



# KOSOVO

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## Kosovo's Dark Meaning

By George F. Will, Newsweek  
<http://www.newsweek.com/id/123473>

In 1915, a year after a spark struck in the Balkans ignited a European conflagration, Walter Lippmann, then 26, wrote: "When you consider what a mystery the East Side of New York is to the West Side, the business of arranging the world to the satisfaction of the people in it may be seen in something like its true proportions." Recently, another Balkan rearranging occurred—Kosovo's secession from Serbia. The disintegration of Yugoslavia, a "nation" largely created by Woodrow Wilson, is complete.

Before World War I ended, Wilson embraced "self-determination," not knowing he was sowing dragons' teeth. His secretary of State knew. Robert Lansing wondered "what unit has he in mind? Does he mean a race, a territorial area or a community?" He said the "undigested" phrase "self-determination" was "loaded with dynamite." On Sept. 26, 1938, a World War I corporal happily agreed.

Pressing the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia on behalf of the Sudeten Germans, Hitler proclaimed: "At last, nearly 20 years after the declarations of President Wilson, the right of self-determination for these three and a half million must be enforced." Because of the havoc Hitler had unleashed on behalf of Germans outside Germany, in 1944 Churchill endorsed—with Roosevelt and Stalin agreeing—ethnic cleansing. Postwar stability would be built by scrubbing Germans from non-German countries. "Expulsion," said Churchill, "is the method which ... will be the most satisfactory and lasting."

Jerry Z. Muller, a Catholic University historian, writing in *Foreign Affairs* on "the enduring power of ethnic nationalism," notes that "massive ethnic disaggregation" in Europe—often using "radically illiberal measures"—has followed the dissolution of three multiethnic empires, the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian and Romanov, into nations. Making ethnic communities roughly congruent with national borders both reflected and reinforced the belief that ethnically homogenous nations would be internally harmonious and pacific toward neighbors.

Ethnic sorting-out has produced a Europe in which more nations than ever have a single ethnicity. The subsequent fate of three exceptions to that rule—Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia—"demonstrated the ongoing vitality of ethnonationalism." Muller says "the fact that ethnic and state boundaries now largely coincide" has produced "the most stable territorial configuration in European history." This homogenization, Muller believes, has taken a toll on Europe's cultural vitality: "With few Jews in Europe and few Germans in Prague, there are



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fewer Franz Kafkas." Most Europeans, having no interest in Kafka, probably think cultural blandness is a price worth paying for peace. But peace might be a casualty of the principle behind Kosovo's secession—the "right" of ethnic self-determination.

Before Lawrence Eagleburger was secretary of State, he was ambassador to Yugoslavia. Serbians, he says, have behaved badly and perhaps deserve their loss. For a millennium, however, before the population shifts of the past 50 years produced an Albanian and Muslim majority in Kosovo, it had a Serbian majority and was the heart of old Serbia. More than 160,000 Serbians remain in Kosovo, at the mercy of Kosovars, who are, in the Balkan tradition, imperfectly merciful.

The current Serbian regime is not as nationalistic as its opposition is. But, Eagleburger says, Serbians generally "are not known for their nuanced view of life." If—when—the Kosovo majority behaves, in the Balkan tradition, beastly toward the minority in its midst, expect trouble.

Ethnic disaggregation in the name of "self-determination" must alarm Spain, which has separatist Basques. Greece, with assertive Albanians in its northern region, and Macedonia (another fragment of Yugoslavia), with a restive Albanian minority, cannot be pleased that Albanians in Kosovo have succeeded in making self-determination a synonym for independence. That concept could someday have interesting implications for southern Texas.

In a New York Times op-ed, Vuk Jeremic, Serbia's foreign minister, was too polite to dwell on the fact that the United States, which promptly recognized Kosovo's independence, has not always been so tolerant of the principle of secession. Jeremic noted that "the forced partition of internationally recognized, sovereign states" is an odd undertaking for the United Nations, particularly given that the 1999 Security Council resolution endorsed nothing more than "substantial autonomy and self-government" for Kosovo. Jeremic predicts that only about 40 of the almost 200 members of the United Nations will recognize Kosovo's independence.

When the Balkans boiled over in the 1990s, Europeans said: We'll handle it. They couldn't, or wouldn't. NATO, meaning primarily the United States, did. Today, Europeans, vociferously unhappy about U.S. "hyperpower," want a less assertive America. Good. Most Americans, recoiling from a few Americans' enthusiasm for their country's being the world's "benevolent hegemon," are in no mood to police Europe's backyard. The next Balkan crisis will be a European problem.

Surely there will be a next crisis. What Pat Moynihan called "the liberal expectancy" was that ethnic attachments and religious animosities were diminishing echoes of mankind's infancy and would be steadily drained of their saliency as definers of national identities. The liberal expectancy is, like Yugoslavia, defunct.