

BOOK REVIEW:

**Klejd Këlliçi, (2023) *Një varrim për çdo regjim* [from Alb.: A Burial in Every Regime].
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After many research articles that have covered various topics of political history, political parties, and regimes in Albania, Klejd Këlliçi writes a monographic study on the use of the dead body by different political regimes in the hundred-year history of the Albanian state. This monography starts with the meaning given to the dead body by different political regimes and how these bodies can be instrumentalized by politics, since the public memory and the identity of many ethnic groups are based on them (Këlliçi 2023: 7). The entire history of the Albanian state, from the first years of its establishment, is accompanied by the continuous performance of the living people on the bones of the dead, giving them different meanings according to the ideology of the first ones. (Ibid:8) The title of the book “A Burial in Every Regime” comes from this last point, as three different regimes which have ruled the Albanian state, the monarchical regime, the Fascist, and the Communist one have made a new burial and monumental tomb for the most important figure of National Renaissance Naim Frashëri. Each of the regimes not only gave to the funeral and tomb characteristics of its ideology, but also imposed on the writer ideological elements of the respective regimes.

The author has addressed this study of the repeated burials of Naim Frashëri in the second chapter of the book, where he also studies the efforts of the Albanian state to repatriate the bodies of Albanian patriots who died and were buried abroad, as well as the tensions that arise during this process; be it other countries, as well as with different Albanian political groups that opposed the policies of regimes (Ibid. 95). The first chapter deals with the beginnings of political use of the bodies of the dead in the history of the Albanian state. In this part, Këlliçi studies how the burial of Avni Rustemi, even more than his murder, became the moment of conception of the June Revolution in 1924 (Ibid. 54). In the third and fourth chapters, Këlliçi deals with the bodies of foreign soldiers, buried in Albania, respectively in the third, the process of repatriation of the Italian soldiers who felt mainly during the Italian-Greek war, and in the fourth the ongoing tension that existed in connection with the troops of other foreign soldiers in Albania, especially the Greek ones (Ibid.: 163, 169). The fifth and last chapter deals with the period after the fall of the communist regime and the approach of the new government towards the dead bodies of the previous leaders.

In this period, on the one hand, there is a tendency to “clean” the Martyrs’ Cemetery from the remains of former communist leaders, but the new regime is careful not to use violence against them, and, on the other hand, there is a constant effort by the state, but more often by families or social groups, to recover and honor remains of the victims of the previous regime (Ibid.: 261).

The study is based on a deep theoretical apparatus on the political use of the dead body as well as biopolitics and necropolitics, it is based on large primary sources, both archival and from the press of the time, while for current events there are also numerous audiovisual or online media sources. The author also uses the published memories or personal reflections of some protagonists of the events with which he deals (Ibid.: 38).

Klejd Këlliçi writes that although dead bodies are material remains, they are inseparable from concepts such as nation, society, and culture and serve as important identity elements (Ibid. 8). Likewise, one of the features of state formation is the ability of the state to recover the bodies of its soldiers and heroes killed or dead abroad, since control of life or death is one of the prerogatives of the modern state. In addition to the importance of the bodies for the modern state, the burial ceremony of national heroes is also important for the respective state, since the burial of a hero in modern times loses the religious characteristics of the ceremony, turning into a state ceremony, where national pride is revealed (Ibid.: 11). Thus, according to Këlliçi, one of the events that have marked the history of Albania more, the so-called June Revolution, took place more during the funeral ceremony of Avni Rustemi, organized by the opposition in which he was a part, than his murder. However, the government, which was accused of murder, tried to emphasize the private aspect, both in the act of murder itself and in the governmental body of the funeral ceremony. Meanwhile, after the return to power of the rulers overthrown by the June Revolution in 1925, and the elimination of opponents such as Bajram Curri, this was considered an act that had to do with the restoration of legality and the restoration of the monopoly of the state violence; meanwhile, for the opponent killed Barjam Curri, the burial was more of a private and religious ceremony (Ibid.: 48). Likewise, the monumental tomb of Avni Rustemi in the center of Vlora, which the revolutionaries considered a place of pilgrimage, was left in oblivion after 1925.

Even the occupying forces of Albania have used dead bodies to gain legitimacy, giving them different meanings. Thus, the Italian troops that occupied a part of southern Albania during the First World War repatriated and reburied in Kanina the remains of Ismail Qemali, the founder of the independent Albanian state. Although the ceremony was mainly religious, the repatriation act was a political one that aimed to convey the message that the Italians were supporters of the Albanian independence and respected the founder of the Albanian state. As Këlliçi elaborates, also in 1940 the Italian invaders reburied the prominent nationalist Naim Frashëri, to show their connection and respect for Albanian nation (Ibid.: 114).

The relationship of the communist regime established in Albania 1945 – 1990 with the dead bodies has been constant, not only because the regime was founded on the “blood of the fallen martyrs” during the National Liberation War, but also because of the treatment it gave to the bodies of political opponents, and sometimes even leaders of the regime, who at a certain moment were proclaimed enemies (Ibid.: 20). The first bodies disappeared, were eliminated, or hidden. About the fallen leaders, the case of Naku Spiro was emblematic, sometimes he was buried with a state ceremony as the hero of the revolution, and sometimes his grave was left in oblivion (Ibid.: 30).

Likewise, the liberal-democratic regime established after 1992 had as one of the first acts the exhumation from the Martyrs’ Cemetery the remains of Enver Hoxha and other former leaders of the socialist regime who, although were not martyrs, were buried there. But not wanting to be associated with the previous regime, which had exhumed and destroyed the remains of political opponents, the new regime gave a completely legal aspect to the act of exhumation based on the fact that the former leaders were not murdered in the war; therefore, they had no reason to be buried in the Martyrs Cemetery and their remains were buried in the public cemetery (Ibid. 14–15). Meanwhile, the new system was built on the sacrifice of martyrs of democracy murdered in Shkoder in April 1991, as well as the most famous figure of the December 1990 protests, Azem Hajdari, although died in 1998, was considered a martyr of democracy and was buried in the Martyrs’ Cemetery (Ibid.: 26).

These ongoing tensions and conflicts over the bodies of the dead in the hundred years of the Albanian state show that Klejdi Këlliçi drew a very accurate conclusion when he wrote that all political regimes in Albania were not only founded on dead bodies, but also the conflictual friend-enemy relations, in the determination that these regimes make them dead, and consequently deal with their mortal remains.

Another element that crosses the whole book and the cases treated by the author are the cemeteries, the space, and the place where martyrs, heroes, or enemies are buried, what Këlliçi calls mortuary geography (Ibid. 25). This is particularly evident in the processes of repatriation of the remains of prominent Albanian patriots who died and were buried outside the country, and in the discourse of their living fellow patriots, the idea that they are not resting in peace as are buried abroad, is constant. Meanwhile, for the remains of Esat Pasha Toptani, who in Albanian historiography is considered the greatest traitor of the Albanian nation, the Albanian state has shown indifference. Since he is buried in the Serbian cemetery in Paris (traditional enemies of the Albanians), it seems that the Albanian state gives the message that the remains of the “traitor” are where they belong, “among enemies.”

The same tension has been regarding foreign soldiers dead and buried in Albanian territory, who are constantly considered as a foreign body in the Albanian land, which should either be left in silence or better returned to their origin.

Likewise, regarding the “most meritorious persons” of national history, martyrs, heroes, and patriots, their resting place is not that of ordinary people, but monumental cemeteries should be erected for them.

In the history of the Albanian state, just as with the funeral ceremony that get separated from the religious character, the dead hero is not buried in the "holy land" in the religious sense, but in a monumental resting place or the cemeteries of the martyrs. Therefore, with the burial of Avni Rustemi, which Këlliçi calls the first state funeral in the history of the Albanian state, his body was not buried in the religious cemetery but in the center of the city of Vlora, due to the historical importance of the city where it was proclaimed the independence of Albania. During Zog's regime and the Fascist occupation, the remains of Naim Frashëri were laid to rest near the Bektashi (an Islamic Tariqa) Headquarters in Tirana, since Naim is considered a great follower of Bektashism; however, the burial ceremony and tomb, bears more nationalist, and during Fascism, Fascist symbols than religious one. During the communist regime, the remains of Naim Frashëri were removed from the resting place and buried in the Grand Park of Tirana.

Continuously, the monarchical regime of Ahmet Zogu and the communist one of Enver Hoxha, but also the liberal-democratic regime after 1991, have tried without much success to erect a monumental cemetery, the nation's pantheon for the most prominent figures of the Albanian history. While in the case of the socialist regime in Albania, this pantheon was unified with the Martyrs' Cemetery, where those leaders of the regime who, even though they were not martyrs, were also buried.

During the Fascist occupation, the territories where the Italian soldiers fell and were buried were considered a "holy land" by the Italian invaders, in which almost a principle of extraterritoriality was applied. Although they were part of the Albanian Kingdom, they were considered an integral part of the Italian homeland, in which the Albanians had no part (Ibid.: 175).

While for the history of the Albanian state as a whole, the relationship with the dead body is of constant importance, the approach that different regimes have regarding the bodies of heroes and enemies varies according to the regime. Thus, for the regimes dominated by Ahmet Zogu, both the monarchy and the republic, the treatment of the bodies of the murdered political opponents was limited to indifference, as well as the organisation of their burials as a completely private ceremony. The governments that came to power after the Revolution of June 1924 did not try to exhume Avni Rustemi from his grave in the center of Vlora, but simply left him in oblivion. Likewise, Bajram Curri's (another opponent) funeral was allowed to be performed as a completely private ceremony with religious symbolism (Ibid.: 49).

The approach of the communist regime was much more radical; to the political opponents was not allowed even a private burial ceremony, the bodies disappeared, their graves were hidden, and in some cases, they were even exhumed, and the bones disappeared (Ibid.: 147).

The democratic regime after 1992 had a dualistic approach with the bodies of the dead; on the one hand, the regime tried to maintain a cold approach to the bodies of the former communist leaders, their bodies were not violated or disappeared, thus showing the difference between the new regime and the previous one.

On the other hand, the new government, but mainly the social groups that had been persecuted by the previous regime, tried as much as possible to highlight the crimes of the state socialist regime, and this was done mainly through discovery and commemoration of the remains of the victims of the past regime (Ibid.: 261).

If all the above-mentioned points are satisfied, it can be seen that the main agent for the treatment, memorialization, disappearance, or leaving in oblivion the bodies of heroes and enemies has been the state; thus this book mainly deals with the state and the different regimes in the way they are brought with the dead and their bodies. However, Këlliçi has made the difference between the state and society, since the first is not always a reflection of the will of the second, moreover, the perception of society or certain segments within it for the dead or their treatment does not always reflect the state's policy toward the dead (Ibid. 32). Thus, the author makes a difference between these actions of the state, and society's perception of these acts, or, in rare cases, the resistance to them. An example is the fact that, in an almost general consensus, the behavior of the communist regime towards the bodies or graves of its political enemies is considered inhumane. Likewise, although the Albanian governments after the 2000s have agreed to erect monumental cemeteries for the Greek soldiers who fell during the Italian-Greek War, Albanian society has been much more refractory in this point, protesting against the erection of several cemeteries in an area for which some segments of Greek politics have irredentist claims. It is considered as a first step for irredentism by a good part of the Albanian society (Ibid.: 249).

This last element is related to another issue that has been analyzed by Këlliçi in this book, which has to do with the role played by the remains of foreign soldiers who fell and were buried in Albania. Exhumations and repatriations of the latter have to do with the cleansing of the territory by foreign troops, but they are also a way of reading the foreign policy of the Albanian state. Thus, although during the Second World War they had been allies, the cemeteries of the British and American soldiers who fell during that war were in a state of oblivion, since the relationship of the communist regime with these two states was hostile during the Cold War (Ibid. 220). While at a certain moment in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the Albanian state was making a break from Moscow and tried to give a message of openness with the West, Albania agreed that the remains of the Italian soldiers could be repatriated to their homeland. From this venture, the Albanian state had financial and internal political benefits, cleaning of the territory, but also foreign policy, as it showed some kind of openness with a western country. The communist regime continued the same attempt in the 1970s with the Greek state for Greek soldiers. However, this repatriation attempt was not realized; even after the fall of the regime, the graves of those soldiers have been a source of continuous conflict between the two countries, perhaps not so much between the two governments, but as a reaction of society to a constant fear that this could be a step the first of the materialization of a possible irredentism (Ibid.: 245).

This book by Klejd Këlliçi not only makes a political history of Albania through the bodies of the dead, burials, and memory of them, but also opens new perspectives on the study of the foreign policy of the Albanian state, both during the communist regime and during liberal democracy, relations with neighbors, fluid alliances and the constant tensions that accompany the remains of the dead. How these bodies of the dead, no matter how old they be, even soldier from the First World War, can reignite tensions in the foreign policy of the Albanian state or reopen the history of territorial claims and border resettlement.

This book also opens perspectives for the comparative study between Albania and other countries in the Balkans with similar histories, especially Kosova, on how the body of the dead has been used in those countries for the legitimization of political power.

Although this is a political history and deals with a state perspective regarding the bodies of the dead, heroes, and enemies, the author also writes about the differences between official state policy and society's approach. Therefore, this type of difference can be deepened in further studies to see through a perspective "from below" the approach of society as a whole or different segments within it about the dead in general, or some individuals specifically, heroes or enemies, the differences between the official state policy and the approach of some societal segments for these individuals, as well as the continuous tension that this can create.

Bibliography:

Këlliçi, Klejd. 2023. *Një varrim për çdo regjim (from Alb.: A Burial in Every Regime)*. Tirana: Berk.