

A Criminal and a Witness

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Arkan's killing fits a pattern of executions of public personalities in Serbia, and even he boasted to the Hague tribunal that he knew too much about the crimes of the regime.

Zeljko ("Arkan") Raznatovic, shot dead on Saturday afternoon, January 15, joins the list of hundreds of the famous or infamous assassinated in Serbia in the past several years.

Arkan's resume is long. Former leader of the notorious paramilitary group the Tigers, volunteer in the war for Greater Serbia, criminal with an international reputation, associate of the Serbian secret police, businessman, former politician, one of the richest men in Serbia and owner of a champion Yugoslav football club, Arkan was shot in an ambush in the lobby of the Intercontinental Hotel in Belgrade.

According to eyewitness accounts, two masked gunmen carried out the attack. Arkan was hit by three bullets, one of which went through his left eye (he is believed to have worn a bullet proof vest). The attackers, firing automatic weapons, left the scene of the shooting immediately and have not been identified.

On Tuesday, January 18, the Belgrade daily Politika - loyal to Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic - reported that one alleged accomplice was under arrest but unconscious in hospital. The unidentified man was reportedly shot by one of Arkan's bodyguards as he fled the scene.

Politika claimed the two gunmen were known to Arkan and had met him at the hotel earlier on Saturday. Following the meeting the two men had left before returning and opening fire on Arkan and his party. Quoting sources it claimed to be reliable, Politika reported that the wounded man "is not fit to make a statement as he is unconscious," but that "information is expected of him when he regains consciousness."

Miodrag Paunovic, the investigative judge, confirmed after an examination into the killings that one man, Dragan Garic, a police official at the Ministry of Interior, was killed on the spot. Arkan and Milovan Mandic, a friend and former business associate, "died from their wounds" 40 minutes later in hospital. Arkan's wife, two children and sister-in-law were unhurt in the attack.

Whatever the subsequent developments, at the time of the attack the police did not release the usual statement that they are "intensively searching for the attackers". Nor did they refer to the perpetrators as "unknown attackers." Nor did the Belgrade media rush to report the news, breaking the story only three hours later, mainly citing foreign agencies. Serbian state TV broke the news Saturday evening, some six hours after the killing, in the 30th minute of the main evening news programme.

Arkan's murder fits a well-established pattern of public killings of important personalities in Serbia over the past five years. Most of the victims have had criminal dossiers. But the nouveaux riches, politicians, policemen and journalists have been targeted as well. None of the perpetrators have been apprehended.

Notable examples are Slavko Curuvija, journalist and owner of the Dnevni Telegraf newspaper; Radovan Stojicic, former head of the police; Zoran Todorovic, a senior official of the Yugoslav United Left, as well as dozens of major criminals with connections to the Serbian regime. Only last month, Zoran Sijan, a mafia leader with a profile similar to Arkan's, was killed.

Arkan straddled the worlds of the underground and the regime, but belonged to neither. Both had reasons

to wish him dead.

Many observers in Serbia had predicted Arkan's assassination after the International Criminal Tribunal in The Hague announced indictments against Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic and four other top officials. Arkan greeted the indictment with public derision and that also may have put him at risk: "I know a lot, I saw a lot, and I took part in lot of that - they don't want me," he said.

The first allegations of involvement in war crimes were filed against Arkan by the Zagreb branch of Interpol. In autumn 1996, the UN announced that it was investigating Arkan's participation in war crimes in Croatia and Bosnia. The Hague Tribunal issued a sealed indictment against Arkan in autumn 1997. The indictment was made public in March 1999, although the contents have still not been revealed.

Arkan was dismissive about these accusations, telling CNN in an interview that it is "a purely political matter, and not an indictment." At a press conference during the NATO intervention over Kosovo, Arkan was asked if he felt guilty for Serb crimes in Croatia and Bosnia. He answered with a smile saying, "I don't give a damn!"

One source with underworld links to Arkan's claimed lawyers representing the indicted war criminal had approached the Tribunal in an effort to secure immunity for their client should he agree to testify against Milosevic and other high-profile accused.

Spokesman for the Hague Tribunal Paul Risely said he could not comment on such allegations. But Risely did say, "Arkan's death should be remembered by those who have been indicted and who are still at large: the safest place for them is within the United Nations detention facility here. If Arkan had turned himself in, he would be alive today."

Starting as a bank robber in western Europe, in 1973, Arkan became an associate of the then-Yugoslav secret police. In a 1986 trial in Yugoslavia, he insisted the court record that he was an employee of the federal secret police - and showed his ID card as a proof.

According to one of his friends, Arkan's father, Veljko, a former Yugoslav Air Force colonel, pressed him into co-operating with the secret police in order to stop his son's involvement in robberies and brigandry. The father, according to this friend, asked then head of the Yugoslav police, Stane Dolanc, to "sort him out."

At the beginning of 1990, Arkan began to gather his Serbian Volunteer Guard (SDG) and to prepare them for war. He personally trained and later commanded the volunteer units. He was the commander of the unit Tigers in Croatia and Bosnia, and from 1996 to mid-1998, he formed a "command post" in Pristina for special actions in which the SDG took part together with special police units.

In April 1992, Arkan led SDG to war in Bosnia, and their arrival in Bijeljina is considered the start of the mass liquidation of Moslems and Croats in eastern Bosnia, as well as along with the border with Croatia.

In June 1992, Arkan founded the Party of Serbian Unity in Belgrade and in October of that year Interpol's seventh arrest warrant for him in western Europe was made public. In the parliamentary elections on 20 December 1992, Arkan won a seat in the Serbian Parliament although his party fared poorly at the polls.

Arkan's political career was short. His public appearances were full of nationalist rhetoric and threatening remarks about his neighbours in Croatia and Bosnia. He spoke about himself as a successor to famous Serbs ("Obilic's blood is in me"), glorified himself ("When I tell you, it is as if God told you") and insulted other ethnic groups ("To Croats, I'll fuck their Ustashi mother", "Slovenia is Serbian, since I was born

there.")

From April to December 1996, Arkan founded a centre for training Serb volunteers in the town of Erdut in eastern Slavonia, Croatia, while the area was under UN protection.

In August 1996, Arkan posed for a picture in front of the Tigers training centre in Erdut with then head of the secret police, Colonel Radovan Stojicic. Stojicic was himself gunned down in a Belgrade restaurant in 1997.

In 1995 Arkan married the popular folk-singer Svetlana Velickovic, known as Ceca, with whom he had two children. (He has seven children from previous marriage). Soon afterwards, Arkan began to extricate himself from the business of war and to start a career in business.

Since the mid-1980s, he has owned a patisserie in the elite part of Belgrade, where he built a concrete castle of impressive proportions. Using his earlier contacts, Arkan founded a private company, SDG, and invested significant quantities of capital in his friends' companies.

For several years he was a main exporter of raspberries, mulberries, blueberries and strawberries to western Europe. Throughout Serbia, he opened currency exchange bureaux that worked semi-legally, as well as a large security agency to guard buildings.

At the end of 1997 Arkan opened a casino in the Yugoslavia hotel in Belgrade. The casino was destroyed during the NATO bombing campaign. NATO said they targeted the hotel because it was believed to be a command centre for Arkan's paramilitary group, the Tigers.

In spring 1998, Arkan purchased the Belgrade soccer club Obilic. He managed the team closely, and chose the coach, but did not make foreign trips due to out-standing international arrest warrants.

He entrusted his larger financial transactions and business deals to his long-time friend, the controversial Italian businessman Giovanni di Stefano. Di Stefano possesses a Yugoslav identity card with a fictitious address - 31 Tolstoy Street. At that location one finds only an empty plot of land. But next door at 33 Tolstoy Street lives the Milosevic family.

Milosevic, himself indicted for war crimes by the Hague Tribunal, never allowed Arkan to appear with him in public or for connections to be made between them. Arkan's activities on the battlefield were closely co-ordinated with elite units of the Yugoslav police, but by now it is likely that all possible evidence is either hidden or destroyed and many witnesses killed.

The question then remains whether Arkan was killed because of some crime-related squabble or because he was a witness who knew too much. Communications between Arkan and the Tribunal have been rumoured but always denied.

Many in Serbia believe that if the killing were motivated by criminal disputes, it would have happened long ago.

Goran Svilanovic, leader of the Civic Alliance of Serbia, believes Arkan's death indicates "the denouement among the strongmen in Serbia has begun".

Zoran Djindjic, leader of the Democratic Party, said that the killing confirms that "the regime is unable to preserve security in Serbia."

A statement from the Serbian Renewal Movement, whose leader Vuk Draskovic was the victim of an assassination attempt, stated that Arkan's murder is "confirmation of the existence of state crime in Serbia."

Radmilo Bogdanovic, Serbia's former chief of police and a senior official in the ruling Serbian Socialist Party, denied the accusations of "state terrorism" over Arkan's death. Speaking on Belgrade's independent radio station, B2-92, he said "only a serious police and judicial investigation" would find the perpetrators.

The early report in Politika of an alleged assailant, wounded and under protection in hospital, will certainly become first evidence in the government's case - and its denial of state involvement. But it is also certain that no official investigation is likely to resolve the mystery surrounding the death of Arkan.

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