

= December 14 , 1998 Albanian ? Yugoslav border ambush =

On December 14 , 1998 the Yugoslav Army (VJ) ambushed a group of 140 Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) militants attempting to smuggle weapons and supplies from their base in Albania into the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia . A five @-@ hour battle ensued , ending with the deaths of 36 militants and the capture of a further nine . Dozens more fled back to Albania , abandoning large quantities of weapons and supplies , which were subsequently seized by the Yugoslav authorities . The ambush was the most serious war @-@ related incident in Kosovo since a U.S.-negotiated truce took effect two months before . It came on the heels of increasing tensions in the province , where inter @-@ ethnic violence had been escalating steadily since early 1996 .

Within hours , suspected KLA gunmen attacked a Serb @-@ owned café in Pe? , killing six unarmed Serb youths . Western diplomats suspected the attack was carried out in retaliation for the ambush , though the KLA denied responsibility . Several days after , Yugoslav authorities handed over the bodies of all but three of the fallen militants to the KLA following mediation by the International Committee of the Red Cross . The militants were given heroes ' funerals in a rebel @-@ held area , in a ceremony attended by thousands of ethnic Albanians , including other KLA fighters . In January 1999 , the KLA abducted eight VJ personnel , who were later exchanged for the nine militants captured in the ambush .

= = Background = =

In 1989 , Belgrade abolished self @-@ rule in Serbia 's two autonomous provinces , Vojvodina and Kosovo . Kosovo , a province inhabited predominantly by ethnic Albanians , was of great historical and cultural significance to Serbs . Prior to the mid @-@ 19th century they had formed a majority in the province , 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 , with whom ethnic tensions had been brewing since the early 1980s . 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 unutrašnjih 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) . The group quickly gained popularity among young Kosovo Albanians . Many of whom favoured an aggressive approach and rejected the idea of non @-@ violent resistance advocated by the politician Ibrahim Rugova . 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 , or through donations from the Albanian diaspora . The group '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 = =

== = Prelude = = =

The Kosovo conflict escalated over the summer of 1998 . The KLA increasingly took to smuggling weapons and supplies from Albania across the border into Kosovo . In September , Yugoslav officials stated that 90 militants had been killed while attempting to illegally cross the border since January of that year . The Yugoslav Defense Ministry reported that 947 rifles , 161 light machine guns , 33 mortars , 55 mines , 3 @, @ 295 hand grenades , and almost 350 @, @ 000 rounds of ammunition had been confiscated by the VJ and Yugoslav border guards in the same period .

In October 1998 , Milo?evi? and the U.S. envoy Richard Holbrooke reached an agreement to temporarily end the fighting , whereby Yugoslavia would halve the amount of troops and police personnel it had stationed in Kosovo . The agreement came after Holbrooke convinced the KLA to consider negotiations with Belgrade while making it clear to Milo?evi? that failing to find a peaceful solution to the conflict would lead to a NATO bombing campaign against Serbia . The agreement stipulated that Yugoslavia had to let Kosovo Verification Mission (KVM) observers enter Kosovo to ensure that the Yugoslavs was abiding by their commitment to withdraw thousands of soldier and police officers from the province . Small @-@ scale clashes continued , and by December , over 1 @, @ 000 people had been killed and more than 300 @, @ 000 displaced in the fighting .

== = Clashes = = =

At around 02 : 00 on the morning of Monday , December 14 , 1998 , 140 KLA militants tried to illegally cross the Albanian ? Yugoslav border between the outposts of Goro?up and Liken , about 70 kilometres (43 mi) west of Pristina . They were coming from a base inside Albania , where they had been training . The subsequent ambush occurred near the village of Ku?nin , just west of Prizren . The militants had been trying to illegally smuggle weapons , ammunition and supplies to be used by KLA fighters in Kosovo . A member of the KVM told reporters that the militants encountered a Yugoslav sentry post and were attacked by the guards . One of the militants was killed instantly , and the column started retreating back into Albania . As the militants turned back , they were ambushed and another 25 were killed . The bodies of five other militants were soon discovered not far from the site of the ambush , raising the KLA casualty figure to 31 . Fighting between the militants and the border guards continued for about five hours . Gunfire and explosions could reportedly be heard in three nearby villages . By 07 : 00 , a total of 36 militants had been killed , twelve were wounded and a further nine were captured . The militants who were not killed or captured either managed to flee back to Albania or were hiding along the border , according to a KVM monitor . The Yugoslavs reported they had suffered no casualties , and stated that large quantities of " modern weapons " , ammunition and supplies had been seized .

The VJ allowed a team of KVM observers to view the bodies and photograph and record the names of the prisoners . Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) observers were also escorted to the site , and reported seeing 31 bodies in camouflage uniforms with KLA insignia . They identified one woman among the dead , and the KVM stated that another woman was among those that had been captured . A KVM monitor told reporters : " Our initial feelings are that this was a normal military operation ... [and] not a set @-@ up . " The reported figure of 36 dead made the ambush the single deadliest war @-@ related incident in Kosovo since the truce took effect two months earlier . Eight KLA fighters had been killed near the site of the ambush just eleven days prior .

== = Aftermath = = =

According to Albanian journalists , villages near the site of the ambush remained sealed off by Yugoslav forces for the remainder of the day . Within hours of the ambush , the KLA vowed revenge . That evening , suspected KLA gunmen entered a Serb @-@ owned caf? and opened fire on the patrons , killing six Serb youths . Western diplomats suspected that the attack was carried out

by the KLA in retribution for the ambush . The KLA denied responsibility ; the journalist Tim Judah suggests that the attack may have been carried out by a rogue unit . The shooting appalled foreign emissaries , and at a meeting with Milošević the following day , Holbrooke condemned it as an act of terrorism and described the situation in Kosovo as " very grave " . Milošević issued a separate statement accusing the international community of failing to prevent attacks on Serb civilians , stating : " The terrorist gangs have not ceased attacking the army , the police , and inhabitants of Kosovo . "

The VJ continued pursuing remnants of the rebel group for most of December 15 , and foreign reporters noted shelling near the site of the ambush through much of the day . After mediation by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) , Yugoslav authorities handed the bodies of 33 militants over to the KLA for burial . The militants were given heroes ' funerals in the rebel @-@ held village of Poljance , on a field dubbed the " Tomb of Heroes " , about 61 kilometres (38 mi) northwest of Pristina . The funerals were attended by several thousand Albanians , including about 500 militants .

The KLA militants captured in the ambush were initially taken to a jail in Prizren , and later transported to a military prison in Niš . On January 8 , 1999 , the KLA ambushed a convoy carrying rations to VJ personnel stationed in Kosovska Mitrovica , taking eight Yugoslav soldiers hostage . U.S. officials negotiated the soldiers ' release five days later . In return , on January 23 , Yugoslav authorities freed the nine militants that had been captured in the ambush . Almost simultaneously , the KLA released five elderly Serb civilians that it had taken hostage two days earlier . Yugoslav officials insisted that the two events were not linked . Earlier , the KLA 's taking of civilian hostages had drawn condemnation from Western diplomats , including the head of the KVM , William Walker , who told reporters : " ... I think it was a very unwise and uncivilized thing for them to do to kidnap civilians . " Upon being released , the militants alleged that they were mistreated and beaten while in custody , and vowed to avenge the deaths of their fellow fighters .