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# Albania Hunkering Down

## All alone in the Cold War

Elisabetta Terragni



1 | Stillshots from the documentary *Lulezo Shqiperi* (Bloom Albania) 1959 (Tirana, Kinostudio Archive).



2 | Beginning of the documentary *Lulezo Shqiperi* (Bloom Albania), 1959 (Tirana, Kinostudio Archive).

When I recently landed in Tirana after almost two years of absence it was as if time had been compressed and suspended. It was a matter of returning to the beginning, once again. Archives and memories have the great advantage of inhabiting a liminal space in which time is of a different value and rhythm. This time it was about bunkers, a story too well known in Albania, quite a worn-out subject with too many questions never answered.

I went first to Kinostudio, the film archive in the former state film production headquarters, a mine for research and a place in which enquiries always instigate interesting discussions and produce discovery and surprise (I am grateful to Iris Elezi, director of Kinostudio, who has started a campaign of salvage and restoration of thousands of spools of films and testimony from the time of their creation. The Archive is replete with pre-and post- production documents which have proven extremely valuable preparing the Kadare House Studio Museum in Tirana).



This time, Dora, a young student at New York University, was following in the footsteps of Jani Nano, her grandfather, who worked as cameraman for many years during the Hoxha regime. Assisted by the staff, Dora dug out some of the footage her grandfather worked on and together they organized a private screening for one of them, *Lulezo Shqiperi (Bloom Albania)*.

I've experienced this feeling before, being in their projection room waiting for images to emerge from the past. Isn't this the ultimate pleasure of research, to start in the dark and gradually grasp what you can see with your own eyes? In this 1959 documentary, embedded in a well-known and well-done propaganda narrative, there is a sequence with sleeping kids in a maternity ward alternating with soldiers looking toward the sea and beyond the borders. The sequence is as obsessively repetitive as its message is simple: the kids can sleep tight because we are not allowing the enemy to get into our country, we are constantly watching, controlling and patrolling our borders at any cost, day and night.

It doesn't matter that nobody tried to attack the country, because the message was delivered *within* the borders of a country no one would have dared to escape from, not even in their wildest dreams (in Ismail Kadare's 1981 novel *Palace of Dreams* even intimate and private dreams were subject to surveillance, they were archived and analyzed so as to extend the dictator's paranoia to the entire nation).

The Bunkerization of Albania started at the end of the 1960s in friendly alliance with China, slowed down in 1982, after the death of Memhet Shehu, the prime minister and presumed successor of the dictator, and finally ended when Hoxha's long reign waned in the late 1980s as if this immense machine couldn't stop at once but continued roaring on by inertia. It was an incredible military campaign to shield the entire country and to offer shelter to everyone, an image insinuated carefully by the State into the fearful minds of its citizens always waiting for a war.

What we learned at university was that we are made up of defences, of shields and armor, that we are cities whose architecture essentially comes down to walls, ramparts, strongholds: bunker states... (Tokarczuk 2018, 12).

From the epic time of the bloom of hope in the future at the end of the fifties, gradually an inner voice was absorbed by all citizens day after day, the fear of being invaded by old and new enemies in a shifting geopolitical struggle that drove them into brutal isolation. Fear, control, and paranoia are part of the same equation and bunkers are their physical manifestation. A country of travelers with a millennial history of migration, trade, and cultural exchange suddenly found itself frozen, paralyzed during forty years of paranoia and terror that still linger on today. Olga Tokarczuk, the Polish Nobel laureate of 2020, is right when she says that fluidity, mobility, illusoriness are precisely the qualities that make us civilized. Barbarians don't travel, they simply go to their destination or conduct raids.

The feared invasion of Albania never happened. Enver Hoxha, the Albanian dictator, was convinced of the opposite. He claimed that every power from Yugoslavia to Greece, from NATO to his former allies, the Soviet Union and China, were determined to invade Albania. To counteract the threat he embarked on a bunker building campaign of unthinkable proportion. To be able to understand the political, military, and human consequences of such an undertaking we are obliged to adopt a dual perspective and consider the position of Albania of the 1960s and 1970s in its geopolitical context.

You need to squint with your eyes as if you were looking through the gun port of a bunker and see a chain of broken, or better failed, relationships culminating at the time of Mao's invitation of Nixon to China in 1972, a move that threw cold water on the Sino-Albanian alliance and finally ended it altogether in 1978. It is against this background that the bunkerization of Albania was started in order to save the most isolated country from being invaded by phantom enemies. How could they possibly have resisted such an invasion? We know a great deal about the political strategy and the military resistance against enemies, but we know almost nothing about how the bunkers were built, how many factories were put to work producing them, how they were manufactured, transported, and assembled on site, in a word, we do not know their architecture. How were they positioned along the coastline versus those perched on treacherous mountain slopes? What was the cost of this staggering operation? How many people were involved, and so on?



3 | Bunker in the mountains, Librazhd, 2021. Peering into the gun port.

4 | Archival boxes for below and above the ground military construction at the ISPUM, Tirana (Institute for Infrastructure and Military Defense, Arkivi IGJIU, I Institutit të Gjeografisë dhe Infrastrukturës Ushtarake).

5 | Still shot from the movie *Kolonel Bunker*, 1996 (Albanian, French and Polish coproduction).

I have always been interested in the mechanics of things in a larger sense and I have always found some insight, exploring their fragments and focusing on people's experience. Istituti i Studimit dhe Projektimit të Veprave të Mbrojtjes (ISPVM), the Institute for the Study and Design of Defense Works was created in the 1960s as a design studio, officially recognized as a military department within the Ministry of Defense (among other designation it was called Reparti Ushtarak n.1748).

The task was to develop artefacts and structures to secure borders and protect citizens. In 1975, due to the massive construction campaign launched after the break with Russia and China, the organization was transformed into the ISPVM, for short the Institute.

In reality the campaign had already started before when, in 1972, together with the Chinese, a team of engineers took control of the munition factory Poliçan in south-central Albania. For this and other operations the Chinese sent several projects and their own staff; the rest was produced within the borders. Made in Albania are all the fortifications and bunkers, the major military infrastructure work that was handled for a while by their accomplices.

The Albanian engineers and architects of the Institute traveled many times to China, but also to Stockholm to see the underground structures and learn on site. We spoke to some of them who worked at the Institute from the 1970s to 1990s and they agreed to talk with us about their experience, looking with us at the drawings from the archives they last saw on their drafting tables many years ago.

The Institute's mission and labor were sharply divided into separate branches, *nën tokë* or underground, dealing with tunnels and bunkers, and *mbi tokë*, above ground, taking care of barracks, lodgings and others, with very little knowledge of each other's activity; they were kept deliberately disconnected. All drawings were made by women, few of them managed to be promoted and able to enter the more prestigious underground department, learning computer calculation for the structures.

The operational structure was divided into 6 units: fire centers (small bunkers), tunnels, socio-cultural buildings, electromechanical engineering, (ventilation and climate control of the structures), cost estimates and finances (payments and salaries). In the 1980s a new sector was added (MCR Mbrojta Civile e Republikës) for the defence of city districts, creating a network of tunnels and chambers below ground in the courtyards of large residential complexes.

During the design and construction of bunkers the technical staff experimented a great deal on materials, testing for the first time high performance cement (400kg/mq) that was later also used in civil construction. The *stalobeton* was innovative too, one of the attempts, not very successful, to use reinforced concrete for larger bunkers and more popular for its name rather than for its performance (*stalo* means steel to remind one of the provenances and the admiration of the man of steel).

There is no doubt that those in charge of the design and structural calculation knew the material in-depth, and that at a certain point the Chinese manuals became hollow and abstract to them, making room for new experiments and innovation. In the end the Albanians were left to themselves under extreme circumstances and they took their task seriously. Talented engineers, many recent graduates, were involved in the Institute as a form of military training that brought fresh knowledge and expertise into a team of almost 130 people.

The bunkers needed to be tested after all, and this was done to study the impact of fire. Animals were enclosed to test the consequences for sight and hearing (see the interview with Alfred Moisiu, by Robert Hackman, April 2009 in Hackman 2019, p. 69; he was a Partisan, a soldier and the President of the Albanian Republic in the 1990s. As a General he was

actively participating in the bunker's mission and this interview confirmed many aspects of the archival research). At least it was not done with humans as the story of the 1996 movie *Kolonel Bunker* portrayed instead.

His story is a real one. Josif Zegali was a civil engineer, trained in the military and learning a great deal in the former Soviet Union. In the film he is Kolonel Muro Neto and his task is to "bunkerize" Albania. He did it dutifully.

The colonel, in a reversal of fate typical during the regime, is forced to be the guinea pig during the firing test of a bunker and this is only the beginning of his military downfall and personal humiliation. He survives, but as often happened in Albania, reality was more brutal than imagination: in fact the real Kolonel was falsely accused of sabotage and imprisoned for many years for apparent wrongdoing. Allegedly, the spacing of steel bars in the bunker's concrete had been altered. Destiny sometimes does lie in the details and so does paranoia.

Nonetheless the effort of bunkerization was enormous and an entire country was put to work to accomplish it. After the drawings had been completed and the structural calculations and stress tests executed, the construction was carried out by the NSHN, Ndermarrje Shteterore e Ndertimit, the State Construction Companies, the NNT Josip Pashko in Tirana among them.

From the Kombinat the concrete pieces were transported on site by the various military departments and installed in greatly varying topography according to a planimetric model. During these stages, the Institute held control but without a voice in the deployment strategy which was strictly a military matter not shared with anyone else.



6 | Cover of the book by Roger Bruge, *Faites Sauter la Ligne Maginot!*, 1973.

It was no secret that the Maginot line in France as well as the Sigfried line in Germany played a role in the Albanian imagination as the country was made to think it continued a task that had been going on for centuries: keep enemies out. Albania would improve its model on the coast line and in the rocky mountains so as to completely seal the Country against the outside.

In 1996, when *Kolonel Bunker* film was shot, the Albanian landscape was still punctuated by thousands of bunkers, “they dominated the landscape, brutally unapologetic for the harsh doctrine from which they were born” ( Hackman 2019, 5). Today the archives are slowly getting

declassified and the landscape is deeply transformed in a kind of reversal of the game.

While the bunkers are vanishing their voice can be heard from the thousands of blueprints developed over almost twenty years. In the Archive of the Ministry of Defense we managed to catch a glimpse of some of the drawings, carefully drafted and annotated (Arba Baxhaku an architect and researcher based in Tirana, managed to track down the drawings in the Archive of the Ministry of the Defense; her work on memory and loss in architecture is a needed exploration in the field).

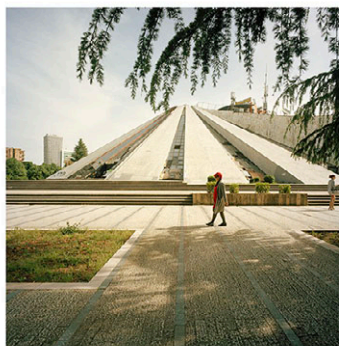
Along the coastline and on flat ground, bunkers were smaller, easy to transport and assemble. They were mounted in two or three pieces with reinforced frames on the cupola in order to avoid a dangerous split of slabs in case of partial collapse. In the drawings, even if some of the data are redacted, one can read the thickness of the concrete, the connection between the gun chamber and the cupola, on separate sheets.

The chamber occupied by one soldier with his gun, is pushed into the ground and serves as a footing to assemble the segments of the cupola on

site. In the mountains the construction system was different, popularly called the *portokall*, the orange. Its wedges were easily transported both by truck and animals and they varied a great deal in scale. They could accommodate more soldiers, heavy armor and cannons. The earth work was massive and planned in advance, detailing water and air control systems accurately.



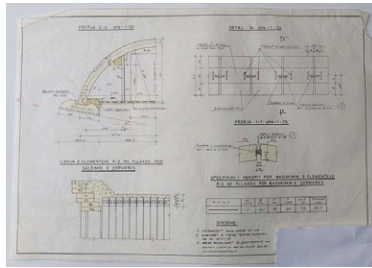
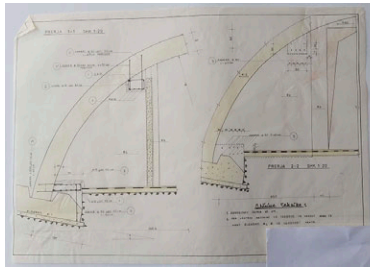
7 | Bunker in the mountains, Librazhd, 2021 . Portokall construction method.



8 | The Pyramid of Tirana, photo by Giovanni Chiamonte.

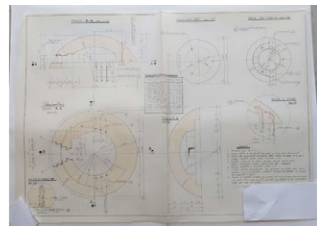
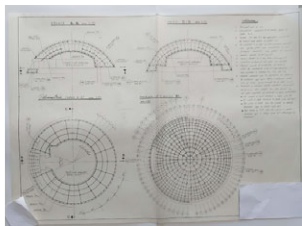
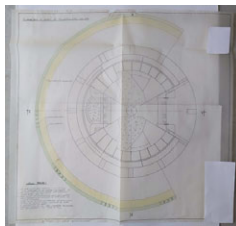
When you open your eyes wide and examine the details and explore the archives, answers will come from different angles, enabling one to go back to the beginning as it stands written on the wall of the ruined Pyramid in Tirana, captured in a striking photograph by Giovanni Chiamonte. At the beginning, Albania was a place to leave in order to live and not a place to be imprisoned. Today, these defense artefacts are still numerous and they slowly submit to the rule of nature and recede in accordance with it.

Bunkers have no roots, they are simply pushed into the ground, but to remove them you need to apply a force opposite to the one applied at the time, with the same gesture backwards. It is not an act of rage or destruction but of determination. What will remain is a void in the ground. In the long run, this gives me great hope for the country.



9 | Sections of a shelter with its footing, 1:20.

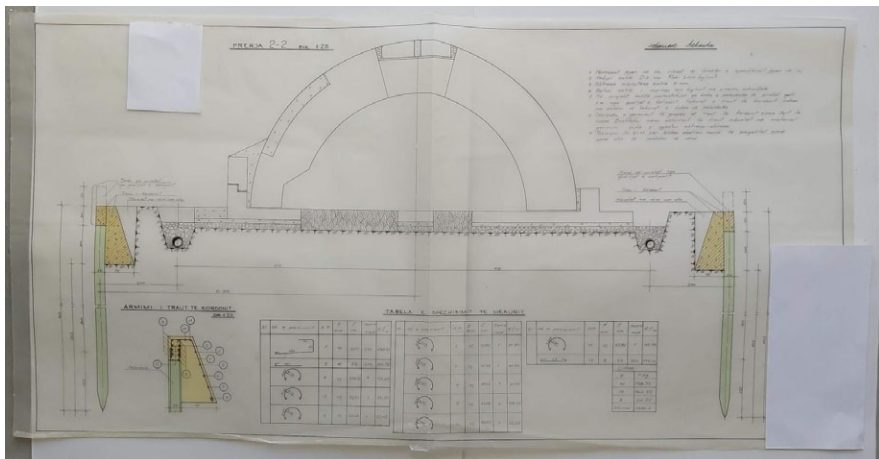
10 | Connective elements with plates for welding, 1:50-1:25. Tirana, ISPUM (Institute for Infrastructure and Military Defense, Arkivi IGJIU, I Institutit të Gjeografisë dhe Infrastrukturës Ushtarake).



12 | Plan with specification of the outer concrete wall reinforcement, 1:25.

13 | Plans and sections of the cupola in reinforced concrete, 1:10. Tirana, ISPUM (Institute for Infrastructure and Military Defense, Arkivi IGJIU, I Institutit të Gjeografisë dhe Infrastrukturës Ushtarake).

14 | Plans and sections of the precast cupola with anchorage, 1:10.



15 | Section through a bottomless bunker with peripheral anchorage, 1:25. Name of the ISPUM Institute reduced (Institute for Infrastructure and Military Defense, Arkivi IGJIU, I Institutit të Gjeografisë dhe Infrastrukturës Ushtarake).



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Tokarczuk, 2018

O. Tokarczuk, *Flights*, New York 2018.

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## Filmografia

*Lulezo Shqiperi*, documentario, Albania 1959.

*Kolonel Bunker*, Kujtim Çashku, Albania 1996.

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## English abstract

A country of travellers with a millennial history of migration, trade and cultural exchange suddenly found itself frozen, paralyzed during forty years of paranoia and terror that still define its modern history. Olga Tokarczuk, the Polish Nobel laureate of 2020, is right when she says that fluidity, mobility, illusoriness are precisely the qualities that make us civilized. Barbarians don't travel, they simply go to their destination or conduct raids. The feared invasion of Albania never happened. Enver Hoxha, the dictator, was convinced of the opposite, that every power from Yugoslavia to Greece, from NATO to his former allies, the Soviet Union and China, were determined to invade Albania. To counteract the threat he embarked on a bunker building campaign of unthinkable proportion.

To be able to understand the political, military, and human consequences of such an undertaking we are obliged to adopt a dual perspective and consider the position of Albania of the 1960s and 1970s and its geopolitical context. You need to squint with your eyes as if you were looking through the gunport of a bunker and see a chain of broken, or better failed, relationships culminating at the time of Mao's invitation of Nixon to China in 1972, a move that threw a chill on the Sino-Albanian alliance and finally ended the relationship in 1978. It is against this background that the bunkerization of Albania started to save the most isolated country from being invaded.

How could they possibly have resisted such an invasion? We know a great deal about the political strategy and the military resistance against enemies, but we know almost nothing about how the bunkers were built; how many factories were put to work producing them; how they were manufactured, transported, and assembled on site; in a word, we don't know their architecture. How different were those positioned along the coastline versus those perched on treacherous mountain slopes? What was the cost of this staggering operation? How many people were involved, and so on? I will answer these questions from different angles, so as to be able to go back to the beginning as it stands written on the wall of the ruined

pyramid in Tirana captured in a striking photograph by Giovanni Chiaramonte. The beginning was when Albania was a place to leave in order to live and not a place to be imprisoned. Today these artefacts are still numerous and they slowly submit to the rule of nature, and recede in accordance with it. Bunkers have no roots, they are simply pushed into the land, there will be no evidence of their construction in future because they lack foundations and, in a long run, this gives me great hope for the Country.

*keywords | Albania; Bunkerization; Kolonel Bunker; Lulezo Shqiperi.*