

Another Warlord Bites the Dust

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Ljubisa Savic 'Mauser', gunned down in Bijeljina last week, is the latest Bosnian Serb warlord to meet a violent end.

Bijeljina's coffee shops are buzzing with rumours over the violent death of Ljubisa Savic, nick-named 'Mauser', one time commander of the Panther Guard, a special brigade of the army of Republika Srpska, RS.

Savic, 42, was killed on June 3 when unknown gunmen opened fire on his jeep. He had apparently stopped by the side of the road to pick up an elderly lady hitchhiker when the assailants, who had been following in a car, riddled their victim with bullets.

Local police and investigative judge, Bozo Peranovic, have so far refused to comment on the progress of the murder enquiry.

The killing fits a pattern now familiar on the streets of Belgrade. Two young men sitting in one of Bijeljina's coffee shops silently gesture in the direction of the Yugoslav border when asked who they believe is behind the murder.

But Savic had a reputation for challenging corrupt officials in Republika Srpska, leading to speculation that his death was ordered by enemies within the entity itself.

Mauser's death came as no surprise to the people of Bijeljina. He had previously survived two assassination attempts. Six months ago, he said he knew an attempt would be made on his life again. "When I embarked on all this, I said goodbye to my life," he said.

Savic was one of the best known personalities in eastern Republika Srpska. He was a senior official in Radovan Karadzic's Serbian Democratic Party, SDS, back in April 1992 when the Bosnian war erupted.

Savic's paramilitary group, the Panthers, together with Zeljko Raznatovic 'Arkan' and his Tiger militia took control of Bijeljina in 1992 - a town with an almost equal number of Serb and Bosniak residents.

One incident cited in The Hague Tribunal indictment against Bosnian Serb leader Momcilo Krajisnik alleges at least 48 Bosniak and Croat men, women and children were killed in the town between April 1 and 2, 1992.

The events in Bijeljina have led to speculation that Savic might be included in a sealed Hague Tribunal indictment. The day after Mauser's murder, however, Tribunal spokesman, Paul Risley, would neither confirm nor deny this.

During the war, Savic became something of a thorn in the side of his SDS counterparts. On several occasions, his Panther unit stopped convoys of smuggled goods traveling through Republika Srpska and confiscated the contents. The convoys had been under the control of the SDS and RS state security.

By 1995, Savic's breach with the SDS was all to clear. He hurled abuse at Momcilo Krajisnik, one of the SDS leaders and now a detainee at The Hague. "I contracted diabetes fighting at the front and now I have to watch the authorities get rich on the backs of the poverty of their own people," Mauser said.

He left the SDS to found his own party, the Democratic Party of RS, and was elected to the RS parliament.

In the summer of 1997, Savic joined forces with the then president of Republika Srpska, Biljana Plavsic, when she left the SDS to launch an anti-corruption campaign. The following year, the newly elected prime minister, Milorad Dodik appointed Savic as chief of one of the entity's police departments.

That spring, Savic arrested Joja Tintor, a former Karadzic advisor, who had amassed a fortune during the war. But orders from above forced Mauser to release him after less than 24 hours. Tintor immediately left for the relative safety of Serbia.

The first attempt on Savic's life happened a few months later in July 1998. Two former Republika Srpska soldiers, Stojan Maksimovic and Vladimir Neretljak, were killed in an explosion outside his house. Mauser accused Krajisnik, the then leader of the SDS, and pro-Belgrade elements in the entity's security services of attempting to plant a bomb under his car.

But the authorities dismissed Savic's allegations, accusing him of staging the assassination attempt. According to the authorities version of events, Maksimovic and Neretljak were already dead when the car exploded.

Mauser continued his campaign against those he considered corrupt. In August, he tried but failed to arrest Milovan Bjelica, one of Krajisnik's closest business associates. Shortly after, one of Savic's friends, Srdjan Knezevic, was gunned down outside his home in Pale.

Knezevic had also been a commander of elite special units during the war and his death provoked a political crisis. The police set up a special headquarters to track down Knezevic's killers. Savic joined the investigative team and arrested seven suspects, including Bato Tesic, a member of Karadzic's security, and Zeljko Jankovic Luna, a member of a special police unit close to Krajisnik.

Accusations that Savic had tortured the suspects caused Bosnia's international police force to intervene in the investigation. Savic denied the charges, claiming the SDS had paid an official with the international administration in Pale to make the allegations.

The seven suspects were released, however, and Savic was banned from further police work by Richard Monk, head of the international police force.

Mauser became increasingly isolated and could rely only on former members of his Panther unit for security. He rarely left Bijeljina, where he remained an influential figure.

It is anyone's guess whether Belgrade was behind his murder. Savic had amassed so many enemies closer to home it is entirely possible he was the victim of a local revenge killing. Perhaps the only thing one can be sure of is that his killers are never likely to be found.

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