

## THE EVENING STANDARD, 14 October 2002

### **'Analysis of evil; But are we any closer to knowing Milosevic?' by Justin Marozzi** ***MILOSEVIC: A Biography* by Adam LeBor**

THE West's latest figure of hate is Saddam Hussein, but for much of the Nineties it was Slobodan Milosevic. The Butcher of Belgrade was a cold and calculating politician who rode a wave of nationalism to supreme power, fighting and losing four wars in the process, and presiding over an era in which, half a century after the Nazi outrages, ethnic cleansing returned to the European mainland.

Adam LeBor covered the Yugoslav wars for two British newspapers and charts a cogent path through the interminable complexities of Balkan politics, and the sense of victimhood on which Milosevic's rise to power was based. The book claims to tell the inside story of the strongman's life, but it takes more than a three-hour interview with Mira Markovic, his Lady Macbeth wife, and a number of other family members and associates, to do that.

In fact, there is rather little on Milosevic's early life - his unhappy childhood and the suicide of both parents are well known an unfortunate lacuna which perhaps explains why the lion's share of this hefty tome is devoted to the conflicts of the Nineties.

LeBor's book would have been better conceived as a history of those savage times, instead of masquerading as a unique biographical portrait by an insider, which the author clearly was not. He draws early parallels with Stalin, Bill Clinton and Saddam Hussein, whose smalltown backgrounds and paternal deprivations Milosevic shared. "Perhaps a provincial background and dysfunctional paternal relationship is a requirement for a career as a political leader" is his somewhat trite conclusion.

He is far more illuminating on the warped politics of the Balkans, detailing how, from the late Eighties, the opportunistic Milosevic succeeded in exploiting the rising tide of nationalism within the broader framework of Titoist orthodoxy, the Brotherhood and Unity concept of six republics within a federal Yugoslavia.

"In the Balkans, the grim arithmetic of genocide can be a badge of macabre pride, and victimhood is seen as legitimising national aspirations," LeBor writes. It was a badge Milosevic pinned firmly to the lapels of his doublebreasted suits.

On 20 April 1987, he delivered his infamous speech to Serbs at Kosovo Polje, scene of Prince Lazar's 1389 defeat at the hands of the Ottoman army, a date which reverberated through Serbian history and was exploited by Milosevic to appeal to the Serbs' sense of nationalism and victimhood. "No one should dare to beat you again," he told the seething crowd, to wild applause.

Milosevic thrived on war, double-dealing and manipulation, one minute assuring Slovenia that he wanted to keep it within Yugoslavia, the next precipitating a conflict and allowing it to declare independence. A peacetime leader he was not.

Nationalism fuelled his rise to power but it was never of any more use, or interest, to him than that.

As one schoolmate put it: "Power was his only ideology and he did not care about anything else."

Throughout the turmoil which Milosevic unleashed, Mira Markovic stood by her man.

LeBor quotes a professor from Belgrade University commenting on this malevolent force behind the throne: "She is a figure who has a very high opinion of herself and she is not deserving of that opinion at all. She does not have one likeable characteristic. She is not charming, she is not intellectual and she is not pretty.

"Her literary achievements are next to nothing. She is a miserable intellectual of poor quality." The Nineties began with Milosevic's second war, first in Croatia, then in Bosnia. The pattern came to be predictable.

Serb minorities were armed and then used to foment conflict.

Once the paramilitaries were attacked, the tanks could roll in.

The ruinous effect of these wars was evident in the crumbling economy of Yugoslavia, a state of affairs which Milosevic only added to with a cynical policy of hyperinflation. In 1994, Serbian inflation was running at 310 million per cent.

With domestic support eroding by the day, Milosevic embarked on his final war, this time in Kosovo.

Calculating that Nato would not stand firm, he refused to back down before the international community. The world watched in horror as Kosovar Albanians were the latest group to be cleansed.

But Nato's bombing campaign in 1999 spelled his final demise, the liberation of the rump of Yugoslavia and Milosevic's capture and transferral to the war crimes tribunal in The Hague. Perhaps there are lessons here for how to deal with Saddam.

Boris Yeltsin described Milosevic as "one of the most cynical politicians I have ever met". Though this is an admirably researched and skilfully written volume, by the end of 350 pages the reader is left with little more insight than that.

Justin Marozzi is writing a history of Tamerlane for HarperCollins.

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