

Leaders put old hatreds back to work

At Jasenovac, where Croats exterminated Serbs, Ed Vulliamy finds a moderate voice

It may not have the infamy of Auschwitz or Dachau, but the same thing happened here: the extermination of some 500,000 Serbs, and tens of thousands of Jews, Gypsies and communists in a complex of five concentration camps administered by the Ustashe regime — the Nazi puppet state of Croatia — from 1941 to 1945.

The site of the Jasenovac camps is now just a grassy field, under which are the mass graves of the dead. There is a clumsy memorial monument — a concrete “flower of life” — and a railway track on the banks of the river where a wartime steam engine and a row of five cattle trucks are parked.

There is also a museum, usually lined with exhibits. They have been removed, for fear of shellfire — or desecration.

Gassing was not used here, apart from one incident involving children. The Ustashe slaughtered the camp “labourers” with guns, knives and axes.

It is almost impossible to imagine what happened here, even with the help of gunfire booming through the otherwise quiet afternoon from across the Bosnian border. The world has all but forgotten Jasenovac; it is history. But history is particularly pertinent in Yugoslavia nowadays.

It is the job of the keeper of the museum, Dr Jovan Mirkovic, never to forget. And he is one of the few men in Yugoslavia with a vision above and outside the hatred that is tearing the country apart. The war has revived a language of 45 years ago, in an exchange of racial odium disguised as democracy on one side, and deep fear and a thirst for revenge on the other.

The numbers massacred at Jasenovac have never been exactly confirmed. The Serbian historian, Radomir Bulatovic, claims 1.1 million. Croatian researchers have put the figure much lower. It has been a grubby “academic” dialogue.

A Yugoslav government commission of 1946 estimated 700,000, and Western military historians have generally agreed, settling for a figure between half a million and 600,000. But the ghastly counting business was resurrected earlier this year by the Croatian president, Franjo Tudjman, when he said that only 32,000 were exterminated.

To Croats, this was a comfort; to Serbs, led by their president Slobodan Milosevic, it was

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another revisionist attempt to minimise the crime. “Whatever the figure,” says Dr Mirkovic, “every innocent life taken is a crime. But for me it is similarly a crime to manipulate the numbers, to exaggerate or diminish them.”

Dr Mirkovic is what Western media would call a “moderate Serb”. He is a reflective, genial but quiet man; a member of the reformed communist party whose friend, the Croatian socialist MP Dusan Trivuncic, was found murdered and dumped by a motorway two years ago.

“What’s happening in Croatia and Yugoslavia?” he asks back. “I find it hard to explain to myself, let alone to you. The governments are throwing a nationalist bomb. People are looking for a role in history — Tudjman, who wants to found the first independent Croatia, and Milosevic, who wants to be the first to unite the Serbs.

“There is this ghastly propaganda, the brainwashing of war. All Serbs become ‘Chetniks’, Croats all become ‘Ustashe’. It’s mass psychology I hoped had gone away. They talk about democracy, but they couldn’t even spell it.”

The angular Ustashe symbol is ubiquitous in Croatia nowadays — painted on walls, worn on the paramilitaries’ cap badges. Dr Mirkovic calls himself “one of the lucky ones. My grandfather was blind, and killed by the Ustashe in his bed,

with a knife. But I survived, just. There were a group of us, hiding in a shed, and people said to my mother she should kill the baby in case he cried and they found us. But I was a good baby.

“This new Ustashe — this appropriation of the residue of history — irritates me. I thought it had been overcome. I suppose we have to see it as part of a global thing, part of the revival of Nazism.” In the West, he suggests, “it’s been marginalised, but here it could become very important, because it feeds on nationalistic feeling.

“One of the surviving camp commandants was interviewed on Radio Zagreb recently, quite seriously. He said it was a ‘labour camp for the rehabilitation of bad elements in society, Jews who had drunk the blood of the Croatian people’.”

Dr Mirkovic’s Croatia has become a society under arms. Every man on a bicycle, every teenager, seems to carry a gun. “This militarisation,” he says, “is a disaster for all of us. There are so many weapons and there’s so much hate, I can’t see it ever ending. But . . . I like to think there is reason in people.”

Dr Mirkovic’s views are echoed among some Croats. Walking through the empty streets of the Zagreb blackout with Ivan-Zvonimir Cicak is a change from the usual company in the city, as the Croatian

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capital is gripped by the melodrama of war.

“Just look at all those guys with guns,” says Mr Cicak. “What are they going to do when the war’s over — if it is ever over?”

Mr Cicak is ex-president of the Croatian Peasant Party, a liberal Roman Catholic party. Its new premises, along with that of the socialists, was bombed in Zagreb last week. Mr Cicak was a radical leader in 1968 and has been twice imprisoned by the Yugoslav authorities for subversion. He wants Croatia independent, but is particular about what kind of Croatia it is.

“Tudjman is not a fascist, but he’s opening the way to fascism. The dangers Croatia faces from outside are less than the dangers from within. We’re all being asked to join one party, Croatia. But Croatia is not a political party, it’s a nation. Milosevic is doing the same thing.”

On Croatian television there are slow-motion pictures of paramilitary action, mixed with rousing songs like Stop The War and Croatia My Home.

“With television, they’re creating an entire political culture in which all Serbs are regarded as animals. It’s what Munich must have been like in 1929, except they didn’t have television. They [the Serbian minority living in Croatia] have become the Jews. I think they will go, because they are afraid they will be killed.

“We must create politics in which Serbs are guaranteed equal citizenship — Tudjman did exactly the opposite — in which they have nothing to worry about, unless they were involved in the killing. And in that case, they should be regarded as normal criminals.”

The new Croatia has drawn in people from its “diaspora”. Their ranks swell the fighters, and foreign media coverage from Zagreb is directed almost entirely by spruce young press officers from Canada.

“Extraordinary people,” muses Mr Cicak. “When they’re living in Canada or Australia, they’re Western democrats. When they come back, they turn into something completely different, rather like those nice Jewish people from New York who go to Israel. They don’t come here to live normally, just to fight, or jump around and tell everybody about it back home. Extraordinary.”

The walk back takes Mr Cicak past the secret police headquarters in the old town. Its people are the same, he said, simply altering their ideology to suit the new state. “If they haven’t any enemies, they’ll produce them: liberal Catholics, Serbs, communists. We’re stuck with them. Them, and the people who keep them there.”