

## **Bosnian Serbs sullen and defiant**

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Bosnian Serbs talk to the BBC News website's Neil Arun of fear, faith and football, 10 years after their army lifted its siege of the capital, Sarajevo.

"You must have two sides to wage war, as you have to make love," says Slavko Jovicic, stubbing out a cigarette as a snowdrift smudges the windows of his office in Pale, on the outskirts of Sarajevo.

He is on a mission to show the world a side of the war he believes it ignored - the atrocities committed against the Bosnian Serbs.

Slavko says he lost a kidney and more than 40kg in weight during four years of torture and mistreatment at wartime prison camps run by Bosnian Muslims.

"They were the longest days of my life," says the 52-year-old former intelligence officer, who now campaigns for Bosnian Serb former prisoners.

"No poet has the power to describe what I endured."

Europe's 'buffer'

Slavko does not expect any descriptions of what he endured to secure convictions at the United Nations' tribunal at The Hague, set up to try war crimes committed in the former Yugoslavia.

Better known to the tribunal is the testimony offered by Muslim and Croat prisoners of their suffering in Bosnia's Serb-run prison camps, such as Omarska and Prijedor.

The relatively few Muslims tried for war crimes at The Hague is a sign, Slavko says, that Europe is biased against the Bosnian Serbs.

The view is echoed elsewhere in Pale, wartime headquarters of Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic, a fugitive since his indictment by the tribunal.

Karadzic and his wartime army commander, Ratko Mladic, top the tribunal's wanted list. Both were indicted for genocide and other war crimes.

"When we were in Europe, Europe was divided," says 30-year-old Miki, referring to Yugoslavia's status during the Cold War.

"Now Europe is united but we are outside it."

Another man, sipping a beer, adds: "Europe should not fear the Serbs. We will always be your buffer against Islam."

Manchester United

Many Pale residents remain suspicious of what they see as Muslim-dominated Sarajevo - a sign that Bosnian integration still has a long way to go.

The road to Pale leads past some of the vantage points from where Bosnian Serb gunners fired into Sarajevo for four years between 1992 and 1996.

"Even a stone thrown from those positions will kill someone," a Sarajevo journalist said. "They had heavy artillery."

The siege of Sarajevo was one of the longest and bloodiest in modern history and was cited, along with the massacre of Muslims at Srebrenica, as justification for eventual international military intervention in the conflict.

Though often better armed than the Muslims, many Bosnian Serbs believe they lost the propaganda battle to their adversary.

"We were defenders, not aggressors," says Miki. "But the other side managed to convince everyone it was the victim."

Foreign media are partly complicit in this, Slavko says.

"People here no longer trust Western journalists. We show them into our homes, only for them to show us in a bad light."

But, he says, the Bosnian Serbs have no quarrel with common people in the West. He points out how countless men in the region closely follow the fortunes of English football teams.

Many of them, he says, support Manchester United because of its historic connection with the Serbian side, Red Star Belgrade.

"Ever since 1958, when the plane carrying Manchester United players crashed in Munich after their game with Red Star, we have felt a deep connection with that team. They are part of us."

'Spiritual reawakening'

At a bar in Pale, Miki and his friend, Simke, agree. Both men say they frequently bet on the outcome of English football games.

"Our local teams are rubbish," Miki says. "The referees have been known to get beaten up by players and supporters."

"As a result, the home side always wins," Simke says. "We prefer the English game."

Neither Simke, who qualified as a lawyer, nor Miki, who studied to be a teacher, are doing the jobs they trained for. Both blame poor employment opportunities.

Miki says three things keep him optimistic - love, his faith in God and his hope of a spiritual reawakening among the Serbs.

Slavko is less hopeful. He says further war remains a real threat, though it will not be the Bosnian Serbs who start it.

"We killed each other. What did we get? We are all poorer now," he says. "I accept Serbs committed some crimes against their enemies."

But, he says, unless Muslims accept they did the same, more conflict is inevitable.

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