

THE CONSTRUCTION OF ALBANIAN MARTYRDOM IN THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

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Vasiliki Neofotistos
State University of New York at Buffalo



National Council for Eurasian
and East European Research
University of Washington
Box 353650
Seattle, WA 98195
info@nceeer.org
<http://www.nceeer.org/>



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Executive Summary

This paper focuses on the significance that memorials, monuments and commemorations, honoring the dead Albanian National Liberation Army (NLA) insurgents, hold for members of the Albanian community in Macedonia. I discuss the initiatives undertaken, in the midst of controversy over remembrance of the past, to produce a version of history in Macedonia, whereby the NLA insurgency in 2001 was a struggle for equality and those who fought it were rightful defenders of the Albanian people and Albanian national martyrs.

Introduction

When traveling in the Republic of Macedonia, one cannot help but notice monuments, statues, busts, memorial complexes, and elaborate graves scattered throughout the predominantly Albanian-populated villages in the northern and northwestern parts of the country –specifically, in the villages in the immediate and distant vicinities of the towns of Kumanovo (Slupcane, Matejce, Orizare, Otlja, Lopate, Vaksince, Tanusevci, Blace, Sopot) and Tetovo (Neprosteno, Gajre, Sllatina, Poroj, and Selce)-- and also in the village of Aracinovo, located five miles from the capital city of Skopje. These sites commemorate about a hundred Muslim Albanian men and a few Muslim Albanian women from Macedonia and neighboring Albania and Kosovo, who served in the Albanian National Liberation Army (NLA; *Ushtria Çlirimtare Kombëtare* or *UÇK* in Albanian) and were killed in an armed conflict against Macedonian security forces in 2001.

A few words are needed here about the armed conflict that will help situate the ensuing discussion of the construction of martyrdom and the politics of commemoration within the Albanian community in Macedonia. The conflict was initiated in February 2001 by the NLA with the proclaimed purpose of securing greater political and cultural rights for the Albanian community, which is predominantly Sunni Muslim and makes about 25 percent of Macedonia's overall population.¹ The decision to take up arms was allegedly motivated by the failure of the Macedonian state, ten years after independence, to pass the laws necessary to carry certain provisions of the founding Constitution into effect and hence provide the Albanian community with the rights it reportedly deserved and demanded throughout the 1990s, including the establishment of an Albanian-speaking state-sponsored university and increase in the number of Albanian employees in the public sector. Macedonian officials, on the other hand, branded the NLA as a terrorist organization. Fighting engulfed rural mountain areas in the north and

northwest Macedonia, and did not escalate into civil war. The conflict ended in August 2001, six months after it started, with the signing of the internationally brokered Ohrid Framework Agreement. The Agreement, in officially ending the conflict, provided the basis for constitutional amendments intended to improve the overall status of the Albanian community and also the status of other communities in the country.ⁱⁱ After the signing of the Agreement, the NLA dissolved and the former NLA political leader Ali Ahmeti was elected Chairman of the newly formed Albanian political party Democratic Union for Integration (DUI; *Bashkimi Demokratik për Integrim* or *BDI* in Albanian).

The commemorative sites under discussion here were built on the initiative of friends and relatives of the deceased at different times during the 2000s in the villages engulfed by fighting in 2001, and with the financial support from members of the Albanian community at home and abroad, and from the Albanian Association of the National Liberation Army War Veterans (*Shoqata e Veteranëve të Luftës së UCK-së*, or SHVL- UÇK), which emerged shortly after the end of the conflict, and is headed by Ahmeti's uncle and NLA co-founder (together with Ahmeti) Fazli Veliu. Based on ethnographic research that I conducted in the Albanian language in the summers of 2011 and 2012 in the villages where the sites are located, I explore in this paper popular constructions of the dead NLA fighters as so-called martyrs of the Albanian nation and the politics of commemoration. I met my research participants through the social networks I created within the Albanian community during my doctoral field research in Skopje in 2000-01 and during follow-up, subsequent trips to Macedonia. During my research, I interviewed self-identified NLA veterans, family members (mainly fathers, and male siblings and relatives) of the dead NLA fighters, architects of the monuments, local religious leaders, and local government officials. I also attended commemorative ceremonies, which are held in the villages where the

monuments, graves and memorial sites are located, interviewed organizers and attendees, and collected poems that were recited, took notes of speeches that were delivered by DUI officials, and recorded Albanian folk music that was played, popular songs that were sung and short plays that were performed during the commemorations.

As I show in what follows, DUI officials and supporters have built upon a discourse of martyrdom (in ways that I discuss in the next section) to produce and publicly disseminate a particular version of nationhood, according to which the Albanian community has since the formation of Tito's Yugoslavia after World War II suffered from political, economic and socio-cultural marginalization and Albanians had to sacrifice their lives to improve the status of their community in Macedonia. That the dead are vested with public importance is certainly not a phenomenon that is unique to Macedonia. Katherine Verdery (1999), for example, has demonstrated that dead bodies have played an instrumental role in post-socialist transformation and meaning-making across Eastern Europe. In the case under examination here, I am especially interested in showing how Albanians in Macedonia combine Islamic symbolism with some of the same strategies, namely the building of memorials and the performance of commemorative rites, used by state elites or dominant groups to produce and legitimate nationalist historical narratives.

To avoid gross generalizations, and provide the background against which such efforts are undertaken, it is important to note that the 2001 conflict is a source of controversy. Not all members of the Albanian community (or any members of the Macedonian community, for that matter) refer to the fallen NLA combatants as "martyrs." Rather, Menduh Thaqi, leader of the rival Albanian political party Democratic Party of the Albanians (DPA; *Partia Demokratike Shqiptare* or *PDSH* in Albanian), has publicly argued that the NLA combatants were "victims"

(*viktimë*), who were manipulated by Ali Ahmeti into joining the NLA and helping Ahmeti establish himself as a politician after the 2001 conflict came to a close in Macedonia. Additionally, some Albanians refer to the dead as “martyrs,” but oppose what they see as the political appropriation of the legacy of the NLA insurgency by DUI. The 2001 conflict, equally important, remains a sensitive chapter in the history of post-independence Macedonia. Macedonians tend to remember the NLA insurgency as a provocation against the territorial integrity of the Macedonian state while for Albanians the insurgency was a fight for rights that brought about important changes and opened up new opportunities for socio-economic progress.

Understandings of Martyrdom

During the 2001 conflict, the dead bodies of the NLA insurgents were wrapped in blankets and buried in individual makeshift graves, mainly in the yards of mosques in the villages where they were killed in the fighting. A few years later, their bodies were exhumed, placed in coffins draped in a flag featuring a double-headed black eagle on a red background -- the national flag of the Republic of Albania, and also the national symbol of all Albanians and the emblem of the NLA--, and re-buried. The dead bodies were re-buried in newly-built memorials or elaborate graves either in the villages where the insurgents were killed or in the insurgents’ respective villages of origin depending on their families’ wishes.

In much popular discourse, the dead NLA soldiers are often referred to as “martyrs of the nation” (*dëshmorët e kombit*, in Albanian).ⁱⁱⁱ The term encompasses two interlinked aspects, namely, religious purity and sacrifice for the nation. With specific regard to the first aspect, during the armed conflict the religious leaders (hoxhas) proclaimed *shaheeds*, or “martyrs” in Arabic, those who had fallen in the battlefield. In accordance with Islamic principles, whereby

the bodies of martyrs are clean and pure and ready to be admitted to paradise, the bodies of the NLA combatants were left unwashed and were buried in their NLA military uniforms. While they are based on readings of the Koran, understandings of martyrdom in the Albanian community also seem to incorporate the concept of martyrdom that is found in Catholic teachings and concerns the non-decomposition of the holy person's corpse. In their conversations with me, close male relatives of the deceased, often relayed that when the exhumation took place they looked at the corpses of the NLA combatants in hopes that they would recognize a marker, such as a piece of clothing or jewelry, that would help them identify the bodies of their loved ones and erase any lingering doubts in their minds that their relatives had indeed died in the fighting. Many of my interlocutors argued that the bodies had not decomposed because Allah had preserved them, and even argued that the corpses were so well preserved that were "alive" (*gjallë*).

The Koran, words of the prophet, and interpretations thereof (see Ayoub 1992) have generated some basic principles, which are also prevalent in the case of Macedonia, regarding how to think about martyrs and life after death. Specifically, the principles of Islamic teaching underlying beliefs with respect to martyrdom include Koran 3:169-70, which David Cook (2007: 31) views as "the most decisive verse specifying the martyr's reward":

And do not think those who have been killed in the way of Allah as dead: they are rather living with their Lord, well provided for. Rejoicing in what the Lord has given them of His bounty, and they rejoice for those who stayed behind and did not join them, knowing that they have nothing to fear and that they shall not grieve.

The term "martyrs" is imbued not only with religious but also with national significance as the NLA insurgents reportedly sacrificed their lives and died violent deaths to bring about change and improve the status of all Albanians in Macedonia. In the words of Artan, a man in his late

twenties, who was unemployed for six years after finishing his college education but was hired at a state institution shortly after the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement: “If it were not for the martyrs, I would still be unemployed.” The Framework Agreement placed an emphasis on equitable representation in the state administration bodies, local self-government units and public institutions and agencies. Many Albanians like Artan who we were hired for government jobs tend to give credit to the dead NLA insurgents. Such understandings of martyrdom in terms of successful political struggle against an allegedly overbearing state emerge in the context of larger efforts, which are undertaken mainly by DUI’s political leadership and the party’s supporters, to define the 2001 conflict as an integral part of Albanian national history, and also to produce and promote publicly the image of the dead insurgents as martyrs of the Albanian nation. Monument-building and commemorative ceremonies are an integral part of these efforts.

Commemorative Monuments

The memorials built to honor the martyrs are visually very different from the gravesites of Albanian non-martyrs. The latter, especially in rural areas, tend to be scattered throughout open fields or the woods. Most often, a slab of stone set up at the head of the grave is used as a marker. The headstone is typically inscribed with the crescent moon and star, well-known visual symbols of Islam, and the name and dates of birth and death of the deceased. The names of the relatives by whom the deceased is survived are sometimes also inscribed on the headstone.

On the contrary, the graves of the martyrs are built in an orderly manner, arranged in rows one next to another. My interlocutors argued that such arrangement was emblematic of the camaraderie of army life and was meant to preserve in the afterlife the social intimacy that the martyrs shared while serving in the NLA. Also, similar to the graveyards of the martyrs in Iran

(Aghaie 2004), low stonewalls, and/or gates that are made of cast iron or wire netting often clearly demarcate the boundaries of the cemeteries, thus separating the living and the non-martyrs from the martyrs. Most of the memorials are built on village squares or on the sides of the main roads and, hence, are an integral part of the landscape through which Albanians physically move everyday. A few memorial complexes (for example, in the villages of Selce, Slupcane and Aracinovo) stand on elevated ground overlooking the villages where they are located. Some of the sites have also been landscaped, depending on the size of monetary donations made.

The architecture of the memorials draws allusions to the unity and cohesion of the Albanian nation. The graves are built of black and red granite, evoking the colors of the nation and the NLA. Alternatively, they are built of white marble, but red and black granite pieces are still used for the commemorative plaques atop the graves, which read the names and sometimes the birthplaces and dates of birth and death of the deceased. The motif of the black double-headed eagle on a red field is prominent and omnipresent. It adorns flags that are flown at full mast in all memorials, thus signifying that the death of the insurgents is of national importance and incorporated into the national narrative. In some villages, such as in the village of Sopot, stone monuments are carved in the shape of the double-headed eagle. The acronym UÇK is, in addition, found inside the gravesites and memorials and is inscribed on the graves.

The full figures of deceased NLA insurgents, unwounded and in military guise, are carved on large slabs of granite that are located, together with the graves of former combatants, inside the memorial in the village of Vaksince. A few hundred feet away from the memorial and atop a set of stairs stands the full-body, metal statue of NLA commander Fadil Nimani (widely known as Commander “Tigri” or Tiger because of his belligerence) with the arm raised, pointing

directly toward the memorial site ahead.^{iv} Yet another full-body statue of commander Ismet Jashari (widely known as Commander Kumanovo, nicknamed after the region where he and the brigades of which he was in charge undertook military operations) stands inside the memorial site in the village of Orizare.^v These figures of prominent former commanders, similar to the figure of the common soldier (see Savage 1994: 131), seek to moderate memories of personal loss and at the same time embody the collective memory of the 2001 conflict.

Many of my interlocutors argued that the memorials were important to them and the Albanian community more generally not only because they were visible signs of respect toward the dead but also because they anchored collective memory in space and time. For example, the unmarried brother of a deceased NLA combatant, told me that when his future children see the memorials they will be curious to know who was buried inside and the circumstances of their death. During a walk through the memorial grounds in the village of Aracinovo, the father of a deceased insurgent pointed to the commemorative plaque reading “martyrs of the nation” and said proudly that the sacrifice of his son would forever be part of Albanian national history. Similar to memorials elsewhere (see Ashplant et al. 2000, Gillis 1993, Khalili 2007), the memorials in Macedonia are sites where memory turns into history, or what Pierre Nora (1989) calls *lieux de mémoire*. They encourage remembrance, and help produce and preserve collective history.

Public Commemorations

Besides monument-building, the definition of the 2001 conflict as a victorious event and the production of the narrative of Albanian national martyrdom in Macedonia involve commemorative ceremonies. Commemorations take place between February and August of each

year on the anniversaries of the so-called liberation (*çlirim*) from state rule in the villages that the NLA brought under its military control in 2001. As such, they help establish a sense of continuity between past and present. Large crowds of Albanians, including NLA veterans from Macedonia (and also Kosovo and Albania), mainly male relatives and friends of the deceased, and DUI officials and supporters, attend the rites. Additionally, the War Veterans' Association organizes public commemorations on May the 5th, the so-called Day of the Martyrs, a holiday that is celebrated in Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia alike. In Albania, May the 5th is the National Day of Commemoration of Albanian men and women who were killed in WW II, while in Kosovo the day commemorates the killing of soldiers of the Albanian Liberation Army of Kosovo in the battle with Serbian government forces between 1998-1999. Public commemorations that take place on May the 5th in the three Balkan states where Albanians live (Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia) help create an overarching narrative of national martyrdom, and produce the NLA martyrs as iconic figures in Albanian collective memory and the most recent guardians of Albanian ethno-national identity in the Balkans.

During these ceremonies, attendees pay visits to the memorials, place flowers on the graves, and lay wreaths, which read “glory” (*lavdi*) and the numbers of the brigades in which the dead combatants served, against the plaques with the NLA emblem or at the base of the full-body statues of former commanders. Men stand in parallel rows in front of the graves to say an Islamic prayer and women, if present, stand aside or behind the men. In some ceremonies that I attended, the person who led others in prayer was a man who had received training in the Qur'an in Iraq and also served as a commander during the 2001 conflict, thus blurring the boundaries between the religious and the political. During the prayer, men stood and held their hands out with palms turned upward toward the sky. When the prayer ended, the attendees walked in a full

circle around the graves as a sign of respect; thereafter the crowd moved to a different locale in the village, usually the square or the school yard to attend celebrations. Commemorative rites take place not only at the memorials but also in public venues to honor distinguished NLA commanders. During these events, the attendees are seated and enlarged photos of the deceased are put on display while Albanian political officials deliver speeches. Flags that bear the black double-headed eagle and NLA signs are, again, omnipresent.

Celebrations typically start off with a one-minute silence to honor the dead and are followed by the singing of the Albanian national anthem. They are usually hosted by Albanian female professionals working as teachers or journalists, who are dressed in the Albanian national colors (red and black). Celebrations include the recitations of nationalistic poems written by school teachers or university professors and recited by school children –often the offspring of the dead fighters--, live performances of Albanian folk music and dance by folk ensembles, songs about the Kosovo war and the Kosovo Liberation Army by popular singers, such as Ilir Shaqiri and Shkurte Fejza (see Sugarman 2010), short theatrical pieces, and speeches by local leaders, Albanian officials in the governing party, relatives of the deceased, and/or by Fazli Veliu. All above-mentioned performances present the 2001 conflict as part of a long struggle for national emancipation from Slavic (both Serbian and Macedonian) rule, and promote unequivocally an understanding of the 2001 conflict as heroic resistance of Albanians in Macedonia and the Balkans more generally. Remarks about “heroes,” “the blood of martyrs,” “sacrifice,” and “homeland,” abound. Celebrations, what is more, are often recorded on DVDs, which people keep at home and watch on occasion for entertainment value. As Khalili has noted (2007:187-213), the circulation of digital images related to martyrs and their alleged sacrifice helps to popularize and, hence, further strengthen the narrative of martyrdom.

Commemorative ceremonies and celebrations then help to consolidate a sense of belonging to the Albanian nation and remind individuals of their positions within a web of social relations in the Macedonian state (also see Linenthal 2001). Like memorials, monuments, and gravesites, they produce a version of history in Macedonia, whereby the 2001 conflict was a struggle for equality and those who fought it were rightful defenders of the Albanian people.

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ According to the latest population census that was carried out in 2002, Macedonia has 2,022,547 inhabitants of whom 1,297,981 (64.18 percent) declared themselves as ethnic Macedonians, 509,083 (25.17 percent) as Albanians, 77,959 (3.85 percent) as Turks, 53,879 (2.66 percent) as Roma, 35,939 (1.78 percent) as Serbs, 17,018 (0.84 percent) as Bosnian Muslims, 9,695 (0.48 percent) as Vlachs, and 20,993 (1.04 percent) as “other” (see Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in the Republic of Macedonia, 2002 State Statistical Office).

ⁱⁱ The most important constitutional amendments included the following. The Preamble was modified in an effort to move away from an ethno-cultural to a civic style of nationhood that is indifferent to ethno-cultural affiliation. The new Preamble no longer refers to Macedonia as “the national state of the Macedonian people”. Rather, it breaks with the Balkan model of nation building premised on nationhood (see Roudometof 2001) and directs attention to “citizens (*gragjani*) of the Republic of Macedonia.” In addition, in areas where at least 20% of the population spoke a language other than Macedonian that language became official --this measure automatically meant that in many predominantly Albanian-populated municipalities Albanian became an official language. Also, state funds were provided for university level education in the Albanian language and the proportional representation of Albanians in the state administration was increased.

ⁱⁱⁱ The NLA transformed into the Albanian National Army or ANA, an organization that was dubbed “terrorist” by the United States in 2003.

^{iv} NLA commanders were nicknamed according to their physical features (for example, “Mustache”), body build (for example, “Bird”), professions (for example, “Teacher” and “Hoxha”), behavior (for example, “Tigri”), or insurgent areas of operation (for example, “Kumanova”).

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