



Overview: Balkans

Today's independent nation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is a recent creation, one chiefly comprised of three different religious groups: the Bosniaks, who are predominantly Muslim; the Serbs, who are Christian Orthodox; and the Croats, who are Roman Catholic. This mix is in large measure a legacy of the Ottoman Empire, which ruled the territories from the 14th to 19th centuries. At the height of its power, the Ottoman Empire brought under its rule various ethnicities, religions, and formerly independent nations; the kingdoms of Bosnia and Serbia are but two examples. The empire extended from southeastern Europe to parts of western Asia and much of northern Africa, but in modern times it showed evidence of decline and was increasingly derided as the "Sick old man of Europe." Nationalism spread through Europe in the early 19th century, when at great cost the Ottomans faced and eventually defeated a Serbian uprising. Serbia would, however, regain its independence later in the century. The major powers of Britain, France, Germany, Russia, and Austria-Hungary were also eager to dismantle the empire.

Austria-Hungary acquired Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1878, mere decades before a Serbian nationalist assassinated the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne and the First World War began. The assassin was hardly alone in thinking that political independence for his people would solve their problems. Especially in Central Europe, nationalism gave millions of people hope that they could enjoy a better quality of life and once again take pride in standing tall in the community of nations. WWI succeeded in toppling several longstanding empires, including both the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian, but still failed to convince most Europeans that a just resolution had been achieved. The immediate postwar period saw the creation of new countries and the drawing of controversial national borders throughout much of the continent.

On one level, it made sense that the newly established Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes – later renamed Yugoslavia – should join together several mainly Slavic peoples who had felt mistreated under the earlier empires, and might each be too small and vulnerable to stand alone. Yet if the new kingdom afforded its citizens greater protection, it was also never designed to offer them full political and economic parity. The Serbians dominated the seats of power, beginning with the monarchy, and aimed to increase their influence and gain territory. To be sure, this was not simply a matter of greed, but rather that most Serbs, like other Europeans in the wake of the war, saw self-rule as their best hope for peace, prosperity, and self-preservation. But Yugoslavia included not just Serbs, but also large numbers of Croats and Bosnian Muslims, as well as smaller minorities, such as Slovenes, Germans, Macedonians, Hungarians, Albanians, and Jews. Several of these groups had once ruled their own lands and refused to accept Serbian governance, particularly as economic hardships grew during The Great Depression. The Second World War exacerbated many of these tensions, with some groups aligning with the Third Reich. At war's end, Yugoslavia moved towards communism under a new government, but President Josip Broz Tito managed to prevent the country's descent into the sort of Soviet satellite state status that enveloped other newly communist nations in Europe. Tito also restored some semblance of stability, if not an easy unity between the nation's various communities. Old tensions continued to simmer not far beneath the surface, however, and matters rapidly



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deteriorated after Tito's 1980 death. With the collapse of European communist governments later in the decade, Yugoslavia's end seemed imminent in the early 1990s.

In 1992, Bosnia and Herzegovina broke from Yugoslavia by declaring independence. Serbs living in that part of Yugoslavia refused to recognize this move, which would make them a minority population, one considerably smaller than the Muslim majority. From the Serbs' point of view, at issue once again was whether other peoples had a right to rule over them. Under the auspices of ostensibly protecting their people, within weeks Serbian forces with the Yugoslav military took control of two-thirds of Bosnia and Herzegovina and quickly began a genocidal campaign against the Muslim Bosniaks. This involved mass murder; systematic terrorization, including rape; forced relocations, sometimes to prison camps; and the destruction of historically Muslim buildings. The United Nations, reluctant to intervene, avoided calling these actions a genocide, and instead resorted to a more benign label, ethnic cleansing, which refers to the process of merely removing a population from a location to achieve ethnic homogeneity. The UN did send humanitarian aid and established a handful of "safe areas" to which Bosniaks might flee, but under the aegis of only a small and generally ineffective peacekeeping force. Since 1992, Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia-Herzegovina, had faced intense bombing by the Serbians, and its government had called for more than humanitarian assistance and token peacekeeping efforts from the international community. If the attacks on Sarajevo failed to galvanize the West, those on a smaller, less famous town brought a different reaction.

The terrible and widely reported events in Srebrenica in 1995 are what finally prompted the UN to take decisive measures to halt the genocide. Srebrenica, a town in eastern Bosnia, was a designated safe area that had taken in a relatively small number of Bosniaks. UN peacekeepers were no match when Serbian troops surrounded and then invaded the area. Prisoners were separated by gender: women and girls were loaded onto buses for relocation at Muslim displacement territories, where they were raped, and males aged 12-77 were removed and murdered in what has been deemed the biggest massacre since the Holocaust, at least in Europe. The events at Srebrenica received widespread media attention and were harshly condemned by the outside world. With the characteristics of genocide now apparent, a more persuasive case was made for stronger military intervention from the Western powers. In August 1995, NATO launched three weeks of bombing on Bosnian Serbs, which pressured Serbs throughout the former Yugoslavia to negotiate. Both sides signed the Dayton Accords in Ohio later the same year, formally recognizing Bosnia and Herzegovina as a single country with two states.

In the wake of the Bosnian Genocide, the West has had to come to terms with its responsibilities to justice, remembrance, and prevention. Between 1991 and 1999, when the total population of Bosnia and Herzegovina was a few million people, over 100,000 were murdered, millions were displaced, and thousands remain missing; in order to hide evidence of their atrocities, Serbian perpetrators on several occasions dug up victims' corpses and buried them anew in places that are hard to find. The International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia, the first of its kind since Nuremberg, has charged 160 people with crimes for the period from 1991-2001, resulting in 60 convictions. The trials continue, having been extended through 2016.



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Serbian Yugoslav leader Slobodan Milošević, whom many people saw as the face of the genocidal campaign against the Bosniaks, was brought before the International Court of Justice, but was never found guilty of the genocide perpetrated by Bosnian Serbs. In 2007, the same court ruled that Milošević had violated the Genocide Convention by failing to act to prevent others' crimes of genocide or to punish the same perpetrators. By then, he had died in prison.