

War and Peace in Kosovo: Seven Relevant Historical Facts (published as ‘**History plays a role in Kosovo conflict**’) by Osvaldo Croci and Brian K. MacLean, Laurentian University

Before the death in 1980 of Marshal Tito, a founder and leader of the non-aligned movement, it used to be said that Yugoslavia had six federated states, five nations, four languages, three religions, two alphabets, and only one true Yugoslav: Marshal Tito. It would be nice if we could ignore the complicated history of the region, and even nicer if the peoples of the region could ignore the grievances they nurse from it, but for understanding how the civil war erupted in Kosovo and for thinking about how it might be ended, some history is essential. Here are seven historical facts, each accompanied by a statement highlighting an aspect or two of its relevance. This summary focuses on understanding the increasingly ignored Serbian perspective.

1. In the early part of this millennium, Kosovo was the heartland of the Serbian kingdoms but this changed in 1389 when Serbia, at the battle of Kosovo, was defeated at the hands of the Ottoman (Turkish Muslim) empire. Ottoman rule also changed the demography of Kosovo with Serbs moving out and Albanians moving in. Despite these changes, Kosovo, home to countless Serbian orthodox churches and monasteries, retained a central place in Serbian national mythology. Relevance: Serb attachment to Kosovo bears similarities to that of Israelis to Jerusalem.

2. Serbia progressively extricated itself from Ottoman rule during the 19th century and reacquired Kosovo as a result of the Balkan wars (1912-1913) which marked the retreat of the Turks from Europe. The Serbs who lived in Kosovo felt they had been liberated while the Albanians, who had embraced the Muslim religion under Ottoman rule, saw this event as a conquest preventing them from joining the newly constituted state of Albania. Relevance: Kosovo tends to be perceived as an occupied land by Albanians in Kosovo and in Albania proper. Turkey and many other Muslim countries (despite three Muslim countries having been objects of U.S. bombing within the past eight months) have lined up behind NATO bombing, while Serbs, Macedonians, Bulgarians, and Greeks see themselves as sharing a common religion (Orthodox, also shared by the Russians) and a common history of Muslim oppression.

3. At the end of WWI, Serbia joined Croatia and Slovenia (previously part of the Austro-Hungarian empire) to form, under a Serbian dynasty, what came to be known as the kingdom of Yugoslavia. The inter-war years were marked by uneasy cohabitation between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo. Many Serbs migrated in, but the Albanians increased their numbers thanks to a higher birth rate. Occasional revolts were put down by the Serbs. Relevance: There is little tradition of ethnic harmony in Kosovo, unlike other parts of Yugoslavia. Serbs and Albanians (as in Quebec, to give a Canadian analogy) have shared concerns about relative population growth, as have the Slavs in Macedonia, where large numbers of Albanian Kosovars have sought refuge.

4. During WWII, many Serbs were expelled when Kosovo briefly became part of an Italian-controlled greater Albania. The Serbs under the leadership of Croatian-Slovenian Marshal Tito were the main force behind the liberation of the country from German and Italian occupation, in a war in which Yugoslavia lost 1.7 million people, one-tenth of its population. Yugoslavia was the only country to defeat the Axis without direct help from the Russian or Allied armies, and in 1946, under the leadership of war hero Marshal Tito, it was established as a socialist, federal Republic. Relevance: The Serbs are extremely proud of their heroic struggle against the Nazis, and regard themselves, as do other Europeans, as capable of fierce resistance should NATO decide to send ground troops to Serbia.

5. As a result of a constitutional reform, in 1974 Kosovo was granted greater autonomy, almost equivalent of that of the other six federated states. By 1987, however, the Serbian minority within Kosovo began to denounce oppression at the hands of the Albanian majority, accusing Albanians of seizing Serb land, attacking Orthodox Slav churches, knifing Serbian boys, and raping Serbian girls. In March 1989, Serbia stripped Kosovo of its independence. Relevance: The stated rationale for Serbia's clampdown on Kosovo, a key decision in the build-up to civil war, was similar to the rationale offered by NATO for the bombing of Yugoslavia today: protection of an oppressed minority under violent attack. Given the information available to the average Serb in Serbia, Serbia's clampdown on Kosovo must look mild and legal compared to NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia.

6. In 1991, Slovenia and Croatia declared independence. So did Kosovo under the leadership of Ibrahim Rugova and his Democratic League of Kosovo. Rugova, however, refused to take up arms against the Serbs to give any meaning to the declaration of independence, conscious that Kosovo could not resist a military attack by Serbia. Only Albania recognized the new state. In 1995, Albanian Kosovars were disappointed that the Dayton agreements, which ended the Bosnian war that had pitted Serbs, Croats and Muslims against each other, did not also take into consideration the fate of Kosovo. Rugova's strategy of peaceful resistance came under the increasing criticism of more radical Kosovar Albanian factions, and the Kosovar Liberation Army (KLA, formed in 1993) was able to seize the right to represent Albanian Kosovars. Relevance: The Albanian Kosovars have had democratic representatives but NATO is now in the uncomfortable position of siding with an armed group that has employed terrorist tactics and has allegedly derived some of its funding from drug-trafficking.

7. In 1996, the KLA began to make the news, first claiming responsibility for the bombing of police targets. By July-August 1998, the KLA came to control about 40 percent of Kosovo's territory. The Serbs sent the army in and retaliated against KLA attacks, often against civilians accused of helping or abetting the KLA. The flood of refugees suddenly increased. Relevance: The formation and activities of the KLA marked a qualitative shift in the Kosovar-Albanian struggle for independence, resulted in stronger Serbian repression, and led to a full-scale civil war.