# 2 Kosovo, 1989–2002

## Introduction

One day the great European War will come out of some damned foolish thing in the Balkans.

— Otto von Bismarck, 1888

### A chronology of key events up to 1989

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kosovo at this time lies at the heart of the Serbian Empire, under the Nemanjić Dynasty. The period saw the building of many Serbian Orthodox churches and monasteries</td>
<td>12th century</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Austrian invasion is repelled</td>
<td>28 June 1389</td>
<td>The battle of Kosovo marks the beginning of 500 years of Turkish Ottoman rule. Over the ensuing decades, many Christian Serbs leave the region. Over the centuries, the religious and ethnic balance tips in favour of Muslims and Albanians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kosovo becomes part of the Kingdom of Serbia</td>
<td>1689–90</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kosovo becomes part of the Kingdom of Serbia</td>
<td>1912–13</td>
<td>The Balkan Wars: Serbia regains control of Kosovo from the Turks. This is recognized by the 1913 Treaty of London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kosovo is absorbed into the Yugoslav Federation</td>
<td>1918</td>
<td>During the Second World War much of Kosovo becomes part of an Italian-controlled Greater Albania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Yugoslav Constitution recognizes the autonomous status of Kosovo, giving the province de facto self-government</td>
<td>1941</td>
<td>Belgrade shows increasing tolerance for Kosovar autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troops suppress separatist ruling in the province</td>
<td>1946</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yugoslav President Milošević strips rights of autonomy laid down in the 1974 constitution</td>
<td>1974</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>The death of Tito</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>In a key moment, future president of Yugoslavia Slobodan Milošević speaks in Kosovo to Serbs, protesting against alleged harassment by the majority Albanian community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Milošević makes a speech at Gazimestan on the battlefield of Kosovo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1989</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>28 June 1989</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Kosovo, a tiny province in the Balkans, was the location of the last great European war of the 20th century. From the assassination that triggered the First World War to the ethnic warfare of the last decade of the century in Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia, the Balkans have been the crucible of Europe in the 20th century; the place where terrorism and genocide became tools of policy, spilling over to engulf the region and beyond. It was by no means the only country where blood was spilt in the last decade of the century but it was probably the most visible. Few countries received anything like the intense scrutiny and media coverage that was devoted to the Balkans. As we have seen in the case study of Rwanda, much of the world largely ignored what happened there. However, the Balkans and Kosovo are part of Europe and therefore more accessible to examination by the international media than conflicts waged in other parts of the world. In contrast to what happened in Rwanda, developments in the Balkans were shaped much more by the actions of major powers.

*Kosovo is on the doorstep of Europe.*

— Tony Blair, 1999

The root cause of the crisis in Kosovo was the collapse of Yugoslavia and the nationalism that engendered it; Kosovo was both a victim and a catalyst of this nationalism and, like Rwanda, suffered from the drive to defend an ethnic group. Kosovo has only recently become a new country. In February 2008, it declared independence, becoming one of the world’s smallest countries in the middle of one of the most prosperous economic and political regions on earth. Kosovo’s pathway to independence caused conflict among some European powers and throws light on another of the major issues causing problems for the contemporary world, namely the exercise of self-determination, which may conflict with the right of the territorial integrity of nation states. In recent times the problems of separatism, whether it be evidenced among the Russians in the Ukraine, Islamic groups within the Philippines, the Basque or Catalans in Spain, Tibetans in China or the Québécois in Canada, each have ramifications for other political entities. So what happened in Kosovo is important: the conflict prompted an intervention by a group of major powers under the umbrella of NATO, ostensibly to prevent ethnic cleansing of one group by another. These actions by the international community – in this case NATO – present a significant contrast to what took place in Rwanda.

Consider why this might have been the case. Ethnicity was certainly a contributing factor. As in Rwanda, there were demographic issues in Kosovo, in this case between majority Serb and minority Albanians. However, the scale of the killing in Kosovo was small compared to what happened in Rwanda. A major reason for this was the geographical locations of the two areas of conflict. As we have seen, Rwanda was, to put it simply, of lesser importance to the major powers than Kosovo and the Balkan region. The inaction of some of those powers in Rwanda did, however, contribute towards different policies being pursued and ultimately towards a more active intervention in Kosovo. How and why did NATO launch its first-ever war – a three-month campaign of advanced air strikes against Serbia, followed by an on-the-ground intervention that resulted in the creation of a newly independent state?
It is necessary to set the story of Kosovo, both in the recent past and the present, within the context of the Balkans and Europe. After this, we need to consider why conflict in this region promoted intervention and what the consequences of this conflict and intervention have been for the modern world.

The Balkan peninsula, showing the states of the former Yugoslavia after 1919
2.3 The decade of change: Yugoslavia, 1980–89

Conceptual understanding

Key concepts
- Change
- Significance
- Consequence

Key question
- How and why did change have an impact on the Yugoslav federation?

There is no doubt Kosovo is a problem of the whole country, a powder keg on which we all sit.

— Milan Kučan, 1987

After Tito died, the system began to fall apart. For Kosovo and the rest of Yugoslavia, this rupture was to show itself almost immediately. "The Yugoslav crisis began in Kosovo, and it will end in Kosovo" is a well-known maxim. In the remaining two decades of the century, the federation fell apart, bringing with it more death and destruction than any had thought imaginable. The break-up of Yugoslavia and the wars that ensued formed the most important conflict for Europe and the West in the period immediately following the Cold War. It was the largest, most destructive conflict Europe had seen since the end of the Second World War, and it brought about the demise of the Yugoslav state and with it the deaths of thousands of people.

Ethnic tensions between Serbs and Kosovar Albanians

The rise of nationalism

The origin of the Yugoslav war and the Kosovo conflict can be traced to the rise of Serb nationalism in the mid-1980s. It began innocuously enough, in retrospect, with a protest over the quality of food in the university canteen in Priština, the capital of Kosovo, in March 1981. Student protests turned into something more widespread, and people began to criticize the authorities. The consequences were to be fundamental in changing the future history of Kosovo and, ultimately, Yugoslavia and the Balkans. The political dispute in Kosovo stemmed from a number of serious social and economic problems that plagued not just the province but the whole of the Yugoslav state. Kosovo's unemployment levels were the highest in the country. As protests in Kosovo spread over the next month, tanks rolled onto the streets and...
the federal government rushed troops to the province, declaring a state of emergency. Official figures initially reported a dozen killed but the true figure could be in the hundreds. The most damaging effect of this political reaction was that it unleashed the latent nationalism among both Kosovar Albanians and Serbs that had been present but suppressed by Tito. Many members of what was to become the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) were put on trial or imprisoned after 1981 and a series of purges of party officials took place in the province. The reaction to the initial protests did much to harm relations between Kosovo and the central government and, in turn, increased the lack of trust and hostility between the two.

By the mid-1980s, a steady stream of propaganda was emerging from the printing presses of Belgrade. Most of it, like all propaganda, was false and loosely based on myth and perceptions. Unfortunately, it had a heavy impact on Serbian public opinion and fanned the flames of nationalist sentiment. Particularly against the Kosovars themselves by the Serbs who lived in that province. Stories of rape, assault and intimidation were fuelled by the reality that, although Serbs still held most of the positions of power in Kosovo, many had chosen to emigrate to other parts of the country. The vast majority of those who left Kosovo were economic migrants; Kosovo was still the poorest of the Yugoslav regions. The political problems in Kosovo were part of a deepening problem of the federal organization as a whole. Slovenia and Croatia, too, were complaining about the weaknesses of the Yugoslav system, but the resentment felt by Serbs who had left Kosovo was used by the nationalists to fuel the fires of discontent against the Kosovars. The special status that Kosovo held in the mythology of the origins of the Serbian state meant that any problems there would resonate loudly among the ultra-nationalists.

Demographics also played a part in the Kosovo situation. Even if census statistics are not very reliable, there were visible trends indicating potential trouble brewing and this, too, played into the hands of the extremists. Just after the Second World War more than 25% of the population of Kosovo had been Serbs and almost 70% Albanians. By the mid-1960s, the percentage of Serbs had dropped to a little over 20% (although both ethnic groups had grown in real terms). By 1981, however, the number of Serbs had dropped in real terms and they constituted only 15% of the total population of Kosovo. Albanians now represented over 77% of the total population and this trend was increasing. Why was this? One of the reasons was the emigration of Serbs from this relatively poor province, but the disparity was also fuelled by the simple fact that Muslim Albanians were having more children than the Christian Orthodox Serbs.

The greater degree of urbanization had led to a steep decline in the birth rate of Serbs everywhere, not just in Kosovo. By the early-1990s, Serbs had the highest rate of abortions in the whole of Europe. There was no conspiracy involved, just basic demographics.

The rise of Slobodan Milošević

It was into such a volatile atmosphere that Slobodan Milošević, an ambitious member of the Serbian Central Committee, emerged. In 1986, he was a determined young communist who had gained a degree in law in Belgrade and then moved into banking. He was a protégé and close friend of Serbian President Ivan
Stambolić, who saw promise in him. In April 1987, Stambolić sent Milošević to Kosovo to deal with some of the problems there. This simple political act was to mark the rise to power of a man who would emerge as the embodiment of the dark side of European rule and become the most dangerous figure in Europe after the Cold War. Milošević rode the wave of Serbian nationalism that had manifested itself through a significant document leaked by a Serbian newspaper the previous year (see below). He was destined to rise to the heights of power in Serbia and ultimately to become the first European head of state to be prosecuted for genocide and war crimes. However, this lay in the future.

In a memorandum of 1984, the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU) had begun to examine the claim that Serbs living outside of Serbia were being subjected to "genocide". The deliberate use of this term raised issues that unleashed the tiger of Serb nationalism and was to prove a key moment in the ultimate destruction of Yugoslavia. The SANU Memorandum, as it became known, claimed that Serbs outside of Serbia and particularly in Kosovo, representing a total of 25% of the Serbian people, were facing extermination at the hands of aggressors. The communist authorities, including Stambolić, condemned the document, warning that its publication and dissemination could bring about the destruction of Yugoslavia.

Milošević declined to condemn the memorandum in public, and a year later, adopted its tone and substance to further his own purpose and to destroy the political career of his mentor, Ivan Stambolić. In April 1987, Milošević was sent to Kosovo on a visit that would change the course of history.

---

**Thinking skills**

You can read the memorandum (and its justification and apologists) at chrtm.gmu.edu/1983/items/show/674.

How does the SANU Memorandum link to the statement made in 1937 by Čubrilović (see page 142)?

---

**Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU) memorandum, September 1986**

SANU was the most prominent academic body in Yugoslavia at the time in question. Dobrica Čosić, called by some the spiritual father of the Serb nation, is considered by many to have been SANU’s most influential member.

The president of Serbia, Ivan Stambolić, asked the academy to investigate the process of reform in Serbia and to come up with some recommendations. He later claims that what the academy produced was completely unexpected, and that he knew nothing about who had written it.

The SANU Memorandum argued that Serbs had been oppressed in Yugoslavia for many years and that in Kosovo they faced genocide. It blamed this on the dysfunctional Yugoslav government. The weakened state of the Serbian economy was also blamed on the 1974 constitution that threatened the very existence of the Serb nation. The memorandum highlighted the fears and tensions that had grown within Yugoslavia as the state began to fragment in the mid-1980s following the death of Tito. The memorandum, its tone clearly shrill and hysterical, was a call to arms by radical Serbs who, it said, were facing their greatest threat since the war against the Turks at the beginning of the 19th century. It stated that "Serbia must not be passive and wait and see what others will say, as it has done in the past". It concluded with the warning that if the Serbs did nothing, their very existence as a nation was under threat.

*All Serbs everywhere saw it (Kosovo) as a battle cry.*

— Ivan Stambolić, 1995

A meeting took place at Kosovo Polje, the field where the Battle of Kosovo took place in 1389. Its name means "Field of Blackbirds" in the Serbian language and it is located just outside the capital of Kosovo, Priština. The meeting saw the presence of Milošević ostensibly to quell any trouble, and to reassure the Serbs living
Slobodan Milošević (1941–2006)

Milošević was Serbia’s party leader and president (1989–97), and pursued Serbian nationalist policies that contributed to the break-up of the Yugoslav Federation. He, more than any other, brought Serbia into a series of conflicts with the other Balkan states. A Serbian politician, known by the nickname of “Sloba”, he dominated events in Yugoslavia in the last decade of the 20th century.

He gained a degree in law from the University of Belgrade in 1964 and entered the business world, eventually becoming head of the state-owned gas company and president of a bank. Both his parents committed suicide, his father in 1962 and his mother in 1974. His wife, Mirjana Marković, who later became known as the Lady Macbeth of Serbia, was a devoted communist and became her husband’s main political adviser. Milošević entered the political scene in 1984 as a protégé of the communist leader in Serbia, Ivan Stambolić. Milošević used Serbian nationalist sentiment to become popular with rank and file Serbs and to overthrow Stambolić in December 1987. As Serbia’s party leader, Milošević demanded that Yugoslavia’s federal government restore full control of the autonomous provinces of Vojvodina and Kosovo to Serbia. In 1989, he replaced Stambolić as president of Yugoslavia and was re-elected again in 1992. He took his country to war with the other provinces in the same year. Milošević became the most dangerous figure in Europe after the Cold War.

Later sections cover the following events in more detail. To summarize here, after the NATO bombing campaign against Serbia in 1999 due to the situation in Kosovo, Milošević lost the presidential election in 2000 and was arrested by the Yugoslav government. In 2001, he was handed over to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) on charges of genocide and crimes against humanity. His trial began in February 2002 but, due to his ill health, it was delayed several times. In March 2006, he was found dead in his prison cell.

there of the government’s concern. From the vantage point of history, we now know that Milošević, the arch-manipulator of the media, had planned for the Belgrade media and television to be there to broadcast events he had orchestrated. Having listened to the Serbian protestors screaming at the police and chanting “murderers”, Milošević delivered the line which would propel him into history and become a rallying call for Serb nationalists in the years to come: “No one should dare to beat you,” he said, staring straight at the cameras. It was theatre in the making.

No one should dare to beat you.

— Slobodan Milošević, 1987

The speech transformed the relationship between Milošević and Stambolić and, three months later, Milošević was ready to make his move against his mentor in another contrived televised episode. In September 1987, in the Central Committee meeting of the Serbian communists, Milošević turned on the Serbian leader with the words, “The fatherland is under threat”. Within days, this appeal to nationalist sentiment in Serbia, latent but always present in the century, was exploited by Milošević to win popularity and to change the landscape of Yugoslavia’s political scene. Stambolić resigned in December 1987 and was replaced by his protégé and his eventual executioner, Milošević. Stambolić later commented, “When somebody looks at your back for twenty-five years, it is understandable that he gets the desire to put a knife in it at some point. Many people warned me but I didn’t acknowledge it” (Silber and Little, 1995: 45).

Constitutional reform in Yugoslavia, 1989–91

The coming to power of Milošević was to change the pace of events in Yugoslavia. Over the next two years, he moved to consolidate his position and foster the flourishing nationalist sentiment that had brought him to power. Never since Tito and the communists took power in 1945 had anyone played the nationalist card so openly, and the media played a powerful role in Milošević’s campaign (as it did in Rwanda). Now that Milošević had emerged as the leader of Serbia, he continued to orchestrate large demonstrations in other areas of Yugoslavia and made Kosovo a leading issue.

The 1974 constitutional reforms had given each republic one vote in the federal presidency; the votes of the six republics, plus the votes (since 1974) of Vojvodina and Kosovo, gave a total of eight. In order to gain control of the Yugoslav state, Milošević was to turn firstly on the two autonomous provinces of Vojvodina and Kosovo, and then on Montenegro. He would replace their leaders with his allies to create a major voting block in the Yugoslav presidency in order to gain
control of Yugoslavia itself. In the summers of 1988 and 1989, the Serbs organized what were called "meetings of truth", which many compared to religious revival meetings. Milošević was the evangelist, the man with the message that he would bring salvation to the Serbs.

In October 1988, the leadership of Vojvodina was ousted by a stage-managed campaign organized by a follower of Milošević named Miloslav Šolević, who had arranged the pivotal meeting in Kosovo Polje the year before. Rallies were arranged to demonstrate against the Vojvodina leaders, who responded to the demonstrators by giving them bread and yogurt. In return, yoghurt containers were thrown at the parliament building by the angry protesters, lending the name "yogurt revolution" to the event. Simple slogans such as "Kosovo is Serbia; Vojvodina is Serbia; Together we are stronger" were cleverly used by supporters of Milošević. Next, the Serbian nationalists turned on Montenegro and, in January 1989, Yugoslavia’s smallest republic, ripe for unrest, succumbed to the same fate as Vojvodina. The old leaders, who were disorganized and incompetent, resigned and were replaced by men loyal to Milošević. Kosovo was to be the next target.

In November 1988, the leaders of Kosovo’s Communist Party had been dismissed and Belgrade announced that it was going to strip Kosovo of the autonomy it had gained under the 1974 constitution. Two Albanian Kosovar leaders, Jashari and Vilaši, were removed from the party committee by Belgrade, and this provoked demonstrations by the miners of Trepcă. One of the richest mining companies in Yugoslavia, Trepcă, yielded 70% of the country’s wealth. The Romans mined there and it was the most important source of lead for the Germans in the Second World War. The miners marched to Priština. The Serb media dismissed these actions as counter-revolutionary moves and Serb nationalists organised a massive rally to be held in Belgrade. In the “meeting of all meetings”, Milošević spoke to an estimated 1 million people, telling them, "Kosovo is the pure centre of its history, culture and memory. Every nation has one love that eternally warms its heart. For Serbia it is Kosovo. That is why Kosovo will remain in Serbia" (Silber and Little, 1995: 63).

The people have happened!

— Slobodan Milošević, slogan

Thousands of workers had been brought in from nearby companies and state workers in Belgrade had been given the day off. The Serbian people loved Milošević. A national awakening was propelling him to the height of his power at the expense, ultimately, of the Yugoslav state. A week later, the federal parliament adopted the constitutional changes and Kosovo effectively voted for its own dissolution as an autonomous unit.

The impact on the other republics was significant; the bullying tactics of Serbia frightened the others, particularly Slovenia, which was the most developed of the Yugoslav states. In the capital Ljubljana, people protested in support of the Trepcă miners in Kosovo, incensing many Serbs. Meanwhile, Milošević pushed ahead with his proposals to strip Kosovo of its
autonomy and, with the help of Yugoslav army tanks and police deployed across Kosovo, a new constitution was declared. On 28 March 1989, as people continued to protest in Kosovo, Serbs turned out to celebrate the creation of a whole Serbian state.

By abolishing the autonomy of both Vojvodina and Kosovo, and replacing the leaders in Montenegro with its own followers, Serbia now controlled four out of the eight votes in the federal presidency. Milan Kučan, party head in Slovenia, said this was “turning Yugoslavia into Serbo-slapia” (Davis, 2013: 31). Milošević seemed unstoppable.

**The Gazimestan speech**

**The anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo, 28 June 1989**

On 28 June 1989, the Serbs celebrated the 600th anniversary of the battle fought in Kosovo in 1389 between the Turks and the Serbs. The date of 28 June reverberates throughout the history of Serbia and the Balkans: it is also the date upon which the Bosnian Serb assassin, Gavrilo Princip, shot dead Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria in 1914, bringing about the First World War six weeks later. However, for the Serbian nationalists, there can be no more significant date than 28 June 1389 when, on Kosovo Polje (the “Field of Blackbirds”), the smaller army of Christian Serbs fought a much larger force of Ottoman Turks and were beaten. The importance of the battle in Serbian consciousness is impossible to overestimate. One historian has noted, “The story of the battle of Kosovo has become a totem or talisman of Serbian identity … this event has a status unlike anything else in the history of the Serbs” (Malcolm, 2002: 58).

When Milošević stepped onto that field, to which he was flown by helicopter, he was well aware of the significance of the event. He had an audience of up to 1 million Serbs. Important figures there to witness his speech included the hierarchy of the Orthodox Church and, uncomfortably for many, the leaders of the other Yugoslav states. It was high drama.

**The Battle of Kosovo, June 1389**

The facts as they are known to us tell that a smaller Serbian army led by Stefan Lazar faced the might of a large Turkish army under the command of Sultan Murad I. Both leaders were killed and there were heavy losses on both sides, with the Turks holding the battlefield afterwards.

The Serbs were to acknowledge they were vassals of the Turks and the descendants of both leaders went on to govern their respective countries. Murad I is the only sultan known to have been killed in battle. Other than that, the battle of Kosovo has become embalmed in myth, particularly for the Serbs.

**Research and thinking skills**

Read other accounts of the 1389 Battle of Kosovo and answer the following questions:

1. Who killed the sultan and how did he die?
2. Was it a crushing victory for the Turks or did the Serbs, in their stubborn resistance, hold up the advance of Islam into Europe for almost a century?
3. Was Stefan Lazar offered a choice of an earthly kingdom or a heavenly covenant?
Imagine a part of the USA, from which the USA started – where is the cradle of your history? This is Kosovo for Serbia.

— Novak Djokovic, 2011

What Milošević said on Kosovo Polje in 1989 was not in itself inflammatory, and defendants of the Serbian leader have claimed that, although it was a speech ringing with nationalism, the occasion demanded it. Milošević began by referring to the historical uncertainty about the battle 600 years earlier:

Today, it is difficult to say what is the historical truth about the Battle of Kosovo and what is legend … It is difficult to say today whether the Battle of Kosovo was a defeat or a victory for the Serbian people, whether thanks to it we fell into slavery or we survived in this slavery.

— Milošević, 1989

However, critics of the Serbian president have pointed to allusions he made in the speech to his willingness to fight for Serbia’s position.

Six centuries later, now, we are being again engaged in battles and are facing battles. They are not armed battles, although such things cannot be excluded yet.

— Milošević, 1989

1989: The year of change

The reaction of the other republics to this manifestation of Serb nationalism and the bullying tactics of Milošević were of great concern. In Kosovo itself, in 1989, the protests continued but were dealt with by the forces of law and order. Later in the year, Slovenia made a determined effort to secure its own position as Yugoslavia’s richest republic by changing its constitution, arguing that if the Serbs could amend theirs, the Slovenes could do the same. The divisions in the Yugoslav Federation were beginning to widen.

The events in Yugoslavia were mirrored in an even more impressive way in much of Eastern Europe towards the end of this momentous year. The flow of asylum seekers out of the Soviet bloc countries and into Austria and West Germany signalled the break-up of the Soviet Union; and, in November, the Berlin Wall, the greatest symbol of communist oppression, came tumbling down as thousands of people crossed from East to West. In that sense, what was happening in Yugoslavia was a sideshow. Nevertheless, as Slovenia stood up to what it saw as Serbian domination, Croatia, too, began to take sides, while in Kosovo the Albanians watched and waited. The growing conflict broke to the surface ostensibly as a trade war and the Croatian leaders, their old rivals, came to the fore in the meeting of what was to be the last Party Congress of Yugoslavia in January 1990 in Belgrade. As communism in the rest of Europe seemed to be dying, in Yugoslavia the gulf between the sides had become irreparable. The three most powerful republics – Serbia on one side, and Slovenia and Croatia on the other – confronted one another. The delegates from Slovenia and Croatia walked out of the Party Congress and Tito’s Yugoslavia, which had held together for almost 40 years, appeared to be breaking apart.