

Albania, Laboratory of Subversion

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Introduction

Incontestable in its spontaneous and destructive extension, the insurrection in course has taken everyone by surprise.

Not least the men and structures of power. When such a profoundly subversive movement surges forth and spreads, the instability and precariousness of State order becomes quite evident. Suddenly appearing at various points it spreads like an oil stain and, fruit of so many contradictions, cannot be stopped as some good people maintain simply with a few well-aimed gunshots.

People find it hard to grasp what is taking place in a world where everything has become uncertain. Will they be able to take a bus? Find a post office open? Get to work (anyone who has a job)? Continue to wait patiently in the food queue at the door of some church?

Anarchists are also taken by surprise. They are elsewhere, spread throughout the world, busy going into theories or distinguishing themselves from each other on the basis of metaphysical levels of reciprocal impurity. So they have other things to think about. Insurrection is knocking at the door but they are deaf to it, slow to act.

And, being no exception to the rule, the incredible Albanian insurrection is full of surprises. With one difference. Power knows what needs to be done at the international level. The insurgents also know what to do, at least at the immediate level. After all, for anyone with any sense doing something is the first thing that comes to mind when they find themselves faced with an unforeseen event, whether it gives rise to fear or opens one's heart to the greatest of hopes.

But really knowing what to do is not so easy.

Although not quite immediate, Power's response at both local and international level has been that of defending its own interests. Knowing that it will have to give up its position sooner or later, the ruling party is doing everything to put that off for as long as possible, so that their strategic retreat can become a starting point for a mass return to the seats they had to abandon.

At the international level the gendarmes' boss, the US, has decided it will be the nations most directly interested in the future economic development of Albania to see to things this time: Italy, Greece and Turkey. Italy, which has always played a role in Albania's ignoble past history, has accepted this task willingly, perhaps for no other reason than to get an opportunity flex its muscles. First, by sinking a ship full of people and drowning them without batting an eyelid; then running the cruiser that was the pride of the navy aground and leaving it stranded on the beach, crammed full of refugees who were trying to leave the country.

These blunders aside, police operations are a routine for any government, and that is what this has become. Bosses of every kind, from the small proprietor of a hat factory who paid "his" workers a fifth of what he would have done in Italy, to the great administrators of the world economy (with the never sufficiently lauded Bank of Rome in the lead), have shared the money rashly invested by the Albanians over the two years between themselves.

But let's take a closer look at this money that so much has been said about. Through its international intermediaries, in the first place American, the Bank of Rome had been entrusted with a huge sum of money following promises of ridiculously high levels of interest. In fact, the oper-

ation was perfect from a capitalist point of view. Some newspapers likened it to “chain letters”, but the comparison does not fit. The game depended on a far greater devaluation of Albanian money than actually happened as a result of the brakes put on due to America’s political concern. When the operation grew out of all proportion their inability to pay interest moved things into the realm of common fraud.

The Albanian people, poverty-stricken as a consequence of the country’s economic conditions, nevertheless had some small savings. Some even had a fair amount from various dealings that recent changes in the geo-political situation had made possible.

Everything poured into the coffers of the Bank of Rome and their international accomplices. It was in response to this situation that the first instances of rebellion broke out. I have heard the reprimands of revolutionaries who cannot see what “tone” a revolt born from the desire to get one’s money back can have. They obviously do not understand the objective and subjective mechanisms that engender surprise, frustration, disdain, hate, rebellion, and generalised insurrection.

I am not saying that these mechanisms can be explained once and for all. When the breakdown occurs, everything spreads uncontrollably, and that is what has happened.

But an insurrection is not a “pure” event. It cannot be seen as a linear process that leads straight to victory (but what victory?), or retreats and extinguishes itself in defeat (but what defeat?). Here lies the crux of the problem.

The step from rebellion to generalised insurrection is not a simple one, nor is it one that is devoid of consequences. Things do not move spontaneously in one direction. Albania is no exception and after the first days of the revolt and the assaults on the prisons and army barracks, the rebels are gradually moving towards more moderate, broader demands such as the nomination of a government, parliamentary elections, the resignation of the director of State radio and television, as well as all the normalising requests for personal protection (amnesty, no proceedings against the insurgents, etc.).

We must look at this question for a moment as it is acquiring dimensions of extreme and tragic importance. Many comrades think that the answer to the problem “What is to be done?” in such cases is to participate in the insurrectional movement directly themselves. In a word, move in the opposite direction to the clandestine refugees: go over there, shoulder the gun and play at who shoots first.

This idea is superficial, to say the least. You can’t turn up out of the blue in a strange context without running the risk of being taken for an enemy and hanged from the nearest lamp post. It is necessary to have organisational contacts, even minimal ones, before events get underway. We do not mean great operational structures, but it is certainly necessary to know someone already, someone who is capable of understanding what is actually happening.

This should not come as a surprise. Since the collapse of the Berlin Wall the economic and political disintegration of the Russian empire has produced, and will continue to produce, many situations similar to that of Albania or Bosnia in the Balkans right along the whole Russian border, and even within Russia itself.

Direct participation is only possible if there is a point of reference on the spot to prevent it from turning out to be a disastrous failure before it even begins. But could this, let’s say active, therefore armed and conscious, revolutionary presence give any valid support to the revolt during its swift transformation to generalised insurrection?

There is no simple answer to this. Some things can clearly be denounced as soon as they come to light of course. These might be the formation of gangs led by the leaders of the old power structures, the presence of elements of the secret police (in the case of which no swearing of loyalty can be considered valid), attempts to re-organise the authoritarian political parties, right and left, control or repression of the self-managed forms appearing in the field of services or production, etc.

At the same time there needs to be a theoretical and practical contribution, not just concerning strictly theoretical or political questions (such as a detailed critique of the authoritarian structure of the Communist Party or the no less authoritarian forms of democratic governments), but also in order to make known structures that are forming within the insurrectional movement elsewhere. Then, and only then, will an international connection and an active participation of insurrectionalist movements elsewhere in the world—which are different but have similar characteristics—become possible.

I am not talking of specific organisations such as unions or workers' councils but rather of an active presence, a co-ordinated participation that can keep the theoretical value of the barricades alive and extend them, as opposed to simply waiting for their flame to extinguish.

After all, isn't the great desire of each one of us to find ourselves prepared when the next revolt breaks out? What better then than to contribute to making these revolts spread wherever they start up, as well as revealing the premonitory signs of rage and hatred of exploitation in all its forms, concretely, now?

Alfredo M. Bonanno
Rebibbia prison, July 1997

Insurrection and counter-insurrection in Albania (Chronology: January – August 1997)

January

Demonstrations of protest file through the streets of Tirana and all over the country. Since the beginning of the year, tens of thousands of people have lost everything through a finance company going bankrupt. This company, proposing fantastic interest rates (from 35% to 100% a month), drew in funds from all over the country. Albanian people sold everything they possessed in order to invest in the Sudë, Populi, Xhaferri, Vefa, Kamberi societies and many others. With the collapse of these financial enterprises, 70 to 80% of Albanian families suddenly found themselves deprived of all their savings.

10 – The government begins to sue two large finance companies, Xhaferri and Populi. In the meantime the World Bank and the International Monetary fund intervene to put a brake on the speculation.

19 – In Tirana riot police intervene to disperse a crowd of over five thousand furious people. The Socialist Party had asked people to participate in this march in the hope of appointing themselves leaders of a peaceful protest movement. But the demonstration, like those that followed, was to make all the parties abandon any hope of controlling this explosion of the people's rage.

– In Berat, police, courts, ministerial and party office buildings are stoned. Two hundred demonstrators are arrested. Parliament asks that the army intervene to protect State buildings.

24 – In Lushnjë the town hall is set on fire during a demonstration. Two thousand people build barricades to prevent the fire brigade from intervening.

25 – In Lushnjë, the vice premier is beaten and held inside the town stadium by force; the demonstrators ask for the head of a finance society, Rrapush Xhaferri, in exchange for his freedom. Some journalists are attacked by the crowd and robbed of their cameras, etc.

– Clashes take place in Berat and barricades are erected. The town hall is burnt down and the crowd also try to set fire to the main police station. Clashes also take place at Elbasan, Librazhd, Laç, Kuçovë, Memaliaj and Tepelenë.

26 – Three thousand people attempt an assault on parliament following a demonstration in Tirana. In Valona (Vlorë), a bomb is thrown at the police during a protest march. The town hall is set on fire.

27 – In Tirana the army intervene patrolling the city streets.

– In Peshkopi about a hundred people attack the police station with stones. Six policemen are killed, then the rebels set fire to the town hall offices.

– In Gavaja prisoners in Barwhor prison begin a revolt which is later suppressed. Two prisoners are killed.

28 – In Tirana, a demonstration in favour of the government is organised.

29 – Berisha accuses the opposition party of organising the riots, and arrests four militants. The government promises that repayment of citizens will begin on February 5.

30 – Ten opposition parties form a coalition called the Forum for Democracy, demanding Berisha's resignation from the government as he is considered responsible for the economic chaos, and the constitution of a government of technocrats to manage the social crisis in the wait for early elections.

February

1 – In Tirana, Lushnjë and Valona, seventy-three people are accused of having provoked the January incidents.

5 – In Valona, the major finance company, Gjallica, declares itself bankrupt. Following this news thirty thousand people come out into the streets to demonstrate and to protest against the arrests carried out the days previously. As the march makes its way to the port the police charge and attempt to disperse the demonstrators with hydrants and truncheons, then fire into the crowd killing two people and detaining another fifty.

6 – In Valona forty thousand people demonstrate against the repression.

7 – In Tepelenë, the Forum for Democracy call a demonstration which sixty people turn up for. In Tirana, Berisha's party mobilises, organising a meeting to call for democracy and non-violence.

8 – In Tirana, the authorities outlaw a demonstration organised by the socialists. Clashes at Fier. Some of the guards on the Greek border sell their arms and emigrate.

9 – During the night, police in Valona arrest a number of people considered responsible for the incidents that have taken place over the past few days. A considerable number of demonstrators gather to protest in front of the police station. The police shoot: one dead and over twenty wounded.

10 – In Valona forty thousand people on a march set fire to the headquarters of the Democratic Party, devastating it: over eighty people are wounded in the clashes that follow; one of them does not survive. The police organise a cordon around the city to prevent access to the rebels coming from the neighbouring villages in solidarity with those of Valona. Meanwhile, in the vicinity of the police station, police are overcome, disarmed and their uniforms burned.

– In Tirana, police fail to prevent the rebels from assembling. The tension rises as the demonstrators shout, "Valona, Valona". A huge demonstration takes place in Gjirokastrë.

Parliament declares itself against the state of emergency.

11 – In Valona over thirty thousand people take part in the funeral of a demonstrator killed by police a few days before. The government attempts to proclaim a state of emergency in the city, but the decree submitted to parliament meets with opposition from the deputies of the Democratic Party, worried about the possible consequences of such a measure. As a result the government decide to fire the head of the police in the town.

12 – The demonstrations continue, extending to nearly all the towns in the south and to some cities in the north. A policeman is killed outside his home in Valona. A few days later a demonstrator is killed in Fier.

19 – In Tirana, a new demonstration takes place in spite of the police ban.

20 – In Valona University about forty students begin a hunger strike, calling for severe judicial measures against those responsible for the police brutality; the resignation of the head of national television and Meksi; the formation of a government of technicians until new elections take place; and an end to all hostilities.

25 – Berisha sends the home minister to Germany to ask for a loan to pay for new police equipment, while the governments of other countries express their support.

28 – Police attempt to evict the University of Valona, where the hunger strike is still going on. A group of secret agents prepares to enter the building, but there is an immediate reaction. In spite of requests for non-violence made by the students on hunger strike, about two thousand rebels armed with guns and knives set off from the university for the headquarters of the secret services (SHIK). Here there are clashes with agents who barricade themselves inside the building; the demonstrators insist on going on the assault and manage to set fire to the SHIK headquarters by using grenades. Three agents die in the burning building, while others who try to escape are lynched: the balance is six dead among the police and three dead and various wounded among the demonstrators. The rebels then move towards an army barracks, break down the door and plunder all the weapons they can without the least resistance from the soldiers. A heavy machine gun is installed in defence of the university. The clashes go on till the next day.

March

1 – The city of Valona is in the hands of the insurgents. The funerals of the three civilians killed the previous night take place without incident, but new clashes begin towards the evening, leaving five wounded. Other arms and munitions depots are sacked, while five army barracks are stormed. The armed insurgents move towards nearby towns to extend the revolt. In Valona, Sarandë and Delvinë, the situation is declared to be out of control. Meanwhile Italian foreign minister Dini declares that the revolt is led by “bands of delinquents incited by left wing extremists”.

– In Lushnjë some police riot-control vehicles en route to Valona are blocked by the population. About forty agents are disarmed, stripped and their vehicles set alight.

– In Tirana, parliament is convoked for an extraordinary sitting. The same evening the government announces the resignation of prime minister Meksi, but the decisions have no effect on the rebels. Fierce clashes between demonstrators and police: the police get the worst of it and a police station is set on fire.

2 – The government declares a state of emergency. The public residence of Berisha, in the hills of Valona, is sacked and torched. Near the port of the city, ten thousand insurgents surround the garrison of the strategic base of Pacha Liman, soldiers abandon their positions and the commander alone remains to open the door to the insurgents. He was to become the organiser of the defence of the town in the case of an intervention of Berisha’s troops. In Sarandë, about thirty thousand demonstrators come out into the streets without being impeded by the terrified police, who disappear. The police headquarters are looted and set on fire, the cars and offices of the SHIK meet the same fate. Four hundred kalashnikovs fall into the hands of the insurgents who carry on attacking the courts, the attorney’s office, and the prison, where they set free about a hundred prisoners. They then set off to storm a bank.

– At Himarë, the town hall and police headquarters are set on fire.

- In Delvinë, the prefecture and the Attorney’s office are attacked and a bank raided.
- In Levan the armoury of an army barracks is looted.
- In Gjirokastër, already on permanent general strike for a number of days, the rebels invade the police station, take the arms, free about fifteen prisoners jailed there, then set fire to the building. From Valona to Sarandë and in Tepelenë barricades are erected in the streets. Violent clashes take place in Tirana during a demonstration of six thousand people. A number of journalists are among the wounded. The rebels overturn and set fire to police vehicles. A state of emergency is declared over the whole of Albania for an indeterminate period. Hundreds of potential agitators are thrown in jail.

3 – In spite of everything, parliament decides to confirm Berisha’s presidential mandate for another five years, and to re-establish order by force without any fuss. The head offices of the most important opposition newspaper is set on fire by SHIK agents, and about twenty people are evacuated. The censor allows the publication of only one daily newspaper, obviously a pro-government one. All other means of communication are outlawed. Berisha orders military encirclement of the area from Valona to Sarandë and dismisses the Chief of Staff, accused of not having shown sufficient zeal in repressing the popular revolt, and puts a SHIK military adviser in his place. From that moment on, all armoured cars sent into the south of the country are commanded by SHIK agents, not by regular soldiers. Berisha orders the insurgents to hand over their arms, while the army takes back control of the area extending to Fier, about a hundred kilometres from the south of the capital.

- Meanwhile, in Gjirokastër, a commercial centre belonging to a finance company is torched.

- First Italian blitz. In Valona, the last of the “important” foreigners and journalists are evacuated in Italian army helicopters. The only law-keeping forces to remain in the town are plain clothes SHIK agents. Four civilians intending to turn in their arms are killed by the rebels.

4 – In spite of considerable international pressure, Berisha refuses to allow the opposition to even enter the government.

- In Valona, the looting of arms depots continues. The insurgents prepare to take on the army: snipers take up positions on house rooftops, barricades are raised at the entrance to the city, lookouts are placed on surrounding hills to survey access to the town, and a bridge is mined.

- In Styari, clashes between demonstrators and the military end after about forty minutes as the army retreats.

- In Sarandë, the insurgents, including women and children, turn up en masse at police stations and the naval base looking for more arms. They find piles of firearms, bags of ammunition, a battery of artillery, cannons, heavy machine guns and six warships, while journalists are forced to destroy their video film footage. Some of the army units attack the port, but are pushed back. All roads to the north are blocked in anticipation of the arrival of tanks. A SHIK car is stopped at a roadblock: one agent is burned alive, two manage to escape and a fourth is taken hostage. On the road leading to Sarandë, fifty soldiers with three armoured cars desert the army and unite with the rebels.

- In Delvinë, some army units shoot at the insurgents from Mig 15s, causing dozens of deaths. Two pilots who refuse to shoot into the crowd escape and land at Galatina, asking Italy for political asylum.

- Anticipating the army’s inability to repress the insurrection militarily, all the forces of recuperation come out into the field. In Sarandë, an Autonomous Communal council is formed, directed by leaders of the opposition parties. A Defence Council directed by a retired colonel.

These organisms lay down the conditions for the surrender of arms by the rebels: early elections, Berisha's resignation and the formation of a government of technocrats to ensure the transition. One of the prime measures taken by these Councils is the organisation of "self-defence against the looters" and "protection of goods" squads. These politicians, directly in contact with Berisha, insist that the army refrain from intervening, aware that if that were to happen they would no longer be able to control the situation. In the name of the struggle for democracy, the head of the town Defence Council orders that the insurgents no longer wear masks; moreover the Albanian national anthem is played in the streets throughout the country every morning.

5 – The movement extends to Memaliaj and Tepelenë, where the insurgents set fire to police stations and loot shops, erecting barricades with the wreckage of the burnt-out lorries. Mortars, cannons, anti-aircraft guns and land-to-air missiles pass into the hands of the rebels, who place them on high grounds in the town.

– In Gramsh insurgents mine a small bridge after taking it from the soldiers, in order to block the advance of the tanks. Army officers desert en masse and unite with the rebels of Valona and Sarandë, others flee to Greece.

– In the north, an area less touched by the movement, the government hands out five thousand guns to the members of the Democratic Party to confront the insurgents. In Tirana, Berisha meets the representatives of the opposition parties and proposes a truce and an amnesty for anyone who lays down arms. They do not get very good results. Meanwhile, the insurgents reinforce their defence positions, erecting barricades and preparing check points to slow the advance of the armed forces.

– One hundred and ten Italian firms which operate and prosper in Albania launch an appeal for peace.

6 – The insurrection spreads all over the country. In Valona, a Public Health Committee is created (PHC) consisting of all the opposition parties, and a Defence Committee is formed by ex-army officials. To combat the passivity of the army, Berisha announces the arrest of four officers accused of not defending their barracks from looting.

7 – In Tepelenë, the head of Berisha's bodyguards, who had been sent there to calm spirits, is kidnapped. Here too a Public Health Committee is formed.

– The insurgents continue to refuse to hand over arms, and looting of weapons depots continues.

– The European Union invites Berisha to put off armed intervention as long as possible and make an urgent call for early elections.

8 – Second Italian blitz in Valona.

– In Gjirokastër, on the arrival of the Albanian army headed for Përmet, the population rebels and captures the commander of the column without any resistance from the soldiers. Arms are requisitioned from the soldiers and distributed among the people.

– Sixty-five SHIK agents pour out of six military helicopters. A group of insurgents manages to block three of the helicopters while the others take off with only the pilot on board. The troops that have disembarked run for cover in the mountains, chased by the rebels. Meanwhile, the airport is occupied and the customs offices are attacked, looted and burned. The local radio station is also occupied. A Public Health Committee is formed to try to placate the rioters.

9 – Dini flies to Tirana, and Berisha proposes early elections. The Greek border is abandoned after an attack by the rebels. Armouries in the Berate area are also sacked. Shots are exchanged at Shkodër, Fier and Përmet. In this last city, five deaths and many wounded are reported among

the insurgents; a whole brigade of soldiers deserts and lines up with them. After pushing back the army, the rebels attack and destroy the police headquarters, courts, town hall, two banks and various shops. The insurrectional movement spreads to another sixteen villages in the Përmet region, where the nth Public Health Committee is constituted to put a brake on the revolt.

The extension of the movement, above all the fall of Gjirokastrë (a military base indispensable for any government intervention), convince Berisha of the need to come to an agreement with the Socialist Party, the main political opposition force. The agreement foresees the establishment of a government of national reconciliation, new elections before June, and an extension of the promise of amnesty to all who have participated in the insurrectional movement.

– The Public Health Committees and the Defence Committees approve the agreement, and the Socialist Party promises to wind up all the committees in three days. In Sarandë and Valona, the insurgents express their disagreement with the politics of the PHC. In the first town, the PHC is ignored as the rebels start making decisions on their own again. In the second, the daily demonstration takes place without flags or opposition leaders and ends up in looting and arson.

– Meanwhile, the revolt spreads in the north, and a huge arms depot is plundered in Shkoder.

– In Peshkopi, Lezhe-Kuksi and Lacy, the army retreats in the face of riots and looting.

10 – The PHC in Valona launch an appeal “to all honest policemen”, to come forward to help them “re-establish calm and peace”.

Third Italian blitz. The revolt continues to spread in the north, to Skrapari, Malakastra, Kelcyra, Berat, Polican, Gramsh and Kuzini. State food reserves and the armouries of three army barracks are attacked. Garrisons and police forces abandon towns without shooting as the insurgents help themselves to weapons. Another PHC is created. In Gramsh, where there is a large arms factory, insurgents take over three barracks and set fire to the police headquarters, then they go up towards Fier and take control of the roads. The army arsenals in Skrapari are sacked; the military airport of Kuçovë is attacked, where the rebels take possession of 40 Migs; control is gained of Polican, which houses an arms and munitions factory. The outcome of the clashes is fourteen wounded. No longer being able to count on the army, Berisha arms his partisans: in Bajram-Curi and Kukes his men sack important arms depots.

11 – The PHC of eight towns in the south meet in Gjirokastrë and create a people’s national health front, whose requests are: the resignation of Berisha, the restructuring of the secret police, the reimbursement of lost savings, and the organisation of new elections. In a declaration signed along with the Italian ambassador, the Valona PHC pledge “to favour the immediate restitution of the arms in the possession of the inhabitants” and “to assure public order and the progressive return to administrative normality” in the city.

– Evacuation orders are issued for all the Italians who are still in Albania. Bashkim Fino, socialist, is nominated prime minister: his first decision is to reinforce the police and attempt to quash the uprising in Durazzo, where three rebels have been killed.

– Looting continues all over the country. The towns in the hands of the rebels are: Polican, Kelcyra, Përmet, Kuçovë, Skrapari, Berat, Gjirokastrë, Sarandë, Belvinë, Himarë, Tepelenë, Memaliaja, Valona, Kruma, Burrel and Lacy.

12 – In spite of attempts at national reconciliation made by the Government to restore calm, the revolt reaches the gates of Tirana. An arms and explosives factory in Mjeksi is plundered. In Elbasan, the last halt before the capital, the army and police retreat while the insurgents take over the arms. Fier, Cërriq and Gramsh are also abandoned by government forces as rebels set fire to the police station and plunder three army barracks. The revolt spreads to Shkodër, the biggest

town in the north: stormed barracks are abandoned by soldiers, the prison gates are swung open, a bank is blown up, the courts devastated and shops looted. The important air base of Gjadër also falls into the hands of the insurgents.

The risk of the revolt extending beyond the borders is beginning to worry the surrounding States, who are taking precautions by closing access to their territory. Berisha prepares his defence: he has numerous mercenaries arrive from the north of Albania and nearby Kosovo. His men sack the arsenals in the cities in the north. In Tirana, SHIK agents break into the military academy and three arms depots in the outskirts, emptying them. They do the same with seven anti-aircraft defence depots and distribute the arms to their men and to members of the Democratic Party.

13 — In Tirana, the secret police are now circulating alone. They parade around the main buildings with armoured vehicles and impressive cars, shooting machine-gunfire and shouting at the top of their voices to show who is in command. Armoured vehicles are placed at the nerve centres of the town: the presidential palace, parliament and the administrative offices. Most of the ministries, public buildings, banks and shops are closed. The streets are deserted, while the noise of gunshot is incessant. Six people, including two children, are killed. Guards abandon the prisons leaving about six hundred prisoners to escape. Mass looting increases in the food and arms depots in spite of the presence of the SHIK. The training centre is also attacked. Nothing remains of the barracks but the gutted shell. The sentinel of the National Guard headquarters does not raise a finger. The people take over everything. The prefect of Tirana makes an appeal on television in the name of all the political parties, calling for calm. But towards the end of the afternoon the whole city is in a state of panic. Faithful civil servants cram as many files and dossiers as they can into government cars; soldiers and police desert and go home. Then even the members of the SHIK disappear from the scene. The embassies spread the order for a general evacuation, while a company of marines is lined up in front of the American embassy. An air-lift is set up between the units of Italian marines patrolling the waters between the Gulf of Taranto and the Gulf of Durazzo. Vehicles are made available to evacuate the foreigners (French, German, Greek, American and Italian).

— In the evening, the historic city of Korçë is stormed. In Lezhë, the rebels attack the SHIK offices and blow up the safe of the State Bank, while the town notables create the 'Safeguarding Committee of Lezhë'; to try to placate the movement they go through the streets in cars with loudhailers calling for calm.

— Berisha sends his family to safety in Italy.

— From south to north the insurrectional movement spreads, making the State vacillate; but if the institutional forces are retreating from Tirana, it is in order for them to re-organise better at national and international level. The insurgents for their part do not get much support from revolutionaries in other countries, left alone to carry on their struggle.

14 — In Tirana the Red Cross headquarters is sacked as clashes in front of the President of the Republic's palace continue. Durazzo port, now in the hands of the rebels, is sacked.

Meanwhile, the European Union assures Albania of their humanitarian support: the intervention of a military force of fifty thousand men well-equipped for the hotbed, and the offer of food in exchange for stolen arms for the more co-operative of the rebels.

15 — Berisha launches an appeal for voluntary workers to re-establish order in the capital to enrol in the army or the police with wages of 400 dollars (four times the average wage). Moreover

he promises to triple the wages of the police who return to their posts. Obviously, the proposal attracts a considerable number of people. In Tirana, the police regain control of the airport.

16 – While the Albanian State is receiving offers of help from Italy and Greece—who are ready to send technical experts capable of providing courses or restructuring the police forces and the army—a march for peace takes place in the centre of Tirana. In Gjadër, soldiers abandon the air base.

17 – European Union experts arrive in Tirana for two days’ talks with the Albanian government, aimed at evaluating the eventuality of a ‘humanitarian mission’.

18 – In Gjirokastër, a bank is attacked and the safe removed.

20 – In Tirana, clashes take place in front of the presidential palace. An Italian marines special unit disembarks on the beach near Durazzo. The Italian government announces the expulsion of any illegal immigrants who turn out to have escaped from Albanian prisons. The Albanian minister protests: “We have no functioning prisons”.

21 – Berisha asks for military aid from Turkey.

22 – Meeting between the new minister Fino and the PHC of Valona. Armoured vehicles take control of the city of Fier.

25 – Forty tons of French aid in food and medicines arrive at Tirana airport.

26 – The negotiations of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) end with the creation of a “Humanitarian mission by a multinational force with a UN mandate”. About six thousand soldiers are sent to Albania to garrison the ports of Durazzo and Valona, Tirana airport, and the main communication links between the north and south of the country.

27 – One of the many armed gangs in the pay of the wealthy proprietors who mingle with insurgents in order to protect their bosses’ interests—and actually reach the point of killing some of them—get a harsh welcome from the armed inhabitants of one village.

28 – An Italian sloop rams a patrol vessel full of Albanian illegal immigrants. It sinks, causing many to be drowned.

– In Valona a congress of the PHCs of the whole of Albania takes place. Representatives of eighteen towns in the south and six in the north are present. Members of the opposition parties also attend.

29 – The decision for an international “peace mission” is delivered as an ultimatum to the military command in Italy

April

9 – About a hundred SHIK agents disembark in Brindisi to control the movements of Albanian refugees in Italy.

12 -The Jaubert commando arrives at Durazzo from France to preside over the landing of the French troops.

14 – An airlift is organised between Pisa and Tirana to transport material and equipment.

15 – Operation “Alba” is set in motion. Six thousand soldiers belonging to the multinational forces disembark in Durazzo and Valona. One ship carries three hundred and sixty tons of flour and thirty six tons of legume: the whip and the carrot.

– Meantime in Tirana, the situation is returning to normal. The only weapons to be seen are those in the hands of the police.

17 – An OSCE delegation meets the representatives of the PHC in Valona, whose president expresses concern about the show of force by foreign troops.

May

1–7 – Police reappear in the streets of Shkodër, Bërat, Burrël, Kukës and Krujë, but the courts are not functioning: no trace remains of the buildings that once housed the police stations, courts, prisons. All over the country the police are having difficulty in recapturing escaped prisoners, their identity unknown due to all the relative documents having been destroyed during the revolt.

14 – The opposition parties threaten to boycott the elections fixed for the end of June for fear of possible intrigues. All discussion is now centred on the importance of moving towards elections to set right the results of the corrupt politics of Berisha during all these years.

21 – An agreement between all ten parties results in the nomination of a new leader of the secret police, one of the demands of the Public Health Committee.

June

4 – President Sali Berisha escapes a dynamite attack during an election meeting with the Democratic Party. Apart from a few exceptions, no one hands over the arms plundered during the revolt. The state of emergency and curfew are still in force.

27 – A convoy of international observers, escorted by Italian and Rumanian soldiers, leaves Tirana for Gjirokastër in the south, passing by Mëmaliaj, Tepelenë and other localities. The passage of the vehicles is greeted with hissing and insults, but no incidents occur.

29 – Elections. The spectre of the revolution moves away from the country thanks to the return of politics.

July

23 – Berisha finally resigns from presidency of the Republic which he had ruled for five years. In this way the spectacle of national reconciliation concludes itself.

August

12 – The multinational forces leave the country.

Albania, laboratory of subversion

The insurrection against power is the only time the word “people” is not a mystification, because it indicates the power of united individuals.

Charles Meslet

The atmosphere in Gjirokaster is mad. The popular revolt has transformed itself into total anarchy, there is no police, no State, no rules. The city has become enthusiastic, has brightened up, got involved in the game of rebellion.

Le Monde 11/3/97.

Albania has become a vast laboratory. On the one hand, like the rest of the countries of the old Eastern bloc in their passage from bureaucratic capitalism to the liberal version, it is experiencing the resistance of the world economy and the democratic management of power. On the other, one sees immense insurrectional possibilities opening up that are capable of upsetting the projects of the State and capitalist power. The importance of beginning to reflect on a potentially explosive situation will therefore not escape revolutionaries. To know and make known the nature and extent of the armed insurrection in Albania as quickly as possible, and begin informal discussions to evaluate the real possibility of a theoretical or practical revolutionary intervention—that is what we are proposing to libertarians and all individuals who continue to see rebellion against the State and Capital as the only road that can lead to real freedom.

Some people have been saying for a long time now that the countries of ex-“real” socialism are ready to explode and strike at the very heart of the world order. The Albanian example is no exception. And what is happening just now on our own doorstep is perhaps making this analysis more concrete.

Unfortunately very few attempts have been made to examine the many problems raised by insurrection: its organisational forms, subversive content, language, communication, sabotage of the power apparatus, plunder, the abolition of money, the destruction of capitalist production and the refusal of any management, even that which claims to be revolutionary, the free appropriation of goods, etc. Locked up in our fine proclamations and empty formulae, we risk being taken unawares by unforeseen social situations.

We believe the time has come for us to talk about insurrection and revolution and cease to be embalmers of ideologies or Cassandra of the eternal defeats of the exploited. We do not deny that news of destroyed barracks, besieged prisons and burned out banks fills our hearts with joy and inflames our dreams. But to really dream, and in the most dangerous manner, means to dream with our eyes open, ready to jump into the heart of the situation without strategic illusions that are as presumptuous as they are ridiculous, and try to join the game with all arms at our disposal.

What follows are no more than a few notes related to a discussion to which each can contribute their own ideas and critique. It is no less important for us to have them circulate without delay. A

better knowledge of events will allow us to analyse what is happening in the Balkans in greater depth, in order to better address our possibilities for action.

From one capitalism to the other

After enjoying the delights of bureaucratic capitalism for such a long time, the exploited of the former so-called communist countries have recently been savouring the many opportunities offered by the liberal version. The Albanian finance company affair, as it has come to be known, is but one example. Without their miserable conditions being in any way changed, the oppressed of Albania found themselves presented with private investment, once considered the worst of evils, as a guarantee of individual freedom and promise of happiness. The new republic is allowing everything that the old one controlled directly. The market has officially become good, just as it was once officially non-existent. Converted to the new religion, the population rushed to put their money into banks that promised them a rapid doubling of stakes. Unrestrained capitalism allows what “normal” capitalism claims to prevent: telling bigger and bigger fibs. So, just as is happening in China, people are finding themselves with the worst of both worlds—the secret police and brutal speculation.

The finance companies went bankrupt, and the press admitted that they had pandered to the party in power in exchange for State patronage. The fact is that nobody wants to make any long term investment in a country that does not have stable political authority. Economic cannibalism consequently becomes the way capitalism functions. The mechanism of the racket was more or less as follows: find particular “clients”, that is to say, people who are so desperate that they are willing to believe the lies of advertising unquestioningly; extract as much money as possible from them, enlist the politicians, declare bankruptcy ... and the deed is done! All this, which the servile press euphemistically refer to as “informal finance”, is permitted and encouraged by the bureaucracy as a means of defending their own privileges.

Parliamentary democracy is the form most suited to capitalism, because the sovereign citizen is the best consumer. That helps us understand the collapse of bureaucratic collectivism. But here Capital is not yet as fully established as it was in the days of the determinist fairy tales. The population is regaining a desire for freedom that had been suffocated in decades of terrible dictatorship. Moreover, the old Stalinist elite are not prepared to give up their power as they undergo a political and economic transformation that is threatening to eliminate them. The situation is therefore creating social conflict, the outcome of which is not easy to predict. Added to this, capitalism is moving from the competitive market—and the American dream of infinite growth—to the new world market. Having lived too long on the putative cold war economy (playing the role of international gendarme, with a military budget continually on the increase, and direct control through the State), the United States are not prepared to launch expensive and at times spectacularly unconvincing expeditions in defence of freedom just anywhere.

Finally, it remains to be seen whether a modern democracy would work in countries like Russia or China—and whether any of the other States which made up the former Eastern bloc, Poland, for example, will ever succeed in having an autonomous political situation.

The mask of democracy

The revolt in Albania has laid bare the unscrupulousness of democracy: a president re-elected under martial law, censorship of the press and the interruption of radio transmissions, the police openly commanded by the central committee of a political party, to give but the most blatant examples. Arms in hand, the insurgents have forced the State to reveal its true essence. Of course, the rebels are nothing but “red terrorists supported and financed by foreign secret services” (according to the first declarations of Sali Berisha), and the revolt “an attack on economic life and individual freedom”. Now it is obvious that what is making a constant attack on life is the economy itself. And as far as individual freedom is concerned, this has never revealed itself with such clarity as in the burning of the courts, police stations, supermarkets, banks, town halls, prefectures and border check posts; in the attacks on the army barracks, the plundering of arms depots and, in a superb gesture of collective joy, the freeing of all prisoners. This is what was seen in Sarande, Himaren, Vlore, Delvine, Levan, Gjirokaster and other towns in southern Albania. The unscrupulousness continues as other States, particularly Italy and Greece, are asking for dialogue to be initiated with the opposition (a clumsy term for indicating an armed attack). The opposition are organising new elections (the May 96 ones being too obviously fixed), designed to lead to the formation of a new government of “national unity, reconciliation or technocrats, it matters little”, as the Greek minister for European affairs declared. Moreover, as a French diplomat pointed out, if on the one hand the head of State is a dictator, on the other it is not known who is who or what they want. “Who represents who?” is asked fearfully. Is repression the only way for Sali Berisha to stay in power? As far as the press are concerned, they are playing around with various bungled hypotheses: “Somali-style bloody anarchy”, “wild repression”, the “awakening of the spirit of revenge” of the other Albanian communities “who tried to get involved”, and an almost “laudatory justification” of the insurrection (“down there it’s not like here, down there it is necessary to take up arms to get free elections!”). As no political change could improve the miserable conditions of the poor, a civil war might, as in the former Yugoslavia, prolong their submission and guarantee a lucrative business for the arms dealers. But no nationalistic demands seem to be appearing on the horizon. And the rebels are still armed.

The intelligence of the revolt

Only those unaware of the incredible banality of the reasons for rebellions throughout history will be surprised that insurrection has broken out in response to a fraudulent financial operation supported by an idiotic government. The disparity between the actions carried out by the exploited and the causes that claim to justify them, no longer surprises us. Revolutionaries who insist on clear programmes and well-defined social concepts such as a just cause for which to fight, show themselves to be just as naive as the journalists they claim to criticise.

Why then should a movement which has gone far beyond democratic legality—in the streets, not in theory—be asking for this legality to be restored? The demands of those claiming to be the insurgents’ spokesmen are: nomination of a technical government, new parliamentary elections, resignation of the director of State television and radio, the dropping of all court proceedings against the soldiers who joined the rebels, amnesty for all the insurgents, and a reversal of the state of emergency.

For their part, the people are calling for the demission of Sali Berisha and an impossible reimbursement of the sums invested. The reasons are to be found in social contradictions which lead to people calling for the imprisonment of corrupt politicians or “criminals” then on the day of the insurrection freeing all prisoners without distinction; to entrusting their money and their hopes to the banks then setting them on fire. When people take their destiny into their own hands they become more intelligent.

Then anything can happen. It is in this veering of consciousness that the necessity of insurrection resides. It is the force of the rupture that leads the exploited to talk to each other and organise directly, making it possible to find answers at the very moment in which new questions are being posed. It is a pure formality to talk of self-management or self-organisation without the presence of the subversive rupture. Worse still, that merely strengthens established order. The normality of work, consumerism, the family and TV utilises everything, even direct democracy, ecology or “alternative” culture. It devours all criticism.

We are not saying that a movement’s content is of no importance. On the contrary, we maintain that this content can only radicalise if it has the time and space to do so, the space of generalised revolt, and time snatched from hierarchy, coercion and boredom.

Where did it spring from?

What is happening in Albania is showing anyone who has eyes to see what many seemed to have been forgotten. Against the apologists of capitalism, the cantors of “complex societies”, the zealots of omnipotence resulting from technological control, and the ideologists of progress upset by the barbarians’ lack of grace, these Albanian barbarians are demonstrating that it is possible to stand against a State, arms in hand. The desertions and mutinies of the soldiers demonstrate that even the most brutally repressive machinery still requires men to make it function. The choice of symbols and persons under attack tells us that, no matter how thick the layers of ideology, oppression is still tangible.

It is difficult to see how the situation will evolve. There seems to be a resurgence of the Stalinist political racket claiming to represent the opposition in response to a need to unify the struggle (during the early days of the struggle plundered weapons were placed at the entrance to the university where students were on hunger strike calling for scholastic reforms; the students then attacked the police station on the campus). The press are talking of popular assemblies and “insurgents’ councils” that have taken the place of the town councils. How all that is working, in other words how life is changing, we do not know. These councils could be an attempt at autonomous organisation by the exploited, or they might simply be a democratic disguise for Leninist ideology. Up until now, the most important element has been the refusal to hand over arms in spite of the new leadership’s attempts to have the guarantees offered by the government accepted. This refusal, as well as making effective the freedom that laws (exactly like the finance company) only promise, could give the insurgents the time to go beyond promises—absolutely useless in the face of conditions of exploitation that no capitalism with a human face could ever improve. What makes the difference is obviously the social aspect (how the State is not just perceived to be the enemy, but is also rendered ineffective; how relations between individuals escape the economy), not the military one. The generalised armed rebellion, the massive participation of women and children, the dialogue in the streets and the free decision to rebel that has been recognised by

each and every citizen are all very significant. None of the parties is in control of the situation, and the people are well armed.

So, what will happen? We are not prophets. We could say, in order to justify our inertness, that everything will simply end up with a change in the ruling class. But we do not have a waiting game to justify.

It should be noted that the geographical area of the clash is a particularly explosive one. In Bulgaria only a short time has passed since contestation ended up in an assault on parliament (there too demanding new elections).

There are many Greeks in Albania (concentrated in the area controlled by the insurgents) and illegal Albanian immigrants in Greece (continually threatened with expulsion and so submitted to ferocious exploitation). The same could be said for Kosovo and Macedonia, not to mention the historical tensions between Greece, Bulgaria and Turkey. If the Albanian insurgents were to pose just one social question that was to extend beyond the borders! In a word, the area is a powder keg that will maintain its explosive potential no matter what the outcome of the revolt is. It is no coincidence that the governments of Italy and Greece are on red alert: an increase in Albanian immigration could make the internal situation in these countries problematic (the Italian army has been protecting its southern coasts for some time now against undesirable visitors from Albania). So all the bosses would prefer to avoid a bloodbath. But if the movement were to become a revolutionary threat, that would be their last card.

When looking on is not enough

As we said earlier, the Albanian situation could be the catalyst for profound reflection on an anti-authoritarian anti-capitalist revolution. It is already demonstrating the theoretical value of the barricades. It could lead us to get rid of old ideological junk and look at questions that need to be faced (for example, the disappearance of the great productive units where capital once concentrated the exploited; the explosion of social rebellion; the end of the old class confrontations and relative forms of organisation, unions and workers' councils; the problem of the unions, the destruction of technology, etc.).

Perhaps there is more to be done. Certainly we do not agree with the political stance of supplying aid, nor do we have pedagogical illusions such as supplying recipes for anarchy in the Balkans. On the contrary, common elements for a possible revolt are needed, to be expressed in direct attack, pillage and violence against the established order. We need to determine what of the Albanian situation concerns us directly, and how we can widen its range in both the social and geographic sense. The problem of knowing how to involve ourselves and radicalise the content of a movement in process is a theoretical problem, that is true. But above all it is a practical one. The question is international, and there is certainly no lack of targets.

Reality is in ferment and the only realism we obstinately continue to extol is that of not wasting time.

A few anarchists
Paris, 11 March 1997

A look at Italian investments in Albania

About 600 Italian firms have opened up branches in Albania over the past six years, 400 of which are based in Puglia. The turnover is not disclosed, but is estimated to be hundreds of billions of lire. Investment sectors for Italian capitalism are multiple: packaging, textiles and clothing, woodcarving, footwear, building, quarrying, hotels, the food and services industry, a network for the sale of petroleum products, chains of shops, especially for food and detergents, import-export companies, bottling of Coca Cola and mineral water, the biggest private bank (Banco Italo-Shiptare, with the participation of the Banco di Roma), the reconstruction of the aqueduct of Tirana and Durazzo, the reconstruction of some of the electric and telephone lines, etc...

Why is there so much interest in investing in Albania? One boss's answer says it all, that of Adelchi Sergio, shoe manufacturer in Tricase (Lecce) with sales proceeds of 250 billion lire. He has 1,500 employees in Puglia and 5,000 spread throughout Albania, Bulgaria, Rumania and India: "One worker in Italy costs me 28 million lire a year, in Albania, 140,000 lire a month, in Rumania 100,000, in India 50,000. I am willing to shut down everything abroad right away. But in Italy, especially in the south, things need to change. I am thinking of tax savings, and labour costs cut by 30–35 per cent. Yes, the world is changing, and it is absurd that you can divorce your wife when you want to, but are obliged to keep a worker all your life". (Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno, February 11, 1997).

It is interesting to see how Italian investors in Albania have seen the popular revolt in that country. First with optimism, then, as the risks increased, they are afraid of losing the capital invested.

The Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno, a Pugliese daily which had invested in Albania by founding the second most widely distributed daily, Gazeta Shqiptare, reported on February 1, 1997 "the voices of those who in a country on the verge of a state of siege are showing their great optimism".

Luigi Fabri, of Ancona, president of the Italian committee of building contractors in Albania, has been in the building industry for five years. "I have 240 employees who earn an average of 280,000 lire a month. What is happening? It is a positive change because at last it relates to the reality of the Albanian market which has been kept going on illusions for years. It was devastating for the country, both at the financial and the ethical level, to believe it was possible to live without working. The huge sum of money that has been locked up all this time in the safes of the finance companies all this time will finally reach the market in the form of investment and consumerism. I believe that this is one more reason for investing in Albania today. Why did I come here? In reality I was working in the public works sector: transferring abroad was the only way to get out of the crisis."

World economic interests in Albania...a few notes that cannot fail to be of interest to all those who wish to demonstrate their solidarity with the insurgents.

First the banks: Banca di Roma, Arab Islamic Bank, Bank of Bahrain, Dardania Bank, Bank of Piraeus, International Commercial Bank (Malaysia).

The following programmes were instrumental in shifting foreign aid away from “humanitarian assistance” towards development schemes based on market-orientation and the transition to privatisation: World Bank (Forestry Projects and much more); Bank for Reconstruction and Development; IMF; EU PHARE Programme (pesticides, herbicide imports, etc., always with the help of the Peace Corps); European Investment Bank; USAID (has moved 92% of the land in Albania into private hands through property registration, leasing of public lands for sustainable forestry and grazing, etc.); The American ORT Federation; World Trade Organisation.

The major government investors in Albania are, the USA, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Greece.

The biggest corporations involved are: Coca-Cola, British Petroleum, Premier Oil, The Rogner Group, F. Lanto.

Other corporations and Foundations: ENI, EniChem America Inc., 2000 West Loop South, Suite 2010, Houston TX; 666 Fifth Avenue, New York 10103; Agip Petroleum, Suite 300, Brokhollow Central, 2950 N. Loop, West Houston TX 77092; Saipem Inc., 15950 Park Row, Houston TX 77024; Copelouzos Group; Prometheus Gas S.A.; Rao Gazprom.

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