

= April 23 , 1998 Albanian ? Yugoslav border ambush =

On the morning of April 23 , 1998 a band of Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) fighters was ambushed by a much smaller group of Yugoslav Army (VJ) border guards near the Ko?are outpost , just west of De?ani . The fighters had been trying to smuggle weapons and supplies into Kosovo via northern Albania . Nineteen were killed in the ensuing attack , and a further two were captured . The VJ did not sustain any casualties . Some of the militants retreated back to Albania , while others managed to break through the ambush and make it past the Yugoslav border , into Kosovo . Following the clash , the VJ confiscated a large quantity of arms that the militants had been transporting .

Villagers in northern Albania and western Kosovo reported hearing explosions in the vicinity of the ambush and seeing helicopters flying overhead for much of the following day . Albanian officials later alleged that two of these helicopters had violated the country 's airspace , and Albania moved elite army units to the Yugoslav border in response . Yugoslav authorities accused Albania of backing the KLA . In response to the ambush , U.S. officials indicated that they would push for sanctions to be re @-@ implemented against Yugoslavia , and said they would look to freeze the country 's assets overseas . Some Albanian sources alleged that the men had not been ambushed , rather they were abducted and killed by Yugoslav security forces . Such claims could not be verified by Western journalists , and later that year , Amnesty International affirmed that the men were killed in an ambush while smuggling weapons across the border .

= = Background = =

Following World War II , Kosovo was given the status of an autonomous province within the Socialist Republic of Serbia , one of six constitutional republics of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia . After the death of Yugoslavia 's long @-@ time leader Josip Broz Tito in 1980 , Yugoslavia 's political system began to unravel . In 1989 , Belgrade revoked Kosovo 's autonomy . Kosovo , a province inhabited predominantly by ethnic Albanians , was of great historical and cultural significance to Serbs , who had formed a majority there before the mid @-@ 19th century , but by 1990 represented only about 10 percent of the population . Alarmed by their dwindling numbers , the province 's Serbs began to fear that they were being " squeezed out " by the Albanians , and ethnic tensions worsened . As soon as Kosovo 's autonomy was abolished , a minority government run by Serbs and Montenegrins was appointed by Serbian President Slobodan Milo?evi? to oversee the province , enforced by thousands of heavily armed paramilitaries from Serbia @-@ proper . Albanian culture was systematically repressed and hundreds of thousands of Albanians working in state @-@ owned companies lost their jobs .

In 1996 , a ragtag group of Albanian nationalists calling themselves the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) began attacking the Yugoslav Army (Serbo @-@ Croatian : Vojska Jugoslavije ; VJ) and the Serbian Ministry of Internal Affairs (Serbo @-@ Croatian : Ministarstvo unutra?njih poslova ; MUP) in Kosovo . Their goal was to separate the province from the rest of Yugoslavia , which following the secession of Slovenia , Croatia , Macedonia and Bosnia @-@ Herzegovina in 1991 ? 92 , was just a rump federation consisting of Serbia and Montenegro . At first , the KLA carried out hit @-@ and @-@ run attacks (31 in 1996 , 55 in 1997 , and 66 in January and February 1998 alone) . It quickly gained popularity among young Kosovo Albanians , many of whom rejected the non @-@ violent resistance to Yugoslav authorities advocated by the politician Ibrahim Rugova and favoured a more aggressive approach . The organization received a significant boost in 1997 , when an armed uprising in neighbouring Albania led to thousands of weapons from the Albanian Army 's depots being looted . Many of these weapons ended up in the hands of the KLA , which already had substantial resources due its involvement in the trafficking of drugs , weapons and people , as well as through donations from the Albanian diaspora . Cross @-@ border arms smuggling flourished ; the unit charged with securing the Yugoslav border was the 549th Motorized Brigade , under the command of General Bo?idar Deli? .

The KLA 's popularity skyrocketed after the VJ and MUP attacked the compound of KLA leader Adem Jashari in March 1998 , killing him , his closest associates and most of his family . The attack

motivated thousands of young Kosovo Albanians to join the ranks of the KLA , fueling the Kosovar uprising that eventually erupted in the spring of 1998 .

= = Timeline = =

= = = Clash = = =

According to Deli? , at 05 : 45 on the morning of April 23 , soldiers of the 53rd Border Battalion of the 549th Motorized Brigade encountered a group of 150 ? 200 militants near the Ko?are outpost attempting to illegally enter Kosovo via northern Albania , just west of De?ani . Rebels had been massing at the Albanian ? Yugoslav border for some time in anticipation of a renewed VJ offensive . Yugoslav authorities stated that the militants were " armed infiltrators " who had been undergoing training in military camps in Albania , and were attempting to smuggle weapons into Kosovo . According to Deli? , the border patrol was greatly outnumbered by the militants . Armed with howitzers and rocket launchers , the patrol ambushed the armed group , sparking an intense exchange of fire . Clashes reportedly lasted all night , and the Kosovo Albanian residents of the border village of Batu?a reported artillery fire and helicopters flying overhead the following day .

The VJ reported suffering no casualties in the clash . Nineteen militants were killed , one was wounded and a further two were captured . It was the single deadliest war @-@ related incident in Kosovo since the attack against Jashari 's compound the previous month . Initial reports suggested that anywhere between 16 and 23 militants had been killed . Nine of the fallen militants were from the village of Erec , near De?ani , about 9 @.@ 7 kilometres (6 @.@ 0 mi) from the Albanian border . Deli? identified the captured militants as Gazmend Tahiraj (an English professor from Erec ; b . 1970) and Ibër Metaj (an agricultural technician from Erec ; b . 1961) . The remaining militants either managed to break through the ambush and reach Kosovo , or fled back to Albania , according to Deli? . Footage taken by the military , and later broadcast on Yugoslav television , showed a field strewn with guns , ammunition and the bodies of three militants . The VJ reported seizing 4 tonnes (3 @.@ 9 long tons ; 4 @.@ 4 short tons) of weapons and ammunition , including 120 cases of landmines .

= = = Aftermath = = =

During Milo?evi? 's trial at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia , Deli? testified that an investigative judge from Ni? visited the Ko?are outpost shortly after fighting had ceased , and conducted an on @-@ site investigation . Journalists were not allowed to visit the site due to " security concerns " . On April 24 , Western reporters saw VJ personnel digging mortar positions south of De?ani , about 24 kilometres (15 mi) from the Albanian border . The troops said they had been exchanging gunfire with the rebels over the previous two days .

The U.S. State Department acknowledged that it had received reports of " myriad deaths " along the Albanian border . State Department spokesman James Rubin called the situation in Kosovo " quite troubling , extremely dangerous . " U.S. officials said they would push for a freeze on Yugoslavia 's overseas assets and an international ban on foreign trade with the country in response to the violence . In turn , the Yugoslav military issued a statement requesting that the West put pressure on Kosovo Albanian leaders " to give up and denounce terrorism if they truly wanted a peaceful and political solution to Kosovo 's problems . " The statement also accused Albania of " training , infiltrating and illegally arming the terrorists , " and demanded that the West pressure the country to desist from such activities . Albania denied supporting the KLA insurgency , and alleged that two Yugoslav helicopters had violated its airspace . Yugoslavia denied that there had been any violations . Consequently , the Albanian Army and police were placed on high alert , and the country stationed elite troops along its border .

On April 27 , nine of the fallen militants were buried in Erec . Some 400 ethnic Albanians attended their funerals . The dead ranged in age from seventeen to forty @-@ five years old . Villagers

claimed that some of the dead had been arrested days before their deaths and thus could not have been ambushed , as the Yugoslav authorities claimed . Such claims could not be independently verified by Western reporters . In a 1998 report , Amnesty International affirmed that the 19 men had been killed in an ambush while trying to smuggle weapons into Kosovo .