



THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
COLLEGE OF SOCIAL & BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES

Center for Middle Eastern Studies

Assignment Description (For Educators)

How History Shaped Literature and How Literature Changed History: The Lasting Impact of Poetry about the Battle of Kosovo



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Purpose/Overview/Connection to the Curriculum: This literature/writing assignment was designed for high school or community college English or World History classes. The purpose is to examine the interrelationship of these disciplines: the ways in which history affects literature and the ways that literature influences one's interpretation of history.

Suggested Procedures:

Part 1 – Background – History/Geography:

1. Together:

A. Physical geography: Locate Kosovo on a map of the Balkans. Note the countries that border Kosovo. If you look up general information on the region, you will see that it is economically underdeveloped without a great deal of natural resources. You will also notice that it has been ruled by different empires/peoples.

B. Human geography: Read and discuss the short handout “Who Are We? Determining ‘Nationality’ or ‘Ethnicity’ in the Balkans” (Document 2). Discuss the idea that in the Balkans, unlike in the U.S., one’s ‘nationality’ has nothing to do with geographic residence, but is something permanent and unchanging. This makes the issue of the population of Kosovo very, very complex and problematic.

2. Have students read the short BBC “Kosovo Profile” <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-18328859> .

3. Either in groups or as a class, brainstorm ways in which the ‘national’ composition of a population might be affected by historical events. Make a chart – either in groups or as a class. List reasons why/how the population of Kosovo and the surrounding areas might change during the following historical periods and which group would be the majority during each time. (In red, I’ve highlighted some of the facts that they may come up with.)

-- Before Ottoman times (before the mid-1300s): Question: What happens to a population in a time of nomadic migrations in a place where the control of the Byzantine Empire was weakening?

**Slavic groups (mostly Serbs) settled the area. A Serbian state was set up.
Reasons: movement of nomadic groups and farmers in search of land.**

-- During the Ottoman era (1389-1914): Question: What happens in a time when a new empire takes over, an empire in which the rulers come from a different religious (and linguistic) background than their new subjects? What happens when that empire engages in a long series of wars with a neighboring empire?

Muslim Albanians and some Turks migrated into Kosovo while many Serbs moved northwards. Reasons: Serbs fled Turkish armies, later moved closer to Austrian (Christian-held) territory. After 1830, some Serbs moved into autonomous (later independent) Serbia. Albanians filled in the gaps, as well as some Turkish administrators. Although there were no forced conversions, there were incentives for voluntary conversions (higher status, no need to pay the non-Muslim tax), which would eventually cause people to be integrated into - through intermarriage? – into the Turkish or Albanian population.

-- During World War I and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1914-1941): Question: What effects does a change in borders have – when an area comes under the rule of a new state and new rulers from a different “national”/religious group?

**Kosovo ruled by Serbs, so Serbs prospered at expense of Albanian population.
Official or unofficial government policies to make Kosovo more Serbian?**

-- World War II (1941-1945): Question: What are the effects on a population when one group is more oppressed by a foreign invader?

During World War II, Italy and then Germany oppressed the Serbs, so Albanians flourished.

-- Socialist (Tito's) Yugoslavia (1945-1980). Question: What impact did the idea of "national equality" of groups within Yugoslavia have on Kosovo?

After the war, Albania became an "autonomous region" within Serbia so Albanian population of Kosovo increased. Higher birthrate. Many t.v. stations, schools, etc. in Albanian. Serbs not moving into Kosovo – some moving out.

-- Post-Tito (1980-present): Question: What happens in the modern, post-Soviet era when nationalism is no longer held in check by Communism?

Revolts of Albanians cause more Serbs to leave the area. 1999 – the Serbian massacres of Albanians and the huge number of refugees fleeing the area caused a drop in pop. But then (after 1999) U.S. actions gave Albanians control (eventually Kosovo got independence), so many Serbs left.

4. Look at the population figures documented in the ethnographic summary of Kosovo's history. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Kosovo. Discuss why it is sometimes hard (or undesirable) to count people in different groups. (Note, for example, the different ways in which the Ottomans and the Yugoslavs identified people. And notice how the new term 'Kosovar' had to be created over the last few years.)

5. Discussion:

- We have seen three different systems of identifying someone's nationality: by religion, by language, by region. Are these different labels sometimes contradictory? How do different labels change how you look at people?

- Is it possible to have conflicting labels? Are there people who have trouble fitting into the classification system? (People of mixed parentage, or people whose religion differs from their language – eg. a Muslim Serb, who speaks the Serbian language but is a Muslim.)

- The regional designation 'Kosovars' is a new label. In what ways might it be problematic/fail to describe relationships among peoples? (Note that the label made it difficult for Americans to recognize the relationship between the Albanian-speaking Kosovars and their co-nationals in Albania and Macedonia. This led to an embarrassing incident in which CIA rifles, given to Kosovars, ended up in the hands of Albanian-minority rebels in Macedonia.)

Part 2 – Literature:

Three Kosovo poems are provided for you as a PDF format, Document 3, "Heroes of Serbia." It is a very readable translation not only from Serbian into English but from poetry into prose. As a class, read aloud and discuss the first poem ("The Fall of Serbia") and one or both of the following poems. OR you can choose to use the poems, translated into English but in their original forms, at:

http://www.kosovo.net/history/battle_of_kosovo.html. Click on the links for "The Downfall of the Kingdom of Serbia," "The Kosovo Maiden," and "The Death of the Mother of the Yugovichi." Questions for discussion and answers to those

questions (including more information that you can share with students) are provided in Document 6, “Questions and Answers.”

Part 3 – Writing:

Several different options are given, depending on the type of writing that fits within your curriculum.

Option 1 – Short research/creative writing:

1. Half of the students in each class should be assigned to read the background reading on the Sarajevo assassination of 1914; the other half should read the background reading on the 1999 Kosovo crisis. The background readings are also found in Documents 5 and 6.
2. Each student chooses a scenario from the list in Document 7. (Make sure that students choose one of the scenarios listed under the background section that they read. You might want to make a sign-up sheet so that only one person per class can sign up for any one scenario.)
3. Students write a report based on their scenario.
4. Students share their work with others in the class, either online or by exchanging written papers. Students write a thoughtful response to the paper of one other person in the class.

Option 2 – Research paper:

1. Each student selects one of the topics in Document 9 and reads the relevant background sheet (Document 5, 6, or 8).
2. Each student researches his/her topic and writes a research paper based on the instructor’s specifications.

Conclusion:

This lesson has shown how history influenced Serbian literature and how that literature, in turn, changed the course of history. But does this extreme example have any relevance to us?

I believe that it does. Even though the case of Kosovo is unusually vivid, it illustrates an important part of human culture. The fact is that even here, even now, our stories (oral, written, film) draw from our sense of history to shape who we are and what we believe about ourselves and about the rest of the world.