

## THE NATION, 19 April 2004

**'Empty vessel' by Laura Secor: Adam LeBor, *Milosevic: A Biography*. Yale. 404 pp. \$35.**

For a man who destroyed his country and wrecked or stole hundreds of thousands of lives, Slobodan Milosevic is an oddly colorless villain. When he was Serbia's head of state, his public appearances were wooden and dull. He made no particular display of his wealth, never (unlike Turkmenistan's flamboyant Saparmurat Niyazov, for example) renamed the months of the year for himself or his mother, built no monuments to his hubris and always kept his private life a cipher. No cult of personality kept Milosevic in power; he managed that instead with force, cunning and the systematic exploitation of divisions and weaknesses within the Serbian opposition. Among ordinary Serbs, the name Milosevic often seemed not to connote a man so much as some looming, inanimate force. Serbia under Milosevic was Serbia under a dark, expansive cloud. All that mattered was getting out from under Milosevic, the way you'd want to get out from under a collapsing roof.

London Times correspondent Adam LeBor's excellent new book, *Milosevic: A Biography*, does little to humanize the doughy-faced enigma who now stands trial for genocide at The Hague. One will not read this book to get a feeling for Milosevic's presence in a room, or the patterns of his speech, or the contours of his thought. We already knew that Milosevic's parents were both suicides; that he was an intense, unhappy child; that his wife, Mira Markovic, was his childhood sweetheart and co-conspirator; that he rose to power by stabbing his mentor, Ivan Stambolic, in the back. Beyond that LeBor will not tell us what makes Slobodan Milosevic tick, or why that driven, unhappy boy, unlike so many others who could be similarly described, became the architect of no end of misery in the country of his birth. Like many unauthorized biographies, in other words, LeBor's book circles an absent center. As a result, what LeBor has written is not a character study but a history of the disintegration of Yugoslavia through the lens of Serbian politics.

Many, many histories have been written in the decade and a half since Yugoslavia began to crumble. Nearly all such accounts acknowledge Belgrade politics as the driving force behind the chain of wars, but few do as good a job as this one of understanding those often complex maneuverings and weaving Serbia's experience into the experience of the region as a whole. As LeBor seamlessly demonstrates, Milosevic's degradation (economic, cultural, moral) of his own republic had everything to do with the sufferings he inflicted outside of it. The picture that emerges, though, is not one of an invincible mastermind with an iron grip on events. Rather, Milosevic looks like a man whose personal, small-minded quest for power unleashed forces he could best control by unleashing even uglier forces, ad infinitum. By the end the Serbian state and society were so deeply criminalized that high-ranking members of the regime were assassinated by mafia men in broad daylight at Belgrade cafes. Those mafia men were often the same paramilitaries the Milosevic regime had trained and equipped to ethnically cleanse Croatia and Bosnia. Milosevic's sinister henchmen in Bosnia, Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic, embarrassingly defied him and, LeBor implies, may even have carried out the appalling

Srebrenica massacre not on his orders but intoxicated by their own bloodlust. Milosevic could not put the genie back in the bottle, even when he desperately needed to in order to put an end to the international sanctions that were threatening his regime.

Milosevic may have been sociopathically cruel, but he was not a mad, grandiose, out-of-touch dictator a la Saddam Hussein. For that he kept his self-interest too conspicuously in view. In his diplomatic dealings he was cordial, seemingly reasonable, even voluble and charming, knocking back whiskeys and sometimes bursting into song. LeBor depicts a man who loved the attention he got from heads of foreign states and high-level envoys. He had a particular fondness for America and Americans, having visited New York during his days as a banker. At the 1995 Dayton negotiations that ended the Bosnian war, Milosevic's bonhomie stood him in good stead next to Croatian President Franjo Tudjman's stiff formality and the guilt-inducing lugubriousness of Bosnian president Alija Izetbegovic. In spite of being obviously in the wrong, Milosevic may have won himself and the Bosnian Serbs more concessions than they were due, simply by dint of being pleasant. Indeed, LeBor takes American dignitaries to task for negotiating in good faith with the man otherwise known as the Butcher of the Balkans; for taking him as their interlocutor even during the brief period when more reasonable men occupied responsible positions within his government; and for viewing him as the solution to the problem of which he was also the cause. In mounting his defense at The Hague, Milosevic is expected to call as witnesses the Americans with whom he once dined and negotiated, during the very period when the crimes of which he stands accused were committed. This ought to be a disconcerting development, in LeBor's view. Much of the evidence arrayed against Milosevic consists of American intelligence that was surely available at the time.

If Milosevic thrived on the attentions of diplomats, it's hard to understand exactly why he backed himself into a corner reserved for the world's pariahs. Particularly as NATO began to bombard Serbia in March 1999, Milosevic emerged not as a master manipulator currying favor but as a proud, stubborn and ultimately self-destructive local tyrant. LeBor suggests that Milosevic figured that if he hung tough, the NATO alliance would splinter. Kosovo was not, after all, a popular war in the United States, let alone in Europe. But then he scuttled his own plan by carrying out a brutal wave of killings and expulsions in Kosovo, as though he simply didn't bank on CNN's broadcasting images of refugees to the world's unanimous disgust. Not only did he lose the war but in clamping down on the Serbian opposition afterward, he provided its warring factions with a common cause. On October 5, 2000, nonviolent demonstrators gleefully toppled the Milosevic regime. Less than a year later Milosevic was arrested, jailed in Serbia and eventually extradited to The Hague.

If Milosevic was committed above all to maintaining his own power, why did he take such counterproductive measures in 1999? If, on the other hand, his commitment was to the Serbian national cause, what explains his total abandonment of Croatia's Serbs in 1995, when the lawless parastate he had supported was ethnically cleansed of Serb civilians by the Croatian Army's Operation Storm? Was Milosevic an ideologue or merely an opportunist? Until a biographer gains access to the man or his papers, Milosevic's motivations, at least as he understands them himself, will remain opaque. LeBor works from published sources and extensive interviews with Milosevic's wife and former cronies, most interestingly Dusan Mitevic, onetime head of the propagandistic Serbian state television, and Hrvoje Sarinic, onetime secret Croatian envoy to Belgrade.

The record is reasonably clear that from the time Milosevic took over the Serbian Communist Party in 1986, he aspired to autocratic power over the largest swath of Yugoslavia possible. To that end, he revoked in 1989 the autonomy of Kosovo and Vojvodina, the two provinces whose self-government effectively checked Serbian power within the Yugoslav federation. He also steered allies into the highest offices of the Yugoslav republic of Montenegro. These moves practically sealed Yugoslavia's fate. A federation disproportionately dominated by Serbia, and by a power-hungry Serb politician at that, was not the Yugoslavia Croats and Slovenes had signed up for. The country hurtled down the highway to civil war, nationalist folk tunes blaring from the windows.

Throughout the Yugoslav conflicts, two narratives competed fiercely for attention, particularly in Europe and the United States, where each entailed a clear chain of policy responses. One, most prominently associated with the travel writer Robert Kaplan, held that the Yugoslav wars resulted from deeply ingrained ethnic hostilities, which themselves sprang from the national character of Serbs and Croats; or from the repressed memory of the Second World War; or even from medieval Balkan history. Those who took this view of the Balkan wars suggested that nothing could really be done from outside to halt or contain them. Exponents of the second view, who urged international intervention, insisted that the ugliness arose from the actions of cynical leaders. Yugoslavia's longest and most recent history, they pointed out, was of peaceful cohabitation. To buy the line about ancient ethnic hatreds (or "Balkan ghosts," as Kaplan put it) was to abandon the cosmopolitan Yugoslavs to the machinations of the atavistic few. LeBor's account provides a less politically instrumental and more nuanced picture than either of these two views.

From the day in April 1987 when Milosevic, then a party functionary under Stambolic's wing, assured a crowd of angry Kosovo Serbs, "No one should dare to beat you again," Milosevic was credited with unleashing the deadly toxin of ethnic grievance. As LeBor demonstrates with insight and subtlety, however, Milosevic was neither the gray-suited apparatchik his leaden speeches would imply, nor was he a fiery demagogue. Nationalist sentiment thrummed under the surface of post-Tito Yugoslavia for nearly all of the 1980s. It drew upon history, mythology and living memory of the Second World War. But that did not predetermine that it would splinter the country. Indeed, it might have come to nothing. But Milosevic quickly grasped that he could use Serbia's nationalists in his quest for power. They, however, thought they could use him in theirs. With Milosevic now in the dock, new violence brewing in Kosovo and ultranationalists having made a shockingly strong showing in Serbia's fall 2003 elections, it might seem that in the end the nationalists got the better end of this bargain. Until the fall of 2000, however, the upper hand clearly belonged to Milosevic. He made nationalist ideologues his front men, then dumped them when they became inconvenient. He had his state-run television whip up a frenzy of sympathy for Croatia's Serbian parastate, then dropped it like a hot potato when it no longer served his interests to support it. His wife, Mira, never abandoned her leftist, nearly Maoist, rhetoric, condemning in print the very chauvinist thugs her husband promoted. In LeBor's telling, the Milosevic household was quite possibly riven by the national question--not because Slobodan actually committed himself to a nationalist ideology (though his feelings about the Serbian claim on Kosovo, according to LeBor, were genuine, as was his hatred of Albanians) but because the thugs he found politically useful espoused an ideology Mira found cosmetically distasteful. Post-Communist Yugoslavia was a political hall of mirrors. Ideology was contentless.

The Serbian economy, too, was a land of make-believe. The story of the criminalization of the Serbian economy and the impoverishment of the Serbs is nothing new, but LeBor's narrative lucidly conveys how deliberately the plunder was orchestrated from above. Isolated under sanctions, the Milosevic regime was starved for foreign currency and devised every means to extract it from the pockets of Serbian citizens. As LeBor recounts, this involved printing absurd amounts of money, which in turn produced mind-boggling hyperinflation. The regime also convinced citizens to invest in pyramid schemes run by friends of the ruling family. Soon enough a country that had enjoyed a near Western standard of living throughout the cold war was reduced to squalid desperation. Anyone who truly believed Milosevic was a nationalist might be disabused of such notions by LeBor's hard look at the Serbian leader's contempt for his own people. Milosevic stood for Milosevic, nothing more.

If Milosevic was a colorless villain, his family provided Serbia with a little dark comic relief. The Serbian leader's children, Marko and Marija, exemplified the crass, brutal, self-seeking criminal culture their father's regime had cultivated. Marko terrorized the small town of Pozarevac, where his parents were born. He ran several shady business outfits, including a nightclub, a cut in the cigarette-smuggling business and a park called Bambiland. Marija ran a radio station, packed heat and flew into rages. And of course, there were few public figures Serbs loved to hate more than Sloba's wife, with her intellectual pretensions, her incoherent diary column in a Belgrade magazine, her jealous death grip on her husband and the flower she liked to wear in her hair. LeBor spent good time with Mira, and his book is enlivened by lengthy quotes from their discussions.

Mira's grip on reality is demonstrably weak. She is fond of saying things don't exist that clearly do. When a BBC reporter asked Mira about something that appeared about her in the Croatian magazine *Globus*, she characteristically replied, "Honestly, I've never heard of such a magazine. I don't know about its existence or what it says, and what you just said is like telling me it's Sunday today whereas it's actually Tuesday." Her life was apparently shaped by the early abandonment of her father, a partisan hero, and by a romanticized, heroic memory of her dead mother, his lover during the war who was later executed on murky charges of spying for the Nazis. Mira rejected the official history that viewed her mother as a traitor, preferring instead to cast her as a martyr to the partisan cause.

By all accounts, Mira encouraged her husband's ambitions and helped mastermind his rise to power. She publicly feuded with some of his nationalist attack dogs, like the fascist paramilitary leader and indicted war criminal Vojislav Seselj. But she was more successful in severing her husband's ties with friends and family members of whom she was jealous. Serbia's ruling couple forged a bond so exclusive and co-dependent that virtually no one could get truly close to either of them. Ivan Stambolic, whom Milosevic would betray in his rise to power and in connection with whose assassination Mira is wanted by The Hague, was not only Milosevic's mentor but his kum, or best man. Serbian culture values friendship like family and considers a man's kum to be something almost more than a brother. But of Stambolic Mira told LeBor, "They were not such great friends. People have made that up, we were not even family friends. We did not visit each other. I could spend three days denying all the things that were written about us."

Beyond denying, however, are the hilarious transcripts of Croatian secret service wiretaps of the Milosevic family telephones, published in *Globus* and excerpted in *Milosevic*. My favorite is

a 1997 conversation between Milosevic and his son Marko, who wants to have an operation to pin back his ears:

Slobodan: Alright, my lovely. Listen, I've been talking to a doctor here and I did some thinking with my own head. You know why it looks that way to you? Because you're terribly skinny, and every geek your age looks that way. As soon as you fill out and, as they say, stabilize a bit, everything will fall into place. I looked even worse at your age. Marko: Look, I agree, but I do not intend to start looking good in fifteen years.

Slobodan: Marko, what I want to tell you is that it only appears that way because you're skinny. Even a chicken has some fat behind the ears. And you have only bones, you see, so any violence against nature is stupid. Secondly, you are handsome as a doll, your father's image. So don't screw around.

Marko: But dad ...

Slobodan: I'm against it and I am your parent. There you go.

Marko: Excellent. And I am in favor of it and I am of age.

Slobodan: Well, since you're of age, I'm going to beat you up as soon as you show up here.... I want to tell you this only because you're skinny. Your head is all drawn thin, your stomach is like a five-dinar coin (i.e., thin). Why don't you put some more fat on it?

There is something so tantalizingly weird about hearing Slobodan Milosevic speak man-to-man with his son about his ears. It is also in perfect keeping with Milosevic's prosaic life and rule. Maybe the authorized--or posthumous--Milosevic biography will one day read as nothing but this: the catalogue of a small man's small life. The great stuff of even a villain's biography--grand delusions, battles of conscience, doubts and regrets followed by self-deceit--may simply require a greater man.

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