

# THE PALACE OF DREAMS

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In an extraordinary evocation of the state of fear that ruled Enver Hoxha's Albania, the novelist Ismail Kadare reveals the workings of the dictator's secret service.

A couple of months ago I decided on the spur of the moment to go to Albania, that long forbidden and tightly closed country on the edge of the Adriatic and within sight of Italy that was closed to the world for so long by the last of the hard-line Stalinists, Comrade Enver Hoxha. He died in 1985 and Communist rule finally ended in 1991, but the country remains largely unknown to those outside; visitors are few and there is very little written about it in English. I discovered a recently translated biography of Hoxha and read it avidly.

It is a well-researched and documented account of the evils of the regime and a compelling indictment of its leader. But it told me next to nothing of the country, its history or the impact of the dictator on the largely rural population. For that I had to go elsewhere, to a quite different source.

On the basis of the truism that fiction is the lie through which we tell the truth, the novels of Albania's most distinguished writer, Ismail Kadare – surely a Nobel Prize winner in the near future – are more revealing of life under the dictator than any of the books on the subject that have appeared since his death. Of his many books, *Agamemnon's Daughter* and its sequel, *The Successor*, vividly convey the methods by which Hoxha inculcated a state of fear in the least of his subjects and the strange intimacy of Hoxha's ruthless dealings with his closest comrades and friends.

Past and present are permeable states in Kadare's fiction: a thin, porous membrane is all that separates narratives as they pass back and forth in time and place. Legend, fable and history are all enlisted with irony, satire and humour, to portray the state of his country under its arch-dictator. In a land that saw Aeneas pass through on his way from Troy and Illyrians fight Greeks and Romans for competing empires, there is a rich history to draw on.

This is perhaps best seen in *The Palace of Dreams*, considered by many to be Kadare's masterpiece, and the book that has made a lasting impression on me as well as best revealing the true nature of what Hoxha's rule meant to Albanians. In their closely guarded palace, a vast and secretive hierarchy of bureaucrats monitor the dreams of the population of the 'United Ottoman State'. An entire nation's hidden consciousness is exposed to its scrutiny



and hapless dreamers subjected to government punishment. It captures the paranoia, the obsession with surveillance and the draconian vengeance of the twentieth century's most ruthless dictator more tellingly than any history or biography. As it does for the reign of fear created by any government that hopes to reduce a population to unquestioning acceptance of its rule.

A new recruit, Mark-Alem, a young member of an ancient family that has a troubled history with the authorities, arrives at the Palace of Dreams to take up his duties:

The fundamental principle of the *Tabir Sarrail* resides not in being open to outside influences but in remaining closed to them. Not in openness but in isolation. And so, not in recommendation but in its opposite...

The task of our Palace of Dreams, which was created by the reigning Sultan, is to classify and examine not the isolated dreams of certain individuals – such as those who in the past were for one reason or another granted the privilege, and who in practice enjoyed the monopoly, of prediction through interpretation of divine omens – but the 'Tabir' as a whole: in other words, all the dreams of all citizens without exception. ... For the interpretation of that dream, fallen like a stray spark into the brain of one out of millions of sleepers, may help to save the country or its Sovereign from disaster; may help to avert war or plague or to create new ideas. So the Palace of Dreams is no mere whim or fancy; it is one of the pillars of the state. It is here, better than in any surveys, statements, or reports compiled by inspectors, policemen or governors of pashaliks, that the true state of the Empire may be assessed. For in the nocturnal realm of sleep are to be found both the light and the darkness of humanity, its honey and its poison, its greatness and its vulnerability. All that is murky and harmful, or that will become so in a few years or centuries, makes its first appearance in men's dreams. Every passion or wicked thought, every affliction or crime, every rebellion or catastrophe, necessarily casts its shadow before it long before it manifests itself in real life. It was for that reason that the Padishah decreed that no dream, not even one dreamed in the remotest part of the Empire on the most ordinary day by the most godforsaken creature, must fail to be examined by the *Tabir Sarrail*. ... For we know that there are forces outside the Palace which for various reasons would like to infiltrate the *Tabir Sarrail* with their own agents, so that their own plans, ideas and opinions might be presented as divine omens scattered by Allah among sleeping human brains.

[Much later, when Mark-Alem has risen in the hierarchy] Every morning, when the daily report was brought in to him, Mark-Alem felt as though he was holding in his hands the previous night of millions and millions of people. Anyone who ruled over the dark zones of men's lives wielded enormous power. And with every week that went by, Mark-Alem grew more aware of this.