Comment:
The Field of Blackbirds

On 28 June 1989, according to the Belgrade media, three million Serbs gathered on the Field of Blackbirds (*Kosovo Polje*) a few miles south west of Prishtina, to celebrate the six-hundredth anniversary of the defeat of their ancestors by the Ottoman Turks, when the flower of Balkan chivalry legendarily perished. In fact, according to Noel Malcolm, who attended the rally, there were between 300,000 and 500,000 people. The famous defeat, as he notes in his splendid book, *Bosnia: A Short History* (Macmillan 1994), was, in any case, not actually much of a defeat. Losses on both sides were heavy, the Serbian leader Prince Lazar was captured and killed, the remnants withdrew, and for a time the Serbs even believed they had won. Their resistance had been weakened, however; in a few years Ottoman rule was established, not to be finally thrown off until 1912 (when thousands of Muslim Albanians were massacred by the victorious Serbs).

Whatever else conspired to bring about the First World War, Serbian nationalism seems to have been fuelled by success against the Turks. As fate would have it, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian empire, visited Sarajevo on 28 June 1914, on a tour of inspection of the summer manoeuvres of the imperial army: he and his wife were shot by a student, a member of a Serbian nationalist group. A month later, Austria-Hungary formally declared war on Serbia. In 1918, at the peace settlement, the Austro-Hungarian empire was dismembered, and Serbia emerged as the principal state in the Yugoslavian federation.

As part of the celebrations in 1989, Prince Lazar's bones were taken in a ceremonial round of Serbia. They were finally placed in the fourteenth-century monastery at Gracanica, south of Prishtina; people queued to pay their respects and stallholders sold posters of Jesus Christ, Prince Lazar, and Slobodan Milosevic, side by side. Then the new leader of the Serbian Communists, Milosevic had persuaded the Belgrade administration to pass constitutional amendments which abolished the political autonomy which Kosovo had enjoyed since 1974. Mass demonstrations and a general strike by the largely Albanian population of Kosovo were put down by Serbian security forces.

At the ceremonies on the battlefield, Slobodan Milosevic was surrounded by bishops and clergy of the Orthodox Church and singers in traditional Serbian folk costumes, as well as by security men in dark suits and sunglasses. 'After six centuries', he told the enthusiastic crowd, 'we are again engaged in battles and quarrels. They are not armed battles, but this cannot be excluded yet'.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1999.tb01670.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Slovenia cut loose from federated Yugoslavia in 1990. Croatia sought to do the same but was attacked by the Serbian-dominated federal army, with the connivance of the EEC (as the European Union then was), and the US administration, both committed to the 'unity and territorial integrity of Yugoslavia'. By September 1991 the Serb minority in Bosnia sought federal troops to protect them. After a good deal of bloodshed and some transfer of population, Croatia's independence was secured early in 1992. In April 1992, after a referendum, Bosnia-Hercegovina was recognized as an independent state, — 'a state of equal citizens and nations of Muslims, Serbs, Croats and others who live in it', as the 64% of the population who voted (including many thousands of Serbs) almost unanimously declared. In what might have been, and largely already was, one of the few genuinely multicultural states in Europe, Serbian paramilitary gangs provoked a brutal civil war, which ended with 'ethnic cleansing', deliberate destruction of mosques and churches, more than 150,000 deaths, and more than two million people expelled from their homes. In a whole series of atrocities, none was worse than the invasion of the UN 'safe haven' at Srebrenica on 11 July 1995, when Serb forces took away thousands of Muslim men and boys to be shot, while Dutch 'peacekeeping' troops looked helplessly on. It was difficult to believe that such massacres could happen in Europe, fifty years after the Second World War ended.

Worse was to come. Belgrade sought to settle in Kosovo 20,000 Serbs expelled from Croatia, but most had no desire to move to what they regarded as the remote and backward south, however sacred in Serbian mythology, and in any case densely populated by ethnic Albanians (some Catholic in religion but most Muslim). Kosovo — southern Serbia — seemed already lost demographically, with two million Albanians to some 200,000 Serbs.

The determination of the Kosovar Albanians to recover their autonomy spawned the Kosovo Liberation Army. By 1997 they were appearing on international television, claiming success in killing Serb officials and policemen. Even then, as Noel Malcolm sent the publishers his second book, *Kosovo: A Short History* (Macmillan 1998), just as informative and impartial as his first, he did not contemplate the possibility, even, that the Albanians would be driven out in hundreds of thousands, by paramilitary Serbian gangs, while the allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization did their best to bomb Milosevic and the Serbian leadership in Belgrade into submission. Outlining the story so far is enough to make one dread how it will end. More vultures than blackbirds in the fields.

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