Disaster Discourse: Representations of Catastrophe (I)

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War as Disaster in the Novels of Ismail Kadare

Abstract: The term “disaster” has, over recent years become associated with war, especially the Second World War and the massive global devastation it caused. This devastation was not only human and material, but also cultural. War is a common theme in Albanian writer Ismail Kadare’s oeuvre. As a young boy, Kadare lived through the Second World War in his home town of Gjirokaster, which was alternately occupied by Italy, Greece and Germany. He writes about life in wartime Gjirokaster in the semi-autobiographical novel Chronicle in Stone (originally published in 1971) and the much more politically charged The Fall of the Stone City (originally published in 2008). The war ended with Enver Hoxha’s Albania pledging loyalty to Stalin’s USSR. This, for Kadare, at least, was akin to vassalage to the Ottomans which began with the defeat of the united Balkan army in the first Battle of Kosovo in 1389. This battle is represented in Three Elegies for Kosovo (originally published in 1998). Each of the three novels deals with two moments of disaster for the nation – the beginning of Hoxha’s Soviet-supported Stalinist dictatorship at the end of World War II and Ottoman occupation after the first Battle of Kosovo. Both of these moments brought about drastic changes in Albanian life and culture which haunt the nation to this day.

Keywords: disaster; war; Ismail Kadare; Albania; cultural identity.

Our wrangling is so deafening that there is no need to come closer.
(Kadare 2011, 7)

The Balkans have a long history of war. Beginning from the Battles of Kosovo in 1389 and 1448, which resulted in the origination and consolidation of the Ottoman Empire in Europe, through the Serbian and Greek revolts against the Ottomans, the Russo-Ottoman War and the Greco-Ottoman War in the 19th century, the Balkan Wars in the beginning of the 20th century and the bloody, violent nationalist conflicts at the end of the 20th century, the Balkans have been

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riddled with war. (Hall 367) This is especially so for Albania and Serbia, whose dispute over Kosovo continues to this day and indeed is a significant factor in the latter’s continued support for Russia in the war against Ukraine. (Vasovic n. pg.) It is, therefore, not a surprise that war is a recurring theme in Albania’s most eminent novelist Ismail Kadare’s fiction. He draws from his own personal experience of growing up in Gjirokaster, his hometown in central Albania, during the Second World War as well as from his nation’s tumultuous history. (Patterson 61) Furthermore, since Kadare’s writing began and developed during the dictatorship of Albanian Stalinist leader, Enver Hoxha, the young writer imbibed the siege mentality that Hoxha sought to permeate among his subjects. (Morgan 83) This anxiety that war was perpetually imminent seeps into Kadare’s writing.

For Kadare, many of Albania’s historical wars have brought nothing but disaster. In The General of the Dead Army (originally published in 1963), the reaction of the Albanians to the Italian invasion is shown to be visceral. They “were not even concerned to know what country it was assailing them, or what enemy they were going to fight, since that was of little importance to them.” (Kadare 2008, 157) Indeed, in his novels such as The Three-arched Bridge (originally published in 1978) and Three Elegies for Kosovo (originally published in 1998), Kadare outlines how foreign aggression and the resulting wars have been disastrous for Albania because they ended in heavy defeats and ultimate submission to the foreign powers. Furthermore, in novels such as Chronicle in Stone (originally published in 1971) and The Fall of the Stone City (originally published in 2008), he represents the civilian experience of war as well as the ensuing political consequences for those who found themselves to be on the wrong side. We will elaborate upon these representations over the course of this essay.

War as disaster

For the moment, we have to address the question of whether war can be classed as a disaster. CE Fritz defines disaster as “an event concentrated in time and space, in which a society or one of its subdivisions undergoes physical harm and social disruption, such that all or some essential functions of the society or subdivision are impaired.” (83) Therefore, there are “three temporal periods” of a disaster – “pre-impact, trans-impact, and post-impact” and it is located in a physical/geographical space. However, in the case of events which have
“multiple (e.g., earthquake aftershocks) or secondary (e.g., hazardous materials releases) impacts”, creating such an impact timeline becomes complex. (Lindell 797-8) In the case of war, the framework is much the same. On this point, Macamo argues that “it is not an extreme event itself that causes disaster, but rather the failure of society to respond to it adequately.” (200) Indeed, disasters were “one collective stress situation” which occurred “when members of a social system fail to receive expected conditions of life from the system.” (Perry 10) Essentially, we can say, disaster is when societies are unable to deal with an external force that exposes their vulnerabilities, which represent “weaknesses in social structures or social systems.” (Quarantelli 345)

“The fact that war and disaster have something in common is clear, and this evidence is part of our common sense,” writes Gilbert. This is because, Gilbert adds, war patterns, in the field of Disaster Studies, fitted into observations made by social scientists who saw them “as being the result of harmful attacks brought against human groups.” Further, since “the concept of ‘agent’” could easily apply to weapons, “arms”, as well as to “the enemy” as a whole, this observation conformed to the fact that “disaster has since the beginning been explained on external grounds.” (Gilbert 232) However, the realisation that socio-political and economic factors cannot be ignored in conceptualising disaster, in the 1970s, a paradigm shift occurred as U.S. researchers “were forced…to recognise that disaster had to be studied within the human group involved in it” and not just in terms of an external agent. (Gilbert 234) This is because “a socially/politically induced disaster impact, such as riots, civil wars, wars, and the like…is normally the result of a societal/institutional weakness that fails to accommodate competing identity groups.” (Albala-Bertrand 150) Finally, the global press in recent years has also placed wars at par with natural disasters in terms of coverage. “Widespread coverage of major floods in the Central European countries in 2002 and 2005 and of regional wars and armed conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and in former Soviet Union republics are but a few illustrations of the point.” (Porfiriev 375) To this, one may add the much more recent coverage of wildfires in the US and the Mediterranean and the Russia-Ukraine war.

Based on the above, we can infer that wars can also be classed as disasters. They are difficult to predict, they can have “pre-impact, trans-impact, and post-impact” timelines as described above and they undoubtedly cause tremendous damage to lives, societies, cultures and economies. The Second
World War is a case in point both as the typical example of war as disaster, but also as the war in focus in this essay. It was one of the biggest disasters in human history with nearly half a billion deaths and financial losses approximately valued at one trillion dollars in total. (Britannica) It has a “pre-impact, trans-impact, and post-impact” timeline. The “pre-impact” would be Hitler’s rise to power and the beginning of his holocaust against the Jews – a disaster in itself. The “trans-impact” would be the years of the war as it ravaged Europe and the Asia-Pacific which began with Hitler’s invasion of Poland and ended with the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Finally, the “post-impact” is the incredible devastation mentioned above suffered by the global population. However, the “post-impact” stage does not end there as it led to the Korean War, the Cold War, the Soviet Empire and is partly responsible for Vladimir Putin’s invasion of Ukraine. (Roth) The Second World War was an “emotionally charged” event, as defined by Brown et al which involved the majority of the global population and impacted everyone else. It was “epoch-defining” in that it fundamentally changed the world’s perception of western civilisation’s apparent infallibility. (Brown et al 405) It is, therefore, a disaster in all senses of the term.

Effects of the Second World War on Albania

During the war, Albania, a non-participant, was occupied by both the European Fascist powers, first by Italy and then by Germany. Bernd Fischer’s book *Albania at War, 1939-45* (1999) provides detailed information regarding Albania’s experiences in the war. The first of which was the Italian occupation, an aspect of Mussolini’s imperial ambitions which also included the earlier annexation of Ethiopia. In the absence of any real military ability, the only real resistance to the invasion was provided by highland tribesmen who travelled incredible distances with their rifles to fight the enemy and were cut down by much better trained machine-gun-toting Italian soldiers. King Zog, the only native king unified Albania ever had, fled into obscurity at the onset of the Italian invasion. (Fischer 10, 17, 25, 93) Later, as the Italians capitulated under allied assault and withdrew, Nazi Germany moved in. They brought with them the promises of a Greater Albania that included Kosovo and parts of Macedonia; essentially those territories that nationalist Albanians claimed to be ethnically theirs. (Fischer 167) Both of these occupations exposed Albania to Western modernity. This influenced the youth in a way that caused tremendous cultural anxiety within Albanian society. Kadare represents this anxiety in his novel the
This double occupation was followed by a civil war between the Communists led by Enver Hoxha and the Balli Kombetar or the Nationalist Front. The victory of the Communists and the installation of Hoxha as the Prime Minister was the beginning of Albania’s nearly five decades of Stalinist absolutism, widespread oppression and national isolationism. It was also the beginning of Albania’s doomed alliances with global political powers. Immediately after the war, Hoxha sought political and economic support from Yugoslavia but his belief in them wavered and soon he shifted Albania’s allegiances to Soviet Russia. But after Stalin’s death, Khrushchev’s revisionism and distancing from Stalinist ideology was disapproved of by Hoxha and caused him to look for solace in Maoist China. However, that alliance was also abandoned as soon as China looked to open itself up to the world. Thus, from the late 1970s onwards, Hoxha placed Albania on a very lonely path towards becoming the last bastion of Soviet Stalinism in Europe until his own death in 1986 and the ultimate fall of Communism soon after. (Morgan 1, Backer 356)

These various alliances left their marks on Albanian society, especially the alliance with the Soviets. The Soviets implemented a system of Russification on Albania as they had with all the nations within the Eastern Bloc. The partnership was certainly not one of equals. The Soviets saw this as an opportunity to expand their presence westwards with the port city of Durres on the Adriatic Sea serving as a strategic outpost for any advance into the Mediterranean or as a first line of defence against any threats originating therefrom. (Roucek 55, MccGwire 140)

**Kadare’s Representation of Wartime**

Having been directly affected by the war, Kadare has lived through history. The war created a “highly-defined autobiographical period” (Brown et al 399) for him as its end brought a dramatic shift in the socio-political framework, economic conditions, literary freedom and lifestyle, notwithstanding the hardships suffered by the Albanians during wartime. In all of the three novels discussed in this essay, Kadare represents war from the point of view of the innocent bystander and, only in *Three Elegies for Kosovo*, as an observer-chronicler figure in the form of the Albanian rhapsodist, who despite being present on the battlefield does not actively participate in the fighting. Thereby representing disaster in the form of war as something that happens to people. They are unable to fully comprehend what is happening to them and, much more tragically, why...
any of it is happening.

Ann Smock in her “Translator’s Remarks” to Blanchot’s seminal text, The Writing of the Disaster (1995) writes:

“the writing of the disaster” means not simply the process whereby something called the disaster is written—communicated, attested to, or prophesied. It also means the writing done by the disaster—by the disaster that ruins books and wrecks language. (9)

That is to say, writing about disaster, representing it in one’s fiction, is not merely depicting a dramatised version of the events and aftermath of the disaster but allowing the disaster to speak for itself where those who have experienced said disaster are unable to express their trauma. In this regard, Eva Horn provides some consolation: “Through fiction, we may not be able to master the uncanniness of looming catastrophe, but at least we are able to keep it in sight.” (15) Thus, writing, especially fiction, attempts to comprehend disaster but is never fully able to. Blanchot himself writes that “there cannot be any experience of the disaster” and that “the real is real inasmuch as it excludes possibility—because, in other words, it is impossible. The same can be said…of the writing of the disaster.” Indeed, this non-experience “obliges us to disengage ourselves from time as irreversible.” (59, 71, 84) Thus, the writing of such an experience of non-experience which causes the experience itself to be incomprehensible cannot but depict the absurd and uncanny as part of normal life experiences.

Growing up in Gjirokaster, much of Kadare’s childhood was spent under occupation so much so that his semi-autobiographical self in the novel Chronicle in Stone is accused of not understanding what it means for a nation to be independent. (Kadare 2007, 25) The other Gjirokaster novel, The Fall of the Stone City, delves into the confused, terrible and often absurd experiences of people under occupation and in its aftermath. Indeed, Kadare addresses the clash of cultures between Western modernity brought over by the occupiers and the ancient traditions of Albanian society. Chronicle in Stone discusses the blows suffered by a key aspect of the Albanian code of honour while under Italian occupation – the social position of women. With the rise of communism alongside the influx of modern ideas and ideologies from Italy, young women in Albania began demanding greater freedoms. As education, knowledge and national identity gained primacy, the old patriarchal norms of family honour,
revenge killing and the inferior status of women began to slowly disintegrate. (Kadare 2007, 45; 22; 231; 243) Kadare shows how there is not much change in the day-to-day lives of people during wartime until something happens which causes the status quo to be changed. “One knows that war has ‘arrived’ because everyday routine is broken.” (Macamo 2006, 207) There are multiple such instances in the two Gjirokaster novels mentioned above – the construction of an airfield in the city, the beginning of the bombing by Allied forces, the arrival of refugees – which force the people of the city to accept that war had arrived. Yet, in Three Elegies for Kosovo, Kadare seems to suggest that a state of war was itself the status quo in the Balkans. (Kadare 2011, 3-5)

In the novels discussed below, Kadare explores the tremors in Albania’s socio-cultural frameworks and the inability of the Gjirokaster natives to fully comprehend their situation. Not only were they under occupation while being bombed by planes from unknown lands but also young men were becoming keener on philosophy and education than manual labour and young women were hell bent on becoming independent. (Kadare 2007, 243) In these novels, Gjirokaster becomes a microcosm of Albania. Even as the youth hankered after modernity, the older generations saw modernity as “[t]he end of the world”. (Kadare 2007, 14) There is a desire to doggedly stick to the old ways despite knowing that it is a losing battle. Old hatreds are maintained as are patriarchal structures. The changes that begin occurring under Italian and German occupation and after the Communist takeover are confusing to the natives in whom the old ways are ingrained, they are part of their identity. They begin to feel that their Albanianess is being slowly stripped from them. Each new structure, event or behaviour that is begat from Western modernity is met with the horror of a disaster.

Chronicle in Stone is one of the very rare works of Kadare’s oeuvre which has significant autobiographical facets. (Morgan 121) It chronicles, albeit in a greatly fictionalised and dramatised form, the experiences of the city of Gjirokaster, with its predominantly stone architecture, and its natives. The first few disasters in the novel are social and cultural ones and each is met with an increasing amount of horror. Isa, one of the older boys in the narrator’s neighbourhood starts wearing glasses. The disaster is not that the boy started wearing glasses per se but that he had decided to extend his studies rather than focus on manual labour which was much extolled in the society he was living in. These glasses are not only at odds with the ancient city but are also described as
“evil”. Its incompatibility with the city and its culture is placed at par with the nunnery built by the Italians which is described as “a house of cardboard” when in fact it was a “breeze-block construction.” The older women of the neighbourhood clearly feel that both of these modern inventions are abominations for which “the Almighty” will “make [them] pay.” (Kadare 2007, 13-14) Qani Kekezi, a local schoolteacher, teaches biology by dissecting cats for which he is sometimes accused of stealing them from people’s houses and traumatizing his students. (Kadare 2007, 61) While this is not exactly legal nor ethical, the pedagogical history of anatomy in the West has not always upheld the highest standards of ethics. (Comer 822-3) Education, clearly seen as a corrupting influence, is accused of doing “[m]ore harm than good” so much so that it had turned a man into “I ask you: a cat thief!” (Kadare 2007, 62)

With fighting getting closer to the city, blackout orders are given and the number of weddings decreases to just one a week from nearly one every day. Cows are driven from the field in front of the city to make way for an airfield. The advancing Italian army establishes a brothel in the city for use by its soldiers. The Greeks occupy the city briefly, having driven out the Italians, and this immediately brings back memories of arbitrary mass executions during the first Balkan war of 1912-13. This reoccupation by the Greeks is seen as nothing short of a calamity. The Allied bombings force the city’s natives to take refuge in the cellars of the 12th century castle of Gjirokaster; thus, effectively turning back time. A rainbow connects the brothel with the house of one of the most respectable women in the city suggesting that during war, such distinctions are impossible. These are all events that disturb the status quo of Gjirokaster. (Kadare 2007, 61; 81-2; 137; 163; 183; 202) The “essential functions”, that Fritz had mentioned, of the society were definitely impaired. They had been so since the Italians had occupied the city. Considering that modernity, brought over by the Italians, was steering the city’s youth away from its ancient customs and traditions and this was being considered the “end of the world”, the influx of modernity itself can be classified as a disaster for Gjirokaster.

As the war rages on, Kadare depicts the Italians, the Ballists (the term used in this translation for the Balli Kombetar) and the communist partisans all vying for the city. Isa, the same boy who had begun wearing glasses assassinates the Italian commander of the city. He is hanged for this offence along with two young girls. In an act of revenge, his best friend Javer assassinates his own uncle, the commander of the Ballists in the city, at the dinner table for his hand in Isa’s
The Communist victory and partisan occupation of the city led to brutal reprisals. Men, young and old, were picked up from their homes, accused of collaboration or similar crimes, given a rapid trial and executed or imprisoned. (Kadare 2007, 244-7; 263) Almost all of the events or incidents mentioned here are related by the neighbourhood women who meet at the narrator’s house to share gossip. It is one of them, Kako Pino, a dresser of brides, who punctuates each story with her catchphrase of “the end of the world.” It is delivered in a way that is at times poignant and at times comedic. She represents the average God-fearing Albanian whose life is based entirely on the old ways. She is executed by the partisans at the end of the novel on the suspicion of being a bomb-maker because they could not recognise her bridal make-up tools. (Kadare 2007, 299) Her death is the death of the old ways which have become unrecognisable to the younger generation, so much so that they wish to entirely destroy it. The old Albanian world was coming to an end. The war was changing Albanian society forever.

Interestingly, although Chronicle in Stone ends with the city falling to the Germans, it is the title of the other Gjirokaster novel, The Fall of the Stone City, that seems to refer to the defeat as it picks up from where the former novel left off. The ‘fall’ in the title of this novel refers to a fall from grace rather than a military defeat as the Germans are soon defeated and driven out of Albania and the Communist era begins with its own multitude of brutalities and constitutes the socio-political background for most of the novel. Kadare implies that this very transition is a disaster for Albania. The themes of cultural anxiety, fear of modernity and obsession with a mytho-historical past continue. Both the ambush on the German advanced party that led to the punitive German bombardment and the white flag that ended it are represented as extremely un-Albanian behaviour and as disastrous for the city. The bombardment itself is seen as shameful by the men of the city as they seem to consider it as the sort of punishment that is reserved for women. It is neither manly nor honourable to be bombarbed from a distance by a much more powerful aggressor. (Kadare 2013, 14-5)

Absurd incidents continuously occur and besmirch the honour of the Albanians. The main protagonist of the novel, Big Dr. Guarameto, has dinner with the commander of the occupying German forces who claimed to be his old friend from medical school, Colonel Fritz. Guarameto had invited Fritz to dinner when they had last parted and this man claimed that he had come to honour that
invitation. Although this dinner secures the release of the hostages the Germans had taken as a reprisal against the original ambush on the advanced party, this dinner is later seen as an abomination and obvious co-operation with the enemy for which the doctor is tortured by the Albanian and Soviet secret police and ultimately shot. (Kadare 2013, 143; 163) This is even more so when it turns out, later in the novel, that the German colonel was an imposter and the original Colonel Fritz turns out to have already died before the German invasion of Albania. He seemed to possess detailed knowledge of the doctor’s friendship with the original Colonel Fritz and even the Soviet secret police cannot figure out his motives for falsifying his identity. The only explanation provided by the narrator is that in Albanian folklore, even dead men cannot refuse invitations once both sides have given their bessa or word of honour. (Kadare 2013, 138, 167) A local male municipal employee is found il fragrante with a German soldier. In the masculinist Albanian society, there is no space for homosexuality and even less for committing such acts with the foreign occupiers. It was seen as such a shame upon the city that the men believed the city was correctly bombed: “It was the very least it deserved.” (Kadare 2013, 56-7) War refugees from Çamëria arrived after being driven out by the Greeks. These were people of Albanian-origin and yet they were not allowed to enter Gjirokaster on strict orders from the capital. (Kadare 2013, 78) The opening of the cave of Sanisha which was last used by Ali Pasha Tepelene, the Ottoman rule of the Albanian provinces, to torture his sister’s rapists, inextricably connects the new communist rulers of Albania with the Ottomans. (Kadare 2013, 128) Thus, the communist victory itself becomes a disaster not just because of the brutality of the reprisals but also because of the cultural changes it would ring in such as banning honour killings, arranged marriages and other cultural practices related the ancient code of honour known as the Kanun of Leke Dukagjini. Indeed, the Hoxha administration also declared Albania the world’s first atheist nation. (Tonnes 7, Morgan 10) Kadare places it on the same level as the defeat to the Ottomans in 1389 which permanently changed the Albanian cultural landscape.

The Old War that Haunts the New

For Kadare, the first major disaster that befell the Albanian state was the defeat of the united Balkan army led by Prince Lazar of Serbia by the Ottomans on the fields of Kosovo in 1389. (Kokobobo 83) This led to five centuries of Ottoman rule in the Balkans when mass Islamisation took place, Turkish phrases
and names became more common and education was significantly changed: all of which had “a prolonged existence as the legacy of perception” with regards to the way the Balkans were seen as oriental. (Todorova 12-3) For the Eurocentric Kadare, it was the Eastern and non-Christian identity of the Ottomans that was the main issue. He saw the Ottoman conquest as leading to a sort of de-Europeanisation of Albania, a subsumption by the Orient. (Kokobobo 87) It is Albania’s European identity that Kadare wishes to highlight whenever possible and at the same time show the culture’s uniqueness. The Soviets were also considered to be of Eastern origin and posed a similar threat to Albanian culture. During the alliance with the Soviets, education was Sovietised, Russian became compulsory in schools and soon a strict Atheism was also embraced leaving Albania’s long-lost Christian identity completely by the wayside. (Roucek 58) Both the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 and the Second World War led to Albania’s cultural subjugation to a non-European nation. They caused Albania to move away from its traditions, codes of honour and, significantly for Kadare, Christianity. (Sulstarova 395)

“After hopes for peace, suddenly war would be declared, which was practically routine in the large peninsula.” (Kadare 2011, 3) With the very first paragraph of the novel Kadare establishes the conflict-oriented and unstable nature of the Balkan Peninsula. Originally published in 1998 during the post-Soviet conflicts in the Balkans, it becomes apparent that Kadare sees no difference between his contemporary socio-political scenario and that of 600 years ago. Kadare feels that Western Europe could have done more to prevent the multiple calamities that befell the Balkans ever since the Ottoman invasion. The Christian Balkan armies had received no support from the Pope and other Christian powers of Western Europe. During the Second World War, the Allies never attempted to take possession of the Balkans and allowed the Soviet Union to subsume the new nations. Arguably, the same can be said of the conflicts in the 1990s when the NATO bombing of Belgrade finally ended the Serbo-Albanian conflict over Kosovo. (Ossewaarde 725) Kadare seems to suggest that this intervention was not enough and the West could have done much more to help unify the Balkans. He represents this in the novel by showing Western European people as having little to no knowledge of the Balkan nations and their culture and showing intense disinclination towards their plight. (Kadare 2011, 71-2)

The defeat of the Ottomans led to the Islamisation of the Balkans and the
Soviet victory in the Second World War led to Sovietisation both of which impacted heavily on Albanian national identity and culture. Kadare feared something similar at the end of the conflict in the 1990s. He, as any nationalist would, detests foreign imposition, especially cultural imposition. According to legend, the blood and entrails of Sultan Murad I, the commander of the invading Ottoman forces, were buried on the fields of Kosovo. This was a deliberate act committed to provoke the sentiments of the Balkans because of the cultural significance of blood in the culture of the peninsula. By burying the blood of the Sultan in Balkan soil the Ottomans injected themselves into the body of the Balkans. This Kadare sees as an infection, a corruption of the Balkan identity and especially that of Albania because of that nation’s claims on Kosovo. (Kokobobo 86, Kadare 32) Although a deliberate human act, this is a disaster in Kadare’s mind as, towards the end of the novel, Kadare makes use of the Sultan’s ghost to lay the blame on this moment of burial as the reason for the constant conflict in the Balkans. It shapes the history and identity of the Balkans forever and dents the region’s claims to being European which persisted even in the 90s. (Kadare 2011, 87)

Conclusion

By representing war from the point of view of the innocent bystander, the non-participating victims, Kadare renders it as nothing but the violent satisfaction of powerful egos. Indeed, he also shows the pity of war a la Wilfred Owen when he describes the haggard and listless appearances of the men who were forced to flee from the battlefield of Kosovo. (Kadare 2011, 41) These images appear in the Gjirokaster novels as Kadare describes Greek refugees who suddenly appear in the city and go from door to door begging for some bread and are roundly refused. (Kadare 2007, 177) The Eurocentric nationalist in Kadare is very much in favour of the modernisation that Italy and Germany as western powers brought or could have brought to Albania had they continued to rule. (Morgan 76) Yet, in order to adequately represent the general feeling of anxiety in Albania, Kadare exaggerates the native reaction to every new facet of modernity. He is being ironic when he describes the horror of wearing glasses or the multiple so-called scandals that rock the city. At the same time, however, he detests both Ottoman and Soviet modernity, not least because these powers intended to replace Albanian culture with their own, but perhaps more so because of their Eastern origins.
The young protagonist of Chronicle in Stone is left almost heartbroken not when his friend Isa is hanged or when the city was being bombarded, but when the Italian bomber which was stationed in Gjirokaster ultimately bombed that very city when the Italians had briefly lost it to the Greeks. This betrayal is set at par with what Kadare sees as the betrayal of the Western European nations who refused to protect Albania and the rest of the Balkans from Eastern occupation. The disaster in the novels is not the loss of the battles or lives but the cultural defeat that comes after. For Kadare and nationalists like him, any event that takes Albania away from its purported Christian European identity is a disaster. Both the First Battle of Kosovo in 1389 and the Serbo-Albanian conflict over Kosovar independence in the 1990s have shaped Albanian identity. The first resulted in today’s majority Muslim population, while the second led to Albania becoming a member of NATO, while Serbia sided with Russia. While the loss of life and property during wars is consistently dealt with in Kadare’s work, attacks on culture are most highlighted and lamented. The disaster-appropriate responses by Kadare’s characters are reserved for these attacks even as they accept death and destruction as part and parcel of life. Indeed, as a people who uphold the highest standards of honour, death, especially in battle or in defending one’s convictions, is itself prized. Thus, while wars themselves are represented as disasters, the oppressive conditions under which Kadare is writing and the desire to reconstruct a new Albanian national identity, for Kadare, nothing is more disastrous than the loss of culture.

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