The Coalescence of Albanian History: Socialist Realism, Nationalism, and the Vlora
Independence Monument

Abstract:

November 28, 1972 saw the inauguration of one of communist Albania's largest and most
significant works of public sculpture, the 17-meter tall bronze Vlora Independence Monument.
The work, created by Kristaq Rama, Shaban Hadëri, and Muntas Dhrami (the preeminent
sculptors of the country's communist regime) represented an unparalleled attempt to visualize
both the geographical and historical unity of the Albanian people, assisting in the cohesion of a
modern national identity created and reinforced by the communist government. This paper
considers the Vlora Independence Monument in the context of several other contemporaneous
events—the standardization of the Albanian language on the model of the southern Tosk dialect;
attempts to constrain or eliminate certain religious and cultural practices of northern Albania
during the Albanian Cultural Revolution; and the emergence of Enver Hoxha, the Albanian
dictator, as a source of not merely political but also cultural authority—and shows the ways in
which public monuments interacted with discourses of nationalism and history in Albania during
the late 1960s and early 1970s. It examines both the visual rhetoric of the Independence Monument and the interpretations of it which were offered before it was even completed.

Nearly three years before the monument was inaugurated, a letter written by Hoxha to the
three sculptors was printed in Drita, the official publication of the Albanian Union of Writers
and Artists. The letter, together with the response from the sculptors, established the crucial role
that the Vlora Independence Monument was to play in coalescing the struggles of the Albanian
people (against the Ottomans, against the fascists, and against contemporary 'revisionist' socialism and capitalism), and in establishing the geographic and ethnographic markers of the Albanian 'nation' through the language of socialist realism. This paper argues that the Independence Monument, as an exemplar of Albanian communist art, represented not the propagandistic revision of national history—as is often claimed of socialist realism—but rather the establishment of a spatial and temporal ground from which its viewers could come to understand themselves as possessing a united national heritage and participating in the shared building of a uniquely Albanian socialism.