The war in Kosovo and the accompanying ethnic cleansing has catapulted this region to the centre stage of Western attention after so many years of relative silence and indifference. Already in the 1980s, many analysts pointed out that tensions between Albanian and Serbian nationalism and divisions between the Christian Serbs and the (mainly) Muslim Albanians were growing. Boundaries were being forced into a dangerous Balkan hotspot. Comparisons were drawn, especially by Serbian nationalists, with the famous Battle of Kosovo fought between the Ottoman Turks and Christian forces in 1389 – a ‘clash of civilizations’ between two deeply antagonistic and incompatible nations. In light of the recent developments, it seems that the rift among Albanians and Serbs is now perceived as a hard and fast line of division. Yet Kosovo has had a history of coexistence, with considerable movement across this ethnic and religious frontier, through economic ties, cultural diffusion, religious exchange and conversion. Throughout history, the ethnic and religious barriers have been anything but watertight.

In July 1991, I went to visit Zólitë, a mixed Serb-Albanian village three miles from the town of Rahovec, in the southwest of the province. Just outside the village on a hill-top, there is an old medieval Serbian Orthodox monastery (dating from the 14th century or even earlier). Its shrine has a reputation for being particularly helpful in cases of diseases of the eyes and mental and psychosomatic disorders. The church is called Sveti Vrač (the Holy Medics) after the saints Kuzman and Damjan, patron saints of the monastery. My reason for visiting this shrine was that, until the late 1980s, many Muslim Albanians from Zocësitë and nearby Rahovec would come to the monastery to join the festivities. The story holds that before the Albanian protests of 1989, which were violent and deadly suppressed in Rahovec (Orahovac in Serbian), Albanian pilgrims had therefore been regularly registered under the category ‘Serbs or Croats’. During my own research, some asserted that their language was similar to Macedonian, apparently trying to dissociate from any connection with Serbian. Since most Albanians had been sacked from their jobs in 1990, there was now a great deal of ‘bad blood’ between local Serbs and Albanians.

During the pilgrimage, the entrance of the monastery is animated by booths, mainly composed of religious paraphernalia. From the café I could hear Serbian songs.

Yet in the last few years the growing distrust between Albanians and Serbs put an end to this ‘mixed’ pilgrimage. Albanians had begun to boycott. As heard from a local Albanian taxi-driver, only a handful of old friends and later that morning army jets flew over, it was far from normal. Suspicion was, however, not only directed against foreigners: I witnessed a Serb pilgrim from Prizren accusing a Serbian tradesman of being a ‘bad blood’ and saying that the situation was far from normal. Suspicion was, however, not only directed against foreigners: I witnessed a Serb pilgrim from Prizren accusing a Serbian tradesman of being a ‘bad blood’ and saying that the situation was far from normal. Suspicion was, however, not only directed against foreigners: I witnessed a Serb pilgrim from Prizren accusing a Serbian tradesman of being a ‘bad blood’ and saying that the situation was far from normal. 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The highpoint of the religious gathering in Zoshte was a circumambulatory procession three times around the church on the morning of July 14, headed by priests and flag-bearers carrying Serbian flags and a banner with an image of the two patron saints. During my visit, most Gypsies remained to the side, clearly showing that the whole event, in this particular place and time, was to be primarily interpreted as a demonstration of Serb presence in Kosovo — amidst a 'sea' of Muslim Albanians. It was part of a much wider‘offensive’ by the Serbian Orthodox Church to strengthen its presence in Kosovo. It is not surprising that during the war, which commenced in spring 1998, the monastery of Zoshte became one of its local arenas: on 21 July 1998, it was taken by the Kosovo Liberation Army, the first Albanian attack on a Serbian Orthodox monastery. According to Serbian sources, the Albanians claimed the monastery as belonging originally to the Albanian Orthodox Church. Seven monks and a nun, as well as a few dozen Serb citizens who had taken shelter in the monastery, were taken hostage. Although they were later released, the monastery remained under Albanian control for several weeks, until it was taken back by Serbian forces.