

ELIDOR MËHILLI

MIMICKING VIOLENCE?
ALBANIA AND CHINA'S CULTURAL REVOLUTION, 1967-1991

Albania provides a particularly apt case study of transnational exchange during the Cold War—both state-directed and unintentional, coercive and non-coercive, formal and informal. Emerging out of Italian colonization in the early 1940s, the fledgling Balkan state initially flirted with the idea of joining the Yugoslav federation under Josip Broz Tito but then found itself an eager Soviet satellite in the 1950s. Under the rule of communist party leader Enver Hoxha, Albania enthusiastically embraced Stalinism: its institutions and techniques of rule; its modern industrial blueprints and cultural products; but also its mechanisms of repression.

Suddenly, in the early 1960s, communist Albania denounced Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev and embraced Mao's China, which also made for far-reaching interactions and transfers. "For the first time since the Mongols," William Griffith wrote in 1963, "a European state is under the influence of a major Far Eastern power." In 1967, Hoxha launched the Cultural Revolution, which mimicked certain formal aspects of the Chinese example but was shaped by specific domestic goals. Ruthlessly targeting clerics, religious institutions, and alleged opponents, Albania's revolution had a profound impact on the society for decades. Atheism was ultimately enshrined in the country's constitution. The rift with China in the mid-1970s, too, had major repercussions and ushered in a decade of profound isolation and paranoia. In order to properly understand the retracted collapse of communism in Albania in 1991, it is necessary to systematically trace the interaction of local politics and practices with global geopolitical developments and the socio-economic landscape of the 1970s and 1980s. Recently opened archives have made this exploration possible for the first time.

My work at the Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung will extend into the late-socialist period by researching how local practices of violence mirrored (or not) Soviet and Chinese models. A neglected example in the literature, Albania can help elucidate the transfer mechanisms of the Cold War, the unpredictable relations between great powers and small states, and how these states adopted, mimicked, and altered distinct institutional practices.