The (Un)Making of Milosevic

Some call him the Beast of the Balkans. Slobodan Milosevic's biographer explains how the Serbian dictator suddenly rose to power—and how he might fall.

by Louis Sell

On the evening of April 24, 1987, in the shabby hamlet of Kosovo Polje, an obscure Balkan politician stepped between a line of policemen and a crowd of Serbs protesting their mistreatment by Kosovo's majority Albanian population. The words he spoke now ring with irony, but in 1987 they electrified all of Serbia. "No one will beat you again," Slobodan Milosevic declared.

Counting on a newsworthy confrontation, local activists had gathered several thousand Serbs outside the hall where Milosevic was scheduled to speak. They chanted slogans, pushed against a police cordon, and threw rocks that had been stockpiled for the occasion. Milosevic waded into the crowd—at a moment when journalists on the scene said they heard the unmistakable sound of AK-47s being pulled back to their firing positions—and began an extraordinary all-night performance. He called upon the Serbs to resist what they claimed was Albanian pressure to leave Kosovo. "This is your country, your homes and fields and memories are here," he cried. As he warmed to his subject, Milosevic raised the stakes. "Yugoslavia cannot exist without Kosovo. Yugoslavia and Serbia will not give up Kosovo."

Before the spectacle of Kosovo Polje, Milosevic had shown few signs of being anything more than a typical Communist apparatchik. As the party boss of Belgrade during the mid-1980s, he was known among his subordinates as "Little Lenin" for his habit of barking out commands while striding about his office. But Milosevic made two fateful discoveries that night in Kosovo: the raw force of Serb nationalism and the power of his own straightforward style of public speaking. Over the next several years he exploited these lessons to tragic effect, first seizing complete power in Serbia, and then, when he failed to dominate all of Yugoslavia, seeking to unite all of the Serbs throughout Yugoslavia under his own rule in a Greater Serbia, in the full knowledge that such a course would lead to war.

Twelve years after that day in Kosovo Polje, Milosevic chose to defy the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) rather than agree to the 1999 Rambouillet accord because its provision for a referendum on Kosovo's status in three years would have been tantamount to giving up Kosovo. Milosevic cares little for Kosovo, which he

After pledging four years of peace, progress, and prosperity in his inaugural speech as president of the Yugoslavian rump state in July 1997, Slobodan Milosevic leaves parliament with his wife Mirjana Markovic.

has seldom visited during the past decade, but he was well aware that surrendering it would remove the last justification for his own rule in Serbia. NATO's 78-day bombing campaign this spring helped persuade Milosevic finally to come to terms, but he had another compelling reason for accepting the June 9th agreement: it offered him a better deal than Rambouillet. It requires no referendum. It provides that Kosovo will formally remain within the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (the post-Yugoslavian rump state formed from Serbia and Montenegro). And it puts the United Nations in charge of the civil administration of Kosovo, which means that Milosevic, through his Russian and Chinese allies on the Security Council, still will be able to influence events there.

For 12 years, Milosevic has stretched ruthlessness, guile, and luck as far as they will go. His quick and brutal reshaping of Kosovo's ethnic balance is something Serb leaders had contemplated for much of this century, but only Milosevic had the daring and cold-blooded indifference to human suffering to actually carry it out. A man of high intelligence who has impressed foreign leaders with his skill and dexterity as a negotiator, he is also a deeply troubled person, inclined when faced with obstacles that appear insurmountable to respond

with a gambler's "double or nothing" logic or to withdraw into sullen isolation, sometimes for months at a time. In the early 1990s, during a late-night drinking session after the failure of his plans to create a Greater Serbia, Milosevic handed a political opponent a pistol and offered him the chance to shoot.

It is often said that Milosevic is a tactical genius who lacks strategic vision. But in fact he has pursued several clear strategies over the course of his 12 years in power. The problem is that the strategies—flawed both politically and morally—have led Serbia and the Balkans into repeated disaster.

After Kosovo Polje, Milosevic quickly consolidated his power in Serbia. He ousted President Ivan Stambolic, his friend and chief political benefactor, in what amounted to a public show trial in 1987. But Milosevic wanted more than Serbia. By March 1989, when he rammed through amendments to the Serbian constitution that eliminated Kosovo's former status as an autonomous province within Serbia, he had gained control of four of the eight units in the Yugoslavian federal system. One more, and he would control enough votes to dominate the collective federal presidency, created after the death of long-time Yugoslavian leader Josip Broz Tito in 1980. That would have given him the de facto power to call out the army and to declare a state of emergency. But his efforts to strong-arm Slovenia were foiled. He would not become the "new Tito."

Then Milosevic turned his attention to the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (LCY), already crumbling but still Yugoslavia's reigning party. At the LCY congress in January 1990—its last, it would turn out—he tried to use the numerical strength of the Serbs to seize control of the party. Milosevic is usually firmly in command of his public emotions but, when the Slovene delegation walked out, the look of raw anger on his face betrayed his recognition that his hopes of dominating all of Yugoslavia had come to an end. His aggressive nationalism had only served to provoke counternationalisms throughout Yugoslavia.

Milosevic is nothing if not resilient, however, and before long he came up with yet another strategy: he would break up Yugoslavia in order to create a Greater Serbia, bringing all the ethnic Serbs living in Bosnia and Croatia under his rule. Only two months after the disastrous party congress, Milosevic chaired a secret meeting of the Serbian leadership at which it was decided to begin immediately writing a new Serbian constitution that could serve for an independent Serbian state. Other plans were put in motion. In June 1990, well before Yugoslavia broke up, Milosevic unsuccessfully encouraged the Yugoslavian army to selectively "amputate" Croatia from Yugoslavia, leaving Serb-inhabited regions under Belgrade's control.

The army's reluctance to do his bidding illustrates Milosevic's always ambiguous relationship with the military. The leaders of Yugoslavia's communist-era military initially welcomed his rise to power, hoping that his vigorous approach to Kosovo would prevent them from being drawn into the ethnic conflict between Serbs and Albanians in the province. Milosevic's aggressive brand of Serb nationalism, however, worried Yugoslavia's last defense minister, Veljko Kadijevic, who remained committed to a united Yugoslavia—albeit a communist one—long after Milosevic began working toward its destruction.

Despite such reservations at the top, Milosevic initially enjoyed support among some younger Serbian officers who called themselves the "military line" (*vojna linija*). By the spring of 1990, U.S. intelligence was aware that groups in the military had secretly begun planning military operations in Croatia, smuggling arms into Serb-inhabit-

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ed areas and drawing up maps of territory to be seized that roughly approximated the borders of the so-called Serbian *Krajina*, or parastate, that the Serbs would carve out of Croatia the following year.

In July 1991, after Slovenia announced its secession from Yugoslavia, Milosevic opposed the Yugoslavian military's ill-fated decision to intervene. He had already agreed with the Slovenian leaders that their republic could leave, believing that this would give him a freer hand to deal with Croatia. Once war broke out in Croatia, during the summer of 1991, Milosevic repeatedly urged the Yugoslavian military to crush the Croats. At the same time, however, he refused the generals' desperate pleas to declare a full mobilization in Serbia and privately disparaged them for incompetence.

After an internationally supervised cease-fire brought an uneasy peace to Croatia in January 1992, Milosevic built up a large, well-paid, and heavily armed special police force to maintain domestic order in Serbia and to act as a potential counterbalance to the military. Over the years he has also conducted purges of the army hierarchy, eliminating in succession non-Serbs, believers in a united Yugoslavia, radical Serb nationalists, and, finally, pragmatic "military technicians," leaving, so Milosevic hoped, only those prepared to blindly carry out his orders.

The Serbian dictator is nevertheless aware that he still cannot fully count on the military's loyalty. In February 1999, reports appeared in Belgrade that he was disbanding an elite special forces unit, allegedly because its officers had planned to act against his effort to crack down on anti-Milosevic street protests in Belgrade in 1996 and '97. Many midlevel officers have grown to dislike this man who has deliberately starved the army of funds and led it into repeated military disasters. The military's prominence in defending Serbia against NATO bombing gave it a center-stage role in politics that it had not enjoyed since the Tito era. Despite Milosevic's efforts to "declare victory," the June withdrawal from Kosovo is bound to be seen by many Serbian officers as a personal and a national humiliation—a potential danger for Milosevic.

If the military retains a degree of independence, other institutions in Serbia have been more thoroughly suppressed. From the beginning of his rule, Milosevic has relied on control of the news media to eliminate other points of view and stifle the voices of opposition politicians and independent intellectuals. For the most part, he has managed the media not by outright censorship but by ensuring that state-run broadcast and print organs are led by journalists who are prepared to slavishly follow his line and do not shrink from appealing to the lowest instincts of the mob.

Milosevic and his cronies have used Serbia's media isolation to dumb down an entire society. Cultural programs from the United States and Europe have vanished, and violent action films dominate the video and cinema screens. The urbane and well-traveled Yugoslavian intellectuals who led Belgrade's public and cultural life before the war have disappeared from the screen, replaced by fanatics, mystics, and charlatans.

The intellectuals have been reduced to hoping—sometimes joking—that Milosevic's unstable personality will eventually do him in. His family history is certainly steeped in tragedy. His father, a professor of Russian at the Orthodox Theological Academy in Belgrade before World War II, later returned to Montenegro, where he is said to have lived as something of a recluse. In 1962, possibly despondent over the suicide of a student to whom he had given a low grade, he shot himself to death. Milosevic, then on a student trip to Russia, did not attend the funeral. Ten years later, his mother also took her own life; the death of her brother, also a suicide, may have been a cause.

Slobodan Milosevic was born on August 20, 1941, in the central Serbian town of Pozarevac. He comes from Montenegrin stock that traces its roots back to the storied 1389 Battle of Kosovo, in which the Ottoman Turks crushed the medieval Serbian Empire. In

At the Battle of Kosovo in 1389, Christian Serbs lost to invading Turks, leaving Serbia to endure centuries of Ottoman rule—and later to create an idea of national identity rooted in this "heartland" province.

school, Milosevic won the esteem of his teachers but had few friends among his peers. He attended the Law Faculty of the University of Belgrade, where he graduated in 1964 with a mediocre 8.9 (out of 10) average—in part the result of consistently low marks in the school's required military training courses. His fellow university students remember him primarily for his buttoned-down seriousness and his enthusiasm for politics. He joined the Communist Party as soon as he turned 18 and quickly rose to become the head of the university's student party organization. Milosevic had "a genius for party politics," recollected Nebojsa Popov, his predecessor as student party head and now a prominent anti-Milosevic intellectual.

In the heady days of his rise to power, Milosevic promised the Serbs an "antibureaucratic revolution" that would, in some fashion he never quite explained, sweep away the poverty, corruption, and pettiness that had steadily narrowed the horizons of life in post-Tito Yugoslavia. He also appealed to traditional Serb themes, glorifying heroic leaders of the past and evoking the spirit of unity against perceived outside enemies.

Yet there was an element of Milosevic's appeal that defied rational analysis. Somehow, he made himself over into the symbol and voice of the Serb people. On October 4, 1988, for example, thousands of striking workers from the Belgrade industrial suburb of Rakovica marched to the square in front of the Yugoslavian assembly building, loudly booing a series of hapless Yugoslavian officials sent out to calm them. They wanted Milosevic. When he appeared, he led them, like a small-town revivalist, through a ritual of call and response, invoking a vision of prosperity, political reform, and an end to counterrevolution in Kosovo. At the end of his speech he paused dramatically. "And

now," he said, "everyone to his task." The crowd replied as one, "We believe." Then they dispersed.

Milosevic's role as a charismatic leader did not come easily to him. He is by nature a loner, and after things started to go wrong for him and Serbia he seldom spoke directly to the Serbian people. In the 12 years of his rule, Milosevic has never held a press conference. He prefers to surround himself with yes men, and he does not deal easily with criticism. During the late 1980s, as a U.S. embassy official, I accompanied a delegation of American religious leaders to a meeting with Milosevic, who waxed long and eloquent about how wrong the United States was to prop up Albania, which he said Washington intended to use as a kind of unsinkable aircraft carrier against Serbia. At the end of the meeting, I told Milosevic politely that his understanding of American policy was wrong. Clearly not used to hearing that kind of remark—at least in Serbo-Croatian—he stepped back almost as if he had been struck, a look of horror on his face. An aide quickly guided him away.

Milosevic's only constant collaborator and colleague is his wife, Mirjana Markovic, whom he met in high school. ("Unlike most men in the Balkans, he has only slept with one woman in his life," one analyst said.) She has played an important behind-the-scenes role from the beginning of her husband's rise to power, and some Belgrade commentators believe that their relationship is a key to understanding both his past career and events in Serbia today.

Born in 1942 in a wartime guerrilla hideout, Markovic comes from one of Serbia's leading Communist families. Her father, Moma Markovic, was a national hero, and her aunt, Davorjanka Paunovic, was Tito's secretary and mistress. But Markovic has in common with her husband a background of family tragedy. During World War II, her mother, Vera Miletic, was arrested by the Germans and under torture apparently betrayed a number of Partisan leaders. She was released, but disappeared in 1944, probably the victim of a Partisan firing squad. Many in Belgrade believe that Markovic's orthodox Marxist views—she insists on being called "comrade" and has been the driving force behind two parties claiming to be successors to the League of Communists—stem from her mother's unhappy history. Perhaps by demonstrating her own fierce devotion to the cause, this reasoning goes, she hopes at some level to establish her mother's as well. Even in her youth, Markovic claimed an attachment to the ideal of pure communism. She refused to join her powerful father in Belgrade, and later recalled with disdain vacations on Tito's luxurious island retreat of Brioni.

Like her husband, Markovic sometimes exhibits signs of instability. During the 1997 anti-Milosevic demonstrations in Belgrade she was reportedly hospitalized for deep depression. According to one account, she sometimes attacked her nurses, convinced they were plotting against her.

Markovic's role in Serbian politics has been growing since the 1995 Dayton Agreement. The agreement left Milosevic, who had expected that the United States would reward him for gaining Bosnian Serb acceptance of the accord by lifting all sanctions against Serbia, feeling betrayed. Markovic heads a strange combination of retro-Marxists and war profiteers. Deeply anti-Western, they believe that Serbia's future lies in a close alliance with a Russia that they are convinced will be reborn someday as a communist superpower. Last March, in a speech to several thousand Belgrade University students, Markovic expressly equated the United States with Hitler's Third Reich. She said that the "small Serb nation"—which she reminded the students had long served as a beacon of tolerance—should prepare itself to stand up to the "biggest bully at the end of the 20th century."

Warren Zimmermann, the last U.S. ambassador to Yugoslavia, once suggested, only partly in jest, that there are two Milosevics. Milosevic One is hard-line and belliger-

ent, while Milosevic Two is affable and always looking for reasonable solutions. Foreign negotiators have generally seen Milosevic Two, at least until recent events in Kosovo. He usually works without the aid of prepared notes, seldom turns to assistants for advice, and exhibits a sure memory for the details of complex negotiations. He can also display a real sense of humor. At Dayton, he once treated European negotiators to a wickedly clever series of impersonations of the various foreign mediators who had passed his way over the years.

On some occasions, however, the mask slips. In September 1995, while NATO was bombing the Bosnian Serbs, Carl Bildt, the United Nations' first high representative for Bosnia, found Milosevic so distracted that he seemed to be on the verge of losing control. On the climactic day of the Dayton negotiations, when it appeared that the talks might collapse, Milosevic pleaded with the U.S. representatives for help; when the agreement was reached, some noticed tears in his eyes.

On May 27, the international tribunal at the Hague indicted Milosevic for war crimes committed by Serbian forces in Kosovo. No one who understands the way Serbia operates could question Milosevic's responsibility for major decisions in all the Yugoslavian wars. On August 8, 1991, for example, he demanded that the army begin a "definitive showdown" with the Croats. Shortly thereafter, the infamous siege of Vukovar began.

Leaving Kosovo, April 1999

Milosevic was also closely connected with military operations in Bosnia. In December 1991, several months before war broke out in that former Yugoslavian republic, he ordered that army units there be staffed only with Bosnian Serbs, making it more difficult for outsiders to demand that former Yugoslavian forces be withdrawn from Bosnia once it achieved international recognition. Just three months later, Serbian paramilitary forces, with the backing of Bosnian Serb military forces, began a brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia. These paramilitary forces were organized with the consent of Milosevic's

secret police and armed, commanded, and controlled by its officers. Serbian deputy prime minister Vojslav Seslj has said publicly that his notorious paramilitary group received instructions from Milosevic during its ethnic cleansing operations in Bosnia. In Croatia, the record is just as clear. Milosevic was asked in a 1993 meeting with Croatian political figure Hrvoje Sarinic whether he controlled indicted war criminal Zeljko Raznjatovic (a.k.a. Arkan), whose notorious "Tigers" committed wholesale murder, rape, and theft in the ethnic cleansing of Croatia and Bosnia during the early 1990s (and were also active in Kosovo). Milosevic replied with a laugh, "Someone has to carry out part of the business for me too."

Under Milosevic, Serbia has become an international pariah state, joining the likes of Saddam Hussein's Iraq and Kim Jong Il's North Korea. Like Saddam, Milosevic faces a hostile international coalition that he cannot hope to defeat. His response, like Saddam's, was to hunker down, eliminating potential internal challengers and hoping that divisions within the ranks of his international opponents would eventually offer him the opportunity to cut a deal.

Like Mr. Micawber, Milosevic is always hoping that something will turn up. And now that it has—in the form of the June international accord that leaves him in power and with a seat at the negotiating table—he is reverting to form. Throughout his career, whenever Milosevic has appeared to be losing in one game, he has folded and immediately reopened play in another. Trying to divert attention from yet another tragic failure, Milosevic immediately began seeking to persuade the Serbian people that he is the man to lead the country's postwar reconstruction.

Milosevic's war crimes indictment, however, fundamentally alters the equation. Unable to seek sanctuary outside the country and condemning Serbia to poverty and isolation as long as he remains in power, Milosevic is running out of room to maneuver. The June 9 agreement's requirement that almost all Serbian forces leave Kosovo will eventually make it clear that Belgrade has lost control over what Milosevic once called "the heart of Serbia." Resentment will continue to simmer in the Serbian military. It is convinced that it was not militarily defeated in Kosovo. Montenegro, Serbia's partner, remains a defiant center of independence. And the fractured Serb opposition is likely to take advantage of the end of the war to make another effort at achieving the unity necessary for a credible electoral challenge to Milosevic. The Serb Orthodox church has called for his removal from office. But Milosevic has been on the ropes before and always managed to slip away. With his almost endless capacity for mischief he could react by provoking a new crisis in the region—perhaps in Vojvodina or Montenegro—or by launching a new crackdown on the opposition. Or he could schedule a snap election, which he would hope to win through his well tested tactics of manipulating the news media and exploiting Serb patriotism.

As long as Milosevic remains in power there can be no stability in Serbia or in the Balkans. During the 12 years of his rule, however, he has chipped away at all the underpinnings of a peaceful transition. It is far from certain, moreover, that any successor installed by a military coup or a violent popular upheaval would be a committed democrat. For the West—which in Serbia, as in Iraq, chose not to pursue its military campaign to the point of removing the offending dictator—the prospect is for more vigilance, more patience. The Serbian people must understand that as long as Milosevic remains in power, they will be denied all but humanitarian assistance. They must also be assured that once he has left the scene, any progress toward democracy and peace will be promptly and fully rewarded.

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