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Life During Wartime
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BELGRADE -- Crime feeds the war, the war feeds crime. Every brutal rape in Bosnia prompts retaliation, prolongs the war. Every new week of the war blurs the line between a smuggler and a hero, a patriot and a gangster. In Serbia today it's sometimes hard to know whether the crimes are used to prosecute the war or the war is used to cover up the crimes.

Statue of "Victory" in Belgrade

On Terazije, a cobblestone pedestrian zone in downtown Belgrade, haggard men stand, shoulders slumped, muttering *"devise, devise"* at passers-by, occasionally catching a customer. The curbs of the "Boulevard of the Revolution" are strewn with casually-parked but carefully-polished Mistubishi Pajero Jeeps, the status symbol of Serbia's new sharp-suited breed of businessman. Every few days one of their drivers is gunned down in broad daylight outside a fashionable restaurant. If you didn't know

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better, you'd think the Serbs were addicted to heroin and beseiged by battling gangs of druglords.

The truth is darker still. The Serbs are addicted, but to hard currency ("*devise*"), not hard drugs. Hyperinflation sends them running wild-eyed to money-changers each day, either to change their meager Yugoslav-dinar salaries into Deutschmarks or to swap some stashed dollars for food. With contracts as meaningless as the dinars they promise, bigger deals are done at the point of a Zastava pistol.

History never promised the Serbs anything less. Under the Ottoman empire they maintained a civil society beyond Constantinople's control in part by leaving it up to bandits to maintain public order. These *klepts* were then so glorified by folklore and ballads that in the recent Serbian elections one well-known war criminal campaigned for office by trying, Nazi-style, to blend his criminal career into that part of the national identity. Committing crimes in defense of the nation, implied Zelko Raznjatovic, (better known as "Arkan"), was a noble Serbian tradition.

But Arkan, then already a member of the Serbian parliament, couldn't claim his share of Serbia's dominant ideology of national-socialism by promoting its nationalist angle. He actually lost ground as the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), the political machine of President Slobodan Milosevic, increased its share of the 250-member parliament from 101 to 123 seats. While almost every party contesting the elections, including the opposition parties, tried to portray themselves as ferocious defenders of "Greater Serbia," Milosevic quietly stood above, showing himself on television only as the quiet apparatchik plodding away in pursuit of the nation's aims. The Milosevic machine knew better than to try to sell potent nationalism to a public raised on grey communism. Although Serbia has plumbed depths of political and economic depravity not known since Hitler's Germany, Milosevic has brought the country to National Socialism from the socialist side.

And to the victor shall go the spoils. Belgrade's street battles are merely for the crumbs, such as crumpled Western bills, that fall from the feast that members of the SPS enjoy. Serbia's hyperinflation, which in the month of the elections hit 250,000 per month, is in fact a vacuum cleaner which the SPS is using to suck the nation's hard currency into its pockets, according to leading independent Belgrade economists. Although Milosevic tells the

Serbs that they are suffering because of the sanctions the West has imposed, his government's response has been far deadlier than the measures themselves. Often accused of war crimes, Milosevic seems rather to have a committed a crime-war.

The noble bandits

Sometimes Serbia's literary legacy of noble warrior-bandits appears to have come to life in a nightmare form. Take, for example, the strange case of the mild-mannered Montenegrin actor Jarkula Lausavic. Halfway through his run portraying Caruga, a sort of nineteenth-century Serb Robbin Hood, Lausavic shot dead some young toughs from his home town who were hassling his brother in a bar. He said it was the first time he'd ever used a gun.

"In Belgrade today," says Duska Jovanic, a stylish journalist specializing in the mafia, "you can't tell the difference between the end of literature and the beginning of life."

The historic character Lausavic portrayed is only one of a number glorifed in Serbian literature and folk music. After their medieval state had fallen to Ottoman rule, Serbs established provincial governments under the umbrella of the Orthodox church. Officially the provinces were to be defended by *armatoles*, militias sanctioned by the local church. But in practice the provinces were barely governable and plagued by renegade Ottoman soldiers. Church leaders were forced to form alliances with *klepts*, bandits who ran private armies. The *klepts* were glorified in folksongs as "individuals who alone or with a close band of faithful comrades fought fiercely and bravely against the odds."[1] Vuk Karadzic, codifier of the Serbian language, avidly collected such songs.

Today the songs are still sung lustily at gatherings such as *Slavas*, Thanksgiving-like feasts that Serbs hold on the day in the Orthodox Church's calendar that commemmorates a saint a family holds dear. I spent the evening of election day sipping vodka and humming along as a friend and his relatives begged a guest playing the accordian to come up with folksong after folksong. It was a heady mix of religion and adventurism, a holiday that seemed to sanction the divine destiny of the Serbs literally to steal their way to freedom. (My own rendition of a Temptations tune fell flat by comparison.)

Wrap such a culture in sanctions and smugglers will hear their praises sung. Dejan Lucic, a real estate dealer in Belgrade, said he approved of some of the criminal gangs operating outside his office on Terazije. "The embargo produced them," he said, "because they are simply providing what is necessary for life. To me, these people are heroes."

Fascism (in its purest form) fails

If the fascist technique is to use a nation's symbols in a fury of self-pity and a promise of renewal, then Arkan gets 10 out of 10 for form. Rallies for his "Serbian Party of Unity" took all the images whipped in living rooms during *Slavas* and bent them through a prism of high technology and public-relations hype. In sports halls across the country, Arkan ushered the disenfranchised into their own Slavic Nuremberg.

The Belgrade basketball stadium where I saw Arkan "perform" was draped with banners emblazoned with the Serbian cross, ordinary but for the four "C"s curving up along the cross-sections. The "C"s stand (in Cyrillic characters) for "Sano Sloga Srbina Spasava" -- "Only Unity can Save the Serbs." As the crowd wandered in, piles of black Peavey speakers repeatedly blasted a simple tune written for Arkan's campaign by Marina Tucakovic, one of Serbia's leading folk musicians and a candidate for the party.

A moment later the lights dimmed and a white curtain at one end was set ablaze with a video of other Arkan meetings, mostly in towns where the Serbs are in the minority. The same song ran mind-numbingly on as Arkan on film hammered away with equal monotony at his themes.

Then suddenly the curtain rose and the court became a church. On stage was a fifteen-piece orchestra to accompany a choir whose members stood as if in stalls on either side of the brightly-lit Serbian cross. Electric prayer candles flickered at their feet. Arkan was nowhere to be seen. Instead, an MC introduced folk star after folk star to perform their hits -- "Jay," dressed in black tie, crooning "Neither East nor West," Oliver Mandic performing "My Friends Help Me." Ceca Velickovic sang last, turned out in a long white dress rather than her usual jeans. Under the cross and backed up the choir she looked like the bride of the nation.

Nazi strategy, according to a leading scholar, was to litter Germany with

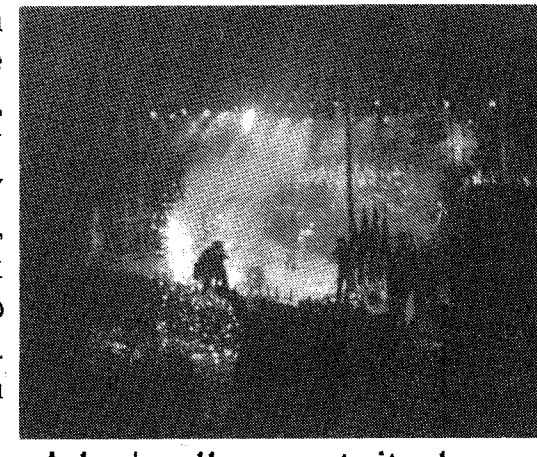
"sacred spaces" -- festival meadows, monuments -- for the practice of the political liturgy. "The new politics can be regarded as one successful way in which the sacred space was filled: with paradees, marches, gymnastic exercises and dances, as well as ritual speeches."[2]

We'd had the games; now it was time for the speeches. The MC returned to introduce some of the party's local candidates, then announced the entrance of the "man whose enemies fear him." Out strode Arkan, only to stand stiff while a trumpeteer in World War One dress uniform led the crowd through the (unofficial) Serbian national anthem. Then Arkan approached the mike and let loose with his theme -- unity, unity, unity.

"The foundation of the Serbian state," he ranted "is Serbian unity. We must forget the past, that some of us were Communists." An appropriate message for a man who, according to an Oxford historian, travelled throughout the 1980s on a diplomatic passport, doing the Communists' dirty work.[3]

"We are an Orthodox people, we believe in God and Serbia," Arkan shouted, his voice cracking. "Serbia! Serbia! Serbia!"

Then the explicit appeal to tradition. Some had accused him, he said, of having committed war-crimes in Bosnia. Arkan dismissed such slander. "We were defending Serbs who were in danger," he said. "This war is only the defense of their land, their children, their religion."[4] He promised more of the same should the Albanian majority in the Serbian province of Kosovo, Arkan's home constituency, seek independence. "I'll be the one to defend Kosovo from any such ideas. Kosovo is Serbia and will remain Serbia."



Arkan's rally comes to its close.

Arkan's rambling speech of nationalist paranoia was sprinkled with other National Socialist ideas, such as that Serbian women must have more children in order to save the nation from extinction ("*Kinder, Kirche, Kuche* anyone?) and that the Serbs were subject to an international conspiracy

against them. The words of the scholar of Nazism applied equally well here. "This was not just a movement of protest reacting to specific grievances," he wrote:

> but was rather a form of mass politics which appealed to more permanent longings and which tried to hypostatize these through myth, symbol and aesthetic politics. The new political style attempted to take the place of mediating institutions, such as representative parliamentary government which links governors to governed.[5]

Back on the streets of Belgrade art, life and history again passed images like batons in a reckless relay race. At the Yugoslav Dramatic Theater, Alisa Stojanovic was directing a sold-out run of "Caberet." She had decided, she said, not to highlight the comparisons between Nazi Berlin and contemporary Belgrade too much. "The parallels are so obvious," she said as she walked her Irish setter through a neglected park, "that there was no reason to exaggerate them."

As all the world became a stage it was difficult to tell where playing left off and life began. In Stojanovic's production, the fresh-faced Anglo-Serbian singer Ana Sofrenovic played her role with worldly disdain. But on the platform of an opposition rally later in the week stopped a few hearts (mine, anyway) with her clear soprano, moaning "Why Did You Leave Me?" Although Arkan's singers were required on his stage to match his coarse naive nationalism, in their own clubs they carried on as usual. One, "Baby Doll," strutted around the mafiosi bar "Tabou" in Spandex tights and a sequined blouse pinching 1940s hits with her Minnie Mouse voice. Every time the green neon lights caught the dark roots of her peroxide blond hair I thought she did more to bring Berlin back than Ana ever could.

The only solace that the Arkan spectacle had offered were the spectators themselves. The hall had been only a quarter full. Most in attendance had been clearly too young to vote. When Velickovic finished her song and the MC began introducing candidates for the party a group of youths in baseball caps had walked out. Arkan's inability to pack them in soon proved fatal at the ballot box, where he lost half his seats. Although their were signs that the votes in his home province had been tampered with,

Arkan had clearly made no impact on the nation. The party with real electoral pull proved to be the one that appealed to a sense of more recent Serbian history.

The Social-Nationalists

"Your typical SPS voter," one wag wrote, "is like a penguin. He likes the cold, he likes to stand in line and he likes to clap."

Milosevic has always succeeded at the ballot box in part by stuffing it, but also in part by approaching National Socialism from its Socialist side. In the period of upheaval that he helped to create, Milosevic portrays himself as a calm Communist pursuing a careful plan. While nationalists pursue divine destiny, Milosevic marches to a Marxist beat, walking, not running, down history's preordained path.

No wonder it's effective. Like all post-Communist countries, Serbia is largely secular. *Slavas* are for drinking, not praying. And, like all post-Communist populations, the Serbs are passive, expecting no more than their official posts and wages, no matter how worthless. If anyone was going to replace parliamentary institutions with a party machine, he would have to appeal to a longing for the stability of socialism.

Over coffee with Olivera Fatic, a student in Prague home for vacation, I wondered aloud why hyperinflation hadn't driven the Serbs to rebellion. Inflation of merely 12 percent, I said, had driven Americans to Ronald Reagan in droves, since they feared its effect on their savings and therefore their plans.

"But it's not like that here," Olivera protested. "People never made their own plans for their own savings."

"Take my parents," she went on. "They graduated from university and went straight into state jobs. They never depended on their own savings, they didn't make plans around them. They expected everything to come from the state. They never cared how high inflation was, just as long as they got their salaries." Olivera complained bitterly that her friends' parents sat out the storm slumped in front of the television.[6]

During the campaign neither Milosevic nor any leading SPS figure appeared

to debate candidates on television. True, Milosevic, as president, was not running in the parliamentary elections. But since the election was a referendum on his record, one might have thought he'd spar with opposition figures. Instead, the SPS sent a well-known drunkard down to mutter a few lies at the clean-cut characters who turned up to argue with him on Belgrade's independent television station. He claimed, for example, that "Germany was on its knees" thanks to Yugoslav inflation. "We give them our useless dinars and get their Deutschmarks!" he proclaimed. Democratic Party candidate Zoran Djinjic pointed out that it was fellow Serbs, not Germans, from whom the government was taking DMs. But the real message of the drunk's presence was to equate all of the parties with him and degrade the whole idea of a multiparty debate.

That's not say Milosevic never appeared on state TV. The cameras lingered lovingly over his every act as head of state. A home movie filmed by his mother could not have spent more time recording his every gesture when, for example, Milosevic met a Russian delegation to discuss a new oil pipeline. First a look at this map. Then, wait, then this map. Hmm, yes. Interesting. What was that on that other map? Hmm, yes, I see.

Since the director of state television was a candidate on the SPS list for parliament, it's fair to assume this portrait of Milosevic as prudent father of the nation was intentional. It certainly jibes with his own contempt for open democracy. "Not without reason" one American scholar notes, "did he (Milosevic) confess to a French journalist in July 1989 that he was hostile to the multiparty system, and actually preferred a system without parties.' In a nonparty system, the people place their trust directly in the leader, who therefore embodies the will of the people."[7]

The only overtly political stance Milosevic took on television was a brief appearance at an SPS rally in Belgrade's cold concrete Sava Center. As he walked to the podium, SPS members stood and clapped for five minutes in a unison that was eerily reminiscent of *the* Party. After a brief statement, ("Even our greatest enemies cannot deny the success of our policies, which we conducted with so much pain"), he settled into the front row and was shown occasionally calmly applauding the proceedings like a Communist Louis XIV.

Levy on the masses

According to independent economists in Belgrade, SPS members have good reason to applaud their leader. Although Milosevic has blamed his country's record-breaking inflation on international sanctions, his government has in fact printed money willy-nilly as part of a scheme to suck hard-currency savings out from under mattresses and into his political and war machine. At a time when ordinary workers receive as little as one DM a month, Milosevic has made his party members very rich.

As Daniel Cveticanin, an economist at the University of Belgrade, points out, Milosevic's response to sanctions has been far more deadly than the sanctions themselves. By inflating thousands of times faster than wages can possibly rise, Milosevic has essentially imposed a 99.99 percent income tax on all Serb workers.

First there is the law that says the Yugoslav National Bank must cover government deficits by primary emission of dinars. Then there is the law, passed since sanctions, that says no firm may fire any workers while sanctions are in place. The result, Cveticanin said, is that the bank prints money to spread diluted wages across the economy.

The government need not actually print any money. "Someone from a factory calls the party central committee and says, 'We have no revenues for this month but we have to pay our workers.' " Cveticanin said. "Then someone from the party calls the National Bank and tells them to put the money on the account of the factory."

Hyperinflation is the vacuum cleaner that the party elite uses to suck hard currency savings out of the Yugoslav population, Cveticanin said. Several "chain-letter" schemes pretending to be banks, such as Yugoskandic and Daffinament, made headlines in the Western press when they drew Serbs in with promises of high interest hard currency savings accounts and then collapsed. But since then hyperinflation and party connections have turned the entire Yugoslav economy into a chain-letter scheme.

In 1990 there were billions of dollars in private hands, most earned by the 900,000 Yugoslavs who had worked for 18 years abroad. Those not clever enough to pull their savings out of the banks two years ago lost everything in a government seizure of hard currency savings. Theoretically this money is still in their accounts. Practically, it is gone.

But how has the government got at money under the mattresses or from the relatives living abroad who send some money home? Through a variety of new schemes. Take, for example, a certain type of bank loan available only to friends of the party. With the right connections, one can give a state bank hard currency collateral for a loan Yugoslav dinars that can be paid back in Yugoslav dinars, Cvetinanin explained.

The recipient of such a loan can turn a quick profit on the street. Say I give Beobanka $5,000 collateral for a loan of 1 billion dinars at 100 percent monthly interest. I'll have to pay 2 billion dinars back at the end of the month. Fine. I then go to the money-changers that have been selling dinars all day for hard currency and give them a new batch. By the time I've unload my billion dinars on them I've come up with only $4,000 dollars. Am I in trouble?

No. I wait until the end of the month, during which time inflation has run far ahead of the rate of my loan. I can now get 2 billion dinars for $100. I buy the dinars off the street (perhaps from the employees of someone just starting on such a loan?) and pay off my debt. I'm $3,900 richer. Of course if I want to get such a loan again I'll have to make a donation to a "worthy cause" -- say, the Socialist Party of Serbia or one of the Bosnian Serb irregular forces. But I need not fear that the interest on my loan, no matter how high, will be higher than the rate of inflation.

The only loser in this scheme is poor soul who doesn't have such connections, earns a paltry Yugoslav wage and is pulling his hard currency out from under the mattress in order to keep up with prices. But since state television has been telling him that inflation is a product of sanctions he's not likely to rebel.

The one-party economy

In a normal economy the beneficiaries of such schemes would have to fear the wrath of the unions, who might insist that wages be indexed to keep up with inflation. But thanks to Yugoslavia's enduring Communist legacy union leaders are not elected but appointed by the SPS, inheritor of the former League of Communists of Serbia. Instead of pressing for indexing, union leaders "negotiate" with the Economic Chamber of Serbia, representatives of management.

"They make these farcical negotiations every day," Dusan Mitrovic, head of Serbia's only truly independent (and therefore impotent) union said. "But any decision is meaningless if you have 3 percent inflation an hour. And they will not index wages to inflation. Inflation is in their interest -- they live on it."

The Yugoslav legacy of "self-management" means that there is little chance of a Lech Walsea rising to challenge the establishment, according to labor expert Mihail Arandarenko. Since workers were theoretically represented in the management of their factories, no union ever represented the workers of more than one factory. This virtual guild system has allowed the SPS to play one factory off against others in a game of divide and rule. "Each enterprise has its own interest," Arandarenko said. "Workers from one factory are only concerned with conditions at that factory." Union leaders are reduced, he said, to scrounging state reserves for truck loads of goods such as laundry detergent and chocolate.

But as Yugoslavia "privatizes," the SPS has scrapped "self-management" in favor of schemes that give management up to 200 times more shares in industry per head than workers, according to law professor Dragon Hiber. Such shares are worthless in an economy so shattered that the major steel manufacturer now cans wild mushrooms. But they could prove valuable once sanctions are lifted.

In the meantime SPS affiliates have moved quickly into the property market as those without savings sell their apartments for money for food. One of Belgrade's most successful real estate agencies, "Elita," is run by a former journalist purged for writing a book about the Communist mafia. Many of his former targets, Dejan Lucic said, are now his clients. Ten or twelve of Belgrade's richest investors bought the majority of property, often using other names, Lucic said. "And the people who are really rich are very close to the old Communist elite."

Indeed Milosevic's SPS had been built on the ashes of the the former Communist League of Serbia as a revanchist revolt against the erosion of party privileges, according to Bozo Jovanovic, an economist who had served in the former Yugoslavia's last federal government. That government had incurred communist wrath, Jovanovic said, by pursuing economic reforms such as free trade and a convertible currency. Milosevic took advantage of the "elasticity" of federal constitution to subvert reform within Serbia by

gathering extraparliamentary political support.

"The main difference between law in socialist countries and law in capitalist ones," Jovanovic said, "is that in a capitalist country, the law is as it is written. In a socialist one, the law is what the 'comrades' decide is the law. Some laws are written but then the 'comrades' decide, 'The situation has changed. We'll do it a different way.' Decisions are made by the strength of the forces in the conflict, not by the law."

Jovanovic, usually cheerful, grew glum as he looked over the day's newspaper to try to calculate the worth of his dinars. That morning the rate appeared to be 5 billion dinars to the Deutschmark, although it was bound to change by the hour. He took off his glasses and sighed. "For the whole year of our government," he said, "it was seven dinars to the mark. Seven."

Peeking behind the curtain

SPS corruption wasn't a major issue in the 1992 elections, largely because then there was enough money in government coffers to buy off pensioners and state employees. But as inflation corroded even the most generous pay rises, ordinary Serbs began to ask what was happening. Some continued to blame international sanctions but others, such as a pensioner I spoke to while she waited for bread, looked closer to home. "This is happening," she said, "because we didn't have the strength to get rid of Communism."

Small-time criminals, Jovanic, the journalist, said, are also disallusioned by the speed with which the communists have taken over their trade. "They say, 'When we were robbing banks in the west, we were taking money from Switzerland to Yugoslavia. Now the communists are again taking money from here back to Switzerland.' "

In the 1993 election SPS corruption was *the* issue. Indeed, the elections only happened because disgust with SPS abuse drove the ultranationalist Serbian Radical Party out of a coalition with the SPS and into the opposition. With his dream of "Greater Serbia" virtually achieved, Radical leader Vojislav Seselj returned his original agenda -- ferocious anti-Communism -- and vowed to join the DEPOS party, led by dissident writer Vuk Draskovic, in removing Milosevic.

In December's elections, every party campaigned hard against the SPS "mafia." Standing in front of the federal parliament on the site where police had beat him in June, Draskovic denounced the SPS as his supporters threw armfuls of worthless dinars into the air and screamed for punishment of the "red bandits." "After they sold everything in Serbia," Draskovic cried, "they announced that Serbia was not for sale."

Worthless dinars after the DEPOS rally

Even the Democratic Party, which shied away from overt attacks on the SPS in 1992, this time boldly vowed never to join the SPS in coalition and campaigned with one word -- "Posteno" -- "Honest." "We will protect national interests," Democratic Party leader Zoran Djindjic said, "but we will not get rich off national interests."

The anti-corruption campaigned partially paid off for DEPOS and the Democrats. Despite abuse on state television and other irregularities[8], the DEPOS increased its share of parliamentary seats from 41 to 50. The Democrats lept from 7 to 33. Depos spokesman Ivan Kovacevic attributed their gains in part to the good cooperation DEPOS had from the Radicals in monitoring the elections.

But even those gains could not make up for the body-blow the SPS landed on its erstwhile allies the Radicals. The 1993 elections, designed to get rid of them, nearly did just that. Seselj's party fell from 75 to 33 seats in parliament.

The whole SPS machine went after the Radicals. While state TV had been

friendly to them in the run-up to last year's elections, it spent the last few months of 1993 denouncing Seselj as a dangerous wild card likely to disrupt the peace process and drive the West to maintain sanctions.

But the SPS seemed unsure that their media assault would do the job. As the election results trickled in on Monday the faint scent of cooked books permeated the electoral commission's press conference. The commission could report figures from all nine of Serbia's provinces except Kosovo, the largely Albanian southern province. Strange that, given that the Albanians had boycotted the election, leaving the commission the job of counting the votes of a mere 10 percent of the population. But the SPS needed most of its 24 seats in order to move from its 101 MPs closer to the 126 seats necessary for an absolute majority. It could not afford to lose nationalist votes, thick on the ground there, to Seselj or even the new Milosevic puppet, Arkan.

When the results finally came in, both Seselj and Arkan had lost out to the SPS there. In the final tally, SPS claimed 123 seats -- not an outright majority, but a working one.

Democracy in the streets?

Having also stolen yet another Serbian election, the SPS machine is on the verge of consolidating its grip on Bosnia. If Milosevic can get a peace deal that both maintains his power over Serb-held parts of Bosnia and lifts sanctions, economists say, the mafia running the SPS will be ready to take their "earnings" into the fledging legitimate businesses in the rest of Central Europe. Milosevic will then be master both of "Greater Serbia" and its highly-concentrated finances.

But it will be a close-run thing. Milosevic must now hurry for a peace deal in Bosnia that will encourage the West to lift its sanctions. Economists estimate that there is only enough private savings left in the country to keep the machine oiled for another three to six months. After that, all hell could break loose. Party hacks at the unions might side with the workers for a change and rural communities, long able to remain immune to inflation by bartering food, might refuse to feed the cities.

The point at which Serbs are more afraid of starving than of losing their jobs is fast approaching, Arandarenko said. "Union leaders will have to organize workers to save their own interests, to save their lives," he said.

"Even the state unions know that." There were faint signs of trouble in the streets. A few dozen workers from the elevator company David Pajic protesting outside of the City Assembly complained to me that their unions did not have the power to hold effective strikes that Western unions had.

Milosevic's two reliable bastions of popular support -- pensioners dependent on state handouts and rural communities able to barter their way around inflation -- might also soon abandon him.

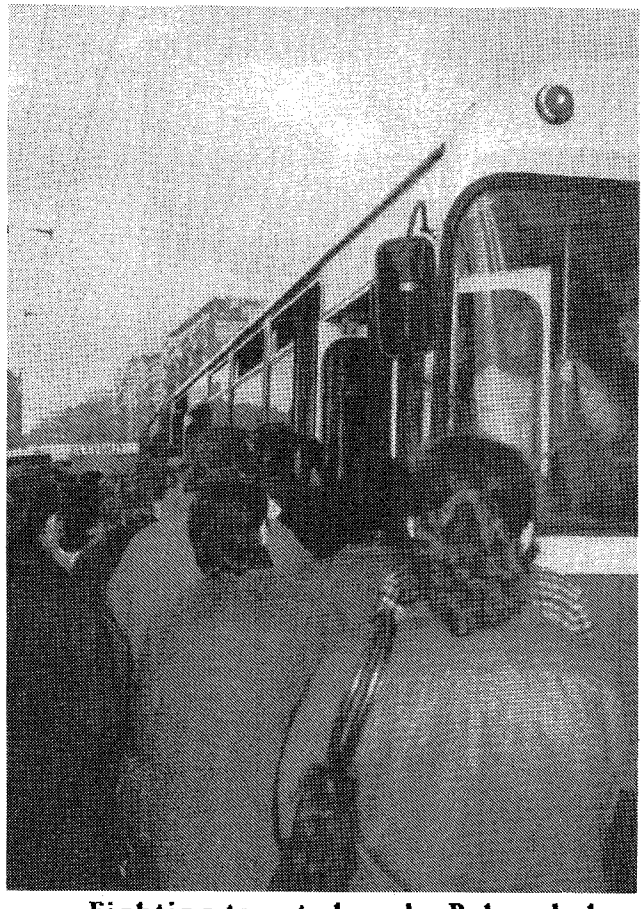
Pensions have not been able to keep up with inflation, leaving the retired to line up every Saturday for half a mile to receive bread and beans from a charity run by Draskovic's wife, Danica. One woman, who said she was dying of cancer, had been standing under Kneza Mihaila Street's cast-iron lamposts since 4 a.m. She did not blame sanctions for her troubles. "Life was hard here even before the sanctions," she said. "This country is being robbed. We have no leadership, no state, no economy." She looked mournfully as she waited for her last words to be translated. "I feel like I am living on the very edge."

The breadline on Kneza Mihaila Street

Rural Serbia, out of the reach of Belgrade's independent television station, has traditionally supported Milosevic staunchly. But its farmers have shown signs of bolshieness too. When the Serb government tried in July to impose price controls on food, shops emptied. If the dinar economy in the cities breaks down completely, Arandarenko, the labor expert, said, Milosevic may be forced to use the army to bring food in from the farms. State officials in charge of emergency reserves have already slipped them all illegally onto the black market, according to Cveticanin. By May what

still circulates in the economy from the July harvest will be gone.

Furthermore, hard currency will soon no longer serve as a measure against which to judge the value of the dinar, according to Branko Jovanovic, first in his class at the Belgrade economics faculty and the youngest member of the city's independent Economics Institute. With the erosion of prices as the means by which to measure the relative value of things, Serbs have begun to lose track of what things are worth even if compared to a rate in Deutschmarks. "It's perfectly possible," he said, "to pay 20 million dinars for a loaf of bread and 100 million for the bag in which to put it." As a result, he said, even the Deutschmark, although stable in Germany, was inflationary in Serbia.



Fighting to get aboard a Belgrade bus.

With panic spreading, some of Milosevic's SPS loyalists are starting to jump ship. Zoran Andelic, an SPS textiles mogul, was apparently not convinced that he would ever be able to reap the rewards of sticking with Milosevic until sanctions were lifted. He fled the country and claimed the money collected in an off-shore account in Cyprus under his name, according to Hiber.

But others are literally banking on Milosevic getting a deal in time for them to invest in legitimate enterprises once sanctions are lifted. "This class of war-profiteers and members of the old nomenklatura," Hiber said, "are planning to become big players in the official European markets. They will start their official businesses with the money they have gained in these two or three unfortunate years."

Knowing he cannot afford to disappoint the party faithful or let Serbia fall

into anarchy, Milosevic may therefore make some surprising concessions at the peace talks. Don't be surprised, for example, if Arkan, having proved so ineffective in the elections, suddenly turns up in chains at the Hague to be prosecuted as a war criminal.

The Crimeian War

That would be the ultimate manifestation of Milosevic's Machiavellian ways and a bitter pill for anti-Milosevic activists to swallow. The SPS could hand over a flagrant criminal, perhaps even accuse him of neo-Nazi "war crimes," and continue quietly pursuing their grey Social Nationalist ways. Those ways haven't changed. Days before the election, Slavojub Filipovic, a member of DEPOS who investigates the secret police, was called into a police station for a session he later described as "psychological terror." The authorities wanted to get the names of his contacts.

Filipovic chuckled bitterly at the thought that while murders were being committed in broad daylight the police had time to harrass him. "To think differently is a much worse criminal act than to commit a real crime," he said. "They will forgive you everything that you have ever done in your life if you are a member.

"Besides," he added, "there is no difference between the criminals and the leading members of the government. The leaders are the mafia and the mafia are our leaders."

My host for the week in Belgrade had spent the summer of 1991 sleeping on a different couch every night, one step ahead of Yugoslav Army conscription officials. Maybe that's where he picked up his rather manic habit of starting the day with a blast of "wake-up" music during breakfast. On the last morning I was in Belgrade he danced out of his bedroom to the nerve-rattling guitars of a Talking Heads song, "Life during Wartime." We sang along over Turkish coffee, revelling in the black humor of it all.

Heard of van that's loaded with weapons,
packed up and ready to go.
Heard of some gravesites out by the highway,
a place where nobody knows.
The sound of gunfire off in the distance,
I'm getting used to it now.

Lived in the ghetto, lived in a brownstone
I've lived all over this town.

This ain't no party, this ain't no disco
This ain't no fooling around.
This ain't no dancing, or lovey-dovey,
I ain't got time for that now.

Or as a rather more ancient songwriter put it:

I see violence and strife in the city.
Day and night they go round it on its walls;
and mischief and trouble are within it,
ruin is in its midst;
oppression and fraud
do not depart from its marketplace.[9]

Yours,

Chandler

Footnotes

1. Jelavich, Barbara. History of the Balkans: Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries (vol. 1). Cambridge, CUP, 1983. p. 175.

2. ???. The Nationalization of the Masses. p. 208. I just have a photocopy of a chapter with me here and would welcome a reminder of who actually wrote the book.

3. Almond, Mark. Still Serving Secretly: Soviet Bloc Spies under New Masters. London, Institute for European Defense and Strategic Studies, 1993.

4. I presume that the pillaged Bosnian Muslim village in which I first saw Arkan's name scrawled in spray-paint was in some way a threat to Serbian children and the Orthodox religion.

5. Nationalization. p. 211.

6. To be fair to the parents, Belgrade television is great these days. Since sanctions have isolated the country from international law, state TV has simply pirated and rebroadcast its own copies of all the latest films showing in Western Europe. "I went up to Budapest," one friend said, "and everyone I met wanted to take me out to the movies, thinking they were relieving my sense of isolation. I just said, '*In the Line of Fire?* No, I've seen that. *The Fugative?* No, already seen it."

7. Ramet, Sabrina P. Nationalism and Federalism in Yugoslavia, 1962-1991 (2nd ed.) Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1992. p. 230-1.

8. On the night before the election, for example, opposition leaders were shown attending a party at the French embassy while a voice-over described them as "traitors of the nation." And although Serbia faced no immanent military threat, thousands of young men were mobilized a few days before the elections, thus taking them away from their home districts where they were registered to vote. Serbian youth is overwhelmingly anti-Milosevic. Such misuse of the army is common in Serbia, thanks to its full-fledged support for Milosevic and the helpfulness of Gen. Radimilo

Bogdanovic. When Milan Martic, Milosevic's favorite son in the Serb enclave of Krajina (part of Croatia) lost an election to Milan Babic, the results were immediately called into question because the army complained of not having received enough ballot papers on the front lines.

9. Psalms 55: 9-11

I would like to acknowledge the help of Branko Jovanovic, who introduced me to many of his friends from all walks of life in Belgrade. If there is any justice in this world, the future belongs to people like him.

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