History of Serbia

Slavic peoples settled on the Balkan Peninsula in the seventh century and for several generations were organized by clans rather than in a united state. In the 11th century, Serbs united and consolidated territory that eventually became the empire of Tzar Dušan. Montenegro was then incorporated into the 12th century. In 1346, Tzar Dušan’s rule included Albania and northern Greece. Serbian power began to decline with the Battle of Kosovo (1389), when the Serbs were defeated by Turks. For the next five hundred years, Serbians were ruled by the Turkish Ottoman Empire and still consider the era one of bondage.

Serbia rebelled under the leadership of Karadjordje (1804) and of Obrenović (1815), both of whom formed ruling dynasties. Serbia achieved full independence in 1878. Other Balkan Slavs had been subjugated to both the Turkish and Austro-Hungarian Empires, and Serbia determined to rid the Balkans of these powers. In the First Balkan War (1912), Serbia defeated Turkey with the help of neighboring nations. The Second Balkan War (1913) brought victory over a former ally, Bulgaria. In 1914, a Bosnian Serb assassinated the Austrian archduke Franz Ferdinand in the effort to liberate Serbs in Bosnia. Austria declared war, regional alliances formed, and the conflict quickly became World War I. The Austro-Hungarian Empire lost the war and was broken into several new states. At that time, Serbia led the move to unite Slavs under one government, becoming the principal power in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes in 1918. The name was changed to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929.

When Germany invaded Yugoslavia in 1941, Croatian leaders sided with the Fascists against Serbia. At the same time, a bloody civil war was being waged in Yugoslavia between communists and monarchists. Fighting on both fronts, many Serbs lost their lives battling Croats and at the hands of fellow Slavs. Thousands of civilian Jews, Roma (Gypsies), and Serbs were killed in Croatian concentration camps. The civil war ended when World War II did, and the communist fighters emerged victorious. Under Josip Broz Tito’s leadership, they formed a federal socialist state.

Tito died in 1980 and the federation weakened. Ethnic tensions and an economic crisis led Croatia and Slovenia to demand secession in 1990. Slovenia’s independence proceeded smoothly, but Croatia’s was resisted by resident Serbs who wanted to remain united with Serbia. Serbia also supported Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina in their war against Muslims and Croats. The 1995 Dayton Peace Accord formally ended the war.
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Serbia and Montenegro, the only republics left in the federation, had declared themselves the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1992. Kosovo and Vojvodina are semi-autonomous provinces that were part of Yugoslavia. When Yugoslavia was dissolved, the provinces became part of Serbia. But unlike the rest of Serbia, Kosovo is mostly populated by ethnic Albanians who practice Islam. Kosovo was embroiled in tensions between the ethnic Albanians (who had moved to the area relatively recently) and the Serbs (who regard the area as the cradle of their culture). The tensions eventually erupted into fighting, and by September 1998, Serbs had forced several hundred thousand ethnic Albanians to flee Kosovo.

Negotiations and international sanctions failed to deter Yugoslav forces. In March 1999, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) began air strikes on targets throughout Yugoslavia, especially Belgrade and Kosovo. Meanwhile, Serb forces systematically destroyed Albanian property and also used torture, rape, and mass executions to “cleanse” the province of Albanians. Nearly a million refugees fled to Albania, Macedonia, and other states. After 78 days of air strikes, President Slobodan Milošević agreed to withdraw his forces. An estimated 10,000 Kosovar Albanians were killed in the Serbian campaign; more than 3,000 Albanians, Serbs, and Roma went missing. The conflict also caused billions of dollars in damages and devastated the economy. A large multinational peacekeeping force was deployed to establish order.

Following defeat in September 2000 elections and mass demonstrations, Milošević was ousted and Vojislav Koštunica became president. Milošević was arrested in 2001 on allegations of misappropriation of funds and abuse of power. Milošević was subsequently extradited to The Hague to face charges of crimes against humanity. In March 2006, while still on trial, he died of a heart attack.

In 2002, Serbia and Montenegro agreed to loosen ties between their two states and, after three years, hold a referendum on continued association. The Union of Serbia and Montenegro (all that remained of the former Yugoslavia) dissolved completely when a slim majority of Montenegrins voted for independence in May 2006. Serbia became the legal successor to the union. In February 2007, the UN issued a plan for Kosovo, which Serbia promptly rejected, that would give the area limited independence coupled with international supervision. Approval of the plan is subject to the UN security council’s decision.
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References: