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'A butcher wooed by the West' by Fergal Keane

Adam LeBor: *Milosevic - A Biography*

Some months back, while clearing out my study, I found a tattered piece of paper among a pile of notebooks left over from some of the wars I had covered in the Nineties, including the former Yugoslavia. On this piece of paper was written: 'Yehat Murseli, seven years old. Mitrovica. Gelac village. Four killed.' The writing is not mine and I can only assume it was pushed into my hand by one of his family. Who were the four dead? I have no idea. Nor can I remember Yehat Murseli himself, though he may have been a child I saw being treated for a bullet wound on the Kosovo/Albanian border one spring evening in 1999. But I have kept the piece of paper. It is my reminder of those years when Europe abandoned the weak and made deals with a monster.

To those of you who might believe that the Edwina Currie story is the great scandal of the Major years, I urge you to read Adam LeBor's excellent new biography of Slobodan Milosevic. I fancied that I already knew a great deal of the story but LeBor, a respected foreign correspondent, has combined journalistic flair with a historian's grasp of detail to bring us a haunting portrait of the man the West said it 'could do business with'. What a perfect moment to publish this book, as the former Yugoslav president stands trial in The Hague, accused of the ethnic cleansing of Albanians in Kosovo by the very countries which once regarded him as the key to stability in the Balkans.

LeBor describes a telephone call to Milosevic in January 1996.

Remember this was after the fighting in Croatia and the Serbian siege of Dubrovnik; after the bombardment of Sarajevo and the massacre in the UN 'safe haven' of Srebrenica; after the rape camps and ethnic cleansing.

The voice on the other end belonged to Bill Clinton. What did the President of the United States say to the man he knew to be a war criminal?

He outlined his hopes for the region's future, and implored: 'We support normalisation of relations and it cannot go ahead without you. We need that...' They needed him because they were never willing to confront him.

Not until the bloody endgame in Kosovo, nearly a decade and many thousands of lives after Slovenia's declaration of independence sparked off the first Yugoslav war. Reading this book one is repeatedly reminded of the central truth of all genocidal slaughters: for genocide to succeed, the killers depend on the indifference and cowardice of other nations.

LeBor shows us how brilliantly Milosevic manipulated the weakness of Western politicians and military men. He reminds us too of how former British Foreign Secretary Lord Hurd led a delegation to Belgrade.

Why? To do business no less. Lord Hurd was representing NatWest which fancied a slice of the privatisation action in Serbia.

LeBor is at his best describing the inner workings of Milosevic's regime which, in essence, was his family.

Everybody else could be used and abandoned. Only his beloved wife Mira and his ghastly children were safe from the manipulation and ruthlessness.

LeBor has used his access to Mira as well as other key members of the family to provide a chillingly intimate account of life in the court of King Slobbo.

The book exposes some striking contradictions, not least the loathing Mira felt for the Bosnian Serbs. Mira came from the old Communist elite and regarded the Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic as a loathsome hillbilly.

Mira remains adamant that Milosevic himself never manipulated nationalist sentiments. But as LeBor points out, without the backing of Milosevic, Karadzic would never have been able to destroy Bosnia in the name of a Greater Serbia.

For those who witnessed the destruction of the former Yugoslavia this will be a sad book. For those who stood by and did nothing it is a book that should make them wince. I recommend it to both but also to a wider public who should know about the policies pursued in their name.

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