

Ismail Kadare

*The general of the dead army.*

Derek Coltman, transl.

New York. New Amsterdam. 1990. 256 pages.

"Like a proud and solitary bird, you will fly over those silent and tragic mountains in order to wrest our poor young men from their jagged, rocky grip." Such was the vision of the Italian general in the company of a laconic priest on his mission to Albania to recoup the remains of his soldiers who had fallen some twenty years earlier. He began his duties with a sense of grandeur befitting his rank, "In the task he was now undertaking there was something of the majesty of the Greeks and the Trojans, of the solemnity of Homeric funeral rites." The general found himself in a sombre, rainy country with a sullen and resentful population as he set about his noble task of exhuming the bones of a dispersed army from Albania's muddy soil. Gradually, though inevitably, the general is confronted with the grim realities of the past and haunted by the futility of his mission. His lofty intentions have long since become a personal nightmare when the bones of the infamous Colonel Z are thrown at his feet by a deranged old woman.

The rain, which streamed down the windshield of the military vehicle put at the general's disposal, is a common metaphor in Ismail Kadare's prose and in his innovative verse. At the time of original publication in Tiranë in 1963, this constant downpour and many other features made *The general of the dead army* (Alb. *Gjenerali i ushtrisë së vdekur*) a step forward in Albanian letters. Grey storm clouds, mud and the humdrum reality of everyday life contrasted sharply with the otherwise obligatory sunshine and blithe victories of socialist realism. So did the Italian general. Here too we find a favourite device of the Albanian writer who, more than any other, brought his country's literature out of its stylistic and thematic lethargy, that of a remote and haunted Albania as seen through the eyes of the innocent or uncomprehending foreigner. This optic not only gave contour to a European country which at the time was more isolated from the Western world than Tibet, but also helped Albanians themselves see their homeland as others might. This novel, still one of Kadare's best, marked the birth of contemporary Albanian prose. In 1961, Albania had broken with the Soviet Union and thus with Soviet literary models of the period. Though relations had ostensibly been severed to save socialism and socialist realism, the more daring writers of the age, Ismail Kadare, short-story writer Dritëro Agolli (b. 1931) and poet Fatos Arapi (b. 1930) who had all studied in the Soviet bloc, took advantage of the event to free Albanian literature of some of the political restraints which had been imposed upon it. *The general of the dead army* was one of the main fruits of this subtle revolt.

In 1970, after an emended edition (1967) of the Albanian original, *The general of the dead army* was translated into French by Jusuf Vrioni, who had spent twelve years in prison after the war before being allowed to work, and from the French into English the following year. Republication this year is a significant addition to New Amsterdam's Kadare programme. While one would and should normally decry such double translations in the field of literature, it must in all fairness be noted that Vrioni's French-language versions of some of Kadare's novels flow much more elegantly than do the Albanian originals. A number of these prose works was indeed published in French long before the Albanian-speaking public ever had access to them. If Kadare has always had a mind to the foreign reader, it is nonetheless among his compatriots that he has stirred the strongest emotions: unbounded admiration for his role as the 'prince of the nation' for whom loftier duties are said to be at hand, saviour of a country and culture in peril, but at the same time misgivings and inimity among intellectuals caused by the memory of many a said Machiavellian move in his past. Survival has never been easy in Albania.

Though he was a political conformist, and who could blame him for it at the time, Ismail Kadare was and remained a dissident in domestic literary theory, and a giant among Albanian novelists. His privileged relationship with Enver Hoxha enabled him to give full expression to his creative talents, to surpass the narrow confines of what was then politically acceptable in Albanian letters, and he survived where others failed.

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