
A Figurative Bunker of the Mind: The Contested Status of the Bunker within Albanian Cultural Heritage

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Edited by: Aviya Krauss, Mari Hoover, Sophie Price, Elena Lee, and Alyssia Sebag

Abstract:

This paper examines how contemporary Albanian society relates to the concrete bunkers built during Enver Hoxha's regime and the difficult past they symbolize. As a ubiquitous physical emblem of communist material heritage, the bunkers occupy a contested status within national cultural heritage. On the home front, an elite-driven, top-down model of heritage management allows state passivity to cede control to private tourism initiatives. Simultaneously, through dark heritage narratives, these sites of state repression are packaged into novel tourist attractions, as exemplified by the controversial 'Bunk'Art 2' museum. Ultimately, this market-driven approach reflects broader power imbalances in post-communist Albania, trivializing local trauma and excluding the public from decisions surrounding their historical legacies.

Keywords: Political memory, dark heritage, Bunk'Art 2, Edi Rama, communism

Introduction

Between 1967 and 1986, an estimated 700,000 concrete bunkers were constructed across Albania (O'Grady, 1993). Among the many legacies of communism that permeate modern life in Albania, the bunkers remain a ubiquitous, physical emblem of a forty-one-year isolationist regime, and occupy a bizarre status within national cultural heritage due to their sheer quantity and geographical dispersion. As 'contested' cultural heritage, the bunkers are an emblem of political and personal trauma for many, and to some, bars and bedrooms in former bunkers – the product of private initiatives – feel trite in the face of the years of suffering associated with them (Payne, 2014). Legally, the bunkers are the property of the Albanian Ministry of Defence. However, responsibilities fall under the Ministry of Culture, which has been criticized for a lack of proactivity in efforts to manage them as heritage.

This article will consider how contemporary Albanian society relates to the bunkers and the difficult past they symbolize, in conjunction with the ambitions of both a rapidly emerging tourism industry and the government actors behind it. Contextualizing the bunkers historically shows a wider debate over Albania's communist material heritage (the physical, architectural remains of the regime). Their contested status arises from elite-driven heritage management, a top-down model where government institutions decide what to preserve, and how to preserve it. These authorities typically rely on Dark Heritage narratives – a preservation approach that packages sites of death, suffering, and state repression into tourist attractions. By using Dark Heritage to market these sites as novelty tourism, authorities end up trivializing local public memory and trauma.

This research focuses on existing literature on public perspectives on the bunkers, before discussing the manifestation of stakeholder perspectives, whose contestation is illustrated using a case study of a museum in the capital city Tirana named 'Bunk 'Art 2'. The paper concludes that the current approach to bunker heritage reflects broader power

imbalances in post-communist Albania, where the public is often excluded from decisions about historical legacies despite the shared sites' deep societal connections through cultural memories.

Political Background of Communist Era Heritage

Albania was ruled as an isolated communist autocracy from 1944 to 1985 by the paranoiac despot Enver Hoxha. Initially aligned with Stalin, Hoxha later developed 'Hoxhaism' as an independent ideology after relations soured with Moscow under Khrushchev's leadership. Amidst an evolving international communist ideology, his rigid defence of unadulterated 'Marxist-Leninist' doctrine led to increasing isolation, and a fearful disdain of other communist powers such as the USSR and Yugoslavia.

The brainchild of Hoxha himself, '*Projekti Bunkerizimit*', was an expression of this isolationism, driven by an imagined foreign threat. The rupture between the Soviet Union and Albania in 1961, the subsequent invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact forces in 1968, and growing antagonisms with Tito's government in Belgrade only fed Hoxha's anxieties (Payne, 2014). As a military-industrial initiative, *Bunkerzimit* envisioned the existence of a bunker for each Albanian person. This was strategically positioned to provide immediate shelter in the event of an attack. Hoxha and his military engineer, Josif Zagali, came close to achieving this with one bunker built for every four citizens, at a cost equivalent to three billion US dollars (Payne, 2014).

During Hoxha's four-decade rule, a foreign invasion of Albania never materialised. The fall of communism in 1991 prompted a mass destruction of the bunkers, among other emblems of the regime. An estimated 500,000 were dismantled. During this demolition project, the bunkers' remarkable durability was evident; while some in urban areas have been deconstructed, many in rural regions remain abandoned. The only use of the bunkers for their intended military purpose occurred during the 1999 Kosovan Conflict, when they served as

shelters from Serbian shells and as defensive positions for Albanian and Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) soldiers (The Times, 1999).

Contesting Stakeholder Perspectives and Heritage Status

For many stakeholders, their involvement with the bunkers' status in Albania is tied to their complex perspectives on the dark past these spaces symbolize. *Bunkerzimit* was not only military or infrastructural; it was a propaganda project built to enforce nationwide 'siege mentality' (Žižek, 2010, p. 247). The symbolic relevance of the bunkers is critical for understanding their status within heritage, and why it is contested. A renowned Albanian film director, Kujtim Çashku, poignantly summarises the symbolism the bunkers carry, particularly for those alive during the regime: *"our country was totally unique in conceptualising its totalitarianism; and if we were able to narrow the bunker in a more semantic form it would exactly be the unique expression of the Albanian totalitarianism."* (Çashku, 2012). This is colloquially referred to as the 'Mentaliteti i bunkerit' or 'Bunker Mentality' - a figurative bunker of the mind (Pike, 2013). The *'bunker mentality'* is rooted in centuries of Albanian history, punctuated by a recurring series of invasions and occupations – the ancient Greeks, the ancient Romans, the Bulgarians, the Venetians, the Ottomans, and Mussolini's Italy, but most importantly, its own communist regime (Pike, 2013).

The subject of Communism remains delicate in Albania, yet its material legacy is ubiquitous. The Bunkers, among other physical legacies, can therefore be classified as cases of contested cultural heritage. Heritage can become contested when conflicting opinions arise over ownership, identity, or historical events, particularly when these opinions are held by different stakeholders. Within the framework of contested heritage, a phenomenon of 'Dark Heritage' has begun to emerge. Dark Heritage is used as an umbrella term for any form of contested heritage that is related to death, suffering, atrocity, tragedy, or crime (Light, 2017).

When this form of heritage is packaged for touristic purposes, it becomes "dark tourism" – a field where places associated with death, suffering, or political repression are commercialized for visitors (Lennon & Foley, 2000). Broadly defined, dark tourism involves traveling to sites of historical tragedy or state violence out of educational interest or curiosity. Through this process, fascinating historical insights are monetized into tourist attractions. . Albania was, at one point, arguably the most enigmatic and inscrutable nation in Europe. Thus it is no wonder that the remains of a regime dubbed ‘Europe’s North Korea’ are highly attractive to any tourist looking for an unconventional attraction.

Within Dark Heritage, stakeholder perspectives on the bunkers shape their management as heritage. These perspectives have been categorized as: Indifference, Derision, Commodification, and Reflection (Lasserre, Bennett, & Arapi, 2022) . In the first case, bunkers are considered with complete ‘indifference’, particularly when the possibility of their destruction arises. In the second case, bunkers become the subject of ‘derision’, particularly if they are vandalized or defecated inside. Third, bunkers are ‘commodified’ when converted or reappropriated, explicitly within a newly thriving Albanian tourism industry. In the fourth case, bunkers serve as commemorative markers, prompting reflection on the past. The respective third and fourth definitions, ‘commodification’ and ‘reflection’, are perhaps the two more recent developments in perspectives and attitudes towards the bunkers. If the former refers to a consumerist/touristic opportunism, the latter is more circumspect in its desire to repurpose the bunkers with their original meanings kept in mind.

However, I would contend that there is a fifth category that is absent from Lasserre, Bennett, & Arapi’s (2022) typology — distress. The symbols of the regime conjure memories of forced labour, imprisonment, and suppression, for many. The notion of 'reflection' that the authors outline does not completely capture collective memory and experience. This additional typology acknowledges that the symbolism of the bunkers is subjective, bringing

into question the handling of ‘Dark Heritage’, and the best way to treat heritage symbolic of national trauma. The following section will bridge these perspectives to the three main stakeholders in the Bunker discourse.

Stakeholder Analysis

Within this section, stakeholders are categorised into three realms of influence: the state, the private and public opinion.

Legal ownership and responsibility for managing the bunkers resides with the state. Although the bunkers are formally under the jurisdiction of the Albanian Ministry of Defence, key competencies lie with the Ministry of Culture, which has faced criticism for neglect and unscrupulousness (Van Der Boon, 2019). To date, no formal initiatives have been undertaken to designate the bunkers’ status as official heritage sites. Furthermore, comprehensive records have yet to be published or declassified, nor are there official statistics or maps detailing the precise number or distribution of the bunkers.

Under state management, ambivalence and a general lack of proactivity characterizes the status of heritage in Albania. The label ‘indifference’ thus fits the state perspective. Other illustrations of this include the former residence of Enver Hoxha, which the Ministry of Culture manages but leaves vacant; statues of Stalin, Lenin, and Hoxha displayed at the National Art Gallery but discreetly positioned behind the museum; and the communist era Pyramid situated in the city center, which sat neglected and deserted for decades before officials decided to restore it (Payne, 2014). Furthermore, the current government, Edi Rama’s Albanian Socialist Party - an entity that emerged from the remnants of the Communist Party in 1990 - has faced criticism for appropriating the symbolism of the former regime, particularly in the context of heritage management. This issue will be further examined in the forthcoming case study.

The new wave of heritagization of communism in Albania has been characterised by a much more market-conscious attitude towards the economic potential that heritage attractions related to this topic can have (Caraba 2011; Ivanov 2009). Some such initiatives have prompted backlash due to reservations over the monetisation of ‘DarkHeritage’, thus suited best to ‘commodification’ within the above categorization. The private sector, an emerging yet influential stakeholder, has identified and capitalized on the unique appeal these bunkers hold for foreign tourists. Indeed, the new wave of heritagization of communism in Albania is marked by a heightened market orientation (Iacono, 2018). The slow advent of tourism in Albania during the early 2000s saw the gradual emergence of the Bunkers as miniature souvenirs fashioned into ashtrays, paperweights, and pen holders (Iacono, 2018). The surge in tourism in Albania since the 2010s has positioned bunkers as a prominent emblem of the country. Private initiatives have procured and repurposed several individual bunkers into hotels, museums, cafés, storehouses, public bathrooms, tattoo parlours, souvenir shops, and spas.

The third and largest stakeholder in Albania’s heritage discourse is the Albanian public. The bunkers are a visually ubiquitous representation of a difficult past for Albanians (Van Der Boon, 2019). For many, these structures are perceived as relics of the past—mere objects that are either too abundant, too mundane, or simply an overlooked feature in the landscape. It is difficult to fit the public into a single category, as citizen perspectives on the bunkers are indeed not homogeneous, yet broadly span ‘Indifference’, ‘Distress’, and a small minority ‘Reflection’.

This spectrum reflects a broader lack of public engagement and lack of awareness regarding the complexity of the phenomena of experience and memory of Communism in Albania, which has been cited in research (Godole & Idrizi, 2019, p. 9). In a comprehensive field research study on perspectives on the bunkers in Albania by Helena Van Der Boon, it is

concluded “Most respondents did not care much about bunkers, but there was a minority with strong, negative feelings towards them. The bunkers reminded them of bad memories” (Van Der Boon, 2019, p. 81).

One explanation for the growing category of ‘Indifference’ among the public is the expanding demographic expansion of the youth. Individuals under 30, having been born after the fall of communism, lack direct personal experience with the regime and its associated hardships. Therefore, various generational trends are observable in both the way Albanians formulate the bunkers in their minds, and opinion on how they should be managed. There is a notable degree of generational differentiation in citizen perspectives. Van der Boon (2019) observed “A considerable lack of historical knowledge was noted among youth, who never experienced living under the regime. According to multiple respondents, they do not even know what Communism is” (Van Der Boon, 2019, p. 105). Iacono and Këlliçi’s (2016) survey findings on the general public’s perception of communist heritage in Albania reveal a greater propensity among older generations to be attached to communist material heritage, such as the Bunkers. When posed the question “Do you feel attached to the monuments of the communist period?” 45% of the over-60s sample responded ‘very attached’, compared with 19% in the total sample. Consequently, the lack of consensus on peoples’ attachment to bunkers makes them difficult to manage. This is particularly evident in a national survey by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), titled ‘Citizens Understanding and Perceptions of the Communist Past in Albania’ (OSCE, 2015), which sampled responses of Albanians across the country. The survey revealed a deficiency in knowledge beyond the most rudimentary aspects of the regime (OSCE 2015, 53). To the question, ‘How informed would you say you are about the communist period in Albania?’ 70% of survey respondents between the ages of 16-35 responded ‘mostly uninformed’ (OSCE, 2015).

As stakeholders in the heritage dialogue, the predominance of ‘indifference’ among younger generations, coupled with the contrasting sentiments of ‘distress’ or ‘reflection’ among older generations, hinders those who feel attachment to heritage from effectively organizing and mobilizing their stance. Consequently, the public wields little power in heritage management, despite many having direct lived experiences of what this heritage represents, making them highly deserving stakeholders.

Power and Contestation

The following section will analyze how the above stakeholder perspectives interact to shape the 'contested' and 'dark' status and heritage management decisions surrounding Albania's bunkers.

Apart from the Albanian public, who have a strong, mnemonic aversion to the remaining bunkers, many Albanians remain apathetic to their existence. Even when people may rather remove one, demolition is a costly and labour-intensive task (Lasserre, Bennett, & Arapi 2022). Certainly, financial factors play a crucial role in determining who holds decision-making power in Albania's heritage discourse. Indeed, heritage is often directly linked to privilege: elites often own it, control access to it, and shape its public representation (Lowenthal, 1998). Although the Albanian public is numerically the largest stakeholder in the bunker heritage, and perhaps the most deserving, they hold the least power. Widespread public indifference enables the political actors to mismanage the Bunkers and subsequently relinquish them to the private sector.

Despite holding legal primacy of power in the management of the bunkers, the Albanian state has taken a laissez-faire approach to their administration. In doing so, de facto ownership of the bunkers has been subject to limited regulation, particularly for bunkers which are in the countryside or remote areas. This lack of proactive governance has created a vacuum that other forces have occupied to shape the status of the bunkers. The relinquishing

of power from the state to the private sector is ultimately advantageous to the state because capital is fed back into the state economy via the tourism industry. With the Travel and Tourism sector emerging as a cornerstone of the Albanian economy, contributing 25% of the country's GDP in 2023, it holds increasing leverage (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2024). Tourism businesses, in particular, wield significant influence in determining how bunkers are repurposed, promoted, and commodified. The state's lack of management has thus created a vacuum, allowing market forces to take precedence over cultural or historical imperatives. The reframing of the bunkers within a sanitized, tourism-oriented narrative largely marginalizes the will of the public, particularly those for whom the bunkers hold personal or experiential value.

The bunkers remain fondly precious to some, terrible mnemonic triggers for certain groups, and mere eyesores for others. A balance between preservation and adaptation among divergent perspectives is essential for effective heritage management, and not one which has been successfully struck in Albania.

Case Study: Bunk'Art 2

Perhaps the most prominent instance of contestation over management of the bunkers is that of 'Bunk'Art 2', which will be used as a case study to show how stakeholder perspectives shape their heritage management. This case exemplifies the process by which the state relinquishes its heritage-managing power to the private sector, and the concurrent exclusion of the Albanian public in the heritage discourse. Public memory and trauma

Bunk'Art 2 is a museum located in the center of Tirana, housed in the original underground tunnel system beneath the Ministry of Internal Affairs, using a bunker as its visitor entrance. It reconstructs the history of the Albanian Ministry of Internal Affairs from 1912 to 1991 and reveals the secrets of the "Sigurimi", the communist secret police

(Bunk'Art, 2016). Edi Rama's government at the time contributed financially to the project as a flagship effort to cultivate Tiranas' heritage.

At the crux of tensions over Bunk'Art 2 was its visitor entrance, a replica bunker, designed to align with the museum's themes, since the original tunnels lacked an accessible above-ground entry (Isto, 2017). This was not well received and sparked an onslaught of dissent, which erupted in violent protests in 2016 organised by the country's anti-Rama opposition party. Protesters took to the structure with hammers and pickaxes, setting its façade ablaze, halting construction. Despite this, the museum opened in November of that year, incorporating the damaged façade into its design as a symbolic nod to the reservations against it (Isto, 2017).

The case of tensions surrounding Bunk'Art 2 highlights the state's top-down approach in heritage decisions and the causative lack of public consultation. As a reminder of a dark past, the spontaneous construction of a new bunker in the heart of the capital was perceived by many as a provocative and insensitive act. Iacono (2018) situates this case within the discussion of Disneyfication/Commodification and commercialisation of communist memories, arguing that the imitation bunker served purposes of tourists' 'pre-digestion'. Furthermore, the content of the museum, too, was problematic in this sense - curation did less to facilitate what Lasserre, Bennett, & Arapi (2022) would deem 'reflection' for civilian stakeholders, and more to appeal to the 'Dark Heritage' fascination to pander to the tourist market. The ticket price was notably disproportionate to the average local income. Many criticised its status as a non-public entity - "BunkArt's transition to private administration has been an operation conducted in complete lack of transparency and unsealed by public authorities, as the law requires", one national news outlet reported (Gazeta Shqiptare, 2016). This hampers the potential to foster meaningful discussions among Albanians themselves,

and primarily plays upon the perceived ‘exoticism’ of Albania’s peculiar past among tourists (Isto, 2017).

Lowenthal (1998, 75) writes “Atrocities are invoked as heritage not only to forge internal unity but to enlist external sympathy”. In the case of Bunk’Art 2, this ‘external sympathy’ is leveraged for profit. For Albanians, bunkers either represent a trauma, or are accepted as an unremarkable reality. For the tourism industry and indeed the wider world, they perhaps bear a ‘unique selling point’ when it comes to communist material heritage, surrounded by a certain intrigue as a quirk native to Albania. Acknowledging the bunkers as Dark Heritage, whilst harnessing their undeniable potential for enterprise, therefore stunts a consensus on how they should be properly administered as heritage.

Conclusion

Many legacies of communism pervade modern life in Albania, including economic hardship, unemployment, poverty, political inefficiency, and corruption. Whilst these struggles continue to overwhelm and define Albanian contemporary society, there are few efforts being made by those in power to address the struggles of the communist memory—politically and socially. The government’s disinterest in the matter serves as the basis of the Albanian society’s inability to escape historical trauma, like *Projekti Bunkerizimit*. Followed by reinstatement of private property rights, further distancing the peoples’ trust towards the state, and further increasing reluctance among Albanians to perceive legitimacy in heritage matters. For many, the ‘heritagization’ of bunkers (Iacono 2018), is associated with Edi Rama’s current and largely disliked socialist government (Van Der Boon, 2019). Furthermore, the private sphere of personal memory contradicts the authorised discourse encouraged by Rama’s government on Albania’s communist past, which favours a Dark Heritage narrative and its potential for tourism (Iacono, 2018). Lowenthal’s (1998) assertion certainly rings true in the *Bunkerizimit* case: “Heritage normally goes with

privilege: elites usually own it, control access to it, and ordain its public image. That heritage still buttresses elite perquisites strikes some as monstrous.” The spectrum of public opinion on bunkers spans extreme indifference and extreme attachment. Therefore, this research has revealed a need for public discourse to be integrated into public heritage management in Albania. The communist period, after all, is a shared memory, and its material remnants’ are shared reminders.

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