

KOSOVO WAR

Background –

- Kosovo's history as a province of Serbia in the Yugoslav federation included a majority of ethnic Albanians (~90%) and a minority of Serbs.
- Tensions have increased since the 1980s, starting when Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic diminished Kosovo's autonomy by revoking a provision from the 1974 Yugoslav Constitution. In turn, ethnic Albanians called for independence and created parallel institutions.
- Founded in the mid-1990s, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) launched armed opposition against Serbian security forces, targeting police and government sites.

Outbreak of War (1998) –

- In early 1998, Serbian police and Yugoslav armed forces launched crackdowns against KLA positions.
- Massacres, such as the Drenica massacres, involved widespread civilian killings and received international condemnation.
- By mid-1998, approximately 250,000 ethnic Albanians had been forced to flee as a result of the refugee crisis.

International Involvement –

- Contact Groups from the US, UK, France, Germany, Italy, and Russia pressured Belgrade to cease repression.
- The UN Security Council condemned the violence; however, it did not authorize direct military intervention because of opposition from Russia and China.
- Racak Massacre (Jan 1999) – Serbian forces killed 46 ethnic Albanians in Racak, shocking the world and strengthening Western resolve.

Failed Diplomacy –

- The Rambouillet Talks (February–March 1999, France) ended without success in negotiations between the FRY and the Kosovar Albanians. The Albanians agreed to autonomy under NATO peacekeeping forces, while Milosevic opposed NATO's presence, citing sovereignty concerns.

NATO Intervention (March – June 1999) –

- Operation Allied Force, carried out from March 24 to June 10, 1999, was NATO's air campaign targeting Yugoslavia. It is notable for being the first NATO conflict initiated without UN Security Council approval.
- Goal – Cease Serbian repression and compel withdrawal from Kosovo.
- Serbian Strategy – Intensified ethnic cleansing, around 8,00,000 Albanians fled Kosovo, and thousands of lives were claimed.
- NATO conducted 78 days of bombing, targeting military sites, infrastructure, bridges, media outlets, and government buildings. Some strikes unintentionally harmed civilians, such as the Belgrade TV station and the Chinese Embassy.

Resolution –

- June 1999 – Faced with pressure, Milosevic agreed to the terms:
- Withdrawal of Serbian forces
- Deployment of NATO-led peacekeeping forces (KFOR)
- Kosovo came under UN administration (UNMIK) following UNSC Resolution 1244.

Aftermath –

- Human toll – approximately 13,000 to 14,000 deaths, mainly Kosovar Albanians, but also including Serbs and Roma.
- Displacement involved around 1 million refugees, most of whom returned after NATO's arrival, while the Serb minority fled Kosovo due to fears of reprisals.

Political Changes –

- Milosevic was weakened and ousted in 2000; he was subsequently tried at The Hague.
- The UN governed Kosovo until it declared independence in 2008. However, this independence remains disputed by Serbia, Russia, China, and several other countries.
- Long-term Impact – Establishes a precedent for “humanitarian intervention” without UN approval, but the issue remains debated in international law.

Significance –

- This marked NATO's first major war conducted entirely under the alliance.
- In international relations, the debate between sovereignty and human rights is particularly prominent.
- In the Balkans, it affirmed Kosovo's independence from Serbia, yet it did not resolve the underlying ethnic tensions.

In brief –

- The Kosovo War was a brutal conflict marked by ethnic cleansing, NATO's controversial humanitarian intervention, and the displacement of hundreds of thousands. It transformed Balkan politics, initially underestimated Milosevic, and set the stage for Kosovo's contested independence.

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Email: info@muditabooks.com
Date of post: 22.07.2026

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