

Background Reading #2: Kosovo in the 1990s

As the Serbs tell it, the turning point in Balkan history goes back to Kosovo. And they are not talking about 1999 when American bombs fell on Belgrade; they are referring to a battle that occurred more than six centuries ago. This historic battle became an epic struggle, which formed the basis of Serbian identity and left the Balkans a battleground between East and West.

The year was 1389. From the southeast marched an Ottoman Turkish army intent on conquering Eastern Europe. It was probably the greatest army in the world at that time, the outpouring of an alien, Middle Eastern, Muslim civilization. The only thing standing in the way of the Turkish advance was an alliance of Balkan medieval kingdoms led by the Serbs. The showdown occurred in Kosovo, an area which *at that time* (though not today) was ethnically Serbian. On June 28, 1389, the Serbs and their allies were defeated, and all of the Balkans passed under Muslim rule for the next 500 years.

In all the years under Ottoman rule, Serbian epic poetry kept alive a special sense of identity and vision of themselves. The stories provided them with a sense of pride and of destiny, but the Kosovo legend also led them to see the region as their “holy land” and their national heartland even after population shifts had moved the Serbian centers northward. In other words, the belief that “Kosovo is ours” persisted despite the demographic statistics showing that it no longer was, that over 90% of the population was ethnically Albanian.

How did that happen? During many centuries of Ottoman warfare with Europe, some basic changes occurred in the population of the Balkans. Many Serbs fled northward, farther from the area of Ottoman control, while other groups such as the Albanians, many of whom had converted to Islam and were sometime allies of the Ottomans, moved in to fill the gaps. Since the Ottomans allowed their subjects to retain their language, religion, and cultural institutions, each group of people maintained its separate identity.

By the early 20th century, new countries had formed in the Balkans. Serbia emerged – and gradually expanded in size – during the 19th century. Albania, on the other hand, was the last Balkan country to emerge on the map, coming into existence only in 1913. When the borders were drawn, the tiny new country contained less than half of the Albanian-speaking population within its borders. Most of the rest lived in the region of Kosovo, which was part of Serbia. When Serbia was absorbed into the larger country of Yugoslavia, so was Kosovo. It remained in Yugoslavia under Serbian control from 1919–1999. At first, Kosovar Albanians had no special status within Yugoslavia. Only after World War II, in the socialist era, did Kosovo gain some rights. Yugoslavia was reorganized as a federal state with six republics and two autonomous regions; Kosovo became an autonomous region within the republic of Serbia. Kosovo was ruled by local leaders, and the Albanian language was taught in the schools and broadcast on television. Yet as ethnic tensions grew in Yugoslavia, unrest in Kosovo increased. With the death of Tito in 1980 and the economic crisis that followed, nationalism was on the rise throughout the country, a dangerous development in a multi-ethnic society. Wars and genocide would soon follow.

The breakdown of Yugoslavia began in Kosovo. Tensions had run high in the area since 1981 when ethnic-Albanian demonstrations against bad economic conditions in their region had turned violent. (Indeed, Kosovo had always been one of the poorest, least developed regions of Yugoslavia, and the economic crisis deepened the divisions.) As Albanian demonstrations spread from the provincial capital of Priština to the outlying areas, Serbs began to flee the area. In 1987 Slobodan Milošević, a previously little-known political figure, used this crisis to set himself up as the champion of Serbian nationalism. On June 28, 1989, he gave an inflammatory speech at the celebration of the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo. Kosovo was Serbian, he said, unleashing the nationalism that would destroy Yugoslavia and plunge it into civil war. That year he stripped Kosovo of its autonomy, sending in the army and police to suppress disturbances. These moves had serious implications for the stability of a multi-national state.

Meanwhile, other factors fueled the crisis. National extremists also came to power in Croatia, representing a Croatian ideology every bit as destructive as Milošević's Serbian hard-liners. On the international scene, the break up of the Soviet Union and the fall of Communism encouraged this wave of nationalism, which swept through southeastern Europe with devastating effects. In June 1991, Slovenia and Croatia seceded from Yugoslavia beginning the first phase of the bloody civil war. Soon Bosnia declared its independence and descended into a genocidal struggle. Macedonia also became a separate country – though not without opposition from Greece and its own Albanian minority.

Meanwhile, events in Kosovo had been steadily worsening. The region was slipping into a civil war as the ethnic Albanian Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) grew more militant. The Serbian police and military reacted by targeting insurgents and civilians alike. According to NATO sources, over 2000 were killed between March 1998 and March 1999, and over a quarter of a million ethnic Albanians became refugees in near-by Albania, Macedonia, and Montenegro. Now the Serbs were facing allegations of genocide in Kosovo. The United States – through NATO - decided to take action. For the first time since World War II, American bombers struck European cities, bombing targets in Belgrade and other Yugoslav cities night after night between March 24 and June 20, 1999. Although U.S. bombers made every attempt to target only strategic areas, there were, of course, civilian casualties. In addition, with the NATO campaign, the situation in Kosovo worsened. By the end of May 1999, NATO estimates that 1.5 million people, 90% of the population of Kosovo, had been expelled from their homes, and at least 5,000 ethnic Albanians there had been executed. The neighboring countries of Macedonia and Albania, already faced with staggering economic problems of their own, were flooded with refugees.

By the summer of 1999, NATO forces were in control in Kosovo, and international peacekeeping troops had taken on the formidable task of helping with rebuilding, bringing in thousands of tons of humanitarian aid, repatriating refugees, and keeping the Serbs and ethnic-Albanians apart. The KLA was given recognition - and weapons - by the United States and its allies (which soon contributed to unrest in Macedonia). Serbian president Slobodan Milošević was overthrown and put on trial for war crimes in Bosnia and Kosovo. Soon the region settled down into an uneasy peace. In 2008, Kosovo was recognized as an independent country.