



GROBAR

**PARTIZAN PLEASURE,
PAIN AND PARANOIA:**
LIFTING THE LID ON SERBIA'S UNDERTAKERS

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Indoctrination

I HAD wanted to be a Red Star fan. Hurrying away from Partizan Belgrade's stadium after my third derby of the season, with Red Star fans lobbing fireworks at me and a hundred other Partizan fans, I initially struggled to remember how I had ended up plumping for the black-and-white half of the city over the red-and-whites. Four crackers had already gone off behind me, the noises getting progressively closer like a rapidly approaching thunderstorm. The crackers, black discs the size and shape of an ice hockey puck, looked innocent enough as they flew through the air. But for something so diminutive, they make a surprisingly loud noise when they go off. A fifth one clattered into a wheely-bin a few metres behind me, giving the sound wave of the explosion a deep metallic ring and sounding even more sinister.

But still we didn't break into a run, even if a few of us quickened our walking pace. To start running would be to admit defeat. A hundred metres in front of me was the junction in the road where I could peel off right and get out of the bombardiers' range. The police couldn't save me – they were nowhere to be seen. Their last act had been to force me into sniper range, blocking my usual exit and forcing 5,000 of us to run the gauntlet of this narrow alley, while the Red Star masses still commanded the heights of the stadium's outer balcony. I was just going to have to hang on grimly for those last hundred metres.

Bang! I turned round to see a Partizan-supporting boy of ten or 11 jumping out of the way of the device as it fragmented just in front of him. 'ZVEZDA [star], WO-O-OH!' came a triumphant call from above us. Maybe I had decided to support Partizan because Red Star fans were the kind of neanderthal cretins who

thought that chucking small incendiary devices at people was fun. It couldn't have been that – some of our number do the same thing in almost equal measure.

The seventh cracker landed 18 inches in front of me, in precisely the spot where my right foot was about to plant itself at the end of this very stride. The little black disc, fizzing and sparking tiny yellow drops, looked harmless enough. But instinctively I contorted my body leftwards, stepping like a drunkard back across my own leg, all the while keeping one eye on the still sparkling puck. As I drew level with the cracker, it exploded. The flash of light was a little disorienting but not dazzling, and the disintegrating cracker's shards didn't so much as tickle the bottom of my jeans. But I did feel a sudden rush of intense heat up the back of my leg.

It was too much for my poor central nervous system. My conscious mind, desperate to maintain my credibility as a football fan and as a man, stopped me from crying out or leaping into the arms of the nearest fellow human, but the proximity of the explosion had been a bit too much for the closest sphincter, and I let out a rasping and powerful fart. In among our crowd, not too tightly packed but with not much more than a foot of personal space each, I can't bear to imagine how many people heard it. As the next 'ZVEZDA, WO-O-OH!' rang out, I was sure I heard more titters from my so-called kinsmen than I heard supportive noises against our mutual attackers above.

In an effort to try and forget my embarrassment at the flappy noises emanating from my own digestive system, I tried to comfort myself by recalling how I ended up becoming the kind of person seen as a viable target by the Red Star grenadiers – that is to say a Partizan fan.

The answer is sadly a lot more prosaic than the threat of concussive weaponry and involuntary flatulence. To be honest, it was more like the excuse that girls used to give me as to why they couldn't be my date at the school disco – because Partizan asked first.

To go back to the start, in April 2010 I was informed that I would be working in the British Embassy in Belgrade from summer 2011 onwards. I have been watching live football, finances permitting, since the early 1990s, so I was determined to continue when I got there. On paper, there was only really one choice. Red Star Belgrade.

Why? Firstly, there is the name. How many other clubs are named after celestial bodies? The Kansas City Comets perhaps, but as a European fan whose formative footballing years were the late 1980s and early 1990s, I don't really consider them in the same league. 'Red Star' has a uniqueness that few other European club names match, apart from maybe the guttural power of 'Monchengladbach', the musicality of 'Fiorentina' or the calendar-specific 'Sheffield Wednesday'. The original Serbian version of the team's name, Crvena Zvezda, has the same effect.

Secondly, the colours. I have been an Arsenal fan since 1986, so I gravitate towards red-and-white teams anywhere in the world. Except Stoke. But I have always had a soft spot for PSV and Atletico Madrid. And where a handy red-and-white equivalent doesn't exist, then I usually prefer the team with more red in any given European duopoly. AC over Inter, Barcelona over Real, Crawley Town over Hastings.

Thirdly, the history. Red Star were the most successful team in the former Yugoslavia, and their European Cup-winning team from 1991 contained some of the best players in the world at that time: Prosinečki, Savićević, Pančev, Belodedici. It seemed like a no-brainer that, from the start of the 2011/12 season, I would transfer my resident allegiance from London N5 to the Marakana in Belgrade.

Partizan, on the other hand? My knowledge of them wasn't as poor as the little Liverpoolian boy in the milk advert, whose ignorance of Accrington Stanley taught a whole generation of kids how to impersonate an incredulous Scouser. But I didn't know much about them.

The luck of the Champions League draw gave me a chance to make their acquaintance, as they were drawn against Arsenal. Watching Arsenal's away game on TV back in London, I was impressed by the level of noise that the Partizan fans made, which just made me think, 'Imagine how much louder it will be at Red Star, given they've got more fans.' Football-wise, I don't remember much of the game, save for Denilson, one of my least favourite Arsenal players of that era, conceding one of the most needless penalties ever. Even though Arsenal won with relative ease, and Partizan's play was never that imaginative, the crowd kept up their noise throughout.

Back at the Emirates in December, Arsenal went into the game needing to win, while Partizan came to London having lost all

five of their Champions League games, and were trying to avoid becoming the arcane statistic of the 11th team in Champions League history to finish the group stage with no points.

Partizan's few hundred fans, mostly made up from the Serbian community in London, but also including some who had come from Belgrade just for the match, were comfortably out-singing the 50,000 or so Arsenal fans who had ventured out on a viciously cold December night. The overall attendance for the game was given at 58,845, but it was nowhere near that many really, judging by how much of the white cannon of seats was visible in the East Stand.

The Emirates is the only ground I know where the fans actively laugh at the announcement of the attendance figures because the official figure is consistently so much higher than reality. I have always assumed that this is because season ticket holders are counted even if they don't come, but there is an inescapable Eastern bloc-era propagandist undertone. This evening was no exception.

Arsenal started the better, and took the lead through a soft penalty converted by Robin van Persie. Partizan wouldn't give up, and equalised when Cleo's shot deflected off Sebastien Squillaci and looped over Lukasz Fabianski. Even away in the upper tier, 90 metres diagonally across the pitch from the Partizan fans, the roar they produced was a surprise, and I am used to visiting fans being the dominant force in my ears. Arsenal scored twice late on through Theo Walcott and Samir Nasri to take a fortuitous 3-1 win, earning us the right to be frighteningly outplayed by Barcelona for the second consecutive year, and go out of the competition.

While the noise and passion of the Grobari, the Partizan fans, had impressed me, and both Cleo and defender Stefan Savić seemed like good players, they hadn't done enough to change my conviction that I was going to become a Red Star fan when I arrived in Belgrade.

The first seed of doubt was sown when, while learning Serbian, my teacher showed me the sports pages of a Serbian newspaper to see how much I understood. I am not the hardest-working student in the world, so I first looked at the pictures. A picture of defender Dusko Tosić, in action for Red Star in a league game, caught my eye, not least because of the logo on his shirt. My former teacher Ana is both an excellent and professional teacher, but is also the possessor of a sixth sense for when her students are not working properly. In a one-on-one lesson, I had nowhere to hide.

‘Zašto ste iznenađeni?’ she asked [why are you surprised?] In my still-halting Serbian, I explained that I didn’t know that Red Star were sponsored by Gazprom, and that I wasn’t 100 per cent sure any more if they were definitely the team for me. I don’t like Gazprom. This isn’t a book about geopolitics or corporate social responsibility, so I’ll just say very briefly that I don’t like them, and leave it at that. Read more about them if you’re interested as to why – Luke Harding’s *Mafia State* is a good place to start.

It is well documented that footballers and football fans have a vast array of superstitions and idiosyncrasies when it comes to the correct apparel for matches. Mine is that as an Arsenal fan, I would always wear trainers in the same colour as the shirt, and I would never wear the same shirt to two consecutive games. I never bought trainers deliberately to match Arsenal’s kits, but subconsciously I might have considered that factor when buying my yellow Onitsuka Tigers.

It is not just me. Liverpool fans complained bitterly about their 2011/12 third kit, which featured blue stripes and looks too Evertonian for die-hard Kopites. There was an outcry from Spurs fans when they first had Thomson as a sponsor and carried an outsized red (anything but red!) logo on their lilywhite home shirts. In 1992, the Italian company Kappa added a thin white piping to Barcelona’s home shirt, shorts and socks to an even bigger protest. A couple of white quarks or other sub-atomic particles would probably be too much of a reminder of Real Madrid for some Barca fans. Kappa changed the kit for the next season and never allowed the person with the white pen anywhere near the design board again.

Despite the association with Gazprom, I moved to Serbia on 5 July still expecting to become a Red Star fan. I just wouldn’t buy the official replica kit.

As part of my pre-job training, I spent the first month living in Novi Sad, Serbia’s second city and capital of the Vojvodina region, an hour to the north of Belgrade. I worked in the mornings at the university’s Student Cultural Centre (SKC) and had a three-hour language lesson in the afternoon, with some homework to follow.

I lived with the Damjanović family – Dejan, Irena and Mikica – in their comfortable flat, meaning that I was to be completely immersed in both the Serbian language and regular Serbian culture at all times. The aim was that I should be able to express myself in

pretty much any situation by the end of the month – not fluent, but not far off, either. It was a great privilege to have such an experience and become better able to do my job at the same time, even if it meant that I was forced to spend a full five weeks away from Claire, my girlfriend of the time, which was going to be tough.

I arrived at the Student Cultural Centre on my first day to find that they weren't exactly ready for me. Serbia is a typical southern European country in that the pace of city life markedly slows in July and August as people take their holidays, often their only one of the year. Coupled with the university summer holidays having just begun, it was definitely the SKC's quietest time of the year, and there wasn't really enough work to go round for all of them, let alone for a British secondee who would probably need a lot of hand-holding. Introducing me to the team, Vladimir Kozbašić, also known as Vlada and 'Pećinko' [Caveman], recommended that I take myself off to the coming weekend's EXIT music festival – Serbia's answer to the V Festival – for four days, and then come back afterwards, when they would have some work for me. Given that I was being paid by the taxpayer to be there, I didn't feel totally comfortable with this, so I decided to stay for the rest of the morning to get to know the team, practise my Serbian, and see if there might be anything a bit more constructive that I could do.

There wasn't. But we did talk a lot about football. I am used to people across the world following the Premier League even more closely than we do in England, and obsessing about the same minutiae of transfer gossip and disallowed goals. But I wasn't ready for the depth of knowledge in the SKC. I told them I was originally from Crawley. My new colleagues Igor and 'Okac' [Big Eyes] immediately dissected the effectiveness of Crawley Town's business model, praised Matt Tubbs and asked why everyone hated Steve Evans. These were serious people.

Igor was a self-confessed anglophile and football anorak. He had first been to Britain in 1987 to watch Yugoslavia play away in London and wanted to go back ever since. He had been to more games in England than I had, including one at Bamber Bridge, and had succeeded in watching most English teams who played in black and white, in homage to his own Partizan. Okac's accent, from the nearby and mostly rural Banat region, was so thick that I could only understand him when he talked about football, so it was easier to

talk about his admiration for Jamie Carragher than it was to talk about the weather.

It was a good thing I liked football. It always is. It is a great leveller. Before Serbia, I had worked in a few other countries, and football chat had served me very well. Sometimes it simply broke the ice or proved I was a more regular guy than my suit or conspicuous foreignness suggested. If you've got football, you can usually count on having at least one mate. And even if he disagrees with every footballing moral you stand for, you've still got something to talk about.

Trying to bond with Okac wasn't the hairiest situation that football has ever got me out of. That was when I cadged a lift with some Tunisian peacekeepers in a remote part of Congo, a lift I'm pretty sure they only gave because I was able to name two players in their national team and one club side from Tunis. I have never been more grateful to Hatem Trabelsi. But it was a lift I badly needed if I was going to catch the only flight out that week. This was much less dramatic, but it gave me some much-needed credibility.

The next day, I had some work to do at the SKC, and I began to realise that the football chat hadn't been for my benefit. This was what they talked about every day. Jovan was a tall, slender hippy with wavy hair tied into a long ponytail and an Indiana Jones hat, who was still living an approximation of the student life 30 years after he had concluded his own studies. His every sentence had baffled me thus far – a swirling mix of poetry, song lyrics and non-sequiturs – until he started talking about football, when he became lucid enough for me to pick up what he was saying. He was still offbeat – insisting to anyone who would listen that Cesc Fabregas was about to move to Real Madrid – but for once he was mostly comprehensible.

Reprising our conversation from yesterday, Igor asked me if I had decided who I was going to watch while I lived in Serbia. I hadn't, I said diplomatically. If Igor sensed his chance at converting me then, he hid it well. But he casually mentioned that Partizan were playing the following week, and I could come with him if I wanted to.

Over the next couple of days Igor showed himself to be a very competent proselytiser as his real agenda became apparent. Every now and then, he would drop in a reason why Partizan were the better option, or more often, why Red Star were in fact the root of

all evil. Over the weekend, while we were at the EXIT festival, he deployed his top envoy – Dušan – to take the indoctrination up a notch. Dušan was going to be in my team at the embassy once I started work a month later, and was a physically imposing prospect even in the context of most Serbian men being considerably taller and broader-shouldered than me. Neither of these is particularly difficult: I am 5ft 7in and shaped a bit like a cylinder. But Dušan is huge, so when he said, ‘Well, you can support who you like, but I really recommend Partizan’, I felt compelled to hear him out.

Dušan had an argument for Partizan over Red Star in every possible category, and where he was struggling a bit, Igor was able to follow up. I started off by wondering out loud if I had to support either. There were four Belgrade clubs, right? And what about the teams in the rest of Serbia? I supported a big club in England, so it would be good to follow someone smaller here. Nonsense. Everyone in Serbia supported one of Partizan or Red Star. Even those with a nominal ‘first’ team had a preference. And supporting an ‘underdog’ was frankly just a guarantee that you would see terrible football.

But, the missionaries argued, if I wanted to support the underdog but still have a chance of winning something, that dog was Partizan. With fewer domestic trophies, and lacking the European Cup, Partizan had statistically had fewer successes. And they had to overcome the fact that Red Star was the Establishment club, and had benefited on many occasions from the assistance of the authorities, and indeed the State itself. So supporting Partizan would be a mild act of subversion, if that’s what I wanted.

Hang on though, I said. Haven’t Partizan won the league four years in a row? That didn’t seem like the results of a club that was a victim of oppression. And Partizan and Red Star were both formed immediately after the Second World War with President for life Tito’s blessing, right? And nominally both had the backing of a major State institution – Partizan were the club spun out of the Yugoslav Army, itself formed around the core of Tito’s Partizans (the Yugoslav resistance movement), while Red Star was the police team.

Ah yes, but in the early years of the club, in the 1950s and 1960s, the army was an institution respected by the whole of Yugoslavia. It was the secret police – the brawn behind Red Star – who went around intimidating the population and banging up anyone who complained about Tito, who had moved swiftly from liberator to

dictator. That primacy had extended itself into the footballing sphere, and Red Star had infiltrated most levels of the State.

OK, maybe that was true, but didn't the of the day president, Boris Tadić, support Partizan, and the leader of the opposition as well? It was, but that was just the politicians. The 'Deep State', the intelligence agencies, murky tycoons and the like, they were all for Red Star. The result had been several championships, cups and transfer deals fixed in their favour, and although Dušan admitted that Partizan had benefited from rigged games too, he still saw that in the context of a wider plan to secure a bigger prize for Red Star.

If that sounded a bit like a conspiracy theory gone too far, Dušan and Igor tried to bring it back to something with an evidentiary base. Red Star was a far less inclusive place than Partizan, and would indeed be less tolerant of a foreign 'fan'. Partizan had always been based around a Yugoslav identity, while Red Star had developed along narrower, Serb lines. Historically, Partizan had had more players from across the whole spectrum of Yugoslav ethnicities and religions, and a fan base more accepting of foreign imports. The fan bases followed the identities – Red Star's was more mono-ethnic, largely Serbs from Serbia, whereas Partizan's had included more from the other Yugoslav republics, across a range of ethnicities. Even Kosovo Albanians, who despised more or less everything to do with Serbia and Belgrade, supported Partizan. As the chairman of the Kosovo FA later put it, 'Partizan was the most open club in the former Yugoslavia.'

In the troubled 1990s, as Igor and Dušan described it, Red Star was very firmly the State club. Partizan was increasingly seen as a throwback to Tito's days, and less popular, but Red Star was a hotbed of nationalism and warmongering – and all of the key war criminals known to Western audiences were either Red Star fans or had drawn many of their volunteers from that fan base. Partizan hadn't been immune, but it hadn't been as bad.

After the break-up of Yugoslavia, Partizan's fans outside of Serbia had found it harder to come to the games, though some did still make it. Big, active fan groups still existed in places as far afield as Maribor in Slovenia, and Ohrid in Macedonia. The club still tried to appeal to all of modern-day Serbia's ethnicities, while Red Star showed less interest. As an example, Red Star and its fans continued to make a song and dance of its use of the Cyrillic alphabet (which is admittedly the official alphabet in Serbia, but is

seen as an imposition by non-Serb ethnic groups), while Partizan went for the more inclusive Latin version.

Red Star went out of their way to suck up to Russia, partly motivated by their relationship with Gazprom (while Partizan had no shirt sponsor at all), congratulating Vladimir Putin on election victories and going so far as to have a plaque somewhere in the stadium commemorating the fact that Putin had once graced a seat with his backside. Partizan were less of a slave to Slavic brotherhood.

Then there were the fans. The Red Star fans went around calling themselves the *Delije* [heroes]. Partizan's had been given the epithet *Grobari* [gravediggers] by Red Star, but instead of coming up with their own self-aggrandising title, they had decided to stick with *Grobari*, and the original insult had become a badge of honour. And admittedly, they had fought fire with fire by labelling Red Star as the *Cigani* [Gypsies], which had stuck too.

Red Star fans were more likely to sing racist songs, salute war criminals, and try to fight the opposition. So I would be more comfortable with Partizan too. Dušan went on to say that since the 1980s the *Grobari* had been pro-English to Red Star's pro-Italian in their supporters' club/firm/ultra model, inspired in part by British punk culture, but also by our hooligans.

Of course, it took me less than five minutes of cursory internet searching to find a Red Star counter-argument to every single one of these stories, as well as Partizan's rebuttals of those rebuttals. But I also found countless references to games in Serbia, especially the Red Star–Partizan derbies, having some of the best atmosphere you could find in Europe. So when Igor said that he did indeed have a spare ticket for Partizan's first match of the season, a home Champions League second round qualifier against Shkendia Tetovo, the Macedonian champions, I had to see what all the fuss was about.

And if I didn't like it, I thought, I can always go and see Red Star once I move to Belgrade. I just wouldn't tell anyone.

Kill the Albanian!

I INVESTED a lot of time in choosing my outfit for the match against Shkendia. My criteria were: something white and/or black, nothing that could be confused as supporting Red Star or the opposition (so no red then), nothing which obviously marked me out as a foreigner. At the forefront of my mind was my embassy colleague Alex, who had turned up for his first Partizan game in a Paraguay shirt, his prized footballing possession. Paraguay's red-and-white striped design is as close to Red Star's as it gets. Dušan's mate Ivan had felt compelled to give the hapless Alex his own shirt, going to the game in just a vest to avoid seeing the Brit pulped.

I dismissed an otherwise suitable white t-shirt with black trim because it had 'VOTE FOR PEDRO' written on it in red letters. Too much red, too foreign, too likely that an under educated Partizan fan would think that Pedro was some Macedonian parliamentarian rather than a character in the film *Napoleon Dynamite*. Eventually, I settled on a white t-shirt with a multi-coloured elephant on it, which I bought around the time of the African Nations Cup. In support of the Ivory Coast, it says, very subtly, 'Les Elephants' on the front of it. I left the house satisfied with my choice.

Igor came to pick me up for the drive down to Belgrade. As he opened the door to let me into the car, he said, 'What's the t-shirt?' I replied, 'Oh, just some Ivory Coast thing I got a couple of years ago.' And he said, 'Yeah, can't believe they beat us at the World Cup.'

Ah. I had forgotten that. Serbia and Montenegro (as was) had been in the 'Group of Death' in the 2006 World Cup with the Netherlands, Argentina and ... Ivory Coast. The Ivorians had

outplayed Serbia and Montenegro (the first World Cup in which they hadn't played as Yugoslavia, and, seeing as Montenegro had already declared independence by that point, the only time that a country that didn't exist has featured at a finals) and come back from behind to win 3-2.

As the first time that the team, as either Yugoslavia or Serbia and Montenegro, had lost to opposition from sub-Saharan Africa, and coming on the back of a World Cup campaign in which S&M had played three, lost three, it had been a dark time for football in Serbia. And here I was rubbing their face in it.

Igor introduced me to his friends, Johnny [real name Miodrag] and Miki [full name Miroslav], and we set off en route. To avoid the traffic, Igor took a back route for the first 30km or so. About a kilometre outside Novi Sad, the road got a bit bumpy. Not in an odd-patches-of-disrepair way, more in a ten metres, bump, judder, ten metres, bump, ten metres, bump, judder kind of way.

My patience for that kind of regular torture of the backside through the worn suspension of a 15-year-old Volkswagen Golf is pretty thin, so I guess within about 30 seconds I had made some kind of unconscious harrumphing noise, just the kind you don't want to hear from your fellow passenger on an away trip. Igor explained, 'This road ... it was built by the Germans when they were occupying Serbia in World War Two.' Bump. 'We haven't repaired it since they left.' Judder. 'Vidim,' [I see] I said. Twenty minutes later, we bumped off the back road and on to the motorway, and it was quiet enough for Igor to elaborate that Johnny was a cameraman for the club, and Miki worked as a photographer for the Partizan club magazine, *Izaberi Partizan* [Choose Partizan]. Izaberi was entitled to a guest ticket, which was how I was getting in tonight.

Igor, Johnny and Miki then proceeded to dissect Partizan's pre-season and the team's chances for the year. Their rapid, colloquial Serbian meant that my brain was so occupied with trying to understand even half of what they were saying that I'm afraid my contribution, until asked direct questions v-e-r-y s-l-o-w-l-y, was just listening and frowning.

The headlines were:

Their two best attacking players had left for China. Club hero Moreira had gone before the end of the season to play for Dalian Aerbin, and top scorer Cleo, who had struck in each game against Arsenal, had gone too, preferring the sweet taste of the yuan

provided by Guangzhou Evergrande to another season hauling his arse round the Balkans.

Rumours that Partizan legend and former Chelsea player Mateja Kežman was likely to make a comeback were dismissed as just rumours. Another prime attacking option, the Senegalese striker Lamine Diarra, was long-term injured and unlikely to play the first couple of games. Replacing this illustrious group were a couple of promising youngsters and Brazilian signing Eduardo, who was coming straight to Partizan having played 37 games for Sao Caetano in the Brazilian league season with no break.

Partizan had a very light central defence. Manchester City's busy spell of acquisitions had not spared the Balkans, and Stefan Savić had traded Belgrade for Eastlands. His partner at the back, Mladen Krstajić, had retired and moved upstairs to become director of football, leaving last year's reserves likely to make up this year's back four. No one particularly thought that it was too early for Krstajić to retire at 37 after a career that peaked in Germany, where he won the league with Werder Bremen and then captained Schalke 04, but many felt that a 38-year-old Krstajić could still play a role in shoring up the pairing of Bulgarian international Ivan Ivanov and returnee (from Belgium) Nemanja Rnić.

The club had been worryingly inactive in the transfer market. It wasn't clear if this was because the players weren't available – or wouldn't come to Partizan because the wages were too low, the manager was trying to promote from within, or because the millions of euros that Partizan had earned through their appearance in the previous season's Champions League had been siphoned off through the ownership structure and there was nothing left to buy new players. The consensus in the car was that there was probably a bit of truth in all three, but that I shouldn't believe everything I heard, especially on the last point. 'Us Serbs love a conspiracy theory,' said Igor, turning to address me even though I would have preferred that he kept his eyes on the road at 120 kilometres an hour. 'We're always looking for what's behind the story, and who's really in control.'

Even in my first few days in Serbia, every time I had talked to anyone about the news or they had found out what my job was going to be in Belgrade, this fascination with conspiracy theories had been obvious. The favourite domestic theory was that all of the politicians were in the pocket of 'the tycoons' – mostly people

who had made huge amounts of money during the years of war in the Balkans in the 1990s (with various shades of legality, luck, and profiteering) or who had benefited from the privatisation process, either through canny entrepreneurialism, political contacts, naked asset-stripping or a mixture of some or all. Many seemed to believe that the fate of Serbia was in the hands of external forces, debated and decided in the chanceries of Western embassies, or that Serbia was a mere pawn of secret 'deals' between Russia and the US, conceived in some smoke-filled room. Even though I was brand new, their eyes said they thought I was in on it.

At this early stage in my time in Serbia, I couldn't work out if this was a subconscious way of absolving Serbia and Serbs from the many mistakes they had made before, during and after the wars, or a legacy of one-party rule, under which all the key decisions had been taken with no transparency, and only presented to the public once all the (in modern parlance) key stakeholders – the big men at the top – had agreed on what they could get out of it. Or maybe I was reading too much into it, and they just loved a good gossip.

Politics aside, it was really a question of whether Partizan would finish first or second in the league. None of the teams outside the big two had improved enough over the summer to threaten even this depleted Partizan, which left only Red Star, perennial challengers, but who hadn't really done much over the past four years. Red Star had made lots of pre-season public noise about this being the year that they ended Partizan's dominance, but the group-think that dominated our car was that Partizan's self-destruction was more likely to hand Red Star the title than anything that the crveno-beli [red-and-whites] could do of their own accord.

After arriving in Belgrade and parking, we strolled down Humska Street and arrived at the ground, about 90 minutes before kick-off. Igor remembered that as well as watching the game, he had some evangelising to do. Operation Convert James was put into overdrive. We met up with Pećinko and some of their mutual friends in the Partizan bar/restaurant, which sits underneath the Sever [north] Stand – reserved for away fans. One of them was a member of parliament, and was therefore going to be very useful as a work contact. Good start. No one let me pay for my drinks. Even better.

We wandered over to the club shop – a hole in the wall further round under the Zapad [west], the main stand housing the directors' box and all the club management's offices – and Igor had a quick

word with the guy running it and a couple of pin badges were produced for me, with no money needing to change hands. 'It's OK, he knows me.' Slick.

We went into the Zapad and into the bowels of the stadium to pick up my ticket from one of the club's administrative offices. 'Do you want to go and see the trophy room?' asked Igor. I nodded my assent, so we wandered, unchaperoned, through a couple of corridors and Igor persuaded the holder of the keys, with whom he also went way back, to let us in.

The trophy room is about 12 metres long and jam-packed with trophies, souvenir pennants and gifts from away matches, and dotted with life-size cardboard cut-outs of the current squad. Dominating the room was the Serbian league trophy, with the cup beneath, reminding anyone foolish enough to be ignorant of the fact that, yes, Partizan did do the double last year.

Most of the other trophies commemorated lesser wins, in friendly competitions or celebrating the reserves' victory in the 1968 Belgrade Reserve Cup. Arsenal had given a solid chrome replica of the Emirates Stadium when Partizan visited last year. Manchester United, who played Partizan in 1966, had given a gift that looked like an equine version of the Red Devil, standing on its hind legs while holding a trident. That was one talented horse.

One particular pennant caught my eye. It commemorated a match between Queens Park Rangers and Partizan, played at Arsenal's Highbury Stadium in the UEFA Cup on 25 October 1984. I knew nothing about this (I was only five at the time, after all). Igor was on hand to tell the story straight away. I could tell before he had finished the first sentence that this was one of his favourites.

QPR had been banned from playing their home games in the UEFA Cup at Loftus Road as they were one of the pioneering clubs trying out Astroturf (or the 'plastic pitch' as it was derogatorily called at the time). So they borrowed Arsenal's ground. Partizan's star player Dragan Mance put them 2-1 up with a stunning goal from 30 yards, causing Alan Parry to choke on his words as they tumbled out of his mouth: 'Mance, haven't seen much of him so far ...'. QPR played out of their skins for the next hour to come back to win 6-2.

Partizan won the return leg 4-0 back in Belgrade to go through on away goals, which then was only the second time a club had

come back from four goals down in a European tie to win it. Igor, beaming, told me that this ranks up in the top five games for all Partizan fans. Even those too young to have watched it live know the scoring sequence from that second leg (Zivković 4, 64, Kalicanin 40, Jesić 46).

We went back outside so that we could then enter the Istok, the east stand. Igor had decided that the Istok was the best introduction for a new fan – close enough to the hardcore Grobari in the Jug, the south stand behind the goal to feel the atmosphere, but not at any risk of trouble. As he explained, the southern end of the Istok was effectively the retirement home for former residents of the Jug – where the most devoted fans went once they had a bit more money to afford the better view, or had lost the urge to shout themselves hoarse at every game, surrounding by the heady aromas of male sweat and cannabis smoke. I wasn't sure if it was possible for me to have been pensioned off from the Jug before I had even made my debut there, but nevertheless I agreed with the rest of Igor's logic.

The queue to get into the Istok was right next to the line for the Jug and, even if we weren't expecting any trouble, the authorities were doing their best to make damn sure there wasn't any. There were maybe 150 police, helmeted, elbow- and knee-padded, and armed with both sturdy black batons and thick Perspex shields in two solid-looking lines on the outside edge of the queuing mass. Serbians tend to be pretty tall and solid chaps in the first place, so, with all the extra kit, it was pretty intimidating, like being surrounded by a platoon of trainee Robocops. A quick glance at the Grobari entering the Jug, mostly shirtless (it was about 35 degrees), tattooed, young and shaven-headed, suggested to my relentlessly middle-class mind that the police might have had a point with the precautions they were taking.

But who were the fans going to fight, other than the police? UEFA had agreed with Partizan and Shkendia that there would be no away fans, either at this match or at the return leg in Macedonia in a week's time. The football associations of both Serbia and Macedonia, and the two countries' respective Ministries of Foreign Affairs, had also been involved, showing just how seriously this was being taken. The agreement was reached to limit the possibility of nationalist or ethnic-based violence, which was a pretty high risk given the history of Shkendia and the incendiary political climate between Serbia and some of its neighbours.

Shkendia aren't just any team from Macedonia. They are the ethnic Albanian team from Tetovo in western Macedonia. Most of their players are ethnic Albanians even now, although they did have one lone Serb among their number. In my first few weeks in Serbia, the lazy stereotypes about Serbs hating all of their neighbours, which are often repeated in the UK, had been quickly disproved by talking to ordinary people. Yes, they had been at war with Croatia and Bosnia, but most people saw this as sad, given that they felt themselves as more or less one people, just with different religions. They made jokes about Montenegrins being lazy, but again, they were brothers. Likewise with Macedonian Slavs. No one said anything much about Bulgarians or Romanians. Although the Hungarians were viewed as a bit serious, there was respect for them and their country. Serbs lamented that they had used to look down on Hungary as a backwater, but it had become a normal western European country and enjoyed much higher living standards than Serbia did now.

But they really don't like Albanians. Most people with whom I'd had any kind of regional-political conversation had spoken ill of Albanians. Chief among their gripes were dark references to Albania's pre-First World War irredentist ambition to create a Greater Albania, which included Kosovo – a country recognised as independent by roughly half the world, but a territory that Serbia still claims as its own, and which is run with significant support from the EU and UN. Serbia's actions in Kosovo in 1999 and before were the reason why NATO bombed the country in 1999. Thirteen years on, in the first half of 2012, Serbia's number one foreign policy priority was reasserting its sovereignty over Kosovo. In short, Kosovo is the most polemical topic that exists in Serbia.

The concept of Greater Albania also included bits of Montenegro and Macedonia, as well as a chunk of modern-day southern Serbia. Many Serbs still believed that Albanians still harboured that ambition. Even food was a source of political argument – the Serbian national dish, the royally-dedicated Karađorđeva Šnicla [a pork schnitzel rolled around cream cheese and ham and then breaded and deep fried] was eaten in ethnic Albanian areas but named the Skenderbeg steak, in honour of their own national hero. Although it had been quiet for a few months, tensions were ratcheting up in Kosovo, bringing with it a concomitant rise in anti-Albanian sentiment.

Few teams are better equipped to arouse anti-Albanian sentiment in Serbia than Shkendia. Formed in 1979 by ethnic Albanians in the Macedonian republic of Yugoslavia, their historic purpose was to unite Albanian fans in Yugoslavia behind one team. They rose from the Yugoslav Fourth Division to the second tier in time for the start of the 1981/82 season. But fearing a rise in Albanian nationalist sentiment on the back of the club's success and increased popularity, Yugoslavia's ruling Communist Party had them shut down. Shkendia reformed after Macedonian independence in 1991 and worked their way up through the divisions again, before reaching the top flight, winning it for the first time in 2010/11 and earning the right to play this fixture.

Shkendia's supporters are known as the Ballistet, named after the Second World War Balli Kombetar Albanian anti-communist nationalist resistance movement. In brief (because this subject alone could be the theme for an entire book), one of the chief goals of Balli Kombetar was to defend the ethnically-based frontiers of the Albanian state revived by the Italians during the course of 1941. These borders included most of today's Kosovo, as well as other bits (but not all) of the originally-conceived Greater Albania. Balli Kombetar also collaborated extensively with the Nazis in both Kosovo and Greece, and killed or deported large numbers of Serbs from Kosovo. If you were trying to add together as many historical reasons for why a Serb would dislike a group as you could, you would probably end up with Balli Kombetar.

As we walked up the steps into the stand, I wasn't exactly impressed by the stadium. Stadion Partizan [Partizan Stadium], formerly Jugoslovenska Narodna Armija [Yugoslav National Army] Stadium, and still referred to by most fans as the JNA, and also sometimes as the Humska, after the road it lies on, is a fairly typical southern European bowl, dull grey except for a shiny office bit on the outside, and completely open to the elements on three sides. It has small backless seats in Partizan's original maroon and blue colours (the kit changed to black and white in 1958). There was a worn-looking athletics track, and a scoreboard at one end that had about as much technology as a dot matrix printer. And these were the fruits of a renovation in 1998.

It was a far cry from the English grounds of the same era, like Middlesbrough's Riverside and Derby's Pride Park, which were palatial by comparison. There were maybe 15,000 inside the

ground, well short of the 32,710 capacity, but the Jug was stuffed to the gills and already belting out a series of Partizan anthems. The atmosphere was powerfully charged and, for a man used to the Emirates – where the first five minutes are even quieter than the rest of the game, as people arrive late and finish their pre-match snacks in their seats – it was great.

This is what football had sounded like when I was growing up in the 1980s. There was a physicality about the support too, fans content to stand and bump into each other as the crowd swayed (even before kick-off). The man next to me, standing a foot taller than me, shirtless, biceps straining the skin of his upper arms, was clearly part of my induction too, bringing the rough and tumble of the Jug to the Istok, and teaching me an early lesson about the need to keep my feet firmly planted at all times.

As the players came out of the tunnel in front of us to line up on the opposite side of the pitch for the pre-match formalities, from inside the solid mass of fans in the Jug came dozens of Serbian flags, alongside the couple of black-and-white Partizan flags, which had been aloft when we arrived. Was this a sign of healthy patriotism or rampant nationalism? I didn't need to wait long to find out.

Partizan were patently the better team from the first kick of the game. Igor and Pećinko had both ventured to me beforehand that the standard was likely to be lower than English non-league football and, in Shkendia's case, it was definitely true. They couldn't string two passes together, couldn't kick straight, couldn't do anything. Partizan must have had 80 per cent possession in the first ten minutes, but somehow couldn't find their way to a clear chance on goal. In the 13th minute, a fortunate ricochet sent the ball into Partizan's defensive third for the first time. Partizan failed to clear properly, and a Shkendia player tried to lob the ball into the box. As the ball broke the plane of the penalty area, the furthest forward it had been for the whole game, Partizan winger Stefan Babović jumped up to block the pass, twisting his head away to avoid taking one in the chops, and brushed the ball with his flailing hands. The referee gave the penalty.

I had expected the Partizan fans to boo and whistle to put off the penalty taker. They did that all right. As the striker placed the ball and turned his back on the Jug, the main body of Grobari, on the command of an unseen man with a megaphone, upped the pressure with a booming chorus of 'ubi, ubi, ubi shiptara!' [kill, kill,

kill the Albanian!']. I can't vouch for how much Serbian Shkendia's players know, but the expression is similar in Macedonian, and the penalty taker's face became visibly paler. He gulped for air as the referee blew his whistle, stepped forward and struck the most timid of penalties, within easy reach of Stojković, who made a regulation save. Ethnic hatred had won this particular battle.

The rest of the half passed by in a blur. Not because of the football – it was 0-0 at half-time – but because I was swept along in the barrage of noise from the Jug. When they were praising Partizan, they were great. And I admired their loyalty in the face of a poor Partizan performance. Arsenal fans would have booed their team off or at least indulged in a lot of exasperated noises. Not the Grobari. But Arsenal fans would never have threatened to kill anyone, not even Teddy Sheringham. And I had never heard such open hatred at a football match before (though Celtic and Rangers supporters would later tell me that they have).

The Grobari's patience was rewarded two minutes into the second half when the pale, blond midfielder Zvonimir Vukić rounded off a decent move, ghosting into the area and stabbing the ball high into the roof of the net. The flags in the Jug waved with renewed vigour and the Grobari jumped up and down in unison in celebration, singing their version of the popular European 'He who doesn't jump is ...' song. Here that unknown scapegoat was, unsurprisingly, an Albanian.

Partizan scored again through Eduardo, who had sported a pained expression until that moment, and once more through his strike partner Marko Šćepović. In a lull between the goals, the crowd had shown more of its nationalist side, with first a chorus of 'Kosovo je srce Srbije' [Kosovo is the heart of Serbia], and then a brief, less unified chant in support of war criminal Ratko Mladić, who had been extradited to The Hague only six weeks previously.

At this latest chant, Igor self-consciously looked at me and winced, 'If you think this is bad, you should go to some of the other clubs. Red Star think that we're not nationalist enough.' Most of the nationalist chanting was confined to the Jug, but some people around me were joining in too, though most confined themselves to the tamer exhortations of 'napred Partizan' [come on Partizan] and 'volim te Partizane' [I love you, Partizan]. I wondered whether this was really something I could be associated with. Igor seemed

to read my mind. 'It's not like this all the time, it's just because of who we're playing.'

A 4-0 win was completed when substitute forward Vladimir Jovančić (on for a visibly relieved Eduardo) saw his cross diverted into the net by a Shkendia defender. The last ten minutes was pure partying for the Grobari, punctuated by sustained one-minute bursts of 'jebi, jebi, jebi Shiptare, Shiptare, Shiptar-e-e-e-e!' [f***, f***, f*** the Albanians!]

In among all the exuberance, a small scuffle broke out in the Jug. It wasn't clear if someone had accidentally jumped on someone in celebration, or someone had started something with malice. The fans in the rest of the ground made their disapproval known loudly, denouncing the fighters as 'Cigani' (meaning Red Star fans rather than literally Gypsies), the worst insult that could be dished out in this stadium. The Grobari recovered their unity and at the final whistle beckoned the players over to them, so that they might salute their efforts with another mighty roar before sending them down the tunnel. No one tried to 'beat the rush' and get away before they had completed the final part of the matchday ritual.

On the way back, we talked (well, actually the others talked, I mostly listened) about what this year's line-up had looked like on the pitch. Goalkeeper Stojković wasn't popular and hadn't been tested apart from the penalty, but he was a decent keeper. At the back, young full-backs Vladimir Volkov and Nikola Aksentijević looked sharp, and decent prospects. This probably meant that they would leave next year, but it was good for now. Ivanov and tonight's central defensive partner Aleksandar Ranković had faced little, but even then hadn't inspired confidence. In midfield, skipper Saša Ilić still had a lot of class and vision but not much pace. Medo [Mohamed Camara], a Sierra Leone international and Partizan's only black player in tonight's squad, was easily the man of the match. He had distributed the ball well and played the 'Makélélé role' of shielding the back four with ease. On the wings, Vukić had scored the crucial goal and generally done OK, but Babović was the kind of 'skilful' winger that I always hated. Lots of technical ability but not good in a game situation, taking too many touches and hogging the ball when team-mates were better placed. Lank, straggly hair, which probably looked little better after an hour with straighteners and hairspray, added to my instant dislike. Up front, Šćepović had scored but not impressed, and Eduardo looked good

but tired. Sub Jovančić had looked pacy and dangerous. All in all, the team looked to be in OK shape despite its summer exodus. But this was only one game against an obviously poor opponent. Greater tests were to come.

We stopped at a service station on the way back to Novi Sad to get a late-night snack, pausing to look at the poor guys who were going all the way back to Subotica on the Hungarian border, who wouldn't get to bed before 2am, and the policemen deployed to escort them all the way back (with a ratio of about one cop for every four fans). That was going to be a long old night.

As we got back into the car, Johnny handed me a bag from the Crno-Beli Butik [Black-And-White Shop] with my own Partizan 'Dupla Krana' [Double Crown] double-winners t-shirt. No-one had even remotely cared about my Ivory Coast t-shirt, but now I had something that would definitely make me fit in. The Cyrillic print would make me look completely authentic. 'From us. So, did you enjoy it?' I could hardly have said no anyway, and I am such a sucker for football-related merchandise that I was totally bowled over and probably gushed a bit. How could I possibly not support this team, given the effort that its fans had made to win me over at my first game?

'I did. Everything except some of the chants.'

'They're worse at Red Star, you know.'

The next day at work, everyone was keen to know how I had found it. There was a degree of disbelief that the stereotyped genteel Englishman and diplomat, who supported Britain's quietest club, could possibly have enjoyed it among those rough and noisy Serbs. The sole truly neutral colleague in the SKC, Nemanja, only neutral because he doesn't like football, was keenest to know what I thought. So, James, did you enjoy the match?

'Yeah, the game was fun, the atmosphere was intense, but I wasn't comfortable with some of the chanting.'

'Oof, and that was Partizan? They're not the worst, you know. You should hear some of the others.'

I wasn't sure if I could use 'least-racist option' as valid grounds for supporting Partizan, but I figured I would definitely give it another go.