

The Kosovo Crisis

Origins and Consequences

by Herman Wagenbichler

Kosovo? What does Kosovo mean?" Ten years ago only a few Europeans could have answered that question. This is not surprising. Kosovo, the small southern province of Serbia was of little interest to the average European -- a region lacking any spectacular landscapes or architectural gems, not a destination for international tourism. The area is completely mountainous except for one fertile plain named "Kossovo polye" (literally "Blackbird's Field") where the Serbs were defeated by the Turks in a murderous battle, on St. Vitus Day (in Serbian: Vidovdan), June 28, 1389, marking the end of mediaeval Serbia.

When the Serbs, as one of the last waves of Europe's great migrations, entered the Balkan Peninsula about 600 B.C., it was the Byzantine civilization and Eastern Orthodox Church which were responsible for their development. After long periods of constant struggle, with wild campaigns in ever-changing alliances, Prince Stepan Dusan proclaimed himself czar and established a Greater Serbia including Bosnia, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Albania and parts of Greece. This expansion ended rapidly when Stepan died -- under his weak and selfish successors all the glory vanished and thirty years later -- on Kossovo polye - the dreams of Greater Serbia were suffocated in blood and tears.

What followed was the Turkish yoke -- a much milder yoke than Christian propaganda led us to believe. The Turks rarely intervened in local affairs, were tolerant of religion, and seldom attacked their subjects' properties. What they demanded was loyalty (rebellions were dealt with promptly and bloodily), modest tributes, and the so-

called "boy tax" by which, at certain intervals, a number of Christian youngsters were sent to Istanbul to be indoctrinated in Islam and recruited for service in the elite troops of "yeni ceri" or "new forces." These were ill-famed in all Christian armies because of their fanatic fighting spirit. The most gifted of them could make career at the Court or in administration. Many a pasha or vezir had been sired by Christian parents.

This Turkish yoke was Serbia's fate for more than four centuries. Only the Orthodox church survived (thanks to Turkish tolerance) and it was the Church that preserved the nation's identity and pride. It was also the Church which created the

"myth of Vidovdan -- the grand, heroic Serbian nation, fighting for the true faith, being left alone by other Christian nations to fight the infidel in the face of overwhelming superior strength. Such a nation could only be defeated by treason -- and, unfortunately, there is evidence that treachery indeed played a role in the battle of "Kossovo polye." One could hardly invent more ingredients for a national legend so that a national trauma becomes a national institution of indomitable pride.

After endless altercations with Turkey and constantly supported by Russia, to whom it was connected by Eastern Orthodoxy and pan-Slavism as well as mutual hostility toward the Turks, Serbia achieved independence in 1878. This was only the northern part of the country. Kosovo was added 35 years later. The realization of a Greater Serbia (Yugoslavia) had to wait through more wars culminating with World War I, the trigger for which was the assassination at Sarajevo of Austria's "Successor to the Throne" Archduke Ferdinand by a young Serb fanatic on the anniversary of Vidovdan, June 28, 1914.

The Serbia of 1878, newly independent and soon to be a monarchy, was kingdom of small-farm peasants. Gradually, in the North, along the borders with Western Europe, the Serbs started energetic efforts to overcome backwardness and poverty. This brought about a migration to the North toward the magnet of prosperity, leaving Kosovo to be emptied of ethnic Serbs.

Herman Wagenbichler, a graduate of the Karl Franzens University Medical School in Graz, Austria, has had a life-long interest in the culture and politics of the Balkans. He lived in Slovenia between 1942 and 1945 and has frequently visited Yugoslavia.

From early times there had been Albanians in Kosovo, especially in the South. Held in contempt because of their Muslim religion and their poverty, many a Serb was glad to “sell his hat or his field” to an Albanian neighbor as he migrated north. And here begins what the Serbs call the “Albanian aggression.” The Albanians took over village after village, the flat land and the towns. Then, after World War II, the birthrate of the Serbs (along with that of much of Europe) declined dramatically. Meanwhile, the fertility rate of the Kosovo Albanians remained the highest in all Europe, and is still in the top ten in the world. The Serbs perceive this as a dangerous and irresistible form of aggression, without noise or bloodshed.

By 1990, when Milosovic abolished the autonomy of the province of Kosovo (which had been ceded to it by Tito — a Croat, not a Serb), the Albanian population had increased to 90 percent. Whenever there had been hope of a peaceful arrangement between the ethnic groups it had been destroyed in later years by terror, suppression and humiliation.

In the fall of 1998 the Albanian resistance turned from passive to active. The discipline of their passivity had been admired in the West but brought about further Serbian contempt.

The positions of both sides are clear — the Albanians demand their independence in close association, if not union, with Albania proper. Any convivium with Serbia or Serbians seems unimaginable.

On the Serbian side there is no doubt that Kosovo, “Serbia's Holy Heart,” has to be maintained at any price. No Serb government could ever dare give it up. As for the Albanian majority, the intruders must disappear, be it by flight across the mountains to Albania, or by “ethnic purification as was carried out a few years ago in Bosnia.

The position of the Western powers was ambiguous from the very beginning. Yugoslavia, just like Czechoslovakia in being an invention of the peacemakers after World War I, was considered a bastion of stability on the Balkan Peninsula and a reliable anti-German fortress in a region full of tensions and imponderables -- not forgetting that the Serbs had proved to be allies of remarkable fighting strength.

But here also we have the Kosovo Albanians, a strange, half-exotic people. And they are Muslims. In the

eyes of Europe, an independent Kosovo would be, after Bosnia, a second Islamic state. There are also growing Albanian minorities in Macedonia and Greece. It could mean a chain of new troubles.

Anglo-Saxon countries in general can hardly reckon with nationalistic conflicts with any kind of sympathy and understanding. The West thinks now in terms of the economy. There is a “religious” belief in the omnipotence of the free market with the aim of globalization. There is little room in such a scheme for the stubbornness of small nations.

But we dare not forget that nations rather than economic systems are the real cornerstones of human history. Behold the Albanians -- for more than four thousand years they have lived in their mountains, obscure descendants of the legendary Illyrians. How many empires have passed -- Alexander the Great, Rome, the Ottomans, the merchants of Venice -- and still they exist.

There is no doubt that if the Serbs had pursued their political goals in another way, more moderate, less rude, not provoking the sensibilities of the rest of the world, they might have carried through. But the system of “ethnic purification” they had carried out in Bosnia and Slavonia brought revulsion to Western minds. Warfare on the Balkan Peninsula was always notorious for its archaic cruelty -- atrocities and torture there have been the rule rather than the exception. But world public opinion cannot support genocide disguised as ethnic purification. (This might be a new thought to the Serbs who enjoyed the permission and blessings of the West when they “purified” themselves of a German minority of 650,000 in 1945, in spite of tens of thousands dead.)

Is peace possible in Kosovo and the former Yugoslavia?

There is so much hatred and deadly bitterness on both sides that only a clear separation of both nations can bring an end of open hostilities.

There is little hope for experiments in multiculturalism. Nowhere in the present world one can find an encouraging example of genuine multiculturalism. It does not work in Bosnia; pull the peacekeepers out of the country and the explosions begin. Democracy is obviously not a fertile soil for multiculturalism. Democracy demands integration which is the opposite of cultural diversity. Though it remains a favorite ideal in liberal circles it cannot be

denied that multicultural societies, where they have existed in human history, were rare sidereal hours of duration.

For Kosovo, any other solution than an acknowledgment of the right of Albanian self-determination would perpetuate the present crisis for a long time to come, and Europe will no longer tolerate wars, nor endless quarrels, nor maliciously provoked streams of expellees inside its frontiers.

For Serbia, the loss of Kosovo seems inevitable -- a bitter pill, but considering the fertility rate of Albanians they might be glad to be rid of them. Together in a common state they would be hopelessly outnumbered within two generations in all of Serbia, let alone in the province of Kosovo.

Finally, Europe must find a way to get Serbia out of the isolation in which it is imprisoned. What they are

going through now is a kind of "twilight of the gods" -- having for so long been everybody's darling in East and West, they now find themselves defamed as Europe's chief rascals. Their losses of territory are considerable, their self-esteem is deeply wounded. Perhaps it would be wise to allow them unification with Serbian Bosnia. And certainly it would be wise to avoid the humiliations they could never forgive. What they urgently need is advancement in economy, social progress, standards of life, and a sweeping away of the residuals of communism -- including President Milosevic.

[Editor's note — Obviously this article was written prior to the opening of NATO's bombing campaign but we felt our readers would benefit from a European's view of the situation.]