

Duke of the Chetniks opts for 'amputation'

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VOJISLAV SESELJ, a hero to many Serbs in the mixed areas of Croatia — where ethnic clashes have claimed more than 100 lives in recent weeks — is a bull of a man.

He is tall and thickset, with the thinning porcupine haircut that is common to ageing colonels. He carries a gun jammed into the waistband of his trousers.

On the wall above his desk in his Belgrade office, he has pinned the colours of the Chetnik nationalist movement of which he is the leader — a white skull and crossbones against a black background and with the inscription "Free or Dead".

The crude simplicity of the Chetnik logo suits Mr Seselj well: he seems to have made the idiom his own. "We want no one else on our territory and we will fight for our true borders. The Croats must either move or die," he said.

As the President of the right-wing Serbian Radical Party, he is a member of parliament, but he is not waiting for political agreement to resolve Yugoslavia's complex internal border problems.

Mr Seselj's readiness to use violence is rejected by many ordinary Serbs: the democratic opposition in Belgrade is horrified by his approach. An increasing number, however, see his fiery brand of nationalism as being the way forward.

He and his Chetnik movement are, for the Croats, the chief enemy. The Croats use the words "Chetniks" and "terrorists" almost as synonyms. In Belgrade, though, Mr Seselj's portrait is one of the most popular items of nationalist kitsch offered for sale by street vendors. Certainly, his ideas are radical.

"We are against Yugoslavia," said Mr Seselj. "We do not want to live in the same country as Croats." Slovenia, he says, should be allowed to be independent. And so should Croatia — up to a point. For before Croatia is freed,

A hero to some, to others a terrorist. Marc Champion in Belgrade meets the self-proclaimed warlord of the Serbs

it should amputate the arm of its territory that runs south along the Dalmatian coast, all of Slavonia — its eastern shoulder — and part of its centre. Everything south and east of the new Croatian border would then become greater Serbia.

What of Kosovo, the southern republic which has a 90 per cent Albanian population? The Albanians, who have been there for several hundred years, are "guests", says Mr Seselj. "They must be loyal Serbian subjects, or else go back where they came from." Macedonia? "An artificial nation made up by [Josip Broz] Tito. Montenegro? "It is Serbia." Bosnia-Herzegovina, with its cocktail of Muslims, Serbs and Croats, was not even worth consideration.

He calls himself the Duke, or Vojvoda Seselj, because that is the traditional title for the warrior chief of the Chetniks. "Vojvoda Djuic, the last Duke alive, passed the title on to me as was his right," said Mr Seselj.

The title of Duke would make Mr Seselj, 36, the direct descendant of General Draza Mihailovich, who led his Serbian troops into the mountains after the country fell to Hitler in 1941. He, in turn, took the Chetnik name from nationalist bands which had fought Ottoman domination in the eighteenth century. Both the Chetniks and Tito's Communist partisans fought Hitler and Croatia's fascist Ustashe,

but they were not allies. "There will not be a real war, because the Croats are not capable," Mr Seselj said with contempt, although the fierce clashes of recent weeks could perhaps belie such confidence.

There have been almost daily battles between the Croat National Guard and Serb gunmen, with an average of several deaths every day. The number of deaths has constantly escalated.

Mr Seselj argues that Franjo Tudjman, the Croat President, is a fascist. Mr Tudjman — who fought with the partisans in the Second World War — has done nothing to discourage that charge by failing to condemn fascist Croatia's extermination of Serbs in the Forties.

Mr Seselj's attitude towards the outside world is defiant. If Europe should get involved by sending a peace-keeping force to Yugoslavia, then he says that Serbs are ready to fight.

"If the West intervenes, tens of thousands of Western soldiers would be killed. It would be total war, a war without mercy and without prisoners. We would poison their food and their water... There are no methods we would not use against them."

Only on the question of numbers and arms did Mr Seselj's frankness appear to waver.

He declined to say how many Chetniks were under his command, and from the barrenness of his headquarters and peace of the telephones, it seems likely that the Duke might not know. He also declined to say from whom he had bought the old American and German guns which the Chetniks use.

However, Mr Seselj has drawn new hope from the political evolution of Serbia's nationalist and Communist President, Slobodan Milosevic. "He had me put in jail last year," said Seselj. "But over the past few months he has been getting closer and closer to our position."