

Regional Report: The Drab Dictator

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Unlike Saddam and Ceausescu, Milosevic refrained from turning his home into a gaudy shrine.

Milosevic had grand designs for political power, but at home he was, by contrast, modest and meek.

Despite having near total power in Serbia, he left little mark on Beli Dvor - the White Court - which he and his wife Mira Markovic occupied in the late 1990s.

He moved into this former royal palace in 1997, on being elected Yugoslav president, following two terms as Serbian head of state.

But unlike Serb royalty and Yugoslavia's former dictator Josip Broz Tito, he and Mira eschewed lavish parties and other extravagances. Not for Milosevic the gold taps and bad art that dictators from Saddam Hussein to Nicolae Ceausescu have favoured. He had more taste, it seems, retaining works installed in the palace by the former kings, including a Rembrandt.

The White Court was built by the Karadjordjevics in the 1920s and 30s - part of a sprawling ten hectare complex of woods and parkland. But the royal family had only been in the palace, set in Belgrade's lush Dedinje suburb, for a few years when Nazi Germany invaded. They fled the bombing on April 6, 1941 - never to return as rulers.

In 1945, the partisans drove into the city and their leader, Tito, installed himself as president for life, settling into the palace. He may have been a communist, but he had a love for royal life. Lavish parties with good food and sumptuous wines were not unusual - despite the austere conditions the rest of Yugoslavia endured in the years after the second world war.

The first foreigner to visit Beli Dvor after the conflict was the Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie in 1954 - a nightmare for the unskilled and inexperienced staff left in charge of managing etiquette at the event. Special fabrics were brought from Paris, London and Trieste for dinner jackets, ties, white scarfs, top hats and white socks.

The following year saw a visit by Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev - a relaxed occasion, which confirmed that the USSR was prepared to tolerate a communist country outside its own orbit.

The thaw in the Cold War in the 1970s saw a visit, in 1972, from Queen Elisabeth II of Great Britain, who came with her husband, Prince Philip. For the occasion, Tito arranged that early every morning, bagpipes were played to wake everyone up. The sound reverberated throughout the corridors of the palace.

The historic visit was only spoilt when Tito's Rolls-Royce, taking the queen to New Belgrade to plant a tree of friendship, suddenly broke down.

After Tito's death, the White Court was used as the official residence for visiting foreign dignitaries. The last international guest was Romania's first democratically elected president, Ion Iliescu in 1990, months after the country had broken free of communism. He left just as Yugoslavia entered its own dark times.

Milosevic was by then in power. He kept clear of the palace. Anyway, with the coming of war and UN sanctions, the supply of official visitors fast dried up.

In 1992, the palace was back in the limelight - for a working dinner between Yugoslavia's president, Dobrica Cosic, prime minister Milan Panic and international peace envoys Lord Owen and Cyrus Vance. Milosevic, at the time president of Serbia, was absent, but was thought to be pulling the strings.

Sanctions had eased by 1997, and Milosevic was the darling of the West after helping deliver the 1995 Dayton Peace agreement that ended the Bosnian war.

But Milosevic and Mira were a private couple. Parties were rare. Milosevic dressed in boring suits. His wife wore frumpy dresses. Parades and bands and banquets were avoided.

With the return of democracy, the Karadjordjevic family members began visiting the former royal estate. The first to do so was Princess Jelisaveta, who inspected with sadness some damaged furniture and art works left behind after Milosevic departed in October 2000, amid a tussle between his body guards and Serb police.

Among many precious works of art, the most valuable are oil paintings, Landscape with Three Monks by Nicolas Poussin and Rembrandt's A Man with a Flute. The Karadjordjevics had purchased the paintings from some of the biggest international galleries of the time.

Many works by well-known Yugoslav artists were also put on display at the White Court after the war.

Apparently, the White Court was not to the taste of the Milosevic family. They already had a large villa in Dedinje, and after moving into Beli Dvor, ordered work on another villa, named Peace - an ironic name given the wars Milosevic was fond of waging.

At the time of the NATO bombing in 1999, the Milosevic family were acquiring land around the palace, apparently to extend their private estate. All of this has now been seized from them.

Now it is once again an attractive prospect to be a guest at the White Court. The representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church, academics, supporters of the constitutional monarchy and well-known nationalist intellectuals often gather.

But controversy has returned, amid concern that meetings are being held there between the heir to the throne, Aleksandar Karadjordjevic, and "patriotic forces" - believed to be the same men who led the wars of the 1990s.

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