

PEOPLE IN THE NEWS

An Ilkley lad speaks up for Milosevic

The Monday interview



Boris Johnson
talks to
Marko Gasic

YOU'RE listening to the latest news from Kosovo, the appalling sufferings of the Albanians. You're hearing about the brutality of the Serbs, the tyranny of Milosevic, and you've just about got your prejudices clear in your head when suddenly this English voice comes on and gives you a jolt.

Unlike the BBC presenters, the fellow seems to know exactly what's going on. Nato is saying it thinks it has hit a passenger train, and this fellow is saying "yes John", and they "carbonised 55 people". The corpses were just sticking to the train, "melted", he says, and his tone is a weary reproachfulness.

Meet Marko Gasic, 41, a British citizen whose melancholy task it is to defend a nation we are being taught to see as fascistic, militaristic, racist, slivovitz-intoxicated barbarians; and the reason he speaks as he does is that he was born in Ilkley, son of a man who fought for the royalists against Tito in World War Two, who lost, and who had to get out.

Like so many other Serbs, young Marko and his family came to west London. He attended St Clement Dane's grammar school, and Sussex university; and had the war not broken out he might have been a full-time musician, exploring ways of melding Greek, Macedonian, Bulgarian and Serb rhythms to Western melodies. But

it so happens that his father comes from a village called Peulje in west Bosnia.

"The Krajina was a UN-protected area, and instead of protecting that area, when the Croats attacked, the US and Nato joined in." He was there as a guide and interpreter for the Western media (he says he has saved Martin Bell's bacon on at least one occasion); and he watched a vast exodus of Serbs — between 250,000 and 500,000.

Now his family are refugees, some still in camps around Banja Luka, and that experience drove him to become one of about 20 Serb apologists at the Serb Information Centre in Ladbroke Grove, which, he says, is not controlled by Belgrade, which does not receive any funding from the Yugoslav government, and which

is, indeed, a charity surviving on the contributions of the 70,000 Serbs now living in Britain.

"For 30 years I hadn't heard anything about my nation, and then I heard the Serbs did this, and the Serbs did that, and I knew it was a heap of crap I was hearing. Serbs are victims of a hate campaign that has lasted about eight years. They are like Jews in Germany."

Why does he think his country, which might have been expected now to be joining the comity of European nations, is a pariah state, being bombed by Nato? Can't he see that it was the fault of Milosevic, for launching his pogroms against the Kosovar Albanians?

Not at all, he says. "The death rate in Kosovo before the KLA became active was one tenth of that in Northern Ireland," and he

starts reciting KLA atrocities, or alleged atrocities, such as the incineration of 22 corpses in a lime-kiln at a place called Klecka. "They were the first gas-ovens since the Holocaust."

"Mr Milosevic is a standard Balkan politician, whose agenda is personal power. Whatever Milosevic's faults, the Nato attack has converted him into a Churchillian figure. Nato has legitimised Milosevic, by attacking a sovereign state, in defiance of the UN charter."

Yes, but can't you see that Nato had to act, to protect the Albanians? No, he says, it's all about the projection of American power. "America needs to explain an immoral act in moral terms. If it can do what it is doing in one sovereign state, it can do it in another." It's all because of the

collapse of the bipolar equilibrium between America and the USSR, he says.

"It's a new philosophy articulated by Madeleine Albright, that we shall use any and every tool to maintain our position. The US wants to be top dog."

Hang on a mo. Why on earth should the Americans want to take over parts of former Yugoslavia? With the greatest respect to your parents' homeland, it's not as though he who controls Kosovo has a stranglehold on the world oil supply.

Well it's certainly nothing to do with humanitarianism, he says. "The conflict with the Kurds was infinitely worse. More people died in Sierra Leone or Sri Lanka in a few days. Everything has to be justified in moral terms, because that is what the media eat up and lap

up. Fifteen people are killed in the TV station, and then Clare Short comes up with these accounts of mass rape. Blair is a total lap-dog of Clinton. Who has it helped? It hasn't helped the Albanians. It hasn't helped the Serbians."

Won't he admit any culpability whatsoever on the part of Milosevic? Who started kicking the Albanians out? Nato may have given him a pretext by attacking military installations, but who caused the disaster?

The trouble with being a propagandist at time of war is that there comes a point when you are driven to say something absurd. "It was the KLA who said everyone should leave Kosovo," says Marko Gasic. One can only hope, one way or another, that he is soon allowed to get back to writing music.

Spotlight on the week

MRS MERTON: Gimbert's, a company providing props to theatres and television programmes, is clearing out a few thousand items from its collection in a three-day auction in Manchester starting today.

There are no reserve prices and so no estimates for a coat of arms which appeared in *Emmerdale*, or the armchair that was occupied by Caroline Aherne's endearingly vicious chat show host.

MAGDALEN COLLEGE CHOIR: The 29 singers will herald May Day on top of the college tower at 6am on Saturday. The tradition's origin is unclear, though it was described as "an ancient custom" in 1674.

In times past the choir threw rotten eggs from the tower, but misbehaviour is now more likely from thousands of drunken Oxford students gathered below — a few years ago one jumped naked into the Cherwell, and swiftly surfaced on Page 3 of the *Sun*.

GENESIS P-ORRIDGE: The artist and musician was involved with *Prostitution*, an infamous exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1976 which led to questions being asked in Parliament.

He left Britain seven years ago after various unfounded allegations were aired in the media, but is returning to play the Royal Festival Hall on Saturday with his band *Psychic TV*. Quentin Crisp will be introducing them via a video link from New York.

WORMS: Around 100 people will gather in Blackawton, Devon, on Sunday for the 16th Normandy Arms worm charming contest. A procession through the village is followed by a toast of Wiggly X, a beer brewed specially for the occasion, and the teams then have 20 minutes to seize as many of the invertebrates as they can.

Liquids can be poured on the area of the hunt, with beer from the pub's drip trays being a popular ingredient, although the charmers must taste the fluids first in order to prove that they are harmless.

SEBASTIEN BERGER

Picture: JIMMY GASTON

