

One Man's Crimes

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Editorial

THE LIFE of Slobodan Milosevic offers another lesson in how one individual can shape the course of history. Yugoslavia, the country whose disintegration he inspired, emerged from communist rule at the end of the 1990s resembling many nations (Iraq comes to mind) in the throes of transition: Ethnic and sectarian rivalry was real in a cobbled-together state, but few people expected, much less wanted, a civil war. Mr. Milosevic, a Communist Party apparatchik in Serbia, deliberately and methodically nursed this latent tension from a flicker to a conflagration and used it to consolidate a criminal regime in Belgrade. He bombarded Serbs with lies and hateful demagoguery about their supposed victimization at the hands of Croats, Bosnian Muslims and Kosovo Albanians, and he convinced them that the only solution was a Greater Serbia created through war and ethnic cleansing.

The result was a series of brutal conflicts stretching across the 1990s in which more than 200,000 people were killed; a painful delay in the spread of liberal democracy to southeastern Europe; and the impoverishment and territorial diminution of Serbia itself. To this day some in and outside Serbia would argue that this terrible outcome was unavoidable, ordained by ancient hatreds in the Balkans or the poisons of decades of communism. But a look at the rest of what was then called the post-Cold War world shows otherwise. In South Africa during those same 1990s, a leader named Nelson Mandela prevented even more explosive tensions between whites and blacks, and among blacks themselves, from touching off a civil war. In the crumbling Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev chose to allow the Baltic nations, and then Ukraine and Central Asia, to secede peacefully, though he, too, could have championed the cause of a greater Russia.

Mr. Milosevic was the antithesis of those great leaders. More than is generally recognized, at least in his own country, he was personally responsible for the most destructive conflict, and most terrible atrocities, recorded in Europe since World War II. There were other protagonists and other criminals, some of them Croatian, Bosnian and Albanian. But without Mr. Milosevic the Yugoslav wars wouldn't have happened.

Because of that, his death Saturday at 64 was unfortunate. His trial before an international war crimes tribunal at the Hague was flawed in several respects, but the most obvious was that it had not ended four years after it began. Mr. Milosevic himself may have conspired to ensure that a judicial verdict on his actions would never be rendered: We're still waiting for the toxicology reports. In any case, the fact that some of his former

followers will conclude that he, and Serbia, have once again been victimized grants him a last, ugly victory.

Like all of his battlefield advances, it will prove temporary and tactical. In the long run, Serbs, and Europeans generally, will surely remember Slobodan Milosevic as the last of the power-craving nationalists who all but destroyed the continent in the 20th century. The sooner that understanding takes hold, the more quickly Serbia will recover.

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