

= July 18 , 1998 Albanian ? Yugoslav border clashes =

On July 18 , 1998 a Yugoslav Army (VJ) border patrol ambushed over 200 Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) insurgents and foreign mujahideen just west of De?ani , on the frontier between Albania and Yugoslavia . The ambush resulted in the deaths of four KLA fighters and 18 mujahideen (mostly citizens of Saudi Arabia) . Another six KLA fighters were arrested by the Yugoslav authorities and charged with illegal entry and gunrunning . The VJ reported seizing a significant amount of arms and ammunition that the militants had been smuggling . One Yugoslav border guard was seriously wounded in the clash . According to Israeli historian Shaul Shay , the ambush represented the first clash of the Kosovo War between the VJ and foreign mujahideen . Human Rights Watch advisor Fred C. Abrahams suggests it is possible that the mujahideen were deliberately led into a trap by the KLA as part of a plan to reduce the influence of Islamic extremists within the KLA 's ranks .

Later in the day , 19 KLA fighters were wounded when the VJ shelled an arms smuggling route near the site of the ambush . They were evacuated by Albanian border guards and airlifted to receive treatment in the country 's capital , Tirana . Albanian officials later alleged that two of the mortar rounds fired by Yugoslav troops had landed inside Albania , sparking further tension between the two countries . That afternoon , KLA militants attacked a Yugoslav border patrol , wounding another soldier .

= = 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 used a series of political maneuvers known as the " anti @-@ bureaucratic revolution " to revoke Kosovo 's autonomy . Kosovo , a province predominantly inhabited by ethnic Albanians , is of great historical and cultural significance to Serbs , who formed a majority there before the mid @-@ 19th century but by 1990 represented only about ten 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 . Once 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 1991 ? 92 , the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia disintegrated following the secession of former constituent republics Slovenia , Croatia , Macedonia and Bosnia @-@ Herzegovina . In 1992 , amidst the breakup of Yugoslavia and the Yugoslav Wars , the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia , a Serb @-@ controlled federation consisting of Serbia (including Kosovo) and Montenegro , was proclaimed .

In 1996 , a group of Albanian nationalists calling themselves the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) began attacking the Serb @-@ dominated Yugoslav Army (Serbo @-@ Croatian : Vojska Jugoslavije ; VJ) and the Serbian Ministry of Internal Affairs (Serbo @-@ Croatian : Ministarstvo unutrašnjih poslova ; MUP) in Kosovo . Their goal was to separate the province from the rest of Yugoslavia . 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 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 prompted 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 = =

= = = Prelude = = =

In the summer of 1998 , a number of senior U.S. intelligence officials met with the leaders of the KLA , and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) agents arrived in northern Albania to monitor the fighting in Kosovo and assist in training rebel fighters . In exchange for American military , financial and intelligence support , KLA leaders promised not to carry out any actions outside Kosovo , not to continue participating in the drug trade , and not to accept help from Islamic radicals . Thus , the KLA ordered the 36 foreign Islamist fighters (or mujahideen) fighting in their ranks to leave Kosovo . Though few Kosovo Albanians sympathized with the Islamists , some argued that the KLA should have accepted assistance from any source , fundamentalist or otherwise . When KLA commanders ordered the mujahideen to leave , they refused , and disagreements arose within the KLA ranks as what was to be done with them .

Serb sources assert that the first mujahideen began arriving in Kosovo in the spring of 1998 , mainly from Bosnia and Herzegovina . By that summer , about 240 mujahideen were present in Kosovo and northern Albania . Most of these were ethnic Albanians , but the group also included several dozen Arabs from the Middle East and North Africa . According to the diary of the ambushed KLA group 's leader , Ali Rabiçi , the mujahideen involved in the July 18 ambush had initially gathered in Munich before taking a ferry from Bari to the Albanian port city of Durrës . Once in Albania , the mujahideen were escorted to the frontier towns of Tropojë and Bajram Curri by their KLA handlers , where they rendezvoused with Rabiçi 's men .

= = = Clashes = = =

In the early morning hours of Saturday , July 18 , 1998 , 24 mujahideen fighters and 200 KLA militants left their base in northern Albania and departed for Kosovo . They were carrying a large quantity of arms and ammunition , which significantly impeded their movement and obliged them to move slowly across the Albanian ? Yugoslav frontier . One hypothesis is that they were heading to reinforce KLA fighters battling for the town of Orahovac . At 02 : 00 , the column was ambushed by Yugoslav border guards near Mount ?eravica , about 6 kilometres (3 @. @ 7 mi) from the Albanian border , just west of De?ani . The clashes reportedly lasted until about 07 : 00 . According to Human Rights Watch observer Fred C. Abrahams , a total of 22 militants were killed in the clash (18 mujahideen and four KLA) . Rabiçi was among those killed , and documents recording the KLA and mujahideen 's journey were recovered off his corpse by Yugoslav authorities . Sixteen of the mujahideen were citizens of Saudi Arabia and one was a citizen of Yemen . Six were carrying forged Macedonian passports under ethnic Albanian pseudonyms . According to Israeli historian Shaul Shay , the incident represented the first skirmish between the VJ and foreign mujahideen during the Kosovo War . It is unclear if the ambush came as a result of Yugoslav vigilance or if the KLA deliberately led the mujahideen into a trap with the goal of eliminating them and thus limiting the influence of Islamic extremists within the KLA 's ranks . Survivors told monitors from the Organization for Security and Co @-@ operation in Europe that KLA fighters had led the mujahideen into a trap and fled . A Yugoslav lance corporal was seriously wounded in the exchange .

Most of the surviving militants either retreated to Albania or went into hiding along the border . As they fled , they dropped large quantities of Chinese @-@ made weapons and munitions , which

were subsequently seized by Yugoslav authorities . Six militants , all citizens of Albania , were captured . They were charged with illegally crossing the border and gunrunning . Yugoslav officials stated that more than 10 tonnes (9 @. @ 8 long tons ; 11 short tons) of weapons and ammunition , including about 300 rifles , 60 machine guns , ten recoilless guns and a number of mortars had been confiscated . Later that day , the VJ shelled a known arms trafficking route near the site of the ambush , wounding 19 KLA fighters . The militants were rescued by Albanian border guards and airlifted by helicopter to receive treatment in a Tirana hospital . At 13 : 30 , two militants opened fire on a Yugoslav border patrol within 300 metres (980 ft) of the Albanian frontier . The border patrol returned fire , and the militants fled to Albania . One Yugoslav soldier was slightly wounded .

= = Aftermath = =

Tim Judah , a journalist specializing in the Balkans , described the ambush as a " catastrophic disaster " for the KLA . Albania 's deputy Minister of Interior Affairs , Ilir Çano , claimed two Yugoslav mortars had landed inside Albania . " These ... incidents could have very dangerous consequences , " he warned . Albanian officials indicated that the mortars did not cause any injuries . Albania lodged a formal protest and demanded an explanation from the Yugoslav authorities . Yugoslav officials denied shelling the border and accused the Albanian authorities of turning a blind eye to KLA arms smuggling in northern Albania . Albanian Foreign Minister Paskal Milo stated that Albania " expresses its fraternal solidarity and supports the just struggle of Albanians in Kosovo . " The Albanian Government released a statement describing the ambush as a " Serb provocation " and calling on the international community to " stop , by any means , the fascist aggression Belgrade is inflicting on the Albanian population of Kosovo . " In turn , Yugoslav officials accused Albania of sending 300 soldiers to fight alongside the KLA in Kosovo , citing the testimony of captured KLA personnel . Albanian officials denied having troops in the province .

The United States warned Yugoslavia not to shell Albanian territory . State Department spokesman James Rubin told reporters that the alleged shelling was likely an attempt to prevent the insurgents from re @-@ entering Kosovo . " If true , the shelling represents an unacceptable violation of Albanian territory . " He continued . " Belgrade must understand that such shelling runs the risk of further escalating the current conflict . " Rubin said that the U.S. was opposed to the creation of a pan @-@ Albanian state , and emphasized that calls for its establishment were a " very dangerous development that could affect the stability of the region . " Russian officials accused KLA fighters of stoking the clashes , and called for peace talks between the militants and Yugoslav authorities . On July 19 , Albanian officials requested that Greece ? an important trading partner for Albania and traditional ally of Serbia ? mediate to end the fighting . Greek Foreign Minister Theodoros Pangalos issued a condemnation , saying " these senseless acts of violence must stop . " The European Union condemned the militant incursion , as well as the alleged cross @-@ border shelling .

= = = Endnotes = = =