

Serbs begin to see the once-hated Chetniks in rather a different light

By Laura Silber in Belgrade

YOUNG MEN in the centre of Belgrade, the Serbian and federal capital, hawk their wares – from cassettes of mournful war ballads to T-shirts bearing the image of General Draza Mihailovic, leader of the Chetniks, Serbian royalist troops in the second world war.

Until last year, the word Chetnik conjured up images of wartime brutality and betrayal among most of Yugoslavia's 23.5m citizens. But now the Chetniks have surged in popularity and many Serbs see them as the saviours of Serbian interests.

The Chetniks were an elite guerrilla unit in the Serbian royal army. They fought against the Nazis, and were backed by the Allies until 1943 when the British and Americans switched their support to the communist partisans under Marshal Tito. Gen Mihailovic was executed as a traitor to Yugoslavia in 1945.

Yet now mothers buy their sons Mihailovic mementos and teenagers proudly claim they are Chetniks.

Mr Vojislav Seselj, a self-proclaimed Chetnik *vojvoda*, or duke, who won a by-election to the republic's national assembly last week, takes his seat in the parliament this week. Mr Seselj, who habitually carries a pistol, heads the ultra-nationalist Radical party and has boasted that 14 of his Chetnik volunteers fought in a skirmish in Borovo Selo in eastern Croatia in May in which 12 Croat

policemen were killed.

However, their growing prominence has further divided Serbia. To some, the popular acceptance of the Chetniks revives nightmarish memories of the war. "When I see them in Belgrade's city centre, I nearly scream. The Chetniks slaughtered three of my relatives and now they have become heroes," says a 32-year-old English teacher.

Marjan, an 18-year-old who has joined the Chetnik guard, says: "Under communism the Chetniks were painted as the enemies, although they originally had Allied support. After the war the process of eliminating the enemies began. Chetniks were then portrayed as the merciless butchers of women and children.

"I don't know whether or not the Chetniks actually slaughtered innocents. But it was during both a civil war and a national liberation war. Those were barbaric times."

The leaders of Serbia and Croatia, the second biggest republic, have revived memories of the brutal civil war of 1941. Serbia says the Croat government is fascist, or Ustasha, after the Nazi-backed independent Croatia. Serbia's propaganda is matched by Croatia, which warns of an impending attack by the Chetniks.

"Serbian nationalists think the Chetniks are the only appropriate answer to the Ustashe, and for them the Croat gov-

ernment is certainly Ustase," says a Belgrade journalist.

Leaders of Serbian ultranationalist parties claim thousands of volunteers have already joined the Chetniks. Their battalions recall Serbian war heroes with names such as "Dusan the Strong". But the surge of mass support, including an evident lack of criticism by the socialist-controlled media, has led critics to charge Serbia under President Slobodan Milosevic of using the Chetniks and their leaders to whip up nationalism and mobilise the youth.

Mr Stojan Cerovic, a Belgrade journalist, says: "The question remains how many of these volunteers will actually go – for three years extremists have demanded arms to defend Serbs against the Albanians in Kosovo, although in the end nobody went," he says.

Most Serbs agree the republic must form its own army, as the federal army threatens to collapse and divide along ethnic lines. A Belgrade history teacher says: "After the war in Slovenia, even moderates now believe in the necessity of a Serbian army to protect Serbs. They may disagree with Seselj and the Chetniks, but they see the Yugoslav People's Army is a phantom. Croats, Slovenes and Serbs can no longer fight on the same side in one army."



A Yugoslav woman praying for peace yesterday