

Ismail Kadare
The great winter
[*Der große Winter*].
Kiel. Neuer Malik. 1987. 444 pages

The harsh winter of 1960/61 was indeed a momentous one in post-war Albanian history. It was that year which marked the break between Nikita Khrushchev and Enver Hoxha, and saw the definitive withdrawal of Albania from the Eastern bloc. Hoxha, after some stealthy manoeuvring in an internal power struggle in the fifties, had originally thrown the lot of his people in with the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact to counter Tito's encroaching influence over the tiny Balkan state. Albania was not destined to become a republic in the Yugoslav federation, and the Soviet Union was more than willing to play the *deus ex machina*.

The winds of change, however, swept the communist world. When Khrushchev stopped grain deliveries in 1960 to show his displeasure at the Sino-Albanian alliance, Enver Hoxha countered haughtily, "We will eat grass rather than give in!" The humiliation for the proud but impoverished Albanians was particularly acute in view of a now famous remark Khrushchev had made earlier on a visit to Albania that mice in the grain silos of the Soviet Union consumed more grain than Albania was able to produce. Once again the Albanians were forced to fend for themselves, this time fully aware that they had no direct allies but the distant Chinese. Tension climaxed as Hoxha openly accused the Soviet Union of colonial politics.

'The Great Winter' portrays these moving events on two levels: the political and the personal, from the negotiating table in the Kremlin to the homes of the simple people of Tiranë.

The principal character of the novel is Besnik Struga, a Tiranë journalist, who finds himself assigned to the Albanian delegation as an interpreter and departs for Moscow as the first snows of the great winter descend over Eastern Europe. There he takes part in negotiations, receptions and high-level secret talks, experiencing political intrigue and power politics at first hand. Kadare has skilfully reconstructed much of the dialogue from the minutes of actual negotiations and from the memoirs of Enver Hoxha, offering us a unique glimpse into the machinery of the communist world of the period. The effect of his stay in Moscow is so shattering to Besnik Struga that his engagement to his girlfriend Zana, waiting at home in Tiranë, must be broken off.

Besnik is but one of many touched by the course of politics. Kadare also evokes a host of secondary figures from street-sweepers to aging exponents of the bourgeoisie caught unawares by the events of the great winter. Albanian students pursuing advanced education at the universities of Moscow and Leningrad are forced to interrupt their studies in mid-term and return home. The Soviet Union recalls all its advisors and, after tense negotiations, concedes to abandoning its strategically vital submarine base of Pashaliman ("Pasha's harbour") near Vlorë. Economic and political relations are definitively ruptured. Indeed nothing has marked the Albanian people in the last thirty years more than this break from the domineering and protective embrace of Holy Mother Russia. The novel concludes:

"At the beginning of March, following a storm surpassing in strength all the snowstorms of the winter, thousands of people clambered onto their roofs and balconies to fix TV antennas broken off or bent in the wind... But the TV antennas, the roofs themselves and the surrounding open countryside were still there. For this reason perhaps, as they prepared to climb down again, the people shook their heads as if to say, 'Well, it was quite a winter anyway!'"

The German version of Kadare's political epic is eminently palatable. It is, however, a sad commentary on the state of the art of translation to note that the translator of the Great Winter, who no doubt spent as much time rendering this epic novel into German as Ismail Kadare did writing it originally, is not even referred to by name. The same is true of the recent English edition of *Chronicle in Stone*. The curt reference "from the Albanian" is by no means sufficient to give credit where credit is due.

A minor note of criticism to this otherwise successful edition should also be made of the use of an acute accent on the author's name, handy at most in French, but quite superfluous in German or English and non-existent in Albanian, giving Balkan author Kadare (stress on the last syllable) an unfortunately Levantine air.

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