

August 9, 2002

Milosevic Trial Leaves Most Serbs Cynical

By DANIEL SIMPSON, NEW YORK TIMES

BELGRADE, Serbia, Aug. 2 — If the war crimes trial of Slobodan Milosevic was supposed to force Serbs to confront their collective guilt for atrocities committed during the 1990's, it has so far failed dismally.

Almost six months after the trial's start, most Serbs remain convinced that the prosecution of Mr. Milosevic, the former president of Yugoslavia, is politically motivated. Furthermore, a power struggle pitting their two leading politicians against each other is drowning out attempts by democrats outside the government to get Serbs to reassess a decade of war and moral ambiguities.

Hundreds of thousands of discontented Serbs massed in central Belgrade in October 2000 demanding Mr. Milosevic's ouster, when he tried to steal an election, and hardly anybody here laments the passing of his authoritarian government.

But defiance runs strong in Serbia's history. Many here have relished the sight of Mr. Milosevic stonewalling prosecutors at the United Nations tribunal in The Hague and conducting his own defense with a bluster that has, at times, threatened to make a farce of the biggest war crimes trial since Nuremberg.

Mr. Milosevic, who is 60, suffers from a severe heart condition, and judges have ordered him to rest, raising the prospect that his trial on charges stemming from atrocities in Kosovo, Bosnia and Croatia may never be concluded.

Even if it is, Serbs will take some convincing of their former leader's guilt.

"Sloba Hero!" graffiti adorn many a Belgrade bus. Opinion polls indicate that Mr. Milosevic's popularity rocketed during the early weeks of the trial, which opened in February, when it was shown live on state television.

It has since declined. But Mr. Milosevic is only slightly less popular than Zoran Djindjic, the Serbian prime minister who extradited him last summer, according to Strategic Marketing, an independent polling agency.

"The whole Milosevic trial is a joke," said Svetlana Veljasevic, a retired 56-year-old resident of Belgrade. "I don't think it can help Serbs realize their guilt."

Reformist politicians in Serbia say prosecutors squandered a unique opportunity to win over a skeptical public. In particular, the reformers are unhappy that proceedings opened with events in Kosovo, dear to Serbs as the heart of their medieval kingdom and national mythology, which allowed Mr. Milosevic to rail anew against NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999.

This struck an instant chord with Serbs, who largely view themselves as victims of the Balkan wars and no more to blame than their enemies for the quarter of a million lives lost.

"Instead of Srebrenica and Vukovar," sites of mass killings of Bosnians and Croats during wars in those countries, "they've seen a soap opera," said Goran Svilanovic, Yugoslavia's foreign minister.

Others criticize the government for shying away from its own responsibility to force Serbs to face up to their recent past.

"Part of the blame rests surely with the ambivalent stance adopted by the country's new authorities toward the tribunal and the events of the last decade, especially the circles around the Yugoslav president, Vojislav Kostunica," wrote Mirko Klarin, a commentator for the Institute of War and Peace Reporting.

President Kostunica, a moderate nationalist who has said the tribunal "makes his stomach turn," was furious when Mr. Djindjic handed over Mr. Milosevic without seeking Mr. Kostunica's approval.

The uneasy alliance these two rivals formed to defeat Mr. Milosevic has since collapsed into open political warfare — another factor hindering public discussion of the past 15 years of death and decay in Serbia, or reform of the quasi-Communist government structure bequeathed by Mr. Milosevic.

Mr. Djindjic's camp holds clear sway only in economic reform, which the prime minister thus paints as the major instrument of change. "My first priority is to modernize Serbia, starting above all with the economy," he said. "I'm convinced that if we succeed in that, the rest of society will gradually change."

This perception may also be fed by the knowledge that much of the international aid that Serbia needs to rebuild after a decade of sanctions and corruption is tied to the extradition of more war crimes suspects.

The reformers who received American help to win power are growing frustrated with pressure to surrender more individuals to The Hague tribunal, regardless of the political cost, while the United States is securing immunity for Americans from a new global war crimes court.

"Do they want a positive result here or do they want to appear self-righteous?" asked Mr. Djindjic. "People have to feel more secure in their daily lives before they can reconsider the past."

After passing legislation to regulate cooperation with the tribunal, something Mr. Kostunica insisted on as a condition for future extraditions, the Yugoslav authorities have published the names of about 20 suspects and told them to surrender.

A few have. But the two most wanted, the Bosnian Serb leader, Radovan Karadzic, and his top general, Ratko Mladic, remain at large.