London Review of Books

Once there was a bridge named after him

Mark Mazower

The Trigger: Hunting the Assassin Who Brought the World to War by Tim Butcher
Chatto, 326 pp, £18.99, May, ISBN 978 0 7011 8793 4

When war came to Sarajevo in 1992 almost the only thing about the city known to the aid workers and journalists who made their way there was that it was the place where a Bosnian Serb assassin called Gavrilo Princip had started the First World War. Most had only the haziest notion of who had ruled Bosnia before the 20th century, or what had happened there after the war ended. But Princip was a familiar name. Few Sarajevans had much to say about their most famous son, generally dismissing him as a Serb nationalist. The city had once celebrated his act (a bridge was named after him in 1918, and a museum commemorated his deed) but the bridge was renamed in 1992 and the museum shut down. During the war in the former Yugoslavia the monument that commemorated Princip and his fellow conspirators was turned into an unofficial public latrine.

Tim Butcher, the author of this biography of Princip, had been a reporter in Sarajevo in the early 1990s, but he was brought up on stories about the First World War: there were memorials in his village church, and a still active cult of Rupert Brooke at his and Brooke's school, Rugby. The Butcher family had lost sons in the fighting. It came to seem important to him to connect those deaths with events in the Balkans, and so, years later, he returned to Bosnia in search of Princip. As he says, despite the outpouring of publications about the killing and its consequences, there are few documentary sources which would allow us to piece together Princip's motives. In his researches Butcher found some new information but the real value of the book lies in the account of the journey he took from Princip's birthplace to Sarajevo.

Princip was born in 1894 in Obljaj, an impoverished and remote Herzegovinan mountain village, the son of a Serb peasant. Today, the village is little changed, a cluster of farmhouses with overgrown hedgerows where chickens are the main traffic hazard. Princip's house is half-ruined: the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement that ended the war left the village under

Bosnian Croat control and few Bosnian Serbs under fifty have returned to the area they fled two decades ago. Astonishingly, however, Butcher found what was left of the Princip clan still living next door to Gavrilo's parents' house. Sitting on the verandah, he was told the family version of the history of the Bosnian Serbs and even a few anecdotes about Gavrilo himself: he was educated at a village school and was a keen student, reading while tending the family sheep. Gavrilo, they said, was at heart a country boy and this remote village and its values hold the secret to his actions. Butcher, often admirably sceptical about what he's told, is sympathetic to this view. Hence the book's conceit that by retracing the journey Princip made more than a century ago Butcher can tell us something new about the motives behind the assassination.

As at least two of his older brothers had done, Princip was determined to escape the poverty of village life, and his parents encouraged him in this. In 1907 he and his father walked across the mountains to the railway at Bugojno where Gavrilo caught the train to Sarajevo – one of his brothers had found what seemed like a good school. Butcher's encounters in the towns along Princip's route provide a valuable account of the fragmented and depressed society Bosnia has become. The impact of ethnic cleansing was invisible in Obljaj, but it became much harder to ignore as Butcher made his way across the cantons and districts the country has been carved into. In Glamoc, Croat nationalist pieties replace the Serb ones he heard from the Princips. Zdravko, the owner of the guesthouse he stayed in was a refugee from Bugojno, now under Muslim control, and bitter at what he saw as the persecution of Bosnian Croats. When Butcher recalled a nearby checkpoint he'd crossed in 1993 with British Unprofor forces, it turns out his host knew the spot well. 'If I had seen you that day,' he said, 'I would have shot you.'

Three days' walk into the mountains from Glamoc, Butcher met two imams fishing for trout deep in the forest. The idyll was marred only by the warning about unexploded mines nailed to a nearby tree. The Muslims' sense of victimhood was no less acute than that of the Croat hotelier: Bosnia's Muslims have always been persecuted, they told him, right back to Tito's day, if not earlier. One thing all three ethnic groups seemed to agree on was the despotic nature of Tito's regime. Its achievements – above all in rebuilding a functioning multi-ethnic society after the Second World War – counted for little or nothing. Visiting a shrine to the Partisans of that war – an airstrip near Glamoc that in communist times had an old Dakota parked under the trees to impress visiting schoolchildren – Butcher found it as neglected as Princip's house. The new shrines to the Dayton Accords are the schlocky mega-minarets, many paid for with Gulf money, that have replaced Bosnia's village mosques with their pencil-thin spires, and the supermalls and huge new Catholic churches around Kupres.

It's hard to talk about Princip without talking about terrorism. Driving past the beautiful town of Travnik, the setting of *Bosnian Chronicle*, the best novel by Yugoslavia's Nobel

laureate Ivo Andrić, Butcher recalled the 'young jihadists' he met in the area during the war. Never numbering more than a few hundred, the so-called 'Muj' were a motley crew, mostly from Afghanistan and the Maghreb. Their military impact wasn't significant but in retrospect they seem to Butcher a portent of things to come. One of them was Shahid Butt, the Birmingham-born son of Pakistani immigrants who was convicted of terrorism offences in Yemen years after the war in Yugoslavia. Butt grew up surrounded by the graffiti of the Anti-Paki League, wanted to join the army but was rejected, and made the journey to Bosnia to distribute aid. In Travnik he met the foreign fighters who trained him and turned him into what he calls 'a traditional mujahedin'.

From encounters like these we get a sharp sense of the divisions and passions that have survived the war, but they don't do much to illuminate Princip. Instead they underline how remote his life is from Bosnia today. In Banja Luka, once the centre of Serb ethnic cleansing, a crowd of young Bosnian Serbs danced to the band Franz Ferdinand, who had decorated the stage with a huge portrait of Princip. No one in the audience seemed to recognise him.

There have of course been other books about him. The first significant one, published in 1926, was the account by the Austrian psychiatrist Martin Pappenheim of his conversations with Princip in his prison cell. But only one work is essential: fifty years after it first appeared, Vladimir Dedijer's *The Road to Sarajevo* is still unsurpassed. Dedijer isn't concerned with the assassin's psychological state but with his reasoning and his understanding of the world around him. If we see Princip's actions in this light, a very different figure emerges, one who gestures forward not to jihad but rather to the social fairness and national co-operation that the former Partisan Dedijer fought for and that the collapse of Titoism has now consigned to oblivion.

Princip was born into a land under enemy occupation. In 1878 Habsburg troops had marched into Bosnia, effectively bringing Ottoman rule to an end. Formally, the sultan in Istanbul remained suzerain. In practice, the territory was ruled from Vienna. Railways were built, there was a modest spurt in industrial growth, a new political system was established with a largely powerless parliament in Sarajevo, secondary schools were set up for young men such as Princip and, most important, a largely pre-capitalist agrarian economy was ushered into the age of capitalism. Life in the countryside was affected by a series of debt crises, as peasants faced demands for payments of taxes in money as opposed to in goods. It was this disturbed landscape that Princip sought to flee, and avenge.

Early in the new century, two more changes took place. One was a geopolitical shift as Serbia, independent only since 1878, moved out of the Habsburg orbit. In 1903, the country's king, Aleksander Obrenovic, and his wife were assassinated in the palace by a cabal of army officers. The headstrong king had displeased his subjects by marrying a woman who'd been

one of his mother's ladies-in-waiting, and he upset the political elite by his cavalier attitude to constitutional reform. The consequences of the assassination were felt throughout the region: the man the army brought to power, Petar Karadjordjevic, moved Serbia closer to Russia and France. The Austrian Empire tried more or less immediately to curb this show of independence by starting a tariff war – the so-called Pig War of 1906-8 – but that only served to alienate the Serbs even more. From then on, Serbia, now led by a man who had taken part in the 1878 uprising in Bosnia, was a magnet for those who wanted to end Habsburg rule in Bosnia.

In 1908, the year after Princip started secondary school in Sarajevo, the Austrians in a dry run for the events of 1914, declared that they were annexing Bosnia. Had the Russians backed the Serbs and acted more forcefully against the Austrians, Europe might have gone to war then and no one would ever have heard of Princip. But Russia wasn't ready for war and was forced to stand aside as the annexation went ahead.

The 1908 crisis was fateful for several reasons. When the Serbs appealed to Russia for a second time, in the summer of 1914, the tsar felt his prestige was on the line. The 1908 crisis had also stirred conspiratorial activity among hardline Serb nationalists in the army; an officer known as Apis, who had directed the murder of the Serbian king, stepped up his work with the Black Hand; a variety of smaller groups formed, dissolved and re-formed, looking for battlegrounds both west across the Drina and south in (still Ottoman) Macedonia. In Bosnia itself, anti-Habsburg activism reached a new pitch. Schools were centres for resistance and among the schoolboys who took up the cause was Princip.

Dedijer's book demonstrated, and Butcher confirms, that Princip and his fellow Bosnian students were nobody's pawns. Mlada Bosna – Young Bosnia – had connections on the Serbian side of the Drina but for most of its members what mattered most was liberation from the Habsburgs rather than expansion of the Serbian state, which was what drove Apis and his fellow conspirators. Many members of Mlada Bosna, and from what we can tell, Princip himself, were strongly in favour of South Slav unity; they saw all religious leaders as forces of reaction and inclined instead towards socialist and anarchist goals of equality. They saw themselves not as terrorists so much as tyrannicides, sharing only the terrorist's belief in the efficacy of violence. Above all, they were republicans, inspired by Italian unification with its secret societies and successful combination of revolutionary violence and state intervention. Serbia was important to them, but as the equivalent of Piedmont in a future South Slav state. The nature of that state wasn't something Princip appears to have spent much time thinking about; the main thing was that their Austro-Hungarian oppressors should be removed.

Attitudes such as these were behind a spate of attacks on royalty and political figures at the

end of the 19th century, starting with the failed assassination of Italy's King Umberto in 1878 (a second attempt succeeded in 1900) and the assassination in 1881 of Tsar Alexander II. Other high-profile victims included President Carnot of France in 1894, the Spanish prime minister Cánovas del Castillo in 1897, President McKinley in 1901 and, closest to home for the Habsburgs, the Empress Elisabeth of Austria, stabbed to death by the Italian anarchist Luigi Lucheni in 1898.

Partly as a result of the ferocious and increasingly concerted police response to the attacks, and partly because it was unclear whether they had had much effect, the wave of political violence subsided in the new century. Within the Habsburg Empire, Tomas Masaryk, a professor of philosophy at Charles University in Prague, represented a gradualist approach to political reform and his influence was powerful among the activists of Mlada Bosna. But the 1908 annexation radicalised Bosnian students and the ever more hardline policing of dissent by the new Habsburg governor of the province, General Marijan Varesanin, led some to plot revenge. In June 1910, a young Serb student called Bogdan Zerajic fired five times at Varesanin during the opening of the parliament in Sarajevo. Zerajic failed to kill Varesanin but killed himself with his final bullet and became a martyr for the anti-Habsburg cause. His death had a great impact on Princip, who visited his grave shortly before assassinating Franz Ferdinand. But Princip wasn't the only one: there appear to have been at least a dozen assassinations planned by Mlada Bosna with varying degrees of seriousness between Zerajic's death and the archduke's. In the circumstances, Princip's deed is less striking than the casualness of the Habsburg police. Compared with the arrangements put in place when the Emperor Franz Josef visited the city a few months before the attempt on Varesanin, the policing of the archduke's visit was slack.

After the assassination, the Habsburg propaganda war began in earnest, and attention shifted from the disaffection of the Slavs in Bosnia to the role of the Serbian government in abetting the assassins. The argument continues to this day. Butcher, like Dedijer, demonstrates that Serbian assistance was relatively modest and against the wishes of the government. The truth is that by 1914 Bosnia, like the other Slav provinces of the empire, was governable only through extreme repression, mass arrests and treason trials. This doesn't match the prettified stereotype of the Habsburg Empire, and the old accusations that the killing was all a Serb plot continue to be peddled in some of this year's crop of First World War bestsellers. Even the Sarajevo museum which was once devoted to Princip now tells the history of the city under the Habsburgs. The assassination, once seen by the city as looking forward to the establishment of Yugoslavia, now only refers back to the forty years of imperial control Princip wanted to bring to an end.

Letters

Vol. 36 No. 21 · 6 November 2014

Mark Mazower approvingly ascribes to Tim Butcher and Vladimir Dedijer the notion that Serbian assistance to the Sarajevo assassins was 'relatively modest', and 'against the wishes of the government' (*LRB*, 23 October). This formulation is misleading. What was 'modest' was the ability of Pasic, the Serbian prime minister, to control the extreme nationalists in Narodna Odbrana ('national defence') and its shadowy operational arm, the Black Hand: both founded by the men who had organised the assassination of the Serbian king and queen in 1903 (in anticipation of which Pasic had sensibly taken his family off to the Adriatic the day before).

The queen, formerly Draga Masin, was unpopular not because she had once been a lady-in-waiting to the king's mother, but because, as Christopher Clark puts it in *The Sleepwalkers*, she 'was well known for her allegedly numerous sexual liaisons' (he describes her as 'the disreputable widow of an obscure engineer'). The interior minister protested at the king's idea of marrying her, arguing: 'Sire, you cannot marry her – she has been everybody's mistress – including mine.' The king slapped the minister's face; when he announced his actual engagement to Draga, the entire cabinet resigned.

As for the 'modest' help to the assassins, the three main conspirators – all Bosnian Serbs – were recruited in Belgrade by Narodna Odbrana. Princip's first planned mission had been in 1912, targeting Turkey, not Bosnia. A Serb army major, Tankositch, and the Black Hand's founder, Apis, to whom he reported, chose the Archduke Franz Ferdinand as the next target, and Tankositch supervised the training, arming and illegal transporting across the border of the assassins by Serb officers and officials. The trio were supplied with four revolvers and six bombs from the Serbian State Arsenal. They were then supported by Narodna Odbrana agents in Sarajevo for the month before the archduke's visit.

Pasic learned of the conspiracy, and wrote to his war minister, Stepanovic, four days before the 28 June attack, warning that the actions of 'officers' allowing weapons and agents to be smuggled across the border into Bosnia was treasonable, 'because it aims at the creation of conflict between Serbia and Austria-Hungary'. Indeed, if friends of Serbia knew the truth, he warned, they would support Austria-Hungary should it decide 'to punish her restless and disloyal neighbour, who prepares revolts and assassinations on her territory'. When Stepanovic in turn wrote to the chief of the general staff asking for an explanation, the matter was referred to the head of military intelligence – who happened to be Apis.

Somewhat half-heartedly, Pasic tried to warn the Austrians, but was too much at risk of being deposed by the Black Hand to be explicit. It was not the Serbian government that

tolerated the plot – as Mazower says, it certainly did not – but the Serbian political system, which had allowed so much sway to the extreme Serb nationalists who nurtured, equipped and managed the assassins. To suggest that Princip had a personal, Bosnian, agenda which transcended this state of affairs is naive. To say of the trio that they were 'nobody's pawns', when the entire enterprise had been dreamed up and delivered to the Appel Quai that day by highly organised and effective Serb nationalists, is foolish. It was precisely because the three boys were Bosnians that they were the ideal pawns.

David Elstein
London SW15

^ Top