

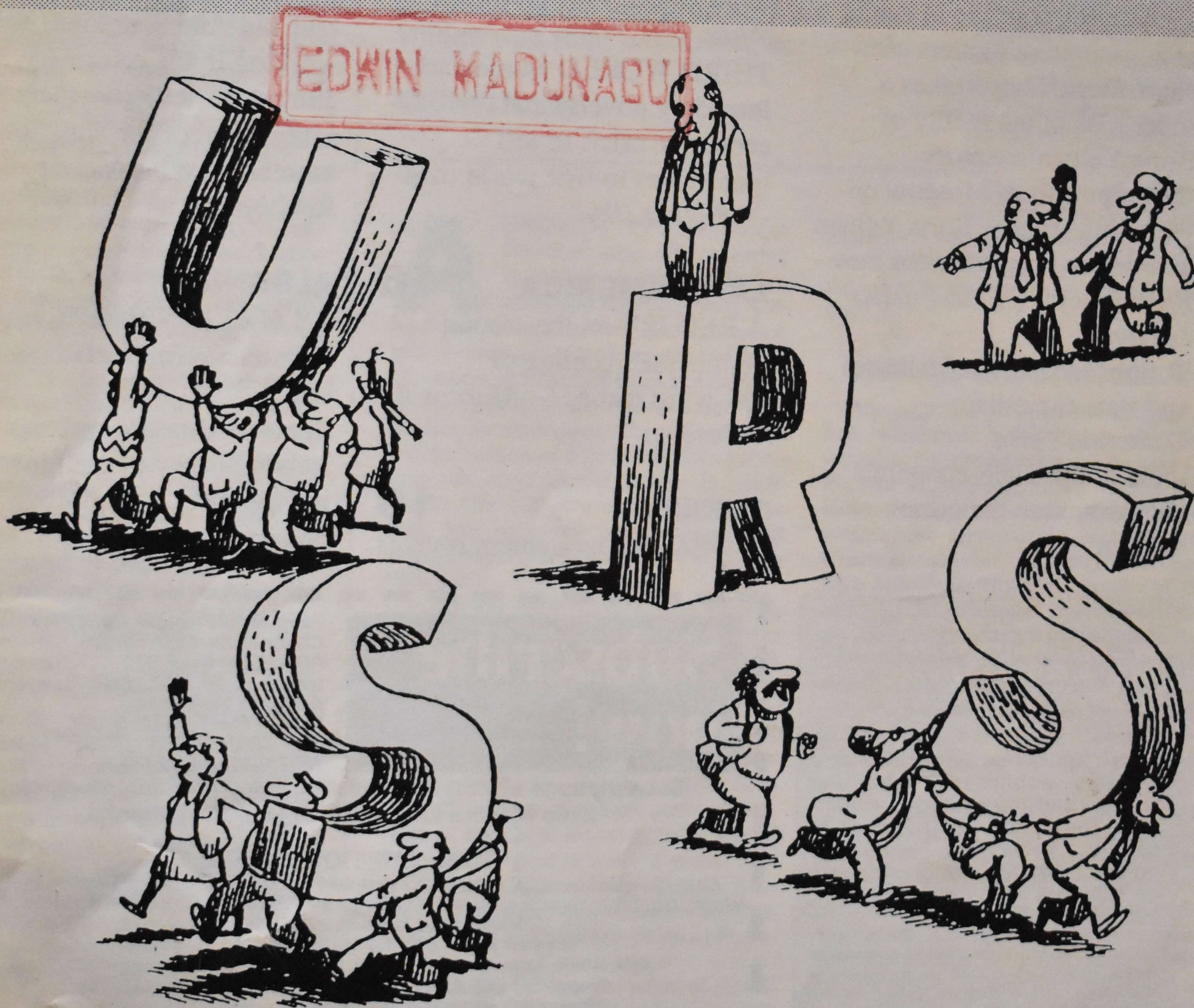
# International VIEWPOINT

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## Back to the future



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gangs and rapes of the few women in the camps, as well as of some Italian women. These episodes were used to mark a whole people as criminals.

This was not only done by the capitalist press: *l'Unità*, the PDS daily, made use of a rape by seven Albanians to denounce the "passivity" of minister Boniver. Mixing this attack up with a legitimate protest by 23 Albanians destined for Rocca Pia, a village of several hundreds near to L'Aquila, *l'Unità* concluded: "the situation has become intolerable. The Albanians ravish and rape. In Pescara six were arrested during a dispute." Such reporting laid the groundwork for the "finding" that 81% of the paper's readers were in favour of sending the Albanians back.

Some of these readers made explicit reference to the fate of the many Italians who were obliged to emigrate in the past, drawing the bizarre conclusion that the Albanians should suffer the same privations as those old Italian emigrants and expressing their support for the government doing nothing to render the arrival of the Albanians easier.

### Economic and political refugees

As is becoming the fashion, the argument that these were economic rather than political refugees was deployed as if it removed any consideration of human solidarity. There were also, no doubt, some who could not overcome their rancour against people who had failed to appreciate the qualities of socialist austerity and had allowed themselves to be seduced by the sirens of the consumer society.

And just about nobody recalled the contribution made by Italy to Albania's backwardness, although Italy exercised semi-colonial hegemony over that country from 1912 to 1939 and occupied it outright after April 7, 1939.

In fact the period of semi-dependence was just as destructive as that of the union, which was followed by the coronation of Italy's King Vittorio Emanuele III as King of Albania — at the same time as another member of the king's Savoja family took the head of the Croatian puppet regime.

After 1939 the Italian presence in Albania (and, after 1941, in Slovenia and Croatia) took the form of pillage, violence and participation in the deportation of the Jews. However its negative impact dates from the preceding period. First of all, there was the corruption of the functionaries of the gangster-king Zog, who was ready enough to accept Italian "loans". The heads of the country's three religious communities, the Muslims (mainly Sunni) and Catholic and Orthodox Christians were also bought off by Italy. But "the economic concessions and the network of interests created by the Italians in Albania were not translated by a parallel augmentation of political influence and strategic control over this little Balkan country".

On the contrary, on the financial plane Italy's intervention in Albania was a loss-making enterprise, particularly during the period prior to the 1939 invasion.<sup>1</sup>

The same goes for the economic and political penetration by Italian imperialism of a whole series of other Balkan or central European countries, as also for Italy's colonial conquests, all of which cost more than what they brought in. It did not amount to charity. They cost the state finances dear above all because of a plethora of intermediaries, of merchants, of lumpen capitalists, of con men and bordel proprietors who took all they could for themselves and left the crumbs for the indigenous clients.

### Royal parasites

The activities encouraged by Italian funding were — apart from the exploitation of very modest mineral resources — largely parasitic. The bulk of the profits stemming from the exploitation of silver and the multiplication of Italian interests were appropriated by the king (even if this policy finally cost him the throne). "Through gifts and Italian concessions, he could pay the wages of the employees of the state apparatus, remunerate his guards, maintain the court and satisfy the caprices of the royal family".<sup>2</sup>

The debts accumulated by Italy through this policy led to the consensus of the state apparatus in its totality in favour of the 1939 aggression against Albania. Naturally, the fundamental cause of this was a thirst for glory on the part of Mussolini, obsessed by the success of his colleague/ally/rival Hitler — but it also appeared as a good measure of rationalization. This did not turn out to be the case. Firstly because, in order to gain support, the occupiers considerably increased the number of employees of the Albanian state (from 6,000 to 18,000, following the example of the measures already adopted by fascism in Italy). Moreover, corruption, already very widespread, increased after the invasion.

The number of Italians resident in Albania went from 1,200 in 1938 to 70,000 during the war with Greece (12,000 permanent residents, more than 58,000 workers engaged in public works linked to the war). The majority of these workers were paid salaries which, while fantastic in relation to those of the Albanians, were nonetheless insufficient to satisfy their needs, which explains the weak productivity of the workers and the limited duration of their Albanian stay.

While bringing no significant benefits either to the state coffers or the occupied workers, the presence in Albania of several hundred Italian firms, particularly from 1940 onwards, was enough to damage the artisanal sector of the Albanian economy and to engender a high rate of inflation.

Already, before 1939, the numerous Albanian clients of the Italian coffers had

shown no particular gratitude, largely because they understood that the donations were not disinterested; after the occupation manifestations of open hostility (before the beginning of a genuine resistance) multiplied at every level. Even the Catholic church, which in the past acted as almost a "fifth column" of the regime, became more intransigent, suspecting the governor, Jacomoni, of being "pro-Muslim" (simply because he financed the other confessions in a proportional manner, and thus gave priority to the Islamic faith to which 70% of the population adhered).

The Italian defeat (caused first by the Greek campaign, where the Italian armies, in spite of their numerical and military superiority, were pushed back to the heart of Albania by the Greek resistance, and then by the decay of the Italian army following the armistice of September 8, 1943) impelled Nazi Germany to occupy Albania, important in the context of the war as much for its modest oil resources as for its much more considerable reserves of chrome. Contrary to the legend of the "good Italians", the Germans were given almost a favourable welcome, at least by the conservative forces. Very many patriots (with the exception, obviously, of the Communists) who were fiercely Italianophobic, nourished initial illusions in the new occupants, who conceded more significant margins of autonomy than those granted by the Italians, and permitted reunification with the Albanians of Kosovo.

### Albania and Nazism

Moreover, Nazi Germany was more effective than Italian fascism in its efforts to seduce the Muslims (the Italians were already exposed because of their behaviour in Libya, colonized in 1912) and a number of Albanian politicians proclaimed their adherence to an "Aryan race of Illyrian stock".

The resistance would soon strip away the mask of the occupiers. In any case, Italy abandoned the country leaving terrible memories and a completely dislocated Albanian economy, weakened still further by the depredations of the war (for which the inhabitants were in no way responsible, and which left permanent scars on their country)

It is, then, not totally absurd that a part of the Albanian population (usually the least politicized and the least cultivated elements, who are thus easy prey to the modern myths carried by the media) now thinks it can resolve its problems by demanding aid from a "rich" Italy, which owes such a heavy moral debt to their country. ★

1. Roberto Morozzo Della Rocca, "Nazi occupation in Albania (1920-1944)", *Il Mulino*, Bologna, 1972, p. 153.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 156.