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Nick Slaughter Versus Slobodan Milosevic

How a cheesy TV detective nourished the Serbian protest movement of the 1990s.

by [Barbara Frye](#)
14 March 2013

Who were the real heroes of the Serbian protests in 1996-1997, which led to the first popular victory against Slobodan Milosevic?

Was it the thousands of people who came out day after freezing day to demand that Milosevic's Socialists stop trying to invalidate the results of local elections that had gone against them? Was it the leaders of that movement, among them Zoran Djindjic, who would become a reformist prime minister before he was assassinated in 2003?

Or was it Nick Slaughter, "an ex-[Royal Canadian Mounted Police] and DEA agent, who had dropped out of society after being fired from his job [and] relocates to the Florida town of Key Mariah to start a detective service," [according to the Internet Movie Database?](#)

The people and their leaders, of course. But in Serbia, you'd get more votes for Slaughter than you might expect.

Slaughter was the pony-tailed, Hawaiian-shirted, chisel-jawed PI whose exploits were chronicled in *Tropical Heat*, an early 1990s Canadian television show that ran – at 11:30 p.m. Monday – as *Sweating Bullets* in the United States.

Stay with me.



When *Tropical Heat* was picked up by Serbian television in the mid-1990s, it aired to a public traumatized by the breakup of Yugoslavia and the wars against Croatia and Bosnia. Serbia's economy had been throttled not only by those geopolitical earthquakes but also by UN sanctions. People couldn't even go to the Croatian seaside anymore for a break.

"We would put something on the screen that would give us some hope," says the TV programmer who brought *Tropical Heat* to Serbia. He was right. Serbians couldn't get enough of this sexy, funny guy who made his living bringing the bad guys to book in a tropical paradise. Nick Slaughter became at once an ironic and heartfelt hero to nearly everyone in the country who yearned for peace, freedom, or just leaders who weren't venal. In other words, to nearly everyone in

the country.

That's the story told in *Slaughter Nick for President*, which won Best Documentary at the Zagreb Film Festival last year and is still making the festival rounds. The movie's website says *Tropical Heat* is "by far the most popular show in the history of Serbian television."

The film follows Rob Stewart, the out-of-work Canadian actor who played Slaughter, on a 2009 visit to Serbia at the invitation of Atheist Rap, a punk band that performs [a song about Slaughter](#). Its lyrics – at least as translated in the movie – include "your wife's well-read,"

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although I'm not sure the character was married. In any event, the important part is the chorus and title, which declares "Sloteru Nice, Srbija ti klice!" (Nick Slaughter, Serbia Salutes You!).

Stewart is a winning and bemused figure throughout the film. He had no inkling he was famous in Serbia until he heard from the administrator of a Facebook fan page, and he acknowledges at the end of the documentary that he had always been embarrassed by *Tropical Heat*. But in Serbia, he gets the presidential suite at a five-star hotel, strangers stop him in the street for a picture, and his visit is front-page news. The country's major television stations all carry a live feed of the press conference that kicks off his trip.

A young Serbian actor explains to a puzzled Stewart that Nick Slaughter was one of only two "good guys on TV in that time and something different than the life that we were living in that time. And everybody was watching *Tropical Heat*."

But how did "Nick Slaughter for President" become a slogan of the era's protest movement? "Our weapon in the fight against the regime was humor," the young man tells Stewart. "They couldn't fight with that because they didn't have humor. We knew that it was our joke and they didn't understand what our joke means."

Every day, there were 10,000 to 15,000 people marching in the morning and maybe 30,000 to 50,000, even 100,000 in the afternoon, says *Srdja Popovic*, an activist who helped topple Milosevic in 2000 and now teaches nonviolent tactics to others living in autocratic societies.

For every roadblock the regime put in front of the marchers – sometimes literally – the organizers found a countermove. For three wintertime months.

The protesters knew, "If [Milosevic] wins, then the elections in the country would mean nothing forever," Popovic says.

"You could see Belgrade boiling with this positive energy," Popovic says. "The energy in which Nick Slaughter was a hero. ..."

Journalist Petar Peca Popovic gives the movie's capstone interview. "To survive in the 1990s, your role was very important," he tells Stewart. "Because during the sanctions, during the psychological downs, the way ... you joke on your show, the way ... you promote the beauty, the humor in *Tropical Heat*, how you solved the problem with small pistols, that's something. ... It's better for the kids, for the generations to grow up watching and smiling to your show than watching and crying to the TV news at half past 7."

Sloteru Nice, Srbija Ti Klice! by Atheist Rap:

You're the king of all detectives
 A step ahead of everyone
 There are no obstacles for you
 You've got high expertise
 You're the king of all Don Juans
 Chicks love you, man
 Your wife's well-read
 And your hair's slicked back

You're the king of all adventures
 Whatever you think of happens

You bring us a better tomorrow
You bring peace between nations and people
Slaughter Nick, Serbia salutes you!

Lead us into victories
With you our chances are strong
Because you gather so well
Women, children, the old, students
Workers and the unemployed
Farmers and freedom fighters
The Superman of our days
You cheer us up with nothing

Barbara Frye is TOL's managing editor.

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