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Bunker Mentalities:
The Shifting Imaginaries of
Albania's Fortified Landscape

Frédéric Lasserre [i]
Mia Bennett [ii]
Enkeleda Arapi [iii]

Between 1967 and 1986, the Albanian government built an estimated 750,000 small and medium-sized military bunkers for defense purposes. These concrete constructions were spread across the country's territory, with many concentrated along borders and beaches, in cities, and near key industries, strategic points, and transportation infrastructure. Long symbols of the communist regime, after it collapsed in 1991, the bunkers lost their purpose. As a result, both the narratives surrounding bunkers and their actual uses experienced significant transformations. Originally designed to control borders and instill fear in the population, bunkers have since been abandoned, destroyed, and graffitied, as might be expected. More notably, local entrepreneurs have transformed some bunkers into hotels or restaurants, while the state and non-profit organizations have turned others into commemorative sites that respectively glorify or expose the communist regime's undertakings. Our ethnographic research into the discursive and material shifts to Albania's fortified landscape, based on several field trips, interviews and investigations carried out between 2007 and 2017, identifies four contemporary "bunker mentalities" in Albania: indifference, derision, commodification, and commemoration.

Introduction

Between 1967 and 1986, the Albanian government built approximately 750,000 small and medium-sized military bunkers for defense purposes (Stefa & Mydyti 2012). Construction on the bunkers began following the decision of First Secretary Enver Hoxha and continued until one year after his death. The bunkers were motivated by the concept of popular defense, understood as the massive mobilization of civilians in militias as opposed to the development of a professional, highly trained army. The mushroom-shaped concrete constructions were spread across Albania's territory, with many concentrated along borders and beaches, in cities, and near key industries, strategic points, and transportation infrastructure. Some bunkers were also placed within the country's interior

i   **Frédéric Lasserre**, PhD, Professor in the Department of Geography at Laval University, Canada, and Chair of the Quebec Council for Geopolitical Studies. Website: https://cgegheiulaval.com/ Email: Frederic.lasserre@ggr.ulaval.ca

ii **Mia Bennett**, PhD, Assistant Professor in the Department of Geography at the University of Washington, United States. Blog: cryopolitics.com Twitter: @cryopolitics

iii **Enkeleda Arapi**, PhD, Lecturer in the Department of Teaching and Learning Studies at Laval University, Canada. Email: Enkeleda.arapi@fse.ulaval.ca

with the aim of slowing down both airborne attack and potential invaders, such as Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union, or NATO (Eaton & Roshi 2014). The bunkers were maintained by the military until 1991, when the communist regime established in 1944 collapsed.[1] The strategic reasons for the bunkers' construction quickly became obsolete, resulting in the destruction of many of the concrete formations. Yet tens of thousands of them still conspicuously dot the landscape. Most are ignored or abandoned. Some have been repainted or graffitied, and others commodified and turned into hotel rooms, bars, and restaurants—a process which began around 2010. A select few have been turned museums and sites of remembrance by both the state and private actors either to memorialize Albania's recent communist past and its leadership or to document its injustices.

Several authors have reflected on the evolving perceptions of these scattered bunkers, focusing on the political dimensions of their evolution (Galaty et al. 1999; Iacono & Këlliçi 2016; Glass 2017). Additional publications have investigated the memorial and economic dimensions of the changing bunkers (Stefa & Mydyti 2012; Iacono & Këlliçi 2017). Albanian bunkers attest to a paranoid perception of foreign threats by the communist regime (1944–1991). They evolved from military tools, with domestic dimensions, to useless artefacts inherited from a despised past after the collapse of the communist regime in 1991, to objects of derision, memory markers, or even touristic assets: it is this peculiar evolution of representations and narratives about these landmarks that we addressed in this paper. While Payne (2014) offers a useful typology of bunkers ("appreciated," "interpreted," "adapted," or "exploited"), our findings, based on information gathered through twelve semi-structured interviews conducted in Albanian in Tirana, Dürres, and Dhermi, and several field trips to Albania between 2007–2017, revealed a different typology of "bunker mentalities" that has arisen since the fall of communism. We determine that the social meaning invested in Albania's bunkers has changed from a pervasive fear of invasion to indifference, derision, commodification, and commemoration. Although Albania's heavily militarized built environment dating from the communist period still largely remains in place, dramatic changes to the political, economic, and cultural contexts in which it is embedded underscore that it is possible to invest even the most unyielding concrete fortifications with new meaning.

1. Mushrooms on the Landscape

1.1. Scattered elements of the past

Most of Albania's bunkers are small and were designed to host two infantry soldiers equipped with rifles or simple machine guns. No artillery was supposed to be hosted in these fortifications. Instead, they were designed as infantry-based bunkers able to be quickly manned in case of attack. The most common type of bunker is a small

Figure 1. Map of Albania. Source: authors.

concrete dome set into the ground with a circular bottom extending downwards, just large enough for one or two people to stand inside (Figures 2–5). Known as *Qender Zjarri* ("firing position", or "QZ") bunkers, they were prefabricated and transported to their final positions, where they were assembled. They consisted of three main elements: a 3-metre-wide hemispherical concrete dome with a firing slit, a hollow cylinder to support the dome, and an outer wall with a radius 60 centimetres wider than the cylinder. The gap between the cylinder and outer wall was filled with soil (Stefa & Mydyti 2012). The bigger *Pike Zjarri* ("firing point", or "PZ") bunkers could accommodate a dozen soldiers. A few even larger bunkers were dug into rock formations to house military equipment and political officials (Nepravishta 2014) (Figure 6).

1.2. The hard logic behind the bunkers

The practice of fortifying borders predates modern states. The Egyptian and Roman Empires and successive kingdoms across Eurasia built defensive walls and fortresses to keep invaders out. Such practices differ

Figure 2. Beach bunkers, Dhermi, 2007. Photo: authors

Figure 3. Bunker on the shores of Lake Ohrid, Pogradec, near the border with North Macedonia, 2007. Photo: authors.

Figure 4. Bunker in Kafasan, next to the border with North Macedonia, 2012. Photo: authors

Figure 5. An urban bunker in Durrës, 2017. Photo: authors

Figure 6. Military bunkers dug into the mountain, Dajti, 2015. Photo: authors.

Figure 7. Bunkers of the Spanish Linea P near Roses, Catalonia, 2018. Source: authors.

from the modern practice of erecting walls to prevent immigration (Paz 2017). More contemporarily, the twentieth century is replete with examples of states fortifying their borderlands with bunkers, largely in times of war. After World War I, beginning in 1920, Italy built defenses along the newly established Rapallo border[2] with the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (Grom et al 2018; Kumer et al 2020). In the years leading to World War II in the 1930s, France built bunkers along its infamously fallible Maginot Line, while Germany created a similar construction with its Siegfried Line. Fears of Nazi invasion drove Sweden to embark on a large-scale fortification of its southern coastline with the Skåne Line (Högberg 2000; Vernon & Zimmermann 2021). From 1939–1940, following the Soviet Union's annexation of the Baltic states and its occupation of eastern Poland, the Politburo erected scattered bunkers along the Molotov Line spanning its new western borders (Short 2008). Then, between 1942–1944, Germany turned its gaze to the coast to protect from seaborne invaders, building the Atlantic Wall, a series of coastal fortifications stretching from Scandinavia to continental Europe (Kaufmann et al 2012). Franco's Spain began building its Linea P[3] along the French border in 1939 and continued its construction until 1948 (Rodriguez 2010) (Figure 7), indicating the continuation of militaristic practices post-war.

In Cold War-era Albania, the official doctrine guiding the construction of Hoxha's bunkers was that their presence would gradually wear down an invading force by compelling them to search and destroy the bunkers. They were built in response to several perceived foreign threats, which heightened after the Soviet–Albanian split in 1961 and the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops in 1968. Hoxha professed a belief that Albania might be the next target of the Soviet Union or Yugoslavia, particularly since he was hostile towards the government of Tito in Belgrade, the latter's capital. Bunkers were meant to provide for the defense of the country along a partisan guerilla doctrine. In other words, what they lacked in firepower they made up for with a popular resistance that was imagined as being able to gradually wear down any invader (Vickers & Pettifer 1997, 210–211; Turku 2009, 108). The strategy partly relied on visualizing "Albania's determination to defend itself

at all costs" (Turku 2009, 108). Built on beaches and along borders with a view to stopping or slowing down an invader, Albanian bunkers were consistent with the logic of border fortification and territorial defense. They were also scattered across the territory to ensure that the enemy could be fought deep inside the country's territory—a similar strategy to that in Switzerland and Austria (Stein 1990) and Yugoslavia (Grom & Štukovnik 2018).

As no detailed official account of the Albanian bunker's production has been published or declassified, there are no official figures nor maps to aid in estimating their exact number or location. Estimates of their construction range from 180,000 to one million, with the most frequent reported range being between 500,000 and 750,000 (Glass 2017). The economic effort of such an endeavour consumed significant financial and industrial resources (Glass 2015). At the height of bunker production between 1977 and 1981, the government invested an estimated two percent (Glass 2014) of net material product[4]—a significant share of the budget—into this activity. As a proportion of the economy, the cost of the bunkers' construction equates to twice what France incurred to build the Maginot Line (Asllani 2010; Stefa & Mydyti 2012), a military defense that ultimately proved as useless as the Albania's bunkers.

The effectiveness of Hoxha's strategy was never put to the test as no invasion of communist Albania ever took place. There are some reports, however, that they were used in combat situations after the regime's collapse. During a period of civil unrest in 1997, sometimes referred to as the Albanian Civil War, in the face of fighting between government troops and rebels, residents of Sarandë in southern Albania were reported to have taken up positions in bunkers around the town (Spollar 1997). In addition, after the outbreak of the Kosovo War in 1999, as Serbian artillery batteries located across the border in Kosovo shelled border villages in Kosovo and Albania, Kosovars and other local residents used the bunkers to take shelter (Holmes 1999). During the conflict, the Kosovo Liberation Army (UCK) also reportedly used them as defensive positions against the Serbian army (Walker 1999; Strochlic 2015).

The bunkers' military value may be partly assessed through testimonies and recent observations. The concrete used to build these bunkers often shows signs of premature deterioration, especially in locations close to the sea. In contrast, German-built concrete bunkers dating to World War II near Pogradec do not appear to suffer from such deterioration (as of authors' field trip, August 2010). One engineer we interviewed attested that individual bunkers could easily be razed by a bulldozer (Figure 8), which provokes questioning of how their structural integrity would have withstood any onslaught by advancing tanks (Informant 1, Tirana, 2010).

1.3. The hidden ideology of bunkers

While the bunkers outwardly aimed to serve as a military deterrent, they had a more domestic function, too. Hoxha mandated that Albanian families help erect and maintain these bunkers (Informant 2, Tirana, 2012; Iacono & Këlliçi 2015), which formed part of the regular collective chores the population had to carry out as part of their mandatory civil service (Informants 2 and 5, Tirana, 2012). Bunker parts were prefabricated (Glass 2014) and then shipped to their destinations, where civilians helped with their final assembly. By disseminating the bunkers across the country, the totalitarian regime strove to inculcate a siege mentality within the population (Galaty et al. 1999; O'Donnell

Figure 8. Toppled bunker near the former Communist Party/ Party of Labour youth camp, Dajti, 2017. Photo: authors.

1999; Glass 2008; Morgan 2017; Iacono & Këlliçi 2015). This strategy of exercising control by instilling fear may explain why some Albanians still associate bunkers with "bad memories" of the political control and constant surveillance exercised by the police and informants alike (Informant 2, Tirana, 2012). Post-Hoxha, Albanians often describe these bunkers as symbols of repression and intimidation (Galaty et al. 1999; Martin-McAuliffe 2017). As one high-ranking military official interviewed for a major study of bunkers, Concrete Mushrooms (Stefa et al. 2012, 26) recalled,

> The bunkers weren't built to defend from outsiders, but to communicate to the people of Albania that everything we do, we do it to defend our people against all. The bunkerization was political force in action under the guise of nationalist interests, when in reality it was wasting precious resources as propaganda to keep people convinced that the country was powerful.

The regime intended that the bunkers, starkly visible across Albania's landscape, would imprint themselves into the public consciousness. They were not hidden as military fortifications in other countries such as Switzerland, for instance, where the national defense doctrine still rests on popular mobilization supported by extensive underground fortifications (Nullis 2002; Reichen 2016; Hunt 2017). Thus, while Hoxha's regime has been gone for three decades, the continuing presence and visibility of thousands of bunkers prompts reconsideration of their evolving relationship with the public.

2. Albanians' Contemporary Relationship with Bunkers

Following the fall of the communist regime, Albania's bunkers lost their association with a fear of war and government repression. Many quickly became obsolete, with people ignoring them or more proactively destroying them. Others were repurposed and invested with new meanings. The sudden shift in attitudes towards bunkers mirrors how similar constructions in other countries have been transformed following regime change and/or the end of the war.[5] For instance, in France, a Vichy-regime era bunker in the town of Sainte Bernadette-du-Banlay has been turned into a church, while in Germany, a Nazi-era bunker has been turned into a climbing playground (Virilio 1991; Morgan 2017).

Professor of architecture Jason Payne (2014) offers a useful typology of Albanians' evolving attitudes with bunkers within post-communist society, on which our research builds. He argues that bunkers may be appreciated as ruins, adapted for practical reuse, exploited for consumerist reuse, or reinterpreted either through a "self-reflective institution" or as a place

that fosters distance and commemoration (Payne 2014, 165). Drawing on our ethnographic observations and interviews in Albania, we suggest the following typology. First, bunkers may become the object of total indifference, which may result in their destruction when deemed necessary. Second, they may become the object of derision once painted or graffitied. Third, they may become converted and reused either ad hoc or more deliberately transformed in order to commodify them. Fourth, they may become commemorative markers to reflect upon the past. While these categories are distinct, they are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Figure 9. The Pyramid, downtown Tirana, in 2007.
Photo: authors.

Figure 10. The Pyramid, 2015. Photo: authors

2.1. Bunkers as objects of indifference

Numerous bunkers have been destroyed for a variety of motives. One involves seeking revenge against the former communist regime.[6] Another is reclaiming land for local use, as is the case with farmers who consider the bunkers in their fields to be nuisances, locals, and entrepreneurs with businesses on beaches that promote of tourism (Informant 3, Tirana, 2015). This undocumented destruction does not seem to have sparked any serious public debate, which contrasts with discussions over the fate of larger, more visible communist landmarks like the Pyramid in Tirana, inaugurated in 1988 and initially designed as a museum of Hoxha's legacy which meant to glorify the communist regime (Figure 9). Now largely derelict and vandalised (Figure 10), neither the municipal nor central government has a plan to destroy or restore it, partly due to the protracted public disagreement as to what to do with the monument (Myhrberg 2011; Iacono & Këlliçi 2016; Iacono & Këlliçi 2017).

Destroying a concrete bunker is a costly undertaking for any individual who tries to remove one, which partly explains why so many still dot the country. Given the expense, bunkers may be more casually reused, for instance as ad hoc toilets (Informant 4, Dürres, 2017) or as a place for teenagers to "behave promiscuously" (Galaty et al. 1999, 203). Even when sites are redeveloped, such as an amusement park opened in 2017 on Dajti Mountain north of Tirana, close to one of Hoxha's countryside residences, bunkers are often left undisturbed (Figure 11).

2.2. Bunkers as objects of derision

While the financial outlays to destroy bunkers in the aforementioned amusement park on Dajti Mountain may have been prohibitive, another possibility as to why the bunkers have remained is that the park's owners may feel that their presence can add a touch of kitsch and serve as a reminder of what the place once was. More

Figure 11. Bunkers near Enver Hoxha's mountain residence, Dajti, 2017. Photo: authors.

sarcastic and derisive attitudes towards bunkers emerge through their commercialization, too. Commenting on the sale of burgers and souvenir pillboxes shaped like small bunkers, social anthropologist Helen Regis argues that bunkers "are being employed to communicate a very different message: a self-depreciating, post-communist kitsch aesthetic which recuperates the past as "heritage" through the idiom of mockery" (Regis, personal communication, quoted in Galaty et al. 1999, 209). The bunker-shaped pillboxes, ashtrays and pencil holders are on display in souvenir shops for the passing tourist.[7] One bunker souvenir was promoted with a message to buyers: "Greetings to the land of the bunkers. We assumed that you could not afford to buy a big one" (Shenon 1996, S1, p.4).

Another form of appropriation that is equally derisive is the painting of bunkers found along coastlines or in urban centers. Some bunkers have been painted with bright colours with a view to making their presence more aesthetically in line with spaces of leisure (Pike 2013, 59). No official municipal program promotes this act of bunker transformation, so it is likely these paintings are the initiative of "locals or students," as one informant surmised (Informant 2, Tirana, 2012). At the same time, the painting of bunkers signals a desire to transform the outward meaning of their continued presence: after all, they could have been destroyed or removed (Figures 12, 13, 14, 15).

2.3. Bunkers as sources of income

Many bunkers have also been reappropriated and turned into sources of income, especially in relation to the country's growing tourism industry. Once foreign tourists and journalists began entering Albania in the late 1990s, their fascination with this unique feature of the Albanian landscape spurred entrepreneurs to transform bunkers into restaurants, bars, and hotels. To enterprising Albanians, bunkers represented a resource to be put to use rather than an eyesore (Pike 2013, 58–59). This trend is exemplified by the aforementioned project Concrete Mushrooms, initiated by two professors at the Politecnico Di Milano in Italy, which led to the publication of a book (Stefa & Mydyti 2012) and the creation of a website (ArkiNet Blog 2009). The objective of the project was to bring a reflection on these inherited concrete bunkers scattered across the country and how different looks could be given at them. The architecture students behind Concrete

Figure 12. Painted bunker, Ksamil, 2010. Photo: authors.

Figure 13. Painted bunkers on the beach in Ksamil, 2010. Photo: authors.

Figure 14. Painted bunker inside a hotel and restaurant complex, Dajti, 2012. Photo: authors.

Figure 15. Painted bunker, downtown Tirana, 2017. Photo: authors.

Figure 16. A bunker transformed into a bar near Durrës, 2018.
Credit: Rémi Bourdillon, Le Devoir, June 16, 2018, https ://www.
ledevoir.com/vivre/voyage/530305/des-bunkers-aux-balkans
(with permission).

Figure 17. Restored bunker, downtown Tirana, 2017.
Photo: authors.

Figure 18. Bunk'Art 2 bunker, downtown Tirana, 2017.
Photo: authors.

Mushrooms now promote the financial benefits of converting bunkers into bars, restaurants, and small hotels. Similar initiatives include "Bed and Bunkers" (Anonymous 2012; Bed and Bunkers, 2015), a project launched in 2012 to turn PZ bunkers into hotel rooms, especially in spots with scenery attractive to tourists (EU Prize for Contemporary Architecture 2015; see also Geoghegan 2012). Converting large PZ bunkers into tourist infrastructure is easier than with smaller QZ bunkers, which lack enough space to be exploited in a similar manner.

The trend towards commodifying bunkers, especially in combination with their painting, has led Albania's capitalist government to perceive them as tourism assets. Western and Albanian private agencies helping to develop tourism have also strongly encouraged the adoption of these new "bunker mentalities" (see for example: TripAdvisor 2017; Albanian Tourist; and Albanian Trip). Ironically for infrastructure that once formed part of the concrete defense fortifications of the communist regime, the bunkers are now part and parcel of the capitalist tourism industry's infrastructure (Figure 16). Moreover, just as there are precedents for building bunkers for defense, there are precedents for using old bunkers for tourist purposes, too. Such fortifications have already been put to economic use in Israel (Gelbman 2008) and in France with both the Maginot Line (Gordon 2018) and the Nazi-era Atlantic Wall (Loizeau & Leleu 2019). The rapid commodification of the bunkers in post-communist Albania, perhaps, given the country's wholesale political and economic transformation, is arguably all the more striking.

2.4. Bunkers as reminders of the past

Finally, bunkers have more recently been preserved and restored as testimonies of the past. This restoration points to a desire among historical associations or municipal authorities to have the bunkers encourage reflection regarding the communist regime rather than to solely reappropriate and monetize obsolete infrastructure. Nevertheless, the preservation of bunkers as sites of remembrance, as has been done in Tirana (Figure 17), can also overlap with capitalist motives, especially with regard to heritage tourism (van der Boon 2019; Azizaj 2020).

One key example of the transformation of a bunker into a site of public remembrance is the first Bunk'Art location, opened in 2014 in northern Tirana. Here, 24 rooms of the sprawling concrete shelter, which was intended to protect Hoxha and his cabinet in the event of a nuclear attack, have been turned into a mixed-use art and culture center featuring a history museum and contemporary art gallery (Figure 18). Bunk'Art 2, opened in 2016, turned a former shelter in downtown Tirana designed to safeguard elite police and interior

ministry staff from nuclear catastrophe into a museum documenting the political persecution perpetrated by the communist regime (Eilers 2016: Bourdillon 2018). Yet alongside these efforts at public communication and commemoration from the Albanian government evinced by these museums, a more derisive attitude can be found among the public. As one Bunk'Art guide explained, "For you to visit our bunkers, it is a good way to punish the dictator. He must turn around in his grave knowing that you, the "capitalists", have fun invading them!" (Bourdillon 2018).

Conclusion

Fearing an invasion from outside, Hoxha's isolated communist regime promoted narratives of a state under siege by NATO, Yugoslavia, and the Soviet Union and its allies. The Albanian military responded to these fears of invasion by frantically constructing bunkers—with the mandated assistance of the entire population—across the country from the mountains to the coast in an effort to fortify its terrestrial and maritime borders. These bunkers generated a pervasive atmosphere of fear among the public. At the same time, these worries were ultimately rather surface-level, much like the bunkers themselves. Once the communist regime collapsed in 1991, a range of new bunker mentalities quickly developed, ranging from indifference to derision, commodification, and commemoration.

As in much of the world where military infrastructure no longer serves its original purpose, many bunkers in Albania now lie derelict. While stripped of their initial military or political purpose, these abandoned artefacts still vividly and inescapably testify to the past. Bunkers were built out of both mortal anxieties (Bennett 2011) and, more specifically in Albania, the totalitarian desire to instill terror into the population. Within a relatively short period of time, Albanians' relationship with the bunkers has shifted from one characterized by fearful distance to a range of other attitudes and practices. This evolving relationship evinces a reappropriation of the bunkers (Morgan 2014) signifying how Albanian society is gradually coming to terms with the painful heritage of its communist past. Further research can investigate what place bunkers will occupy both in public space and public imaginaries going forward. Will the trend towards destruction prevail, will bunkers increasingly be turned into productive assets, or will they gradually fade away from the landscape and memory, as our conversations with numerous locals hinted? Several narratives and potentialities are at play. How they will materialize and affect the tens of thousands of bunkers still imprinted upon Albania's territory remains to be seen.

Notes

1   The Republic of Albania was proclaimed on April 29, 1991.

2   See the website Mapping the Rapallo Border fortifications: https://www.rapalskameja.si/zemljevid/; see also Soca Valley, https://www.soca-valley.com/en/in-search-of-adventure/culture/2021011821175101/the-rapallo-border/

3   See the website Mapping Linea P: https://lineap.spiki.org/

4   In a socialist economy, services are not taken into account and only material production is considered in the calculation of domestic economic production.

5   Like the modern church in Sainte Bernadette-du Banlay, Nevers, France.

6   Other infrastructural relics of the regime that were destroyed included railway equipment and irrigation canals in rural areas, which now lie derelict and useless (Informant 1, Tirana, 2010).

7   As we witnessed in several locations; also Informant 4, Durrës, 2017: "It is not uncommon to find souvenirs and gimmicks using the concept of bunkers" .

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