

# LEFTIST DISSENT AGAINST STATE SOCIALISM IN ALBANIA

How the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Influenced the Left-wing Dissent in Albania

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## Abstract

*This article deals with the most important event of leftist dissent during the 45 years of state socialism in Albania. This event was the Conference of the Party Committee for the City of Tirana, where delegates from all over Tirana, under the influence of the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, criticized the party's high leadership for economic difficulties in the country, leadership privileges, lack of internal democracy in the party, and other problems of the time. This paper aims to discern to what extent Marxist terminology is employed in the critique of the system by these individuals. From an analysis of the discussions of the delegates in the conference, it is observed that although they do not directly employ Marxist concepts in their critiques of the party leadership and its policies, they have positioned their criticism from a leftist perspective and have used critiques similar to those that Trotsky used against Stalinism.*

**Keywords:**

*left-wing dissent, Conference of the Party Committee of Tirana, the critique of state socialism, Marxist terminology.*

**Introduction**

This article will treat one of the most important events of dissidence against the system of state socialism, which is the only case when criticism against the system in Albania and its leadership was made public and from within the Communist Party<sup>1</sup> by ordinary communists, intellectuals, and clerks of a low rank in state and party apparatuses in Albania. This event was the Conference of the Party Committee of Tirana, which was held on April 14–18, 1956.<sup>2</sup> At this event, communists from the city of Tirana, under the influence of the de-Stalinization process announced by Nikita Khrushchev at the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, rose up and openly criticized the Labor Party of Albania's leadership for the mistakes they had made, and for the path taken by the socialist system in Albania.<sup>3</sup>

In Albania, little has been said and written about the Conference of the Party Committee of Tirana, because it seems like a distant event. However, even when it is written about, the criticisms of the delegates towards the leadership of the party and the

<sup>1</sup> The Communist Party of Albania was formed on November 8, 1941 when Albania was occupied by fascist Italy and the party became a proponent of the Anti-Fascist War. After the liberation of the country, Albania was proclaimed a socialist country, which it remained until March 1991. In 1948 under the influence of Stalin, the Communist Party of Albania changed its name to the Labor Party of Albania because Albania was a backward agrarian country, with the majority of the population peasants. Thus, a Party named "Labor Party" would have sounded more appropriate than the name "Communist Party" in a country without industry and, therefore without a proletariat.

<sup>2</sup> The full name of this event is the Conference of the Party Committee for the City of Tirana, however in Albanian historiography it became more widely used with the names Conference of the Party of Tirana, or only the Conference of Tirana. The full name will be used in this article, but other names may be used interchangeably.

<sup>3</sup> The structural organization of the Labor Party of Albania had as its basic unit "the cells of the party," which existed in every working center. Before each general congress of the party, every four years, in each region a Conference of the Party was convened, with representatives from all the party cells of that region. These conferences discussed the problems presented by the grass-roots organizations and would be discussed later at the party congress. Since in Tirana, as the capital, there were many working centers and consequently more party cells than in any other city, the Conference of the Party Committee of Tirana convened only for the city of Tirana, not the region. It should also be mentioned that since most of the governmental, media, educational and scientific institutions were in Tirana, and each of them had its own party organization, the intellectual level of the communists of Tirana, and consequently their representatives in the Conference of the Party, had a higher intellectual level than the communists of other districts.

system are not analyzed from a leftist perspective. The historian Ana Lalaj,<sup>4</sup> as well as participants of the conference who lived after the fall of the socialist system (1991), have however identified the conference as a dissident event and the participants in it as leftist dissidents. The importance of this conference in the Albanian political reality of that time is also shown by the harsh reaction of the senior leadership of the Labor Party of Albania towards all who participated in the conference.

The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, to analyze the use of Marxist concepts by the participants of the conference; second, to analyze how much the Marxist approach was used by the delegates of this conference to identify the problems of state socialism and criticize that system. The research question whose answer will be attempted in this paper will be: To what extent was Marxist terminology employed in dissident reflections as a critical tool for describing the operation of power, ideology, and economic injustice?

The speeches of these delegates at the conference will be analyzed to answer this question, and to see if a Marxist critique of the system had been used by the delegates of the Conference of the Party Committee of Tirana. Thus, the method used in this paper will be an analysis of public discourse (considering as public discourse the speeches of the delegates at the Conference of the Party Committee of Tirana, as presented in the minutes of the conference). Initially, a theoretical summary of various authors who have made a critique of state socialism – Stalinism as they call it – will be given. Afterwards, an overview of the historical situation follows, as well as the current state of studies on left-wing dissent in Albania. Afterwards, parts from the delegates' discussions at the conference and their criticisms of the leadership will be given. These speeches will be analyzed in order to answer the research question and to come to appropriate conclusions.

The delegates' discussions at the Conference revolved around three main issues: first, the economic problems of the population and the economic privileges of the party's top leadership (the luxury in which the latter lived); second, the development of the cult of the personality in Albania, especially in the person of the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Labor Party, Enver Hoxha, and consequently the development of the idea of his infallibility, directly affecting the lack of internal democracy of the party, where the criterion of truth was the word of the leader; third, the sharp development of the so-called "class struggle," which was in fact state terror against the population that had already begun to affect not only the overthrown classes but also the communist leaders who did not agree with Enver Hoxha. Excerpts from the speech of the discussants at the conference, will be presented according to this categorization.

<sup>4</sup> Ana Lalaj, "The Party Conference of Tirana, an aborted spring for the left in Albania, (14–19 April 1956)," *Studime Historike* (2009), no. 1–2, pp. 109–132, here 108.

### Theoretical Critique of Soviet State Socialism

A systematic critique of state socialism in the Soviet Union, from a left-wing perspective, was first made by Leon Trotsky. Trotsky was the first and perhaps the only communist from Russia who had the opportunity to make a systematic critique of the Soviet system between the two World Wars. A rival of Stalin within the Bolshevik Party after his exile from the Soviet Union Trotsky developed a whole theory aimed at the criticism of Stalinism.<sup>5</sup> For Trotsky, the system that had triumphed and was still evolving in the Soviet Union was a kind of “Russian Thermidor,” a triumph of right-wing elements within the Bolshevik Party over the ideals of the October Revolution. The cause of this shift to the right, a reactionary movement according to Trotsky, was the bureaucratization of the main cadres of the party, who had become a caste. The latter had replaced the revolutionary platform with their interests as a new caste, which was superimposed on the rank and file membership of the party and also lived at its expense. According to later authors, this turn to the right of the Bolshevik regime is defined as happening in the mid-1930s when, after a period of triumph of the “left-wing” of the Bolshevik Party, which brought about a series of reforms in the economy (industrialization, dekulakization, and collectivism), in social life (liberalization of divorce and abortion) and in cultural life (experimentation with ultra-innovative forms of art and pedagogy to create the so-called Proletarian Culture), it launched a series of reforms aimed at strengthening state authority and disciplining the population. These reforms produced the strengthening of nomenclature power, the re-emphasis of traditional Russian values, and the rise of a Russian nationalist ideology within the USSR.<sup>6</sup>

According to Trotsky, the class struggle in Stalinism takes place between the bureaucracy, which does not own but administers the means of production, and the proletariat (the latter remaining exploited, while the former – namely the bureaucracy – becomes the exploiter of the proletariat or, one could also say, the owners of the means of production’s administrators). Starting from a Marxist premise, Trotsky analyzes Stalinism as an economic, political, and social system and casts doubt on the socialist nature of this regime.<sup>7</sup> He calls Stalinism a degraded bureaucratic system, and this degradation and bureaucratization of the system had come from the influence of the backward economic and social conditions of Russia where the revolution had been isolated.

Three authors from the 1960s, Stephen Cohen, Robert C. Tucker, and Moshe Lewin, write in the spirit of an internal critique of Stalinism and questioning of the socialist nature of the system.

<sup>5</sup> Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed: What Is the Soviet Union and Where Is It going?* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1972), pp. 86–114.

<sup>6</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 148–163.

<sup>7</sup> Trotsky, *The Revolution*, p. 112.

Stephen Cohen has produced deep analyses of the writings of the main ideologue of the right-wing faction of the Bolshevik Party after the Revolution, in the 1920s, Nikolai Bukharin. Through this analysis, Cohen has concluded that Stalinism was not a logical conclusion of Marxism and Leninism. Additionally, he wrote that the consideration of the Soviet Union as a totalitarian state would be correct only for the period of Stalin's rule, but not for the period of Lenin's rule or the years after Stalin's death.<sup>8</sup>

Another scholar, Robert C. Tucker, has analyzed two aspects of the Stalinist regime, that were previously neglected. First, Stalin's personality, which he identified as the primary cause of the excesses and brutality of the Stalinist model.<sup>9</sup> According to him, violence was not an essential and inevitable part of the system, but a feature of special actors within this system, the product of their conduct. The second equally important point according to Tucker was the legacy of the Russian tsarist autocracy in the new regime. As for the behavior of the leaders, the new regime was not detached from the legacy of the old. Stalin did not represent a modern totalitarian leader but the continuation of modernizing Russian autocrats such as Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great, a model accepted by the Russian patriarchal-authoritarian culture.<sup>10</sup>

The academic work of Moshe Lewin continued in the same line. For Lewin, the influence of the tsarist tradition in the Bolshevik system has been one of his favorite topics of study. Starting from the Trotskyist critique of Stalinism, developed mainly in the 1930s, Moshe Lewin separated Stalinism from Leninism and called Stalinism a coexistence between the authoritarian tradition of the Russian tsars and the degeneration of a bureaucratic process that took place in the Bolshevik Party in the late 1920s and especially during the 1930s. Although in its appearance Stalinism retained some social forms, in its essence it was a hybrid system, a mix between Russian rural culture and authoritarianism. The large mass of peasants raised to the status of the elite by the Stalinist regime solidified into an all-powerful bureaucratic apparatus, constituting its social basis and showing the non-socialist nature of the system.<sup>11</sup>

This summary of the theoretical critique of Soviet state socialism was presented above so that through this theoretical background, an analysis of the discourses of the conference participants could be made. And, thereby, to determine whether the latter had employed a leftist critique of the socialist system in Albania.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Cohen, *Bukharin, and the Bolshevik Revolution: A Political Biography, 1888-1938* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp.156.

<sup>9</sup> Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above, 1928-1941* (New York: Norton 1992), pp. 4-6.

<sup>10</sup> Robert C. Tucker, "A Choice of Lenin?" in George R. Urban (ed.), *Stalinism: Its Impact on Russia and the World* (London: Temple Smith, 1982), pp. 146-179.

<sup>11</sup> Moshe Lewin, "The Social Background of Stalinism," in Robert C. Tucker (ed.), *Stalinism: Essays in Historical Interpretation* (New York: Norton, 1977), pp. 111-136.

### The Current State of Studies about Dissidence in Albania

In today's political and public discourse in Albania, the idea that there was no dissidence in Albania during the period of state socialism is hegemonic. The main justification for the lack of dissidence in Albania, according to this discourse, lies in the fact that, unlike the rest of the socialist bloc, Albania continued to be Stalinist until the end.<sup>12</sup> When Khrushchev's reform of the Soviet Union began (with the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress in 1956), which was reflected in the rest of the bloc, Albania was reluctant to denounce the cult of the individual and Stalin's crimes. In a gathering of 81 parties in Moscow, Albania sided with China and denounced Khrushchev's revisionism. Consequently, until the end of the regime's rule, Albania continued to be a hard-line Stalinist country. No form of public opposition or criticism was allowed. The process of de-Stalinization, which began during Khrushchev's rule and intensified especially after the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, came to a halt after Brezhnev came to power. Yet many Soviet liberal intellectuals developed a critique of the Stalinist system outside the official channels of the party and the state, mainly by writing and circulating an alternative literature called *samizdat*.<sup>13</sup>

The same discourse about dissidents in the former-socialist states usually highlights figures like Václav Havel, Adam Michnik, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, whose dissent against the socialist regimes has largely been from a liberal perspective, generally talking about freedoms and human rights. This is not illogical when one considers that since the fall of the socialist regime (1991) Albania embraced a strong antisocialist discourse, and figures such as Enver Hoxha, Stalin, and Marx are usually equalized. Even the mention of Marx's name or a critique of capitalism, during the 1990s and early 2000s could have subjected a person to being labeled, for example, a "terrorist." To some extent, this is a common belief even today in the mainstream media and political scene of Albania.<sup>14</sup>

Studies about the socialist period in Albania continue to use Hannah Arendt's concepts, considering it a totalitarian regime and criticizing it in liberal terms. These studies consider the socialist period in Albania as a repressive regime that oppressed liberties: market freedom is usually the first to be mentioned, followed by freedom of expression and movement, lack of private property rights, political parties, and free elections. In other words, it is a typical, liberal critique that never focuses on the living conditions of the working-class or the cooperative peasantry. An exception to this is the doctoral dissertation of Dr. Sofokli Meksi, "Albanian Stalinism, a view from below," defended at the University of Tirana, which, to my knowledge, is the only study that makes a Marxist analysis of the Albanian socialist system, which he considers a Stalinist regime.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Sofokli Meksi, *Stalinizmi shqiptar: një vështrim nga poshtë* [Albanian Stalinism: a view from below, unpublished dissertation] (Tirana: University of Tirana, 2015), pp. III-IV.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 18.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p. VII.

<sup>15</sup> Meksi, *Stalinizmi shqiptar* [Albanian Stalinism].

Likewise, when personages of resistance or opposition to the regime were written or talked about, the scope ranges from some Fascist collaborationists during the Second World War to some intellectual figures who were imprisoned for ideas expressed in private between friends. Even for these figures, there is usually no deep analysis of their political ideas as they are all marked with the same label – “anti-communists.” However, from the writings of these persons – Mustafa Kruja, Mehdi Frasheri, Hasan Dosti, Ernest Koliqi, and others – it can be seen that their opposition to state socialism was due to their conservative ideas regarding the political and economic system.

Nevertheless, some biographies have been published of different figures associated with the Albanian left, before and after Second World War, who were convicted by the socialist regime – mostly accused of being Trotskyites, revisionists, or social democrats. This includes the life and political activity of Anastas Lulja, Sadik Premtja, Zef Mala, Petro Marko, Sejfulla Maleshova, and Musine Kokalari, as well as other anti-fascist activists and devoted communists/socialists who had disagreements with the leadership of the Communist Party of Albania (later Labor Party) during or after the war. Some of them were executed while others were imprisoned or exiled. The most comprehensive study of these figures is a collection of biographies *E MAJTA Mendimi Politik / Profile Biografike* (The left, political thought / Biographical profiles) published by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Albania.<sup>16</sup> However, this book, as is the case with many others, deals mostly with the life stories of these personages, only briefly mentioning their political ideas; it is not a structured study about their critiques of state socialism. Reasons for that might be objective: first, as they were imprisoned or executed, they did not leave anything written about their critique of the system or they wrote only vague ideas in their private notebooks. Another reason is that because Albania continued to be a Stalinist country until the regime’s finish, these dissidents did not have a public tribune to express their critiques of the state socialism clearly and structurally. From what they have written, their critiques have been mostly about state violence, terror, and political oppression.

The aforementioned dissidents were “old-time” communists, who had fought in the National Liberation War and were eliminated or imprisoned during the first years after the war because of the disagreements they had with the party leadership. However, after the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party of Soviet Union, where the cult of personality and crimes of Stalin were denounced, another group of dissidents formed in Albania. In the gathering of 81 Communist and Labor Parties in Moscow (November 1960), Albania sided with China and later broke relations with the Soviet Union, consequently continuing Stalinism and proudly calling itself a defender of Stalinism. During that time, a group of communists who had studied in the Soviet Union started to oppose the Albanian leadership and tried to side with the Soviet Union. These were

<sup>16</sup> *E MAJTA Mendimi Politik / Profile Biografike* (Tirana: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2020). Online at [library.fes.de/pdf/files/bueros/albanien/16892.pdf](http://library.fes.de/pdf/files/bueros/albanien/16892.pdf) [accessed Jan. 22, 2021].

mostly a younger generation of communists who had studied in Moscow or Leningrad and were affiliated with the Soviet Union, sometimes for sentimental reasons. Most famous of them were Xhavit Qesja, and two journalists, Fadil Kokomani and Vangjel Nezho, who spoke up against breaking relations with the Soviet Union and called for a process of de-Stalinization and ending state terror.<sup>17</sup> These critiques, however, were not expressed publicly but only in private circles, and these individuals were later arrested and ended up in prison.

### The Conference of the Party Committee of Tirana

As was mentioned above, dissidents in Albania did not have a public space to communicate their ideas, or criticize the regime about economic, social, and political problems, as this was not allowed in journals or magazines, or even at public gatherings such as party congresses, plenary meetings, or conferences. However, there was an event where the leftist dissidents openly criticized the party's leadership and especially the economic situation in Albania. This was the Conference of the Party Committee of Tirana, that occurred on April 14–18, 1956, during which many of the participants openly criticized the party's leadership, its economic privileges, state of terror, and economic policies. Albanian historian Ana Lalaj has written an article and a fairly detailed book about this conference. Her book deals with the historical background and context in which the conference took place, its participants, the attitude of the party leadership towards it, and the denial of the participants of accusations by the party's leadership that they were foreign agents.<sup>18</sup> From the historical data and their analysis, Prof. Lalaj concluded that the Conference of the Party Committee of Tirana was a dissident event and the participants in this conference had a dissident approach towards the socialist system in Albania.<sup>19</sup> In this article we will analyze the speeches given by the delegates at the conference, to identify the theoretical background of the participants and to additionally see how much they had mastered and employed Marxist terminology in their critique of the socialist system in Albania and the party's leadership.

The Conference of the Party Committee of Tirana convened about two months after the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In the secret report presented by Nikita Khrushchev to the Congress, the “cult of personality” of Stalin was denounced, as well as the crimes committed by him. It was also reported that many citizens convicted during the Stalin era would be released from prisons and rehabili-

<sup>17</sup> “Fadil Kokomani dhe Vangjel Lezho,” *Panorama*, June 20, 2019 (online at [panorama.com.al/fadil-kokomani-dhe-vangjel-lezho-prehje-ne-hapesiren-e-gjelber-te-kryeministrise](http://panorama.com.al/fadil-kokomani-dhe-vangjel-lezho-prehje-ne-hapesiren-e-gjelber-te-kryeministrise) [accessed Jan. 22, 2021]).

<sup>18</sup> Ana Lalaj, *Pranvera e rrejtshme e pesëdhjetegjashhtës: vështrim studimor mbi Konferencën e Tiranës dhe dokumente për protagonistët e saj* [The fake spring of fifty-six: a study overview of the Tirana Conference and documents for its protagonists] (Tirana: Infbotues, 2015).

<sup>19</sup> Lalaj, *The Party Conference*, p. 112.



tated. There was also talk of a political coexistence of peace with the West, as well as a softening of relations with Yugoslavia. A process of “fusion” had begun.<sup>20</sup>

However, the Albanian leadership remained silent about the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress and its decisions regarding Stalin’s personality cult. Although Nikita Khrushchev had recommended that his secret report criticizing Stalin be discussed in the plenums of the Central Committees of People’s Democracies, Hoxha did not do this. In the Plenum of the Central Committee on March 2, 1956, he simply stated that at the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union there had been criticism about Stalin.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, he ordered that the issue of criticizing Stalin not be discussed outside of the Central Committee meetings, nor should ordinary communists be allowed to ask questions about or discuss these issues.<sup>22</sup> This because, according to him, in Albania there was strong propaganda in favor of Stalin, the “father of the small nations” and thus open criticism against him would be used to attack the party policies. This left many communists in Albania dissatisfied, who, having studied in Moscow, Leningrad, or other capitals of the “peoples” democracies, maintained contact with their former colleagues in these countries, learning about the decisions of the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress and the opening-up process that followed in its wake.

The conference was held in the spirit of the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress, also because most of the conference participants, like most middle-level cadres in the state institutions of the time, were educated in the Soviet Union or other countries of the socialist bloc. Consequently, taking advantage of this space promoted by the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress, these individuals who represented the party organizations openly criticized the party and state leadership in Albania.

On the eve of the Conference of the Party Committee of Tirana, the economic situation of the country was exceedingly difficult: there was a lack of goods and food, there was a rationing system, salaries were exceptionally low, and working and living conditions were difficult. Even the political situation was quite difficult: there was a state of terror, the so-called class war was very fierce, and the secret police persecuted any suspects.<sup>23</sup> Even communists, at all levels, could not escape this.

The Party Conference of Tirana convened on April 14, 1956. The conference was attended by 453 delegates from all party organizations in the city of Tirana, but there were also guests from the Politburo, the Central Committee of the Party, and the Council of Ministers. The report for this party conference was given by the secretary of the Party

<sup>20</sup> Nikita Khrushchev, “Speech to 20th Congress of the C.P.S.U.” (online at marxists.org/archive/khrushchev/1956/02/24.htm?fbclid=IwAR16KhiwtbUqHNIQ9Xfr-9cTrYLNxVZ-cBoujpuEtO4vSq7rvtqQvbjt14Q [accessed Jan. 22, 2021]).

<sup>21</sup> Central State Archive of Albania/Party Archive (Hereinafter: CSA/PA), Box 14, folder 24, sheet 15 (Governing Bodies), 1956.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Lalaj, *The Party Conference*, p. 110.

Committee for Tirana, Fiqirete Shehu, who was Prime Minister Mehmet Shehu's wife. This report was schematic and general, not digging deeply to find the causes of the economic, social, and political problems which had arisen in the discussions among the party cells all around Tirana.<sup>24</sup> No self-criticism was made about the work of the party's leading bodies. Most importantly in this report, there was no reflection on the economic difficulties faced by working masses, on the economic privileges of the senior leadership of the party, the Politburo, and the Central Committee, who were called the "new beys" (the new feudal lords).

All these issues were raised as concerns in the meetings of the party cells in the work centers in Tirana but were not reflected in the report of the conference, which irritated the delegates. Consequently, they reacted against the report given by the First Secretary of the Committee of the Party of Tirana, and also gave some speeches against the privileges of the leadership, the luxury in which they lived, the lack of internal democracy in the party, the cult of the personality of Enver Hoxha, the severity of the so-called "class struggle" (which was nothing more than state terror, the harsh punishments received by some former party leaders for reasons unknown), and the extralegal conduct of the secret police against communists and citizens generally.<sup>25</sup>

Although the criticisms made by delegates at the conference cover a range of issues, including the political, social, state terror, secret police activity, the essence of their criticism of the Party leadership lies in their economic privileges, the luxury in which they lived while the population lived in poverty. Also, the harshest criticisms of the delegates are against the Party's economic policies, investments in heavy industry, the immediate collectivization of agriculture and handicrafts, which had caused great poverty to the peasantry and the working class.

The concerns raised by the participants in the conference were related to the economic situation in the country. Wages were low, and workers were forced to work long hours without receiving proportionate pay. Food and industrial goods were dispersed based on a rationing system that provided workers and peasants with far less than they needed. Concerns were also raised about the great backwardness of agriculture, the lack of mechanization, and the low level of productivity.<sup>26</sup> Although only ten years had passed since the agrarian reform, an extremely fast process of collectivization had begun, which was forcibly imposed over the peasants. Those who refused to become part of cooperatives (a type of *kolkhoz*) suffered severe consequences. This caused severe dissatisfaction in the peasantry who viewed the party and the government with hostility, but it also caused economic problems for the workers in the city because the

<sup>24</sup> CSA/PA, Box 2, file 39, sheet 5-5/1 (Governing Bodies), 1956.

<sup>25</sup> CSA/PA, Box 2, Folder 1/1.1, sheet 189 (Party Committee of Tirana), 1956.

<sup>26</sup> CSA/PA, Box 2, folder 1/1.1, sheets 141-151 (Party Committee of Tirana), 1956.

collectivization of agriculture had led to declining yields and consequently a shortage of agricultural products in the market.

Other economic issues raised by the participants at the conference had to do with mistaken economic policies in regards to the country's industrialization. This is because the economic policies of the party were aimed – primarily for ideological reasons – at heavy industry. They aimed to modernize the country, something that, according to them, went hand in hand with the industrialization and proletarianization of the majority of the Albanian population, who had been living up until then rurally. This industry was not efficient in terms of its productivity. Due to the lack of raw materials, the factories existed but did not function. Also, due to the lack of specialists, and the skill level of the workers, efficiency and productivity suffered. Consequently, the workers could not meet the production quotas and with the small pay that they received they could not meet the basic needs of life.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the state's investments in heavy industry weakened the ability to buy consumer goods, which caused difficulties in the lives of workers.

All these economic problems were quite obvious, and caused great dissatisfaction for the popular masses. They were raised in the meetings of the party cells but were not given any consideration at all in the report of the conference or in, the discussions of the members of the Politburo or the Central Committee.

In addition to criticizing the economic situation and economic policies of the party, the delegates at the conference also criticized the party's internal organization. This included the lack of internal democracy, the lack of debate within the party, and taking the leader's word for granted without it being discussed. Censorship and self-censorship in the press were also criticized, as well as the lack of freedom for communists to express their views freely in the party gatherings and the persecution by the secret police of communists expressing dissatisfaction or dissent at the state of terror in the country and at the instructions of the party.<sup>28</sup> From their criticisms it seems that the delegates considered the senior party and state leadership and employees of the apparatuses of these institutions as “a caste, the new feudal-lord class” – although these concepts are not mentioned and there is no data on how much knowledge the participants in the conference had of these concepts.

Topics discussed at the conference also included the issues of over-administration, bureaucracy, and over-employment of military, police, secret police (State Security), and party administration. This category of administrative employees often with nepotistic and social ties to the high leadership of the party (even if they did not have the same privileges as members of the Politburo and the Central Committee), still lived

<sup>27</sup> CSA/PA, Box 2, file 1, sheet 1 (Conference of the Party Committee of Tirana), 1956.

<sup>28</sup> CSA/PA, Box 2, folder 1/1.1, sheet 164 (Party Committee of Tirana), 1956.

a much better life than the masses, either by receiving wages much higher than the working class or by having no restrictions on access to food and industrial products.<sup>29</sup> The rationing system mentioned above did not apply or was much less restrictive for this category of employees than it was for the rest of the population.

From the minutes, it appears that the main criticisms of the discussants in the conference were directed at the party leader, Enver Hoxha, the Politburo, the members of the Central Committee, and the Council of Ministers. Thus, a representative from a textile factory, expressed the concern, that while the market lacked goods and food, the top party leadership had special shops where they could buy these products; not only that, but their wives managed to get clothes and custom-made textile materials, which was unthinkable for the rest of the people. He proposed that these problems be discussed more widely in the party and measures be taken, because this differentiation of treatment violated equality, one of the basic principles of socialism.<sup>30</sup> The problem of the price difference also arose, the party leadership could get food and industrial goods at much lower prices than the rest of the people because they bought them in special shops, and part of their expenses were provided by the Directorate of Governmental Services. A flagrant case, mentioned in the context of leadership privileges, one which had revolted the masses and the straightforward communists was that, on the occasion of a measles epidemic, the top leadership had bought vaccines from abroad for their children only and not for the children of the common people. As a result, the cemeteries were filled with children's graves.<sup>31</sup> Concrete proposals were made to correct these mistakes, especially because these privileges were enjoyed by the familiar clans of leaders.

A delegate from the party organization for Radio Tirana, addressed direct questions to the Minister of Trade and the Minister of Finance, wanting to know from what part of the budget did the expenditures to cover the high expenses that were made for Bloc (an imitation of the Kremlin where the senior leadership of the party lived) come from. He added that this isolated life of the leaders of the state and the party had aroused great dissatisfaction among the masses, who often asked how the leaders could live in villas and own cars with private chauffeurs. These questions were often addressed to the communists by common people, but the communist cadre did not know how to answer them because they had not received clarification about these problems.<sup>32</sup>

The issue of the leaders' privileges was discussed at length. Other delegates discussed this problem with officials from the ministry of Defense and the Central Committee

<sup>29</sup> CSA/PA, Box 2, folder 1/1.1, sheet 154 (Party Committee of Tirana), 1956.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> "Viktor Gjokolaj, ju rrëfej 100 vjeçarin Ihsan Budo, që kaloi 35 vjet internim në Kurbnesh," *Pirusti News*, Dec. 4, 2020 (online at [pirustinews.com/2020/12/04/viktor-gjokolaj-ju-rrefej-100-v-jecarin-ihsan-budo-qe-kaloi-35-vjet-internim-ne-kurbnesh](http://pirustinews.com/2020/12/04/viktor-gjokolaj-ju-rrefej-100-v-jecarin-ihsan-budo-qe-kaloi-35-vjet-internim-ne-kurbnesh) [accessed Jan. 22, 2021]).

<sup>32</sup> CSA/PA, Box 2, Folder 1/1.1, sheet 175 (Party Committee of Tirana), 1956.

of the Party and asked for these points to be discussed within the party cells and then addressed because they were violations of core principles and aroused dissatisfaction in the people and the party.<sup>33</sup> Family ties between Central Committee members were also criticized as they created castes and forestalled the objective judgment of organizational problems.

The harshest criticism on this issue was made by a delegate from the School of Army Officers, Iljaz Ahmeti, who in his speech presented a calculation detailing the expenses of the members of the Central Committee. According to him, seventy thousand Albanian Lek was spent per month for each of the member of the Central Committee because they had a house with free electricity and a free heating system, used a state car with a chauffeur paid by the state budget, had free vacations, and so on. More to the point, seventy thousand Albanian Lek per month came from the state budget to pay for the members of the party elite. That amounts to almost one million Albanian Lek per year, all the while the salary of an industry worker was four thousand Lek per month.<sup>34</sup> It would seem from the minutes of the conference that this was the speech that irritated the party leaders the most; Enver Hoxha himself, who had come to the conference for its final two days, stood up and interrupted this delegate, insulting him by calling him an enemy.

In addition to the economic problems, the conference discussed the lack of internal democracy in the party, which was seen as a Leninist norm. Thus, for example, the question arose as to why the decisions of the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress were not published in the press, or discussed in the basic organizations of the party, or in the mass organs of the communists and why the party hesitated to denounce the cult of Stalin. The conference also discussed dogmatism, hypocrisy, and the lack of freedom of expression within the party.<sup>35</sup> This was passed down from the top leadership of the party to the leaders of the lower levels, exposing a spirit of hesitation and censorship in the press. An example of this was the fact that the press had censored Palmiro Togliatti's (General Secretary of the Italian Communist Party) speech at the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress, especially the part where he denounced the cult of the personality of Stalin. The same thing happened with the speech of Mátyás Rákosi, First Secretary of the Hungarian Working People's Party. Speeches by other Communist and Workers' Party leaders on these issues were cut short and censored. From the discussions of the delegates representing the press organs it emerged that these censorships had been ordered by the Central Committee, which increased the dissatisfaction of the conference participants. Regarding the censorship of the truth in the press, the issue was raised that both the radio and the press in Albania buffed up the economic and social reality of the country, only presenting news about

<sup>33</sup> CSA/PA, Box 2, Folder 1/1.1, sheet 192 (Party Committee of Tirana), 1956.

<sup>34</sup> CSA/PA, Box 2, Folder 1/1.1, sheet 235 (Party Committee of Tirana), 1956.

<sup>35</sup> CSA/PA, Box 2, folder 1/1.1, sheet 164 (Party Committee of Tirana), 1956.

the country's achievements and successes, which were often untrue when in actuality the economic condition of the masses was miserable.<sup>36</sup>

The participants in the conference tried to bring the critical spirit of the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress to Albania, thus attempting to raise questions about the emergence of the cult of the personality in the Albanian leadership. The question was raised as to whether there might not be a cult of personality in Albania – namely in the person of the country's leader – Enver Hoxha. The apathetic behavior of the party leadership regarding these problems was criticized, especially the lack of self-reflection and self-criticism regarding the mistakes that had been made during this period. No in-depth analysis was made on the leadership of the party as to whether or not there were tendencies of the cult of personality in the Labor Party of Albania.<sup>37</sup> The delegates criticized the conclusions of the Plenum of the Central Committee of the Party that there was no cult of the personality in Albania and that the Leninist norms for the organization of the party were not violated and requested to start a broad discussion in every party cell about this issue. This would encourage criticism and self-criticism both from the rank and file communists and the party leaders; consequently, the internal democracy of the party would be strengthened.<sup>38</sup> It was also emphasized by the delegates that these demands and the discussions were not just a wish or opinion of the delegates of the conference, but some conclusions reached from the discussions with the rank and file communists in the party cells.

Another important issue that was raised at the conference was the ambiguity about the sentencing of some middle-ranking leaders of the party, for whom the delegates asked to reconsider the sentencing and, if it was possible, even consider their rehabilitation. Thus, questions were asked about the reasons for the sentencing of Tuk Jakova (former secretary of the Central Committee of the Party) and Bedri Spahiu (former Minister of Education) for whom there was no evidence of guilt, the delegates saying that their sentences seemed unjust. The delegates asked that their sentence be reconsidered and that they be rehabilitated.<sup>39</sup> Regarding the severity of the punishments, they were also requested that the party's policy on the so-called "class struggle," which was in fact state terror against the families of those considered enemies, be revised. They also wanted a review of the policy of punishing an entire family for the guilt or crimes of one member of it.

As mentioned above, participants in the Party Conference in Tirana included representatives of the Central Committee of the Party, members of the Politburo, the Council of Ministers, and party cadre. Since the intellectual level and the ideological formation

<sup>36</sup> CSA/PA, Box 2, Folder 1/1.1, sheet 175 (Party Committee of Tirana), 1956.

<sup>37</sup> CSA/PA, Box 2, folder 1/1.1, sheet 169 (Party Committee of Tirana), 1956.

<sup>38</sup> CSA/PA, Box 2, Folder 1/1.1, sheet 192 (Party Committee of Tirana), 1956.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

of the cadre was much lower than that of the delegates to the conference, the former did not rise to oppose the issues being discussed by the participants in the conference.<sup>40</sup> Even in cases when any of the senior party cadre answered the questions of the delegates or stood up to reply to any discussion, they did not oppose these discussions but tried to justify their actions, giving mainly dry, schematic answers.<sup>41</sup> However, these cadres were quite alarmed by the discussions of the delegates because this critical spirit could pass on to the Party Congress, which was expected to happen after a few months, and as a consequence could endanger the positions of the party leadership. For this reason, the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Party, Enver Hoxha, was urgently summoned to calm the delegates and to answer the questions and problems raised by them. On the second day of the conference, on 15 April, Hoxha came and urged them to continue the critical discussions because these served the party. On the next day, however, he stood up and denounced the delegates as being dangerous enemies, as being agents of American imperialism and Yugoslav revisionism.<sup>42</sup> On the following day of the conference, the First Secretary of the Central Committee continued with these serious accusations and insults accusing the delegates of the conference as being agents, enemies of the party and people, molded by foreign ideologies. At the same time, secret meetings of the Politburo, the Central Committee, and the Party Committee of Tirana were held, in which the “subversive” activity of the delegates of the conference was denounced. Additionally, they were asked to replace the delegates and to attack these individuals in their working centers.<sup>43</sup> The leadership ordered that this whole campaign be carried out in secret, not to give a voice in the press or the meetings of the party organs to these individuals. Radio and the newspapers were instructed not to write about the Conference of Party of Tirana, and not to mention details from the discussions there. It was also demanded from the party base that all those individuals who had “suspicious” views, “asked strange questions,” or had attacked the party leadership, be expelled from the party. The State Security (Secret Police) organs would deal with them.<sup>44</sup>

## Discussion

It can be said that the critical spirit of the Conference of Party of Tirana, which was influenced by the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CPSU, was extinguished with an “iron fist.” Nonetheless, it did have a profound impact on the political situation in the country. First of all, the leadership of the Labor Party of Albania mentioned the connections with

<sup>40</sup> CSA/PA, Box 2, file 1/1.1, sheet 189 (Party Committee of Tirana), 1956.

<sup>41</sup> CSA/PA, Box 2, folder 1/1.1, sheets 141–151 (Party Committee of Tirana), 1956.

<sup>42</sup> CSA/PA, Box 2, Folder 1/1.1, sheet 246 (Party Committee of Tirana), 1956.

<sup>43</sup> CSA/PA, Box 2, Folder 1/1.1, sheets 280–302 (Party Committee of Tirana), 1956.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* sheet 282.

anti-party elements at the Tirana Conference in every “enemy group” that was found guilty between 1956 (when the conference was held) and 1983, when the “last enemy group” was “discovered” in Albania. Also, although the leadership of the party tried to silence the conference and all the discussions of the delegates there, their impact not only in Tirana but in the whole of Albania was quite high. From witnesses of the time as well as State Security reports, it has been shown that people were discussing the events of the Conference of Tirana and the criticisms that had been made of the party leadership by the delegates at that conference.<sup>45</sup> It should be noted here that despite the orders of the Central Committee of the Party, the base did not accept the orders from the party cells to expel the delegates of the conference from the party. The communists rose in the party meetings, expressing the feeling that, at most, those individuals should be reprimanded for the political mistakes they had made; but they could not be agents and enemies and consequently could not be expelled from the party. Even Secretaries of the Central Committee had expressed skepticism about these individuals being enemies, and even demanded that they not be punished, but be helped to correct their mistakes.<sup>46</sup> Certainly, these sentiments were not given consideration by the Politburo and the First Secretary of the Labor Party of Albania as the delegates who had made the criticisms were expelled from the party and received harsh punishments.

After the collapse of the socialist system throughout Eastern Europe, including Albania, some of the participants in the Tirana Conference, although advanced in age, were still alive and well and began to give interviews and write about this conference. Two of them were Njazi Jaho, a lawyer sentenced to twenty years in prison, and Ihsan Budo, a former deputy minister, sentenced to more than ten years in prison. Both of them, as well as the historian Ana Lalaj, had faced the accusations by Enver Hoxha against the delegates in the Tirana Conference, and have categorically denied any kind of connection between the participants in conference and any foreign secret service. This includes that of the Soviet Union, which was an ally state at the time.

According to Njazi Jaho, the Conference of Tirana did not intend to change the socialist system and establish capitalism. The delegates of the conference came from the National Liberation War and demanded changes within the socialist system. The conference was not a war between the clans within the party, as there were no clans, fractions, or groups in the party. The conference had no plans to overthrow the leadership and bring in another. The conference sought to create the possibility of achieving socialism with a human face through criticism.<sup>47</sup> It is not clear whether this phrase – “socialism with a human face” – used by this former delegate to the conference was

<sup>45</sup> CSA/PA, Box 14, Folder 166, sheet 2 (Administrative Directorate), 1956.

<sup>46</sup> CSA/PA, Box 14, Folder 26, sheet 47 (Governing Body), 1956.

<sup>47</sup> “Njazi Jaho: Party Conference in Tirana, 1956,” *TV KLAN*, Jan. 4, 2009 (online at [tvklan.al/video-histori-me-zhurmes-njazi-jaho-cfare-ndodhi-ne-konferencen-e-tiranes-me-1956-arkiv](http://tvklan.al/video-histori-me-zhurmes-njazi-jaho-cfare-ndodhi-ne-konferencen-e-tiranes-me-1956-arkiv) [accessed Jan. 22, 2021]).



borrowed from Alexander Dubček's later discourse or has been in the minds of the delegates since the time of the Conference of Tirana (1956). Likely, this slogan was later borrowed from Dubček; however, from the discussions of the delegates in the conference and from the memories of those who are still alive, it is understood that they aimed at improving the economic situation of the working class and peasantry, easing the terror and state violence, strengthening the internal democracy of the party, and improving the situation in the country in the spirit of the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CPSU. According to Jaho, the delegates in the conference themselves were not clear about what form the socialist system should take but hoped to follow the example of the Soviet Union, where the process of de-Stalinism had begun.<sup>48</sup> The delegates insisted on two things: they were communist and did not aim at replacing the socialist system with the capitalist one. Their purpose was to correct the system's mistakes.

More or less the same thing is said by Ihsan Budo, who strongly denies that he or the other participants had any link to foreign espionage. Their criticism was that of ordinary communists who were concerned about the economic and political situation in the country and wanted to improve living conditions for the working masses and have more democracy within the party. In no way did any of the participants intend to change the socialist system or to support the intervention of foreign powers in the country. Budo reaffirms that the Tirana Conference was inspired by the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CPSU, by the spirit of criticism of Stalin's mistakes that was proclaimed at that Congress as well as the opening that followed it. Criticism of the Albanian leadership was made through the "lenses" of the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress. This was the only "foreign influence" the delegates could have had; they were not enemies or agents of foreign services.<sup>49</sup>

If one reads the discussions of the delegates in the conference, they will see that they were mainly criticisms of the economic privileges that the high leadership of the party enjoyed, which was contrasted with the difficult situation of the masses, workers, and peasants. Based on these discussions and criticism of the top leadership of the party, the isolation they had from the masses, the economic privileges they enjoyed unlike the mass poverty in the country, it seems that criticism of this leading group goes was aimed at their transformation into a "caste." The participants in the conference did not mention the word caste but criticized the bureaucratization of the party leadership, the nepotistic ties between them, the privileges they enjoyed, and their secession from the masses. This critique is similar to that which Trotsky made of the Soviet system, which he called a triumph of high-ranking party cadres who put their interests above those of the popular masses and the ideals of the October Revolution.<sup>50</sup> The conference

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> "Viktor Gjokolaj, ju rrëfej 100 vjeçarin Ihsan Budo, që kaloi 35 vjet internim në Kurbnesh," *Pirusti News*, Dec. 4, 2020 (online at [pirustinews.com/2020/12/04/viktor-gjokolaj-ju-rrerefj-100-vjecarin-ihsan-budo-qe-kaloi-35-vjet-internim-ne-kurbnesh](http://pirustinews.com/2020/12/04/viktor-gjokolaj-ju-rrerefj-100-vjecarin-ihsan-budo-qe-kaloi-35-vjet-internim-ne-kurbnesh) [accessed Jan. 22, 2021]).

<sup>50</sup> Trotsky, *The Revolution*, p. 98.

participants do not refer to Trotsky because, despite the “opening” process initiated by Nikita Khrushchev in the Soviet Union, Trotsky was not rehabilitated. A reference to Trotsky could immediately lead to imprisonment of the conference participants, as in Albania being “Trotskyist” was a charge leading to imprisonment. Also, there is no evidence that the conference participants were aware of Trotsky’s criticism of the Soviet system, yet their critique is essentially similar to that of Trotsky on the bureaucratization of the system. Also, the environment did not allow for many theoretical references, because it was a party meeting, so the delegates mostly employed the criticisms of the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress and applied them to the Albanian leadership.

Regarding the discussions about the “cult of the personality” in Albania, related to the person of the main leader, Enver Hoxha, the delegates in the conference have repeatedly referred to the violation of Leninist norms regarding collegiality, and decision-making in collegiality. This definition of the violation of collegiality, as a violation of the Leninist norms of the party, was made in the Secret Report of the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CPSU by Nikita Khrushchev to J. V. Stalin.<sup>51</sup> This definition was also employed by the delegates to the Conference of Tirana and was used to criticize the norms of action of the leadership of the Labor Party in Albania. The lack of internal democracy and the right to express one’s opinion in the Party organs was also presented as a violation of Leninist norms in the conference. Along this line, criticisms were made of the fact that the decisions were made in the Politburo and were imposed on the base of the party, where these decisions could not be discussed or improved upon but had to be implemented. None of the participants in the conference, however, questioned the socialist nature of the system or made an in-depth analysis of its internal problems to determine whether these deviations were due to the will of the country’s leadership, were a logical consequence of the economic and cultural backwardness of the country, or resulted from the deficiencies of the political culture and the authoritarian legacy of previous regimes. Criticism of the participants focused mainly on the senior leadership of the party, the Politburo, and the Central Committee, but not on the lower state and party bureaucracy, though the factory directors and party secretaries for the districts were also privileged and had an economic and social status much higher than workers. According to Trotsky, the class struggle in Stalinism takes place between these bureaucrats who administer the means of production, and the workers.<sup>52</sup> The middle and low bureaucracy is also the social basis on which the high party and state bureaucracy, even the main leader (chief bureaucrat) is based.<sup>53</sup> The 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the CPSU had not issued such a criticism aimed at the lower bureaucracy of the state and the party, which has been a supporting structure of the high bureaucracy and the

<sup>51</sup> Khrushchev, *Speech to 20<sup>th</sup> Congress*.

<sup>52</sup> Trotsky, *The Revolution*, p. 102.

<sup>53</sup> Lewin, *The Social Background*, p. 123.

top leader. This missing critique by Khrushchev, which, if it had been allowed to reach its logical conclusion, could have affected himself as he was a product of the system promoted by Stalin, was also not addressed by the delegates of the Conference of Party in Tirana. So, their position and criticisms of the Albanian leadership went as far as the space given to them by the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress, but without exceeding it, without making a Marxist analysis of state socialism in Albania. However, it can be imagined that if this reflective and critical spirit of the Conference of Party in Tirana were allowed to develop within the Labor Party of Albania, it would have created space for a revision of state policies and the Party organization of the Labor Party of Albania.

From the discussions of the delegates at the Conference of Tirana, it appears that they did not refer directly to the Marxist concepts of criticism of the economic situation in the country and the criticism of state socialism. Yet they have criticized from a Marxist perspective some of the issues they have raised in their discussions, such as the economic privileges of senior leadership, their separation from the workers and peasants, their isolated luxury living, lack of internal democracy in the party, and violation of collegiality in the party's decision-making forums. Without directly referring to Marx himself or mentioning Trotsky or his critique of the Soviet system, these delegates have critiqued the way the system in Albania functioned. So, it can be concluded that the criticism of the delegates at the Conference of Party Committee of Tirana was a criticism that started from a Marxist position, though without clearly referring to Marxist concepts. It was criticism that aimed to correct from within the system of state socialism, without replacing it, or without thinking of other alternatives beyond it.

## Conclusions

This paper aimed to analyze an event that turned into a tribune of leftist dissent against state socialism in Albania. This event is the Conference of the Labor Party Committee for the City of Tirana, where in the spirit of the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, many delegates, mainly intellectuals but also rank and file communists, stood up and criticized the high leadership of the party. These criticisms covered a wide range of issues, including economic issues, the Party's internal democracy, the cult of the individual, and state terror, but did place a greater emphasis on the economic privileges of the leadership and its detachment from the masses.

Initially a theoretical summary was presented of various authors who have analyzed and criticized the system of state socialism, that Trotsky and other authors have called Stalinism. Then a presentation was made of the historical situation of Albania at that time, as well as the state of studies so far on dissent and left-wing dissent in Albania. The research question the paper tried to answer was: *How much Marxist terminology was employed in these delegates' critique of state socialism?* For this reason, sections of the discussions by the delegates in the conference that address these issues were presented as they exist in the minutes kept and found in the Archive of the Labor Party of Albania. From the analysis of the participants' speeches at the conference and the comparison

of them with a Marxist theoretical framework (unclear) it appears that although they have not directly employed Marxist concepts in their critiques of the party leadership and its policies, they have positioned their criticism from a leftist perspective and have used critiques similar to those made by Trotsky of Stalinism without, however, referring to Trotsky or using the same terminology. As was mentioned, this critical spirit of the Conference of Tirana was strongly suppressed by the party leadership, and the most critical voices were severely condemned. It may be thought that if this critical spirit within the party had been allowed to develop, it would have corrected those errors of state socialism that in later years became so severe that, after the fall of the socialist system, they led to a reactionary revenge that can be said to continue until today.