential ally (119).

13. Morgan stresses that the Hoxha regime was a Stalinist regime, including the Stalinist cult of personality and the central role of the security police and the nomenklatura. Yet, whereas Stalin created and controlled the nomenklatura (and kept them in a state of fear), Hoxha’s nomenklatura included twenty clans, primarily of Southern Albanian origin. Intermarriage among these clans strengthened the power structure (Ismail Kadare, 19).


15. Totalitarianism is an ambivalent notion that derives its particular meaning from the history of the twentieth century: Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Soviet Union were the totalitarian regimes. In George Orwell’s 1984, as well as in Hannah Arendt’s Origins of Totalitarianism, totalitarian regimes are characterized by the denial of the right to think, to speak and to live, which is enforced by the rule of terror, total domination and concentration camps or ghettos.


17. In Albania, such was the fate of writers like Arshi Pipa, Fatos Lubonja, Gjin Jaku, Ndue Jako, Vilson Blloshmi, Genc Leka, Trifon Xhaghika, Vilson Blloshmi, Preç Zogaj, Bashkim Shehu, Visar Zhiti, and Kapllan Resuli. Kosovar Albanian writers like Ibrahim Rugova, Azem Shkreli, Rexhep Qosja, and Flora Brovina were brutally persecuted in Yugoslavia. Adem Demaçi, a Sakharov Prize winning dissident writer, spent twenty-nine years in a Serbian prison. In his afterword to the Dutch translation of Qosja’s masterpiece Death Comes to Me from Such Eyes, Kadare explicitly refers to the cruel persecution of the Kosovar Albanian writers in the Serbian Republic of Yugoslavia. See Ismail Kadare, “Afterword,” in Rexhep Qosja, Die Ogen en de Dood (Amsterdam: Van Gennep, 1997), 334.


20. In the Soviet Union, Pasternak and Achmatova received numerous letters from soldiers quoting from both published and unpublished poems; there was a stream of requests for autographs, for the confirmation of the authenticity of texts, for the author’s opinion on this or that problem. See Isaiah Berlin, The Soviet Mind: Russian Culture under Communism (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), 55. Kadare enjoyed a similar status in Albania. Some of his novels sold more than 25,000 copies within an hour in Albania. See Pipa, “Subversion vs Conformism: The Kadare Phenomenon,” 47–77; De Moor, Een Masker voor de Macht; Morgan, Ismail Kadare.


24. An example of such a fictional account of history, an artistic liberty, is Kadare’s account of dream interpretation in The Palace of Dreams, in which the regime, like an Orwellian Thought Police, treats dreams as if they were the products of rational thought and subject to the laws of the regime, whereas in reality dream interpretation was a private affair in the Ottoman Empire, for the benefit of the individual. See Ani Kokobovo, “Bureaucracy of Dreams,” 525.


26. In the Soviet Union, the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP) was set up under the auspices of the secret police, before it was dissolved into the Union of Soviet Writers in 1932, with Maxim Gorky becoming its first president. See Harry T. Moore and Albert Parry, Twentieth Century Russian Literature (London: Heinemann, 1974), 26–27.

27. In The Captive Mind, Milosz, writing as an exile in the early 1950s, has most clearly narrated the workings of socialist realism under Stalinism. Milosz observes that with socialist realism comes “the reduction of artists and scholars to the status of yesmen,” to the point that the republic of letters is reduced to a “literary ghetto” in which writers exist in a “tense atmosphere of propaganda” (63, 109, 131).

28. Kadare’s style and content are also defined by his literary strategy to cope with the Hoxha regime. Morgan points out that “Kadare’s texts are Aesopian in the extreme, having had to operate with the logic of contradiction rather than of irony in order to exist at all” (Ismail Kadare, 210).

29. Morgan, Ismail Kadare, 159.

30. De Moor, Een Masker voor de Macht, 53–65; Morgan, “Ismail Kadare: Modern Homer or Albanian Dissident?”


32. Agolli was Head of the Writer’s Union. Kadare had studied with him at the Gorky Institute of World Literature in Moscow during the years of the Pasternak Affair. See Morgan, Ismail Kadare, 56.

33. Kadare typified the Soviet Union as “the steppes of Central Asia.” See Morgan, Ismail Kadare, 90.

34. Morgan, Ismail Kadare, 154.

35. According to Pipa, Kadare manifests himself as “a major mouthpiece of Albanian Stalinism” in The Great Winter. See Pipa, Contemporary Albanian Literature, 107. Morgan, on the other hand, stresses that The Great Winter represents Albania as having been led into a winter of discontent, isolated and impoverished and abandoned. See Morgan, “Ismail Kadare: Modern Homer or Albanian Dissident?”.


38. De Moor, Een Masker voor de Macht, 40–41.


42. Morgan, Ismail Kadare, 28.
47. Morgan, Ismail Kadare, 84.
52. In The First Circle, Solzhenitsyn alluded to Dante’s most privileged circle of hell, with Stalin bearing a close resemblance to Satan in Canto 34. See also Caute, Politics and the Novel during the Cold War, 267, 282.
53. De Moor, Een Masker voor de Macht, 37.
55. Sulstrarova, “Rilindja’s Place in the Orientalism of Intellectuals in Post-Communist Albania,” 393.
56. Cox, “Pannonia Imperilled: Why Danilo Kiš Still Matters.” In Stalinist regimes such as the Hoxha regime, however, as Milosz emphasizes, cosmopolitanism was defined “as admiration for the (bourgeois) culture of the West,” and hence was an open violation of the doctrine of socialist realism. See Milosz, The Captive Mind, 43. Kadare is not a cosmopolitan writer.
60. In Ismail Kadare Morgan provides more background on the particular historical context of the Rilindja.
61. Sulstrarova, “Rilindja’s Place in the Orientalism of Intellectuals in Post-Communist Albania,” 393.
62. Cox, “Pannonia Imperilled: Why Danilo Kiš Still Matters.” In Stalinist regimes such as the Hoxha regime, however, as Milosz emphasizes, cosmopolitanism was defined “as admiration for the (bourgeois) culture of the West,” and hence was an open violation of the doctrine of socialist realism. See Milosz, The Captive Mind, 43. Kadare is not a cosmopolitan writer.
64. See, for instance, Morgan, “The Wrong Side of History.”
66. Morgan, Ismail Kadare, 8, 197.
68. Sulstrarova, “Rilindja’s Place in the Orientalism of Intellectuals in Post-Communist Albania,” 394.
69. Kadare repeatedly mentions that, once conquered, many Albanians came to occupy high posts in the Ottoman Empire and participated, often as generals, in the Ottoman conquests. See, for instance, Kadare, “Afterword,” in Qosja, Die Ogen en de Dood, 344.
70. Morgan, *Ismail Kadare*, 140.
74. As documented by Morgan, Kadare visited China in 1967, attending a banquet in the presence of Mao and Lin Biao. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao disbanded the union of writers and literature was denounced as unnecessary. Western literature was condemned and Chinese literature disappeared. See Morgan, *Ismail Kadare*, 97. Milosz explains that under Stalinism tragic literature, including Shakespeare, was forbidden because it would lead to thoughts about the mystery of human destiny, which most obviously contradicted the “official optimism” of socialist realism. Milosz, *The Captive Mind*, 73–74, 168.
75. Alexandar Ranković was Yugoslavia’s head of the secret police and Tito’s would-be successor until the 1960s. Labeling Kosovar Albanians as “Turks,” as Slobodan Milošević would do in the 1980s, he had some 300,000 of them expatriated to Turkey.
76. In Pipa’s view, Kadare manifests “anti-Yugoslav hysteria dating from Albania’s break with Yugoslavia” in such novels. See Pipa, *Contemporary Albanian Literature*, 94. A similar view is expressed by Fatos Lubonja, who finds Kadare at times racist and xenophobic vis-à-vis the Slavs and Islam.
81. Sulstrarova, “Rilindja’s Place in the Orientalism of Intellectuals in Post-Communist Albania,” 397.