

History of Serbia

Before Serbia

Serbs settled the Balkan Peninsula in the 6th and 7th centuries and adopted Christianity in the 9th century. In 1166, Stefan Nemanja, a Serbian warrior and chief, founded the first Serbian state. By the 14th century, under the rule of Stefan Dusan, it became the most powerful state in the Balkans. After Serbia was defeated in the Battle of Kosovo in 1389, it was absorbed into the Ottoman Empire. Throughout the 19th century its struggle against Ottoman rule intensified, and in 1878 Serbia gained independence after Russia defeated the Ottoman Turks in the Russo-Turkish war of 1877–1878. In the Balkan wars (1912–1913), Serbia and other Balkan states seized hold of more former Ottoman lands on the peninsula.

World War I began when a Serbian nationalist assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria in 1914, which led to Austria's declaration of war against Serbia. Within months, much of Europe was at war. In the war's aftermath, Serbia became part of the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (1918). It included the former kingdoms of Serbia and Montenegro; Bosnia-Herzegovina; Croatia-Slavonia, a semiautonomous region of Hungary; and Dalmatia. King Peter I of Serbia became the first monarch; his son, Alexander I, succeeded him on Aug. 16, 1921. Croatian demands for a federal state led Alexander to assume dictatorial powers in 1929 and to change the country's name to Yugoslavia. Serbian dominance continued despite his efforts, amid the resentment of other regions. A Macedonian associated with Croatian dissidents assassinated Alexander in Marseilles, France, on Oct. 9, 1934, and his cousin, Prince Paul, became regent for the king's son, Prince Peter.

Paul's pro-Axis policy brought Yugoslavia to sign the Axis Pact on March 25, 1941, and opponents overthrew the government two days later. On April 6 the Nazis occupied the country, and the young king and his government fled. Two guerrilla armies—the Chetniks under Draza Mihajlovic supporting the monarchy and the Partisans under Tito (Josip Broz) leaning toward the USSR—fought the Nazis for the duration of the war. In 1943, Tito established a provisional government, and in 1945 he won the federal election while monarchists boycotted the vote. The monarchy was abolished and the Communist Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia, with Tito as prime minister, was born. Tito ruthlessly eliminated the opposition and broke with the Soviet bloc in 1948. Yugoslavia followed a middle road, combining orthodox Communist control of politics and general overall economic policy with a varying degree of freedom in the arts, travel, and individual enterprise. Tito became president in 1953 and president-for-life under a revised constitution adopted in 1963.

Modern Serbia

After Tito's death on May 4, 1980, a rotating presidency designed to avoid internal dissension was put into effect, and the feared clash of Yugoslavia's multiple nationalities and regions appeared to have been averted. In 1989, Slobodan Milosevic became president of the Serbian republic. His arch-nationalism and calls for Serbian domination inflamed ethnic tensions and spurred on the breakup of Yugoslavia. In May 1991 Croatia declared independence, and by December so had Slovenia and Bosnia. Slovenia was able to break away with only a brief period of fighting, but because 12% of Croatia's population was Serbian, Serb-dominated Yugoslavia fought hard against its secession. Bosnia's

declaration of independence led to even more brutal fighting. The most ethnically diverse of the Yugoslav republics, Bosnia was 43% Muslim, 31% Serbian, and 17% Croatian. The largely Serbian-led Yugoslav military pounded Bosnia, and with Yugoslavia's help, the Bosnian Serb minority took the offensive against Bosnian Muslims. It carried out ruthless campaigns of ethnic cleansing, which involved the expulsion or massacre of Muslims. The war did not end until NATO stepped in, bombing Serb positions in Bosnia in Aug. and Sept. 1995. In Nov. 1995, Bosnia, Serbia, and Croatia signed the Dayton Peace Accords, ending the four-year-long war in which 250,000 people died and another 2.7 million became refugees.

Despite entangling his country in almost continuous war for four years and bringing it to near economic collapse, the Serbian government of Slobodan Milosevic maintained its effective control over the remainder of Yugoslavia. Constitutionally barred from another term as president of Serbia, Milosevic became president of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (which at this stage consisted of just Serbia and Montenegro) in July 1997.

In Feb. 1998 the Yugoslav army and Serbian police began fighting against the separatist Kosovo Liberation Army, but their scorched-earth tactics were concentrated on ethnic Albanian civilians—Muslims who make up 90% of Kosovo's population. More than 900 Kosovars were killed in the fighting, and the hundreds of thousands forced to flee their homes were without adequate food and shelter. Although Serbs made up only 10% of Kosovo's population, the region figures strongly in Serbian nationalist mythology.

NATO was reluctant to intervene because Kosovo—unlike Bosnia in 1992—was legally a province of Yugoslavia. The proof of civilian massacres finally gave NATO the impetus to intervene for the first time ever in the dealings of a sovereign nation with its own people. NATO's reason for involvement in Kosovo changed from avoiding a wider Balkan war to preventing a human rights calamity. On March 24, 1999, NATO began launching air strikes. Weeks of daily bombings destroyed significant Serbian military targets, yet Milosevic showed no signs of relenting. In fact, Serbian militia stepped up civilian massacres and deportations in Kosovo, and by the end of the conflict, the UN high commissioner for refugees estimated that at least 850,000 people had fled Kosovo. Serbia finally agreed to sign a UN-approved peace agreement with NATO on June 3, ending the 11-week war.

In the referendum in May 2006, the people of Montenegro decided that Montenegro should gain independence, which ended the disintegration of Yugoslavia, and from that date on Serbia existed as an independent country under the name Republic of Serbia.