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Kosovo: Historical Background to the Current Conflict

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Summary

This short report discusses the historical background to the current conflict in Kosovo. It also includes a short suggested reading list. For background and current developments on the Kosovo issue, see *Kosovo and U.S. Policy*, by Steven Woehrel and Julie Kim, CRS Issue Brief 98041, updated regularly. For a discussion of military operations in Yugoslavia during World War II, see *Yugoslavia: World War II resistance operations and their implications for the current war*, by Robert L. Goldich, CRS Report RL 30177. A complete list of CRS products on Kosovo can be found at <http://www.loc.gov/crs/kosovo.html>.

Introduction

A striking aspect of the current conflict in Kosovo to some Western observers is the extent to which both sides in the struggle use history, sometimes reaching into the distant past, to sanction their right to control the region and justify whatever actions are necessary to secure that control. For example, many Serbs claim Kosovo as the cradle of Serbian civilization. Ethnic Albanians insist that they have lived in Kosovo longer than the Serbs and now form the overwhelming majority of the population there.

However, it should be noted that many historical claims need not be taken at face value for several reasons. One is that they often distort or falsify historical events. A related reason is that they may not be a sufficient explanation for why the conflict is occurring; indeed they may serve in large part as pretexts for political leaders seeking to enhance their power and wealth. Finally, such arguments sometimes lead observers to believe that the history of the region is one of centuries of unceasing ethnic conflict. While there has indeed been much conflict in Kosovo's history, it should be noted that historical accounts, particularly those favored by nationalists, often focus on change and conflict among political leaders. They do not always reflect centuries of everyday peaceful coexistence and cooperation among ordinary people.

Early History

Serbs and other Slavic tribes migrated into the Balkans, including Kosovo, in the 6th century AD.¹ Serb historians assert that few if any ancestors of the Albanians lived in Kosovo at this time. Albanian historians say that Albanians are descended from the ancient Dardanian and Illyrian inhabitants of the region. The latter are mentioned in texts by ancient Greek historians as early as the 3rd century BC. The region saw a variety of ethnic groups vying for control in the waning centuries of the Roman Empire.

In the late 12th century, King Nemanja of Serbia took advantage of the weakness of the Byzantine empire to seize what is now Kosovo, and other territories. Kosovo became the center of the Serbian state. Nemanja and his successors built many churches and monasteries, some of which remain key Serb holy sites today. They made Pec the seat of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Medieval Serbia reached the zenith of its power under King Stefan Dusan from 1331-1355. His kingdom included all of Kosovo, northern Albania, Macedonia, and much of Greece. He established his capital at Prizren. However, Serbia's strength soon declined due to squabbling among Stefan Dusan's successors, and the increasing power of the Turkish-led Ottoman Empire. In the Battle of Kosovo Polje on June 28, 1389, forces of Serbian Prince Lazar were defeated by a Turkish-led army. Many details of the battle remain obscure, but some historians say that it is quite possible that there were Serbs and Albanians fighting on each side. While the historical reality of the battle may have been more complicated than has sometimes been suggested, the conflict has nevertheless passed into Serb historical legend as the decisive battle that ushered in over 400 years of Turkish domination, celebrated in an epic passed on by Serbian bards for hundreds of years.

In 1689, Austrian forces temporarily seized Kosovo from the Ottomans. Local Serbs joined forces with them to fight the Turks. The Austrians were routed near Kacanik on January 2, 1690. Serbian Orthodox Patriarch Arsenije and more than 40,000 refugees fled Kosovo for Hungary. Another Austrian expedition into Kosovo in 1737 was also forced to retreat, touching off another wave of Serb refugees. Serb historians claim that the shift from a predominately Serbian population to a mainly ethnic Albanian one began at this time, as Albanians migrated from the poor, mountainous regions of northern Albania onto the more fertile plains of Kosovo. Other historians say the shift started much earlier, and occurred more gradually. Most ethnic Albanians in Kosovo converted from Christianity to Islam (although a largely Roman Catholic minority continues to exist today). Many conversions were undertaken not due to religious fervor, but in order to avoid higher taxes and other discrimination that non-Muslims in the Ottoman Empire faced.

The Rise of Modern Serbia and Kosovo

After uprisings from 1804 to 1815, parts of Serbia near Belgrade became a semi-autonomous principality within the Ottoman Empire. By 1833, Serbia received full autonomy and more territory as a result of an agreement reached with the Ottomans under Russian pressure. Kosovo remained in Ottoman hands. In 1877-1878, Serbia and Montenegro seized parts of Kosovo during the Russian-Turkish War. Russia won a crushing victory and imposed the Treaty of San Stefano in March 1878, which created a

¹Albanians spell the name of the region as “Kosova.” The Serbian spelling “Kosovo” is used by U.S. officials as well as by most U.S. and international media

greater Bulgaria and assigned parts of what is now Kosovo to Serbia and Montenegro. Outraged ethnic Albanian leaders formed the League of Prizren in June 1878, with the aim of consolidating Albanian-inhabited lands into one province within the Ottoman Empire. At the Congress of Berlin in July 1878, other Great Powers, alarmed at Russia's gains in the region, forced a reduction in the size of Bulgaria and took Albanian-inhabited lands away from Serbia and Montenegro and gave them back to the Turks. However, Serbia and Montenegro were permitted to keep other territories they had seized. Serbia received formal independence from the Ottoman Empire. The demands of the League of Prizren to group all Albanian-inhabited lands in one state are still advanced today by ethnic Albanian nationalists in Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia.

In October 1912, Serbia, Montenegro, Greece, and Bulgaria attacked the Turks, setting off the First Balkan War. Turkish forces were decisively defeated and virtually the entire Balkan peninsula was liberated from Ottoman control. Serbian and Montenegrin forces seized Kosovo and part of what is now Albania. On June 28, 1913, Bulgaria, angry at its meager territorial gains in the conflict, attacked Greece and Serbia in the Second Balkan War and was defeated by late July. After pressure by several Great Powers, Serbia and Montenegro were forced to disgorge some territory, and an independent Albania was created. In part at Russia's urging, Kosovo remained in Serb hands. Serbia nearly doubled in size as a result of its gains in the Balkan Wars.

On June 28, 1914, Austro-Hungarian Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated by Serb nationalist Gavrilo Princip in Sarajevo. Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia in July, touching off World War I. After offering stubborn and effective resistance for over a year, the Serbian army was defeated when Bulgaria joined the war in September 1915 in hopes of avenging its losses in the Second Balkan War. The Serbian army made a last stand in Kosovo, and the army and many Serb civilians retreated across the mountains of northern Albania to the Adriatic Sea under conditions of extreme hardship. Remnants of the army were evacuated by Allied warships to the Greek island of Corfu.

Kosovo in Yugoslavia

After the victory of the Allies in World War I and the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918, Kosovo became part of the new Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, ruled by a Serbian king. As one of the victors in the war, and the only people in the Kingdom to have had a state of its own before the conflict, Serbia felt it had a right to dominate the new country, sparking the resentment of other nationalities. Serbia began a large-scale effort to settle Serbs in Kosovo in an effort to dilute the ethnic Albanian majority in the region. King Aleksandr declared a dictatorship in 1929 and renamed the country Yugoslavia. He was assassinated in 1934 by Macedonian terrorists.

Italy occupied Albania in April 1939, shortly before the outbreak of World War II. Germany invaded Yugoslavia on April 6, 1941. Yugoslav Army resistance collapsed within ten days. Most of Kosovo was included in a Greater Albanian puppet state. Part of the rest went to Bulgaria, while areas with valuable mineral resources remained in German-occupied Serbia. Some Kosovars rejoiced at their union with Albania and supported the new state. Like many areas of Yugoslavia, Kosovo became the site of bloody fighting among Serbian royalist Chetniks, Communist Partisans, German and Italian occupation forces, and ethnic Albanian armed groups often allied with the Germans and Italians. Atrocities against both Serbian and ethnic Albanian civilians were common. In 1944, the Partisans seized Kosovo. They soon had to crush an uprising from ethnic Albanian rebels.

who did not want Kosovo incorporated in what they saw as a Serb-dominated Communist Yugoslavia. In 1945, the victorious Communist government, under Josip Broz Tito, gave Kosovo its current borders, and made it one of two autonomous provinces within Serbia, the largest republic of the new, six-republic Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

Despite its new nominal autonomy, Kosovo remained under Serb domination until 1966, when secret police chief Aleksandr Rankovic, a Serb and the key architect of repression in Kosovo, was removed from office by Tito. Tito then began to shift his policy toward ethnic Albanians in Kosovo from repression to conciliation. However, the process did not move quickly enough for some ethnic Albanians. In 1968, in demonstrations throughout Kosovo, ethnic Albanian protesters called for Kosovo to be given the status of a republic within Yugoslavia, and thus full equality with Serbia. Some demonstrations turned violent and police and army troops were called in to quell them, resulting in several deaths.

In 1974, Yugoslavia adopted a new constitution. Capping efforts since 1966 to increase Kosovo's rights within Yugoslavia, the new constitution gave Kosovo in many respects *de facto* republic status and therefore equal footing within the Yugoslav federation with Serbia. Ethnic Albanians took over leading posts in the local government and economy. Kosovo received large subsidies as part of a federal plan to equalize the sharp difference in levels of development between rich and poor areas of Yugoslavia. More Kosovar voices demanded secession from Serbia and status as a full republic within Yugoslavia. In addition to achieving greater representation in federal bodies and formal equality with Serbia, republic status would have given Kosovo the right, at least in theory, to secede from Yugoslavia. A few even proposed union with Albania, although most Kosovars recognized that they were freer and economically better off than their compatriots in Albania, who suffered abject poverty under the exceptionally rigid Communist regime there.

While nationalism rose among ethnic Albanians, the resentment of the Serb minority in Kosovo at the “Albanianization” of Kosovo increased. Serbs charge that ethnic Albanians used discrimination, intimidation, and violence to drive Serbs out of the area in hopes of creating an “ethnically pure” Kosovo. Ethnic Albanians say Serbs left because of the area’s poor economic outlook and the Serbs’ discomfort at the shift in power from the Serbian minority to the ethnic Albanian majority. Rapid population growth among rural Kosovars also contributed to the population shift. While estimates of the extent of the emigration vary, there is little doubt that it was significant. In 1961, Serbs made up 23.6 percent of Kosovo’s population; on the eve of the present conflict, they were under 10 percent.

Kosovo and the Collapse of Yugoslavia

After Tito’s death in 1980, the highly decentralized political system he put in place gradually began to fail, and there were increasingly open power struggles within the Yugoslav political elite. Ethnic Albanian nationalism remained strong. In 1981, a student protest against poor conditions at Pristina University escalated into a riot. Protesters at the university and throughout the province called for republic status for Kosovo. Some demonstrators called for union with Albania. The demonstrations and riots were put down by Serb police and the Yugoslav military, resulting in several fatalities. The riots reinforced Serb fears that the ethnic Albanians wanted to secede from Yugoslavia. More Serbs called for the reassertion of Serb control over the province.

By 1987, one Serbian leader seized on the Kosovo issue as a springboard to power. During a visit to Kosovo Polje on April 24, Serb Communist party official Slobodan Milosevic gave a rousing speech to Serbs in Kosovo, vowing that “no one should dare to beat you.” The speech, which tapped into waxing Serb national resentment, launched Milosevic as a major political figure. He was elected Serbian Communist Party leader later that year. In this post, and later as President of Serbia, Milosevic moved to take control of Kosovo. In 1989, the Serbian parliament passed amendments to the Serbian Constitution sharply limiting Kosovo’s autonomy. The Kosovo parliament, under heavy pressure by Serbian security forces, did likewise. In 1990, Serbia approved further measures that eliminated Kosovo’s autonomy and abolished Kosovo’s parliament and government.

Over 100,000 ethnic Albanians in government, the police, enterprises, media, educational institutions, and hospitals were fired and replaced by Serbs. Serbian police arrested hundreds of ethnic Albanians for allegedly engaging in nationalist activities, occasionally beating them fatally. Another element of Serbian strategy was to encourage Serbs to settle in Kosovo, through jobs and financial inducements. However, fearing war and economic deterioration, Serbs did not take up the government’s offer in large numbers. Milosevic’s destruction of Kosovo’s autonomy provoked unease in Slovenia, Croatia and other republics in the Yugoslav federation, which had not approved Milosevic’s crackdown in federal government institutions. Many in the other republics feared that they could be the next victims of Milosevic’s nationalist policies. For this reason, many analysts say that with his moves in Kosovo, Milosevic “lit the fuse” that eventually resulted in the breakup of Yugoslavia in 1991.

Ethnic Albanians reacted to this seizure and monopolization of public institutions by boycotting them and building their own parallel set of political and social institutions. Kosovo’s parliament and government refused to be dissolved and went underground. Kosovars established their own schools, hospitals and clinics, although these were desperately short of resources. Massive layoffs at enterprises now run by Serbs made an already poor economic situation even worse. Some Kosovars coped by emigrating or receiving aid from ethnic Albanians overseas.

Slovenia and Croatia seceded from Yugoslavia in June 1991. Milosevic, who wields de facto control over the Yugoslav Army and federal government, conceded Slovenia’s independence after a brief skirmish, but the conflict escalated in Croatia. Ethnic Serbs joined with Yugoslav army troops to seize one-third of the country. Feeling that autonomy within Yugoslavia was no longer a viable option, ethnic Albanians held a referendum on independence for Kosovo in September. Independence was approved by an overwhelming margin, and the underground Kosovo parliament proclaimed the region’s independence on October 19, 1991.

After the United States and European Community recognized Bosnia -Hercegovina’s independence in April 1992, Bosnian Serbs and Yugoslav Army troops seized large parts of Bosnia’s territory and expelled non-Serbs. In May, Kosovars went to the polls to elect a new President and 130-member parliament. While Serbian police stopped voting in public places, they did not make a serious attempt to try to stop the election altogether. Ibrahim Rugova, the leader of the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK), was elected President. The parallel parliament and government were prevented from functioning in Kosovo by Serb police. On March 22, 1998, Rugova and the LDK-dominated parliament

were re-elected against weak opposition. Leaders of other Kosovar parties criticized the holding of the vote in the midst of a crisis.

For almost a decade, Kosovar leaders had looked to the international community to improve their situation. However, in 1995, the Dayton Peace Agreement brought an end to the war in Bosnia, but Kosovo was not dealt with in the negotiations. International sanctions against Serbia-Montenegro were lifted. Some Kosovars concluded that Rugova's policy of non-violence and seeking international support for Kosovo had been a failure, and turned to violence. In 1996, a shadowy group called the "Kosovo Liberation Army" (KLA, also known by its Albanian acronym UCK) came to public notice after claiming responsibility for killing several Serb policemen and other officials, as well as alleged ethnic Albanian "collaborators" and Serb civilians. On February 28, 1998, Serb police, reportedly angered by the deaths of several comrades in a KLA ambush, launched a massive assault on a village in Drenica, a region of Kosovo where the Serbian police believed that the attackers lived. Press reports from the scene suggested that Serb forces committed atrocities against civilians during the assault. Outrage among ethnic Albanians at the Drenica attack led to a rapid expansion of the KLA and the birth of the present conflict in Kosovo.

Suggested Reading

Dragnitch, Alexander and Slavko Todorovich, *The Saga of Kosovo: Focus on Serbian-Albanian Relationships*. Boulder: Eastern European Monographs, 1984. Provides a Serbian viewpoint on Kosovo and its history.

Jelavich, Barbara, *History of the Balkans*, 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983. Provides an overview of Balkan history, including chapters on Serbia.

Malcolm, Noel, *Kosovo: A History*, New York: New York University Press, 1998. The author's magisterial use of historical archives (except Serbian ones) has been praised by many reviewers. Other reviewers, particularly those sympathetic to Serb viewpoints, have questioned Malcolm's objectivity, because he focuses on debunking what he views as Serbian historical myths. Much of the book is devoted to Kosovo's history during the Serbian medieval state and the Ottoman period, although the period through 1997 is covered.

Stavrianos, L.F., *The Balkans since 1453*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1958. A survey of Balkan history considered to be a classic in its field.

Vickers, Miranda, *Between Serb and Albanian: A History of Kosovo*, Columbia University Press, 1998. Deals with many of the same topics as Malcolm, but is less intent on exploding Serbian historical myths. Provides more detail on the Tito era and the breakup of Yugoslavia than Malcolm.