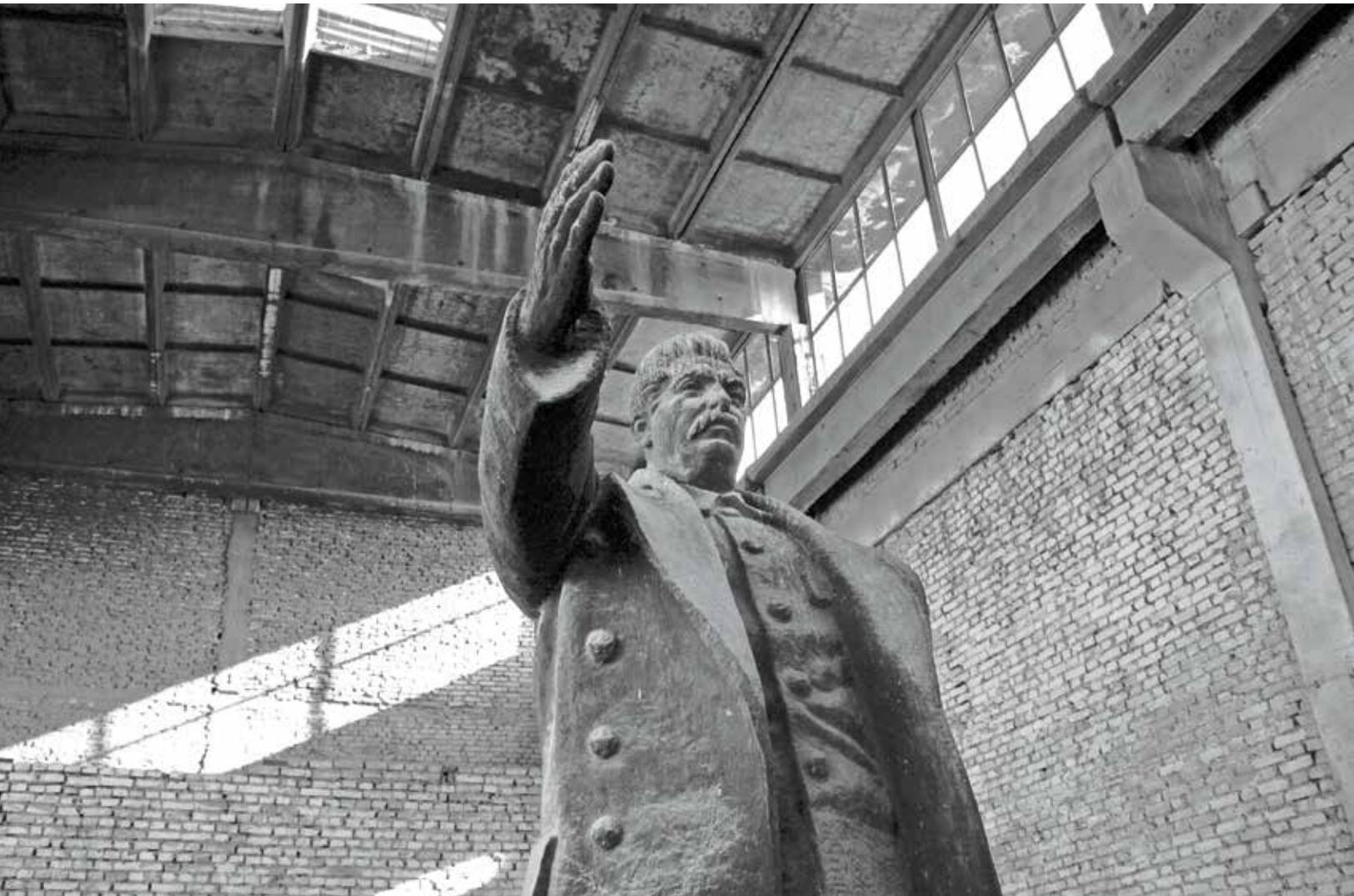


From left: Stalin in a warehouse, 2007; construction work at the Stalin textile complex, 1951 (Albanian Telegraphic Agency/ ATSH archives); inauguration of the Stalin textile mills, 1951 (ATSH). All photographs by Elidor Mëhilli, unless otherwise noted.

STALIN AND THE SLUMS

A PHOTO ESSAY BY ELIDOR MËHILLI



It was the showcase socialist project in 1950s Albania: a brand-new textile complex named after Stalin (*Kombinati i Tekstileve "Stalin"*). It arose out of nothing—a short distance from the capital, Tirana, after the nearby swamps had been cleared. The machines came in big wooden crates from the Soviet Union. Teams of Soviet engineers and advisers arrived to help lift the small agrarian coun-

try from poverty and deliver on the promise of an industrial socialist future. During those heady years of construction, Albania borrowed extensively from Moscow: not only tractors and industrial installations, but also school textbooks, literature, and city plans.

Kombinati, as it has been known ever since, was one of the hallmarks of the country's first five-year plan. Within a short time, it became a kind

of microcosm of the country as a whole. Soviet in design, it was staffed by workers who had moved there from distant villages and other towns. But the brand-new mills also stood for something bigger than textiles. Local officials spoke of them as “schools” for turning illiterate Albanian peasants into conscious workers, for introducing women into the workforce. Government-backed campaigns sought to introduce







Soviet labor techniques (officials referred to them as *metoda sovjetike*). Plans called for new housing blocks, schools, and leisure provisions, so that a new urban reality would emerge, thanks to Soviet engineering. “The swamp is now in bloom!” one local journalist declared a few years later.

From Stalin to Mao tells the story of how this Soviet project became a national icon. Kombinati enabled local men and women to make claims about themselves, their past, and their standing in the world. This small episode in one corner of Europe illustrates how the Soviet Union created a transnational traffic of people and technology on a large scale after World War II. But Moscow ultimately could not control this kind of transnational exchange. During the Sino-Soviet conflict of the early 1960s, Albania’s ruling party turned against Soviet party boss Nikita Khrushchev. Soviet specialists left the country in a rush. Tirana looked to Beijing for industrial aid instead. Still, Kombinati continued producing textiles and social identities—the former symbol of Sovietization now transformed into a symbol of national will.



Clockwise, from top left: Where Stalin’s monument once stood, 2007; living next to industrial ruins, 2007; female workers inside the factories, 1952 (ATSH); “1951”—the birth of the textile complex, 2007; new housing for workers finished, 1952 (ATSH).

Sixty-six years later, Kombinati is one giant ruin. Following the Albanian regime's collapse in 1991, many of the shops were dismantled. Stalin's towering statue, which used to greet visitors in front of a monumental entrance, ended up in a warehouse. Over the years, residents of the 1950s housing blocks have walled off balconies to acquire a bit of extra living space. Squatters have moved into the decrepit former administrative quarters. Within the factory ruins, poverty-stricken families have built makeshift homes out of cardboard and discarded materials. But if socialism appears as a transnational mass of ruins today, Kombinati is also a reminder that Albania's profoundly painful *tranzicion* (transition to capitalism) has ensured that the ruins continue to be homes. ■

Elidor Mëhilli, a postdoctoral fellow at the Harriman Institute in 2011–12 and an assistant professor at Hunter College of the City University of New York, recently published From Stalin to Mao with Cornell University Press.

Top row: Details of 1950s-era housing units, 2007–2010.

Bottom, from left: "The way to punish corruption is to vote"—election-related graffiti on a facade on site, 2007; a 1950s-era housing unit, 2010.





PHOTO ESSAY



Based on eight years of archival research in seven countries, the book tells the story of how socialism connected people, places, and economies from the Mediterranean to East Asia after World War II. One case study concerns the Soviet-designed Stalin textile complex outside the Albanian capital, Tirana. In addition to conducting archival research on its history, Mëhilli has visually documented this structure's postsocialist life for the last decade. The historical photographs in this photo essay are from the Albanian Telegraphic Agency (ATSH) archives.

Former industrial and administrative structures, 2006–2010.





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