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THE THURSDAY BOOK: 'The murderous charm of Serbia's Mr Popular' by Marcus Tanner; Milosevic: A Biography Adam LeBor

NOT LONG after her husband's army flattened and torched the suburbs of Dubrovnik, raining shells on the Old City, Mira Markovic put pen to paper in one of those newspaper columns that Serbia-watchers once read so avidly. Her topic was where she and her husband "Slobo" Milosevic most loved to spend their free time. You might have thought she would have skirted the topic of Croatia, one-third of which was then occupied by the Yugoslav army and an assortment of ghastly paramilitaries financed by her husband's government. Oh, no. Her favourite holiday spot was, of course, Dubrovnik. The lovely flowers! And the people: so spirited, such fun!

Adam LeBor's study of Serbia's old "caudillo" is full of such surreal anecdotes. In 1995 we find Milosevic at the height of his powers. At the Bosnia peace talks in the Dayton airbase, LeBor describes how he held the world in his palm. No one wanted to sit next to boring old Franjo Tudjman of Croatia. They also kept a wide berth from Alija Izetbegovic of Bosnia, all long-faced about the slaughter of some 200,000 fellow Bosnian Muslims.

Instead, it was Milosevic - the man almost entirely responsible for the extermination - who was Mister Popular. He displayed no sign of embarrassment or contrition, singing along in the airbase restaurant to his favourite songs, chatting up the waitresses, and downing monumental quantities of whisky while poring over maps with foreign diplomats. It was thanks to one of these whisky-fuelled sessions that the town of Gorazde went to the Bosnian Muslims, along with a road running through Serb territory to Sarajevo. As Lebor says, it was nicknamed the "Scotch route" in honour of its sponsor.

Sketches like this - and the book is full of them - help explain why this most destructive of Balkan politicians retained the support of most Serbs and the sympathy of most international diplomats for so long. Time and time again they set off for Belgrade after some Serb atrocity armed with stiff ultimatums, only to return sheepish and empty-handed - disarmed by Milosevic's bluff bonhomie, innocent shrugs and endless stream of jokes.

LeBor charts with dexterity and black humour the rise, and eventual fall, of this provincial Communist functionary. He has a good feel for the sheer weirdness of Serbia's political odyssey, and the curious and perhaps inexplicable character of the Serbs' romance with the Milosevics.

Perhaps his desire to bring out the element of macabre comedy in the regime means he sometimes underplays the intense fear that underpinned the system. The Belgrade of the 1980s and 1990s was, as I well remember, a city where many people lived in terror of the night-time knock. But this is a small cavil. So many biographies of dictators concentrate overmuch on the politics and adopt a rather worthy tone. LeBor is right to link Milosevic's politics with his domestic life, and peek behind the closely-guarded doors leading into Slobo and Mira's kitchen. For it is there, it appears, that the destinies of millions were decided.

The reviewer's book 'Croatia' is published by Yale
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