

1999

March 24

NATO bombs Yugoslavia

On March 24, 1999, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization ([NATO](#)) commences air strikes against Yugoslavia with the bombing of Serbian military positions in the Yugoslav province of Kosovo. The NATO offensive came in response to a new wave of ethnic cleansing launched by Serbian forces against the Kosovar Albanians on March 20.

The Kosovo region lay at the heart of the Serbian empire in the late [Middle Ages](#) but was lost to the Ottoman Turks in 1389 following Serbia's defeat in the Battle of Kosovo. By the time Serbia regained control of Kosovo from Turkey in 1913, there were few Serbs left in a region that had come to be dominated by ethnic Albanians. In 1918, Kosovo formally became a province of Serbia, and it continued as such after communist leader Josip Broz Tito established the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia in 1945, comprising the Balkan states of Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Slovenia and [Macedonia](#). However, Tito eventually gave in to Kosovar demands for greater autonomy, and after 1974 Kosovo existed as independent state in all but name.

Serbs came to resent Kosovo's autonomy, which allowed it to act against Serbian interests, and in 1987 Slobodan Milosevic was elected leader of Serbia's Communist Party with a promise of restoring Serbian rule to Kosovo. In 1989, Milosevic became president of Serbia and moved quickly to suppress Kosovo, stripping its autonomy and in 1990 sending troops to disband its government. Meanwhile, Serbian nationalism led to the dissolution of the Yugoslav federation in 1991, and in 1992 the Balkan crisis deteriorated into civil war. A new Yugoslav state, consisting only of Serbia and the small state of Montenegro, was created, and Kosovo began four years of nonviolent resistance to Serbian rule.

The militant Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) emerged in 1996 and began attacking Serbian police in Kosovo. With arms obtained in Albania, the KLA stepped up its attacks in 1997, prompting a major offensive by Serbian troops against the rebel-held Drenica region in February-March 1998. Dozens of civilians were killed, and enlistment in the KLA increased dramatically. In July, the KLA launched an offensive across Kosovo, seizing control of nearly half the province before being routed in a Serbian counteroffensive later that summer. The Serbian troops drove thousands of ethnic Albanians from their homes and were accused of massacring Kosovo civilians.

In October, NATO threatened Serbia with air strikes, and Milosevic agreed to allow the return of tens of thousands of refugees. Fighting soon resumed, however, and talks between Kosovar Albanians and Serbs in Rambouillet, France, in February 1999 ended in failure. On March 18, further peace talks in Paris collapsed after the Serbian delegation refused to sign a deal calling for Kosovo autonomy and the deployment of NATO troops to enforce the agreement. Two days later, the Serbian army launched a new offensive in Kosovo. On March 24, NATO air strikes began.

In addition to Serbian military positions, the NATO air campaign targeted Serbian government buildings and the country's infrastructure in an effort to destabilize the Milosevic regime. The bombing and continued Serbian offensives drove hundreds of thousands of Kosovar Albanians into neighboring Albania, Macedonia, and Montenegro. Many of these refugees were airlifted to safety in the United States and other NATO nations. On June 10, the NATO bombardment ended when Serbia agreed to a peace agreement calling for the withdrawal of Serb forces from Kosovo and their replacement by NATO peacekeeping troops.

With the exception of two U.S. pilots killed in a training mission in Albania, no NATO personnel lost their lives in the 78-day operation. There were some mishaps, however, such as miscalculated bombings that led to the deaths of Kosovar Albanian refugees, KLA members, and Serbian civilians. The most controversial incident was the May 7 bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, which killed three Chinese journalists and caused a diplomatic crisis in U.S.-Chinese relations.

On June 12, NATO forces moved into Kosovo from Macedonia. The same day, Russian troops arrived in the Kosovo capital of Pristina and forced NATO into agreeing to a joint occupation. Despite the presence of peacekeeping troops, the returning Kosovar Albanians retaliated against Kosovo's Serbian minority, forcing them to flee into Serbia. Under the NATO occupation, Kosovo autonomy was restored, but the province remained officially part of Serbia.

Slobodan Milosevic was ousted from power by a popular revolution in Belgrade in October 2000. He was replaced by the popularly elected Vojislav Kostunica, a moderate Serbian nationalist who promised to reintegrate Serbia into Europe and the world after a decade of isolation.

Slobodan Milosevic died in prison in the Netherlands on March 11, 2006, during his trial for crimes against humanity and genocide. Due to his death, the court returned no verdict.