

Ismail Kadare.

*Novembre d'une capitale.* Jusuf Vrioni, tr.

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One of the most frightening moments in the history of the long Stalinist dictatorship in Albania was the so-called Purge of the Liberals at the Fourth Party Congress in 1973 which unleashed a reign of terror against Albanian writers and intellectuals lasting to at least 1975. Comparable in spirit to the Stalinist purges of the 1930s, this event followed in the wake of the Cultural Revolution in China, with which dictator Enver Hoxha had allied his little Balkan country. The years of the purge constituted a major setback for the development of Albanian literature and culture. Almost all major authors had a work withdrawn from circulation and 'turned into cardboard' and many intellectuals found themselves in concentration camps, even for minor ideological failings.

Ismail Kadare (b. 1936), the leading exponent of literary creativity and of a modicum of literary dissent in Albanian writing, felt the pressure as rarely before. Having published significant novels like *Kështjella* 'The castle' in 1970 and *Kronikë në gur* 'Chronicle in stone' (see WLT 61:4, p. 668) in 1971, he turned precipitously and quite understandably to a safer theme. The subject matter of *Nëntori i një kryeqyteti* (November in a capital), printed in 1975, was certainly conventional. The partisan 'liberation' of Albania from the Germans in November of 1944 as part of the so-called 'national-liberation struggle' was, after all, one of the Party's favourite themes. The novel focusses on a unit of mixed partisans which has been charged with taking over the radio station in Tirana, needed to give the partisan movement a voice in the last days of the fascist occupation. The political conformity of the plot is relieved fortunately by a living mosaic of characters, not only from the ranks of the partisans themselves: the peasant Sherif Goreni, the shy Thanas, the Greek teacher Dino Sinojmeri, a young lady named Teuta, the urban Javer Kurti, the irascible Mete Aliu and the Deaf One, but also of neutral observers such as the writer Adrian Guma, a man in search of the truth and unsure which side of the political fence he belongs on. Kadare's portrait of 'bourgeois' Tirana society on the eve of its destruction is infused with the 'magic realism' characteristic of his mature style. As such, he managed to retain his integrity as a writer - to the extent possible in Stalinist Albania - and produce a readable and entertaining novel on a subject which was then and, to an extent even now, is of historical and political interest.

In 1989-1990, as the dictatorship was in its last throes, Kadare revised the novel, making substantial alterations. With an eye to the Western and to the post-communist Albanian reader, he cut out a lot of the period propaganda which had been essential to getting the novel published in the first place. Among the cuts was the deletion of the whole last chapter in which Comrade Enver Hoxha enters the scene as a *deus ex machina* to make profound suggestions to the partisan fathers of a new Albania. A German translation by Robert Schwarz was published on the basis of this revised edition in 1990, and now a French translation by the eminent Jusuf Vrioni (b. 1916), currently Albanian ambassador to UNESCO in Paris, has appeared on the market, making another one of Kadare's classics known to a wider public.

Robert Elsie

Olzheim / Eifel, Germany