

# NIKITA KHRUSHCHEV'S VISIT TO BUTRINT

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BY RICHARD HODGES

**E**NVER HOXHA'S POST-WAR communist regime in Albania had close ties with Stalin's Soviet Union. Even young Albanian archaeologists were trained in Moscow. But with Stalin's death, Hoxha suspected the Soviet leadership of betraying the ideals of Leninism. In May 1959, in an effort to heal the growing rift between the superpower and its Mediterranean ally, Nikita Khrushchev and his defense minister, Marshal Malinovsky, visited Albania. In keeping with Hoxha's obsessive interest in Albanian history, the Soviet leader was taken first to the Greek colony of Apollonia and then by ship down the spectacular Albanian coast to Butrint.

The preparations made at Butrint ultimately revealed the motives and fundamental differences between the two leaders. A new road was built from the port of Saranda, where Khrushchev landed by Soviet warship, to the archaeological site—a distance of 20 kilometers. At Butrint itself, though, where archaeology and nature are inseparably intertwined, Hoxha feared for the Soviet leader's life and took some extraordinary steps. The beehives of the site custodian were burnt lest the bees sting the Soviet leader, while the snakes were poisoned with saucers of doctored milk. Bodies of snakes filled the Hellenistic theatre. Ismail Kadare, Albania's internationally renowned novelist, used this episode as a sym-



Nikita Khrushchev visits Butrint in 1959. To the right is Enver Hoxha, General Secretary of the Communist Party in Albania. Black and white photographs shown here are from the film *Visit of Comrade Khrushchev*, 1959.



Khrushchev is shown the Lion Gate, part of the Late Roman defenses.

bol in *Dimri I Vetmisë Së Madhe* (The Winter of the Great Loneliness, 1973):

It was also the first time that Besnik had visited the ancient town. Despite the exhausting journey Besnik woke up early in the morning. There was an amazing tranquillity about this place. The walls of Butrint, the colonnades, statues and theatre all passed before his eyes. King Oedipus, Electra and other myths occurred to him, everything was simultaneously serene and sleeping, somewhere far away there was the sound of a hammer. Someone was trying to put up a slogan painted in capitals on red paper; in Albanian and Russian a phrase from Khrushchev's last speech "Albania will become Europe's flourishing garden."

Besnik walked down to see the statues and the theatre, which were almost covered by water. There had been a shower of rain overnight and thin streams of muddy water were gently circulating around the filled theatre. The statues watched the scene with indifference. Suddenly the surface of the water was disturbed and the bodies of snakes appeared on the surface, their bodies gyrating with disgusting slowness. He moved a step backwards as someone laughed behind him.

"Don't be afraid, we have poisoned them because Khrushchev likes to walk. The marshes here are full of them and they are very dangerous."

"Today it's nothing," said Zef who worked for the television.

"Yesterday it was terrible. Their bodies filled the water and hung from the statues and columns," Zef pointed to the statues. Some were in a desperate condition, standing or leaning without arms or legs. Besnik asked him to stop, he could not stand the thought of it any more. However, he spent a further brief time gazing at the dead snakes that hung from the statues.

Khrushchev seems not to have noticed the listless carcasses of Butrint's poisoned snakes. In his account of the period, *The Khrushchevites* (1980), Enver Hoxha described his visitor as a boorish man, insensitive to the wonders of Albania's greatest archaeological site:

He even criticised our archaeological work as "dead things." When he [Khrushchev] visited Butrint he said: "Why do you employ all these forces and funds on such dead things! Leave the Greeks and Romans to their antiquity!"... Khrushchev was truly an ignoramus in these fields. He could see only the "profitability." "Why are these things of value to you? Do they increase the well-being of the people?" He asked me. He called Malinovsky, at that time Minister of Defense, who was always near at hand: "Look how marvellous this is!" I heard them whisper. "An ideal base for our submarines



Khrushchev, Hoxha, and their aides walk through the wooded site. Before Khrushchev's arrival, snakes were poisoned and beehives were burned to avoid potential injury to the Soviet leader.



Khrushchev and an unidentified woman visit the Baptistry, the largest 6th century baptistry in the Balkans.





*Enver Hoxha Denouncing the Soviet Revisionists* (also known as *The Moscow Conference*) was painted by Guri Madhi in 1979. The painting depicts a meeting of the Politburo in Moscow in 1961, when Hoxha broke with the Soviet Union. Khrushchev sits on the left, with his hand at his shirt collar. Leonid Brezhnev sits to Khrushchev's right.

could be built here. These old things should be dug up and thrown into the sea [they were referring to the archaeological finds at Butrint]. We can tunnel through the mountain to the other side," and he pointed to [the village of] Ksamil. "We shall have the most ideal and secure base in the Mediterranean. From here we can paralyse and attack everything."

Khrushchev's wish to build a submarine base was summarily rejected by Hoxha. To make matters worse between the two leaders, the launch taking them across Lake Butrint, back to Saranda, broke down. The Soviet leader was furious. In 1961, Hoxha broke off relations, denouncing the Soviets as

traitors. Except for a spell in the 1960s and 70s, when Albania formed an alliance with China, the country entered an ultimately disastrous period of isolationism. However, the new tarmacked road to Butrint made it a viable tourist destination. Within a decade, foreign tour groups were chaperoned not only to see Albania's model tractor factories, but also the marvels of Butrint, where, in Hoxha's opinion, the special link between the Albanians of history and the prehistoric Illyrians was forged. 🏠

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