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Serbs

Profile

Serbs are the largest minority group in Kosovo. In 2005 there were an estimated 140,000 Serbs remaining in Kosovo—down from around 300,000 in 1999. They speak Serbian and most are Christian Orthodox. Most Serbs live in areas of compact settlement.

Historical context

Serbs have lived in Kosovo since the 11th century. From about 1200 to 1455 Kosovo was part of the Serbian Kingdom. This is when some important Christian Orthodox sites were built in Kosovo. In 1389 the battle of Kosovo Polje between a Christian Orthodox army led by a Serbian feudal prince and the Ottoman army took place. Although Albanians fought in the armies on both sides of the battle, and historians debate the battle's outcome and importance, it has passed into Serbian mythology as a heroic defeat for the Serbs, who in the telling were martyred in a decisive battle for Ottoman dominance of the region. The Ottomans finally conquered Kosovo in 1455, and it remained under Ottoman rule for 450 years. During this time, most of the population of Kosovo became Muslim.

During the late 19th century, a time of many national movements in Europe, the Christian Orthodox mythology surrounding the 1389 battle of Kosovo Polje was re-interpreted from religious into ethno-national—Serbian—history. In 1912 Kosovo was conquered and divided between Serbia, Montenegro and Bulgaria. The largest part went to Serbia and became part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (later Yugoslavia) following World War I. Kosovo was the poorest area of the Kingdom, with the ethnic Albanian population much poorer than the Serbs and Montenegrins who were supported from Belgrade. During this time, Belgrade expelled 45,000 Albanians from Kosovo and replaced them with 60,000 Serb settlers. During World War II, Italy ruled Kosovo as part of greater Albania. Many Serbs were killed and fled.

Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

Under Josip Broz Tito's Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), power gradually devolved to the authorities of Kosovo, although it formally remained a part of the Socialist Republic of Serbia. The Serb percentage of Kosovo's population went into steady decline after the war (dropping from over 23 per cent to ten per cent between 1961 and 1991). Crime and discrimination directed at Serbs accounted for some of this, but certainly did not amount to 'genocide', as some Serb nationalists would later claim. Rather, while Kosovo Albanian birth rates remained steady, Serb birth rates declined, and many Serbs emigrated for economic reasons. As Albanians formed a growing majority, they demanded greater rights. In an attempt to defuse national movements, Tito approved a new constitution in 1974 that granted substantial rights of self-government to Kosovo, sharpening Serb feelings of resentment and victimization. Education was increasingly conducted in Albanian, and knowledge of both Albanian and Serbian languages became required for state employment. As Kosovo's economy crumbled over the course of the 1980s, greater competition for any kind of employment only exacerbated the situation.

The rise of Serbian nationalism

In 1986 the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts published a memorandum that laid the intellectual groundwork for the rise of Serbian nationalism, rooted in historical mythology surrounding Kosovo and themes of victimization, including vastly overblown claims that Kosovo Albanians were continuing a long-standing campaign against Serbs amounting to ‘physical, political, juridical and cultural genocide’. In April 1987, the head of the Serbian Communist Party, Slobodan Milosevic, visited Kosovo—ostensibly to try to calm Serb protests against Albanian rule. Instead he broke the ruling party’s taboo against nationalism, vowing to Serb protestors, ‘No one should dare to beat you.’ Hailed as a hero, Milosevic harnessed Serb resentment to manoeuvre his way to the Serbian presidency. In 1989, the Serbian parliament revoked the right of self-government in Kosovo and Vojvodina, and Milosevic’s supporters took control of the republican government of Montenegro, giving Milosevic fully half of the votes in the federal presidency. In Kosovo, ethnic Albanians were fired from the state administration. Kosovo remained relatively calm from 1991 to 1995, as war devoured Croatia and Bosnia and Hercegovina. Kosovo Albanians largely adhered to the principles of non-violence espoused by their leader, Ibrahim Rugova, and Washington—concerned about a regional conflagration in the southern Balkans—threatened Milosevic with military intervention if he launched war in Kosovo.

As Serbs refocused on economic problems in the late 1990s and opposition to Milosevic grew, he once again turned to Kosovo in order to rekindle nationalist sentiment. In response to isolated attacks on Serb police and civilians in the province by a small band of guerrillas calling itself the ‘Kosovo Liberation Army’ (KLA), in February 1998 Milosevic ordered reprisal attacks on ethnic Albanian villages. As the violence escalated and western states showed no signs of intervening, Milosevic grew bolder and broadened his assault on Kosovo Albanian civilians, as well as guerrillas. As Albanian deaths and displacement mounted, the community embraced the KLA in ever greater numbers. The strengthening KLA posed a very real and increasing threat to minority Serbs in Kosovo, which in turn provided Milosevic with additional fodder for war propaganda at home.

NATO intervention

Amid mounting atrocities, NATO intervened in March 1999, bombing Serb targets in Kosovo and Serbia proper. The NATO bombing stopped in June 1999 following an agreement with Milosevic that resulted in withdrawal of Serb forces and installation of NATO peacekeepers along with UN administrators.

By the end of the conflict, many radicalized ethnic Albanians viewed the KLA not only as a force for liberation, but one for revenge. Ethnic violence against Serb communities erupted, and NATO peacekeeping forces (KFOR) proved incapable or unwilling to provide adequate security to targeted minorities. Serbs withdrew into increasingly homogenous ethnic enclaves. The area north of the Ibar River became the largest of these, and the Belgrade government maintained strong influence there. Straddling the Ibar, the town of Mitrovica became a festering flashpoint, its communities separated by heavily armed KFOR checkpoints. March 2004 saw a resurgence of ethnic violence. Protests against the killing of three ethnic Albanian children escalated into an anti-Serb pogrom and clashes with KFOR and UN police. The violence in 2004 claimed the lives of over 28 civilians and one KFOR soldier, and wounded hundreds; 3,600 Serbs were displaced, and 30 Serb churches destroyed along with 200 Serb houses. Violence flared again in June 2005, albeit on a smaller scale, with coordinated attacks against the international presence in Kosovo.

The unresolved issue of Kosovo’s final status has fuelled the violence. Kosovo Serbs insist that Kosovo should remain a part of Serbia, and that the principle of state sovereignty should prevail. Kosovo Albanians say that after the violence of 1998-1999, they can never again be ruled from Belgrade, even with substantial autonomy, and are unanimous in their demand for full independence.

Current Issues

Serbs in Kosovo today lack physical security and consequently, freedom of movement. They have no realistic possibility to return to their homes outside compact areas of Serb settlement, to which their freedom to speak Serbian practice their Christian Orthodox religion is also restricted. They have poor access to public services, including education and justice. They face economic exclusion, including lack of access to employment, and limited political participation. Issues relating to the negotiations on the status of Kosovo are crucial for all communities, including the Serbs. Parallel Serb administration operates in Kosovo's compact Serb settlements; some political leaders are heavily influenced by Belgrade, which in September 2007 called on Kosovo Serbs to boycott parliamentary elections in the disputed territory scheduled for November 2007.

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