



Members of the Kosovo Security Force raise the Kosovo flag before the start of Kosovo's Independence Day Parade in Pristina, Kosovo, on Feb. 18, 2018. Many American guests attended celebrations for the 10th anniversary of Kosovo's independence. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Staff Sgt. Christie R. Smith)

The Liberation and Independence of Kosovo

By Sgt. Maj. Fatmir Rama

Kosovo Security Forces

The history of the people of Kosovo can be described in one word: *war*. Kosovo's more than 600 years of occupation began with the Ottoman Empire, which ruled for 500 years, and was followed by Serbia for another 100 years until 1999. This is when Kosovo's war for freedom began (Clark, 2000).

After centuries of oppression and being treated as

less than equal, Kosovo took their freedom from their occupiers by force.

The Kosovo Liberation Army War 1998-1999

The Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) was an Albanian armed force that directly fought against the Serbian

Police and military forces occupying Kosovo during the 1990s (Eriksson & Kostic, 2013). The decision to start an armed resistance came after the initial peace movement, when Kosovo's diplomatic negotiations with Serbia were rejected. The Serbian Milosevic regime further retaliated against the Kosovars' movement towards independence by spitefully, and violently, removing Albanians from their work places, closing all Albanian schools, universities, and hospitals, and removing their access to public institutions. All hope was lost that anyone would help negotiate for a fair solution for Kosovo—and in that moment of desperation, the KLA was born.

The First Attacks Against the Enemy

While in their infancy stage, the KLA's first attacks used small unit guerilla tactics and targeted corrupt Serbian Police stations in the Drenica region (the heart of Kosovo). The KLA attacked and killed several Serbian policemen guilty of repeatedly abusing the Albanian civilian population (Perritt, 2008). When word of the successful attack spread, the number of freedom fighters increased exponentially. And in 1997, again in the Drenica region, the KLA engaged the Serbian Police convoy that was planning to arrest, and most likely kill, Albanian civilians to spread fear and force obedience. The KLA was victorious in this attack and it marked the first of many direct battles between the KLA and Serbian forces (Krasniqi, 2006).

The Enlistment Surge and Support from the International Community

Fighting between the KLA and the Serbian military and police force escalated even further when the Serbian military attacked Prekaz and killed the KLA Commander, Adam Jashari, and members of his family including his brother, wife, and son. Then they slaughtered more than 50 unarmed civilians (Krasniqi, 2006). This infuriated the Kosovo Albanian population and resulted in an explosion in growth for the KLA as they mobilized against the Serbian army. After the ranks of the KLA swelled, they finally had the numbers to confront Serbia in a more traditional campaign. Youths and elderly alike

were taking up arms against their enemy and fighting for their country. After 600 years of occupation and oppression, it was finally time to demand their freedom, even at the risk of death.

In the eyes of the Kosovo Albanians, the Serbians were now considered evil for murdering unarmed and innocent civilians, and the KLA earned the support of the Albanians in Kosovo and abroad. According to Perritt (2008), "The KLA received large funds from the Albanian diaspora in Europe and the United States" (p. 90). This money was used to buy arms and logistical support to sustain long-term military operations.



Lt. Gen. Rahman Rama (center), commander of the Kosovo Security Force (KSF) gives a KSF capabilities brief to Brig. Gen. Drew DeHaes (left), deputy adjutant general of the Iowa Air National Guard, and Brig. Gen. Steven Altman (right), deputy adjutant general of the Iowa Army National Guard, during a staff ride visit to Kosovo on September 13, 2016. (U.S. National Guard photo by Tech. Sgt. Linda K. Burger)

To the Kosovars, the KLA was a force for good, and was the only organization protecting its citizens from being systematically slaughtered. While the KLA was technically a military force, it sought assistance from the international community to diplomatically end the war. The KLA was willing to negotiate a peaceful resolution, securing freedom for the people of Kosovo (Pettifer, 2012).

Over the year and a half period of war, the KLA's willingness to negotiate and search for a peaceful outcome changed the opinion of the global community who began to look favorably upon Kosovo. Former U.S. Secretary of State Madeline Albright considered the KLA a constructive participant in international talks and a potential partner to the U.S. (United States Senate, 1999). The KLA soon drew the support of NATO and the U.S., and the dialogue concerning their future was discussed at the Rambouillet Conference (Scott, 2007).

The Rambouillet Conference

The 1999 Rambouillet conference held in France, involved representatives from Kosovo, Serbia, the U.S., and several European countries, and was the single most important political event in Kosovo's history. The negotiations for peace and independence lasted an entire month as each group presented their case and solutions to end the war. The agreement reached, and backed by the majority of the international community, would grant Kosovo independence and freedom to become an autonomous country. When it came time to sign the agreement and ratify the deal, Serbia, still operating under the oppressive Milosevic regime, vehemently refused.

Once news of the unethical treatment and killing of civilians reached international ears, it was deemed a humanitarian crisis, and NATO intervened, launching Operation Allied Force, a three-month long airstrike campaign against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (which included Serbia) ("Kosovo Air Campaign," 2016). Once Kosovo had NATO's support, and the political support of Europe and the U.S., Kosovo's independence finally seemed within reach.

Initially, the airstrikes had little effect on Serbia or their steadfast resolution to never release Kosovo from their rule. In fact, in spite of the bombings—or arguably, because of the bombings, the Serbian military began uprooting and relocating over 863,000 Kosovo Albanians to regions outside of Kosovo—essentially performing an ethnic cleansing of the country (Layne, 2000).

After the first month of bombings, with Serbia still refusing to cave, the NATO airstrikes were seen as too mild of a response, and many in the international community thought NATO should have used infantry forces to stop the mass ethnic relocation. The problem was that NATO couldn't mobilize troops in a timely manner, and transportation paths for M1 Abrams tanks and other large military vehicles couldn't be established without extensive work on the roadways. NATO was also dealing with a number of countries that did not fully support a full-scale ground invasion, namely Britain, France, Germany, and Italy, all influential players in the NATO organization (Erlanger, 1999).

During one of the Serbian army's relocations, the military force began killing unarmed civilians in the village of Raçak. After news of the incident spread, NATO demanded an investigation, but the Serbian government refused to let an international prosecutor come to the site to investigate for war crimes. They stated that the investigation done by Serbian military forces was sufficient, who reported that all those killed were members of the KLA and attacked the Serbian army first. But it was later reported by an international group that 45 women, children, and

elderly civilians were murdered ("A Kosovo Chronology," n.d.).

U.S. Ambassador William Walker, part of the Kosovo Verification Mission (KVM), described what he saw in Raçak as he and his KVM team investigated the attack. This is his description upon discovering several mutilated bodies:

They looked like older men, with gray hair or white hair...They had wounds on their heads, and there was blood on their clothes...I just looked and saw a lot of holes in the head...A couple had what appeared to be bullet wounds knocking out their eyes. (Daalder & O'Hanlon, 2001, pp. 63-64)

After Raçak, the U.S. realized that the Milosevic regime could not be afforded leniency any longer and began petitioning NATO for a full scale ground attack. Even during the second month of NATO airstrikes, the Serbian military forces increased the killing of civilians.

Once the racial abuse and murders began, even fellow Serbians felt remorse. In an interview with a Serbian tank commander, he stated, "For the entire time I was in Kosovo, I never saw an enemy soldier and my unit was never once involved in firing at enemy targets. The tanks...were used to slaughter Albanian children...I am ashamed" (Judah, 2000, p. 332).

In June of 1999, once the news of the war crimes was discovered, and after the U.S. heavily lobbied for a more traditional attack plan, the first NATO ground troops entered Kosovo. They formed a joint coalition responsible for patrolling the country and stopping the unnecessary brutality to unarmed civilians.

After the NATO troops established themselves in the region and forced out the Serbian military, the safety net that they created gave safe passage to the more than half a million Albanian refugees that were forced from their homes, allowing them to return (Anderson & Moore, 1999).

The Self-Government of Kosovo

After the war ended in 1999, Kosovo became the United Nation's patronage. This gave the U.N. the main authority over their future. The U.N.'s mission in Kosovo was to establish Kosovo's provisional self-government institutions, which were formed in 2001 on the basis of the United Nation's Security Council Resolution, UNSCR 1244. With Kosovo's constitutional framework in place, the basic institutions were assembled: The president, the assembly, the government, and associated ministries and departments (UNMIK, 2001).



New York Rep. Eliot Engel addresses the Kosovo Parliament and guests during a solemn session of the Kosovo Parliament prior to the Kosovo Independence Day Parade in Pristina, Kosovo, on Feb. 18, 2018. Engel was among many American guests to attend Kosovo's 10th anniversary of independence celebrations. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Staff Sgt. Christie R. Smith)

The Kosovo Legal Institutions

Now that the war was over, it was time to rebuild Kosovo and bring it into a new democratic era. The citizens and leaders worked to establish their own elected officials guaranteed by the citizen's vote. The local elections were held in 2000, the central ones in 2002, and the presidential elections for the formation of central institutions in 2007. This built the initial structure of their current government.

The newly elected Prime Minister of Kosovo, Hashim Thaci, who was also the political director for the KLA, was involved in all international dialogues and conferences, and was a major political pillar since the beginning of the war (Krasniqi, 2006).

Declaration of Independence of Kosovo

Following the government of Kosovo's agreement with the international community, and with the support from the U.S. and other major democratic countries, on February 17, 2008, the Kosovo Assembly proclaimed the region of Kosovo its own independent country.

During his visit to Albania, former U.S. President George H.W. Bush proclaimed, "Sooner, rather than later, you've got to say enough's enough. Kosovo is independent," (Traynor, 2007, para. 9).

But not everyone held the same opinion. Serbia, backed by Russia, opposed the proclamation, refusing

to acknowledge its legitimacy and asked the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to assess the legality of Kosovo's proclamation of independence. Serbian President Boris Tadic stated, "Serbia will never recognize the unilaterally proclaimed independence of Kosovo," (Tanner & Stevenson, 2010, para. 8). But the ICJ responded that Kosovo's declaration of independence did not violate the general international law, making it legal for them to secede from Serbia.

Conclusion

Kosovo Albanians are tough. They have endured more than 600 years of occupation and oppression at the hands of other, often violent, civilizations and regimes. Their independence, like many other countries around the world, was earned through sacrifice.

This war not only gave Kosovo its freedom, it also propelled NATO and the U.N. into the global spotlight as a virtuous protector. In a televised interview in 1999, former U.S. Secretary of State Madeline Albright said, "I think we have shown that this kind of thing cannot stand, that you cannot in 1999 have this kind of barbaric ethnic cleansing... It is ultimately better that the democracies stand up against this kind of evil" (Gellman, p. 2). ■

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