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Kosovo: History of a Human Rights Crisis

Part one of a two part series on the Kosovo Crisis

by Sarah Aird*

On September 26, 1998, Serbian police killed 18 members of the ethnic Albanian Deliaj family in Kosovo, a region in Serbia, Yugoslavia's dominant republic. Besnik Deliaj, four years old and one of the few survivors, was so traumatized that he now tries to do himself physical harm.

Besnik's story illustrates the psychological damage that many ethnic Albanian Kosovars suffer after 11 months of persecution by the Yugoslav military and Serb police forces. In February 1998, the president of Yugoslavia, Slobodan Milosević, initiated a campaign to crush the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), an ethnic Albanian guerrilla movement fighting to achieve independence for the Yugoslav province of Kosovo. In Kosovo, over 750 civilians have been killed and as many as 300,000 others displaced since January 1998.

Ethnic Albanians make up roughly 90% of the approximately 2,000,000 inhabitants of Kosovo. Most speak Albanian and practice Islam. There are also approximately 200,000 ethnic Serbs living in Kosovo, who speak Serbo-Croatian and are Eastern Orthodox Christians. According to historian Noel Malcolm, the widespread belief that the conflict in Kosovo results from long-standing ethnic hatreds between these two groups is not entirely true. Rather, historical ethnic tensions have been exacerbated by politicians, especially President Milosević. To better understand the contemporary political situation in Kosovo, it is essential to acknowledge the histories of the ethnic Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo and their historical relationship to one another.

Historical Origins

Ethnic Albanians in Kosovo are probably descendants of either the Thracians or Illyrians. Around the sixth century, Slavic tribes, predecessors of today's Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs, invaded and displaced the ancestors of ethnic Albanians, forcing them to move south to what today is Albania.

Between 1180 and 1200, Serbs took advantage of the Byzantium Empire's internal disorder and conquered Kosovo. Kosovo became the cultural and administrative center of the Serbian state for 200 years, during which Serbs constructed churches and monasteries in Kosovo. In the centuries since then, these structures have come to symbolize Serbian identity and history and are one reason that the area is so important to Serbs.

The Ottoman Turks conquered the region in the 14th century, at the battle of

Kosovo Polje in 1389, and ruled Kosovo for 400 years. Under Ottoman rule, Muslim ethnic Albanians were generally privileged over Serbian Christians, who were conscripted and forced to pay higher taxes. Serbs have portrayed this period as a time when they suffered discrimination and ethnic Albanians did not. The Ottomans, however, also oppressed ethnic Albanians by forbidding the Albanian language in schools and in public.

The Serbian state gained autonomy during the 19th century. The legend about the sacrifices made by Serbs during the battle of Kosovo Polje encouraged the populace to recall a glorious Serbian state. This helped to unify the Serbian population against the dominant Turks, and, in 1878, Serbia and Montenegro were born.

Ottoman rule over Kosovo continued until 1912. Serbia and Montenegro ultimately defeated the Turks and liberated Kosovo from Ottoman rule. By 1918, after the end of World War I, Kosovo became a part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. In 1919, ethnic Albanians rebelled against the kingdom, which suppressed the revolt; widespread atrocities occurred in the process.

In an attempt to suppress any future unrest, the government initiated a colonization program between 1918 and 1941, passing laws offering land and tax exemptions for Serbs willing to move to Kosovo. The program's primary purpose was to alter the ethnic composition of the Kosovo population by increasing the percentage of Serbs in strategic locations. The process resulted in confiscation of some Albanian-owned lands and led to tension in the region between the new settlers and long-time residents.

In 1929, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes became the country of Yugoslavia and was divided into nine governorships. Kosovo was divided among three of these regions. Although Kosovars were recognized as Yugoslav citizens, the ethnic Albanian population did not enjoy all the rights of ordinary Yugoslavs. Yugoslavia passed laws that either closed or converted to Serbian-only education schools that were originally designed for the ethnic Albanian minority. By 1930, almost no Albanian-language schools remained in Kosovo, nor were there any Albanian-language publications to be found. Despite being a signatory to the 1919 Treaty on the Protection of Minorities, Yugoslavia maintained an official policy that denied the existence of national minorities within its territorial boundaries by claiming that ethnic Albanians

were Albanian-speaking Serbs, rather than a separate group.

The situation worsened during the 1930s as the confiscation of ethnic Albanian-owned land became far more common and general discrimination more rampant. During this time, the Yugoslav and Turkish governments even began to discuss the possible deportation of as many as 200,000 ethnic Albanians to Turkey.

World War II and its Aftermath

During World War II, the ethnic Albanian population, motivated by revenge and a desire to regain their confiscated lands, took advantage of the 1941 invasion of Kosovo by Axis forces to attack Serbian villages within Kosovo. By the end of the war, tens of thousands of Serb colonists lost their land and were expelled from Kosovo.

Albanians became the majority group within Kosovo partly due to the expulsion of Serbs. Also, because Kosovo suffered economic underdevelopment, many ethnic Serbs and Montenegrins living in Kosovo immigrated to other areas of Yugoslavia beginning in the early 1960s. Finally, because Kosovar ethnic Albanians lived in a primarily agricultural society where the tradition of large families continues, they had, and continue to have, one of the highest birth rates in Europe. Serb political and social leaders exaggerated the numbers of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo to portray Kosovar Serbs as victims of ethnic hatred, asserting that they were persecuted by ethnic Albanians in a campaign of ethnic cleansing.

Tito in Power

During World War II, Joseph Broz Tito came to power in the Communist Party of Yugoslavia and eventually became Party Secretary General and the leader of Yugoslavia.

After the war, the 1946 Yugoslav Constitution provided that Yugoslavia would be made up of six republics: Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Slovenia. Kosovo became an Autonomous Region within the Republic of Serbia. According to the Serbian Constitution, passed one year after the Yugoslav Constitution, Kosovo had the right to direct its own cultural and economic development and was responsible for protecting its citizens' rights.

This was a significant achievement for ethnic Albanians in Kosovo because they were included as minority representatives in the federal government of Yugoslavia and had a degree of self-determination.

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During this era, members of the Communist Party, both ethnic Albanians and Serbs, received privileges not available to non-members.

In the early period of Tito's reign, however, ethnic Albanians in Kosovo continued to experience political and economic discrimination. A particular blow against ethnic Albanians occurred in 1948, when Tito and the leader of Albania, Enver Hoxha, ended their once amicable and cooperative relationship. Ethnic Albanians within Kosovo were now seen as potential traitors.

Around this time, Tito's government encouraged ethnic Albanians to identify themselves as "Turks," a word used as a general term to mean Muslims. In 1953, when Yugoslavia signed a new treaty with Turkey, it included a provision allowing for the emigration of Yugoslav "Turks" to Turkey. Approximately 100,000 ethnic Albanians from the Kosovo region emigrated to Turkey between 1945 and 1966.

In the economic realm, employment discrimination left ethnic Albanians with few opportunities. Investment funds did not reach the region until 1957, and most of these funds were used to support industries that were capital-intensive and did not create many jobs. Ethnic Albanians also continued to have limited access to decent educational resources.

In 1963, however, Yugoslavia adopted a new constitution, which made Kosovo an Autonomous Province. This new status allowed the region greater decision-making powers. In the 1970s, Tito's policies continued to become more favorable to ethnic Albanians within Kosovo. In 1974, Yugoslavia adopted another new constitution, which entitled Kosovo to participate in the federal government, have its own representative on the rotating federal presidency, elect parliamentarians in the federal legislature, and develop its own constitution.

Kosovo Post-Tito

After Tito's death in 1980, the fragile coexistence between ethnic Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo began to break apart. During the early 1980s, ethnic Albanians encountered high levels of unemployment, while Serbs and Montenegrins, approximately 15% of Kosovo's population at the time, held roughly 30% of all state jobs. In 1981, ethnic Albanian students in Kosovo led a series of protests that stemmed from complaints about poor university conditions but turned into broad-based demonstrations against the poor socio-economic conditions for ethnic Albanians in Kosovo. The Communist Party leadership portrayed the demonstrations as the work of counter-revolutionaries and purged over 500 members based on this suspicion.

These events coincided with a government policy to free the press after years of Communist-imposed censorship. Writers and intellectuals from various disciplines and all ethnic groups produced highly charged works interpreting history and contemporary politics in ethnically biased manners. Both sides presented themselves as victims. Ethnic Albanians pointed to discriminatory practices and the fact that Kosovo was still not recognized as a republic within Yugoslavia. They also focused on their status as a minority population within Yugoslavia, downplaying their majority status within Kosovo. Serbs, on the other hand, decried their minority position within Kosovo, ignoring their dominant position within the region. Ultimately, the concerns of each group contained kernels of truth that prevented their fears from being dismissed as groundless rhetoric. Fear, paranoia, and actual events worked together to heighten the atmosphere of mistrust.

Recent Events

In 1987, Milosević, an ambitious young Communist Party official, was sent to a rally in Kosovo. He gave an extemporaneous speech in defense of Kosovar Serbs' rights that captured the crowd and caused his political career to be intimately linked with the future of Kosovo. Exploiting this success, he continued to attend rallies focused on Kosovo and his popularity soared.

In 1989, as part of the burgeoning Serbian nationalist movement, the Serbian assembly proposed amendments to the Serbian Constitution that would ensure greater Serb control over Kosovo. According to the constitution, Serbia could propose such amendments but the Kosovo assembly had to approve them. In March, when the Kosovo assembly met to discuss the proposed changes, tanks and armored cars surrounded the meeting place, forcing the assembly to accept the amendments. These changes severely limited Kosovo's autonomy, giving Serbia control over Kosovo's police, civil defense, and court system, and leaving it to Serbia to determine Kosovo's economic, social, education, and language policies. Protests erupted within Kosovo, where a state of emergency was declared and troops were sent to quell unrest in the region.

Also in 1989, Kosovar ethnic Albanians became the target of discriminatory laws and policies at all levels of society. The Serbian assembly passed a series of measures known collectively as the "Programme for the Realization of Peace and Prosperity in Kosovo." Under these laws, the government again encouraged Serb colonization of the region and prohibited ethnic Albanians from buying or selling property without government permission.

Family planning programs targeting the ethnic Albanian population were created to lower their birth rates and diminish the size of their population. A new labor law made possible the expulsion of over 80,000 ethnic Albanians from their jobs, and ethnic Albanians were encouraged to find work in other regions of Yugoslavia. In short, the intent of Serb government policy was to create such untenable conditions for the Kosovar Albanians that it was actually a policy of indirect expulsion.

Serb rhetoric and actions regarding Kosovo had a strong impact on other groups as well. Croat and Slovene leaders grew wary of Milosević's nationalist sentiments. In response, they developed their own nationalist politics, which eventually contributed to the final break-up of Yugoslavia.

Moderate ethnic Albanian leaders continued to demand the formation of a Kosovo Republic within Yugoslavia and, in protest against the Serb and Yugoslav governments, refused to recognize any laws that these governments passed that were contrary to their goals. Instead, a new Kosovar constitution and a popularly elected shadow government formed in 1990. Eventually, this body administered its own school system and provided other services to the ethnic Albanian population in Kosovo. The moderate leaders followed a three-prong approach in their efforts to achieve autonomy for Kosovo within Yugoslavia. First, they wanted to prevent violent revolt by ethnic Albanians in Kosovo. Second, they sought cooperation from the international community in their efforts to achieve a Kosovo Republic. As the Croats and Slovenes began to fight for their own independence, the ethnic Albanian leadership shifted from pursuing a goal of autonomy within Yugoslavia to a goal of independence for Kosovo. Third, the leadership continued to assert the illegitimacy of Serbian rule.

Conclusion

It is apparent that both of the major ethnic groups in Kosovo have painful historical memories. In addition, modern-day politicians have compounded these problems by using discriminatory policies to heighten ethnic tensions rooted in historical memories. Discriminatory policies have perpetuated the ethnic tensions in Kosovo, leading to the current crisis. ☉

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