Kosovo is Europe’s last important unresolved territorial issue left over from the Second World War. In 1945, this majority-Albanian province was reincorporated into Yugoslavia, which had just been reconstituted as a federation under Marshal Tito’s leadership after four years of occupation and civil war. In the wake of Yugoslavia’s defeat and dismemberment in April 1941 by Germany and Italy (assisted by Hungary and Bulgaria), Kosovo had been attached (together with Western Macedonia) to the already Italian-ruled Albania. Before 1941, in the Serbian-dominated Kingdom of Yugoslavia ethnic Albanians had been arguably the most poorly treated national group, subjected to systematic discrimination and various forms of pressure, to emigrate en masse being one of them. Not surprisingly, nowhere was the demise of the Yugoslav state in 1941 welcomed more warmly than among Kosovo’s Albanians. When, after the German attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941, Yugoslav communists began to organize guerrilla resistance, local Serbs were ready to respond—but there was, for a long time, no response from Kosovo’s Albanians. Participating in any struggle involving a return to Yugoslav—which, to the Albanians, meant Serbian—rule was anathema to them. As the Second World War was coming
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to an end, the Yugoslav Communist Party prevailed upon the Albanian Communist Party, its junior partner in the region, to agree (though most reluctantly) to the return of Kosovo to Yugoslav rule. Thus, the Kosovo Albanians’ almost unanimous demand for self-determination that, above all, meant not going back under Serbian rule, was ignored. An armed uprising by Kosovo’s Albanians against their province’s re-annexation by Yugoslavia in the spring of 1945 was crushed by the Yugoslav army and police.

In June 1999, the province was detached from Yugoslavia following NATO’s bombing campaign against the regime of Slobodan Milosevic. Since then, it has been administered by the United Nations as a de facto protectorate, pending a definitive solution of its status. Whether that should be a return to Serbian rule, independence or something in between is this year the subject of a lively international debate among policy-makers, academics, think tanks and the media. The books under review here are a part of that debate, offering—in some cases diametrically opposed—interpretations by Serbian, Albanian and other authors of the history and the nature of the Kosovo conundrum and views on how it should be handled by the locals and the international community.

An important contribution to that debate is Ana Cosic-Vukić’s selection culled from the published writings of Dobrica Cosic and dealing with the Kosovo issue and Serbian-Albanian relations. The second part of the book consists of entries dealing with the same subjects selected from his extremely frank and highly interesting unpublished diaries right up to September 2004. Internationally, Dobrica Cosic (b. 1921) is probably best known for the time he served as president, from 1992 to 1993, of the rump Yugoslavia, set up in 1992 after the collapse of Tito’s original six-republic federation but comprising only Serbia and Montenegro. However, to Cosic’s fellow Serbs (as well as the ethnic Albanians) much more important than his brief occupancy of the top political post is the hugely influential role he played for more than three and a half decades both in articulating and in shaping Serbian public opinion over the issue of Kosovo.

It all started in 1968 when Cosic achieved instant fame—or notoriety, depending on one’s point of view—as the first open critic of the new, ‘softer’ Yugoslav policy towards Kosovo. That policy was adopted by the ruling Yugoslav Communist Party in the wake of the dramatic dismissal two years before, in July 1966, of Aleksandar Rankovic, the interior minister and the chief enforcer of the tough post-1945 security policy in Kosovo. After the crushing in 1945 of the local Albanians’ uprising against the province’s re-annexation to Yugoslavia, the continuation of a tough police regime was justified by the need to protect Yugoslavia from hostile incursions via Kosovo from an Albania closely allied with Stalin, who was out to crush the cocky and disobedient Tito. But by the 1960s, with Yugoslavia getting on better with the post-Stalin Soviet Union, any justification for the policy that might have existed previously no longer applied and in 1966 was abandoned as part of Yugoslavia’s political liberalization. Rankovic’s sacking (and the parallel downgrading of the hitherto
all-powerful UDBA, the secret police that he had been controlling) sent a strong signal that Yugoslavia was embarking on a ‘new course’ in Kosovo as well.

Not everybody was happy, Cosic especially. In May 1968, at a session of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Serbia, Cosic caused a sensation by speaking against ‘appeasing’ Albanian nationalism in Kosovo at the expense of its Serbs. Kosovo was getting upgraded constitutional status with more autonomy and power for the local Albanians, Cosic claimed, while the province’s Serbs were being treated as usurpers in their historic homeland, discriminated against and pressurized to leave for good. Cosic’s speech, which led to his expulsion from the Central Committee, is printed in full in Ana Cosic-Vukic’s volume. Ever since delivering that speech Cosic has done a lot to reinforce many Serbs’ already well-entrenched public perception of their nation as a victim of its history. In his series of best-selling epic novels about Serbia in the wars of 1914–18 and 1941–5 he portrayed a noble and unselfish nation shedding blood in those wars and actually winning them, but then losing the peace—thanks as much to the betrayal and cowardice of its own politicians as to the machinations of its external enemies. Cosic was a key figure in the preparation of the politically explosive memorandum produced by the Serbian Academy of Sciences and leaked in 1986. The memorandum publicized what it claimed was the disadvantaged and steadily deteriorating position of the Serbs in Yugoslavia, not least in Kosovo; the ‘de-Albanization’ of Kosovo was one of its central proposals. Cosic was one of the leading figures at the so-called ‘Kosovo evenings’ at the Belgrade Writers’ Club in the late 1980s agitating for a resolute and fast ‘re-Serbianization’ of Kosovo. Those gatherings helped swell the rising nationalist tide that had swept Milosevic into power in Serbia and was carrying him towards total dominance of the country’s political scene.

The secret of Cosic’s popular success—and influence that went with it—was that he had given expression to his fellow Serbs’ anger with Tito for giving Kosovo—regarded by the Serbs as the cradle of their culture and the chief repository of their nationhood, but now under an Albanian majority—a dangerously high degree of autonomy and thus providing its Albanians with at least a theoretical chance eventually to detach it from Serbia. The fact that a high degree of autonomy was also given to the majority-Serb but multi-ethnic Vojvodina in the north added insult to injury, making Serbia proper (uza Srbija) smaller still. Tito’s nationalist critics coined an ironic shortened form for this, as they saw it, truncated Serbia: it was Uzas, the Serbian word for ‘horror’. It is worth noting that Tito’s policy of careful balancing among the country’s different nationalities—never allowing any nation in his federation to be totally dominant or, for that matter, totally down—was not popular with some other nations of Yugoslavia, but was particularly resented by the Serbs, its largest nation. This may have had a lot to do with the fact that the Serbs, having enjoyed clear predominance in all aspects of public life and feeling comfortable in pre-1941 royalist Yugoslavia, saw themselves demoted in Tito’s version.
The new and interesting thing about Cosic’s latest book is that he, once a
defender of a single Kosovo for Serbs and, up to a point, the Albanians as well,
has changed his mind. The idea of a multi-ethnic Kosovo was dead, he pointed
out in 2002 to the then British ambassador in Belgrade, Charles Crawford,
accompanying a senior Foreign Office visitor from London who had come to
see him. What was wanted, he went on, was not some wishy-washy confed-
eration of Serbia, Montenegro and a multi-ethnic Kosovo that his British visitors
were trying to sell him. Such a constellation would be, he said dismissively, only
a prelude to, and a fig leaf for, the province’s independence under Albanian
rule. What Cosic advocated instead was straightforward partition—on condi-
tion that the Serbian religious and cultural heritage in Kosovo were protected
under an extra-territorial regime guaranteed by the international community.
Those following the current debate about Kosovo’s, as well as Serbia’s, future
will find much other interesting and new material in Cosic’s detailed and frank
diary notes recording, inter alia, his many meetings over the years with
western, Russian and other senior international figures visiting Belgrade.

Much of the Serbian case against giving Kosovo autonomy—let alone full
independence—rests on the proposition that it would inexorably lead to the
creation of a ‘Greater Albania’ that would take in not only Kosovo and Albania
but also the majority-Albanian region of Western Macedonia and the three
majority-Albanian districts in Southern Serbia. In a diary entry from March
1963, quoted in the Ana Cosic-Vukic volume, Cosic relates how he asked
Fadil Hoxha, the then top Kosovo Albanian communist functionary, after they
had had a few drinks, what the ‘Shiptars’ (now both received and used as a
pejorative Serb name for Kosovo’s Albanians) were up to. Were they in reality
preparing an Albanian version of the nineteenth-century Kingdom of Pied-
mont’s key role in the unification of Italy? Put bluntly, were they staying in
Yugoslavia until an industrialized, urbanized and well-educated Kosovo was
ready to take the lead in the formation of a Greater Albania? Cosic writes that
Hoxha embraced him, saying he had indeed understood the Albanians very well.
Some people outside Serbia share Cosic’s concerns about a Greater Albania,
seeing Kosovo’s independence as a dangerous first step towards the de-
stabilization and, eventually, break-up of Macedonia, leading perhaps to an even
more de-stabilizing (because it would be contested) attempt at a union with
Albania proper.

The Greater Albania theory is closely and critically examined by Paulin Kola
in his extremely well-researched and well-balanced book. The author, Albanian-
born and educated at Tirana University during the period of decaying Stalinism
in Albania, was a co-founder in 1990 of Albania’s first opposition party and
served for a while in the post-communist Albanian diplomatic service. He has a
PhD from the London School of Economics and is now a broadcaster and analyst
with the BBC in London. He starts off with the observation that, growing up
close to Kosovo and Western Macedonia, in an area in north-central Albania
that should, by virtue of geographical proximity, have been a hotbed of Albanian
nationalism, he rarely, if ever, heard his relatives refer to either Kosovo or to other Albanian-inhabited areas of the then Yugoslavia. There was no mention of Albanians outside Albania in geography and history textbooks or anywhere else. It was his fellow Albanians’ profound lack of interest in Albania’s borders that led the author to the question which is the subject of his book, i.e. whether the Albanians had ever developed the kind of strong bond so typical of the nationalism of Albania’s neighbours in the Balkans, bonds that could inspire the Albanian-speaking inhabitants of several Balkan states to join a movement working for and ultimately achieving a single Greater Albania.

His conclusion, briefly stated, is that the chances of the extremely insular Albanians of Albania (or, for that matter, the Albanian diaspora in Switzerland and the United States) supporting moves to change the present international borders in pursuit of an ‘Albanian homeland’ are extremely remote. Divided as they are by religion, ideology and in other ways, Albanians do not appear keen to live in a single political entity and do indeed appear content to retain the separate entities within which they live provided they are allowed to trade and travel freely. However, Kola regards a ‘Greater Kosovo’ taking in the border regions of Macedonia as at least a theoretical possibility—a cautious conclusion that is hard to dissent from in view both of Kosovo’s volatility and Macedonia’s continuing fragility.

Kola’s book is far more than just an examination—and pretty definitive demolition—of the Greater Albania scenario, as can be seen from the list of topics dealt with in separate, solid chapters: the recent past of Kosovo since 1878; Albanian–Yugoslav relations during and after the Second World War; Soviet–Yugoslav–Albanian relations; Kosovo’s political and constitutional evolution during and after the Tito era; relations between Albania and Kosovo after the fall of communism; Kosovo and the immediate aftermath of the break-up of Yugoslavia; movement to war in 1992–9 (taking in also the political and economic collapse in Albania in 1997); and, finally, a look at the situation in Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia and Serbia post-NATO’s 1999 campaign and the 2001 insurgency in Macedonia. The fact that so many political problems to do with nationality in the region still remain to be tackled is, as the author shows in some detail, due to the failure of the post-1945 communist leaders of the region to approach them in an open and flexible way, calling a spade a spade. Their difficulty was that they were hampered by the totally useless ‘internationalist’ precepts for dealing with nationalism bequeathed to them by Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin to which they were obliged to pay at least lip service. That sometimes made matters worse and stored up trouble for the future. This book should—and surely will—be used for a long time as a reliable, balanced and highly informative guide, anchored in up to date western scholarship, not only to matters Albanian but also to those of the whole region of the southern Balkans.

In his ‘personal reflections’, which conclude Kosovo-Kosova, Wolfgang Petritsch calls the province a ‘very special challenge’ for the European Union.
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and earnestly pleads for a ‘resolute intensification’ of its involvement in it as part of the broader effort to stabilize democracy and the rule of law and to promote prosperity in South-Eastern Europe. Now Austrian ambassador in Geneva, Petritsch has been involved in the region and made his contribution to it in a variety of ways. A recognized expert on the region as well as an experienced senior diplomat, he was appointed the EU’s special envoy for Kosovo in October 1998 while serving as Austrian ambassador in Belgrade. In February 1999, he acted as the chief EU negotiator at the ill-fated conference in Rambouillet, which tried—and failed—to find a peaceful international solution for Kosovo. A month later, on 23 March 1999, NATO began its bombing campaign against the Milosevic regime. From 1999 to 2002 Petritsch was the international community’s High Representative in Bosnia. This book, an earlier version of which and with some different authors appeared in 1999, is a joint product. Petritsch’s co-author Robert Pichler, who teaches at the Karl-Franzens University in Graz and is a member of the Centre for the Study of Balkan Society and Culture, specializes in historical anthropology with particular reference to Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia. Martin Prochazka, of the Department of South-East European History, also at the Karl-Franzens University, is the author of a special final chapter entitled ‘Der lange Weg zum Frieden’ (‘The long road to peace’) reviewing developments in, and over, Kosovo from 1999 to 2004.

This weighty tome that should become required reading for officials, diplomats and journalists as well as for all who are interested in Balkan affairs, is sensibly constructed and user-friendly. The first chapter deals comprehensively, in a balanced way and in depth with the historical relationship between the Serbs and the Albanians, which is aptly characterized as one of both cooperation and confrontation. That there was quite a lot more of Albanian–Serb peaceful coexistence in Kosovo until relatively recently than is generally thought is one of the important points made in this chapter. This was not surprising in view of the fact that both nations rubbed shoulders during their centuries of living side by side under Ottoman rule (so much, then, for all the ignorant talk about ‘ancient hatreds in the Balkans’ by western politicians as an excuse for their passivity towards the ‘ethnic cleansing’, the bombardment of towns and villages, the internment camps and other ugly aspects of the wars in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s). When the use of force in pursuit of political ends became the general norm rather than the exception in Kosovo in the years following Tito’s death in 1980, the Albanians were—to the surprise of many observers—much slower to resort to it than the Serbs. Unarmed rather than armed resistance remained the preferred option for more than half a decade after the forcible abolition by Milosevic in 1989 of Kosovo’s high degree of autonomy, bordering on the status of a federal republic, granted to it under Tito in 1974.

There were, as the authors point out, two main reasons for that. One was that Kosovo’s mainly urban civil activists, impressed by examples of successful
unarmed struggle in other parts of the world, hoped that their exemplary, peaceful behaviour would attract the sympathy and the political support of the West. Perhaps even more important was the then Kosovo leaders’ awareness of their weakness vis-à-vis the well-armed Serbian forces. Fear of an intifada with heavy Albanian casualties made unarmed struggle the ‘option for survival’. However, this tactic proved a political miscalculation. With no bloodshed in Kosovo, nobody outside seemed to care. After more than six years of that, the younger, mostly expatriate Albanians lost patience and so the guerrilla phase began. This culminated in an incipient mini-civil war in 1998 and early 1999, with thousands of civilians fleeing their homes after the reprisals of the Serb security forces for the guerrilla raids by the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). TV coverage of the harrowing scenes from Kosovo made even the most hardened non-interventionists among western politicians and officials sit up.

The bulk of the book is devoted to an exhaustive, meticulously detailed and critical but fair analysis of the international community’s policy towards Kosovo. This goes for the opportunistic and, in the long run, immensely damaging decision to exclude Kosovo from the 1995 Dayton conference because of the wish to have Milosevic’s signature on the Dayton Accords. Later on, once again in order to avoid irritating Milosevic, any mention of even the possibility of independence for Kosovo was studiously avoided by pusillanimous western politicians. Those grave errors of judgement will haunt western policy for a long time to come. The analysis is in many cases accompanied and backed by extracts from, in some cases previously unpublished, official documents from Wolfgang Petritsch’s personal archive. The account given here of the ever more dangerous confrontation over Kosovo in early 1999 leading to the ‘last-chance saloon’ Rambouillet conference in February, which was followed almost immediately by war, is the clearest and most authoritative so far published in the West. It is a shrewd insider’s view, packed with significant, mostly depressing but occasionally amusing and even moving details. Much of the time it reads like a rather gripping thriller. A good deal of space is devoted to a minute analysis of the reasons for the breakdown of the narrowly failed compromise deal that would have allowed for a peaceful solution within an international framework, assisted by the presence of international forces—a ‘Bosnian solution’ but without the bloody war that preceded that solution in Bosnia. In the book, a number of myths or half-truths are looked at and eliminated from the discussion. One of those is the widely peddled criticism of the western side’s insistence on the so-called Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) regulating the movement across Serbian territory of the NATO force that was to be stationed in Kosovo. Petritsch calls the attempt to cite this routine and eminently reasonable demand as the alleged explanation for the Serbian side’s rejection of the Rambouillet deal ‘grotesque’, adding that four years before Milosevic had accepted the same arrangement for Bosnia at Dayton.

In his concluding ‘personal reflections’, Petritsch writes that, from the very beginning, Milosevic clearly had no intention of accepting any deal that would
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limit Serbia’s control over Kosovo. He banked on two things: inept Albanians and a hesitant NATO. But instead of, as he had hoped, the Albanian delegation rejecting the deal, taking the blame for Rambouillet’s failure and antagonizing the West (especially the US), it signed on the dotted line, responding to many pleas for compromise, including a memorable one from the famous Albanian writer Ismail Kadare living in Paris. In his appeal to the Kosovo Albanian delegation to accept the draft compromise deal (printed in this volume), Kadare reminded the delegation that it represented the entire Albanian people of Kosovo at a particularly delicate moment and that not only the future of Kosovo but also the lives of women, children and men depended on their wisdom, courage and sense of honour. They responded—to Milosevic’s chagrin and disappointment. NATO also let him down: he had put his trust in the western governments’ extreme unwillingness to go to war. Here, too, he mis-calculated. Either he was not aware of or he simply ignored the western leaders’ dread of a Srebrenica in Kosovo. The final comment by Milosevic’s man at Rambouillet, Milan Milutinovic, was the fatalistic as well as banal ‘Que sera, sera’. The West’s response came in less than a month: NATO did go to war and the rest, as they say, is history, though with many questions tackled in this book to be studied further.

One of those questions, so far not looked into in any depth, is that of the role played by Russia during the 1999 Kosovo war. This important subject is tackled by John Norris, former communications director to Strobe Talbott, US deputy secretary of state and now special adviser to the president of the International Crisis Group in Brussels. In his previous capacity, the author had a ringside seat during the numerous tense meetings his former boss had with senior Russian leaders during and just after the Kosovo war, which tested US–Russian relations to the limit. Quite apart from its historical interest, Russia’s role in the Kosovo conflict has considerable contemporary significance. NATO, as Talbott writes in his foreword to Norris’s book, would have launched its bombing campaign in 1999 with the blessing of the UN Security Council had Russia not threatened to use its veto. The war began over the vigorous objections of the Russians, but it ended in large measure because President Yeltsin and his special envoy, Viktor Chernomyrdin, threw Russia’s weight behind what were essentially American terms, endorsed by NATO, for stopping the bombing. In that sense, the war was both the most severe crisis of the first decade of post–Cold War US–Russian relations and a dramatic instance of US–Russian diplomatic collaboration in that period. But it was not that simple: a lot needed to happen in between for the crisis to be turned into a deal. This is an important and exciting story told with verve and a lot of detail by the author.

What the Kosovo conflict illustrated was how a limited war can get out of control, which is the point at which international diplomacy backed by credible force becomes indispensable. Having decided to launch its bombing campaign, NATO found that various factors including faulty intelligence, personality conflicts, competing national interests, accidents and the fog of war
could—and indeed did—push events to a breaking point. That point seemed to be reached on 12 June 1999, as the end of the Kosovo war was still being negotiated. On that day, a battalion of Russian peacekeeping forces stationed in Bosnia started moving in the direction of Kosovo via Serbia just as NATO forces were advancing towards Pristina, the province’s capital. Both sides’ target was the strategic Slatina airbase, which the Russians looked set to reach first. Should they be pre-empted by NATO or, if that were to prove impossible, be forcibly expelled? It was a highly dangerous moment triggering furious additional diplomatic activity. In the end, the Russians did reach Slatina and occupy the airbase but were denied the reinforcements that were going to be flown in from Russia by air because several of their erstwhile allies in Central and Eastern Europe refused them overflight permission. They also never got a zone of their own. What were the Russians up to?

According to President Ahtisaari of Finland, an active and important participant in successive peacemaking initiatives in the Balkans, quoted by Norris, Russia’s occupation of the Slatina airbase was designed to prepare the partition of Kosovo as part of a secret agreement with Milosevic. And the secret plan would explain why Milosevic so readily accepted the peace offer Ahtisaari brought to Belgrade. It was not, therefore, the threat of a ground offensive by NATO that made Milosevic give in but the hope of saving at least a part of Kosovo. If he believed that, he must have been deeply disappointed because the Russians did not deliver. A senior US diplomat, also quoted by Norris, comments that if it indeed was a partition deal, it was a pretty poorly thought-out one. Another interpretation cited by the author is that the Slatina operation was a macho move designed to show that Russia was still capable of surprises and to raise the morale of the Serbs. The debate will continue and this interesting, well-researched book is a valuable addition to it.

The media have played a crucially important role in the Kosovo conflict as well as in previous conflicts in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. The coverage of the Kosovo war in the media is one of the subjects covered in the book by James Pettifer, an experienced journalist himself who has for a number of years reported on Balkan affairs for The Times, the Economist and a number of other western publications. He is now Professor at the Conflict Studies Research Centre of the Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, Sandhurst. His book is a mixture of reportage and reflection and his broad canvas is Kosovo during the ten years or so before the start of the NATO bombing campaign in the spring of 1999. As a witness on the ground, he gives the reader a good feel for what it was like to be in Kosovo during the period from the emergence of the KLA in 1996 to the massive refugee movements in the province in 1998 and 1999. While covering the ground war between the KLA and the Serbian security forces, the NATO bombing, the subsequent retreat of the Serbian forces from Kosovo and the return of the refugees expelled by the Milosevic forces, he uncovered a good deal of controversial material about the hitherto only partially known or suspected links between several European governments
and the Milosevic regime.

He also reports from his own experience (as well as from that of others) of the regular, ruthless manipulation of the media in the region by the Yugoslav authorities but also by western agencies and—one must presume—the KLA and other organizations on the Albanian side. Nothing new there—governments do it all over the world—but in Kosovo as in Bosnia and Croatia before, the very absence of a clear western national interest meant that involvement by western governments depended to a high degree on media coverage—no coverage, no action. This also casts a new light on attempts to manipulate the media elsewhere. This murky area into which Pettifer probes in his book will repay further exploration if the world is to get a full picture of what has happened in Kosovo in the past and at least some idea of what the future may bring.