**Otpor: Serbians overthrow Milošević (Bulldozer Revolution),2000**

**Background**

Slobodan Milošević was President of Serbia from 1989 to 1997. During this time he led Serbia into four wars with neighbouring countries resulting in more than 210,000 deaths and nearly three million refugees. The economy of Serbia was ruined with high unemployment and rising prices. Many people tried to oppose Milošević but violence was often used against them.

Elections were held across the country in 1997 and the opposition group Zajedno (“Together”) won for the first time in 40 cities. Milošević refused to recognise the victories and many people protested. After 55 days of protest the government finally gave in and allowed the politicians to take their seats.

However when Milošević’s term of office as President of Serbia came to an end later in 1997, in order to stay in power, he had himself elected President of Yugoslavia.

**Otpor!**

In 1998 university students who had been involved in the previous protests decided to form a new nonviolent protest group called Otpor! (Resistance!). Their main goal was to remove Milošević from power. They also wanted free and fair elections, free university and a free and independent Media.

One of the first things they did was to march from Belgrade to Novi Sad (80km) passing through many small towns and villages to get support from as many communities as possible.

From the beginning, Otpor was committed to using nonviolent tactics. They knew that if they were to fight, Milošević’s army and secret police would kill them. They wanted to help the Serbian people to lose their fear of Milošević and make them realise that he could be resisted.

Otpor’s logo, a clenched fist, which was easy to paint onto walls or use on stickers as well as show physically, quickly started appearing throughout the country. The black fist was a parody of Milošević’s favourite image of a bloody fist. It appealed to older and younger generations. The fist had strong patriotic associations as it recalled the icons of the Yugoslav Partisans who fought against Nazi occupiers during the Second World War. This appealed to the country’s older generation who could remember the resistance movement. It also appealed to young people, as the Partisans were the subject of a 1970s popular TV show which many of them loved. Young Serbians under thirty were keen on wearing T-shirts with the logo.

During the first half of 1999, Otpor lay low due to the 78-day NATO (including the UK) bombing war against Yugoslavia. Despite their hatred of Milošević, Otpor organisers opposed the bombing of their country as they saw how it made the population give more support to Milošević.

When the bombing finished, Otpor reappeared and groups carried out hundreds of small actions across the country. These actions were playful and funny and succeeded in getting the movement known as well as undermining the regime. For example, in one town, activists held a birthday party for Milošević offering him gifts such as handcuffs, a prison uniform and a one-way ticket to the International Criminal Tribunal at The Hague. An alternative rock station called Radio B92 became the leading broadcaster of the resistance. Some of Otpor’s largest rallies doubled as rock concerts with pamphlets being read out between songs. Other entertainers supported the resistance. In 1999, the entire cast of a play called *Powder Keg* raised their fists in unison on stage at the National Theatre and they received a standing ovation.

The government tried to repress Otpor through censorship, arrests and violence. They took over radio stations, closed Belgrade University and made Otpor illegal. After every arrest of Otpor activists, groups of supporters gathered outside of the prison demanding their release. Activists and supporters made their actions even more humorous and silly so that the arrests would appear unjustified to the general public. In this way support grew for Otpor across the country.

When Milošević tried to punish newspapers such as the weekly *Vreme* and the daily paper *Dnevni Telegraf* for positive coverage of Otpor it had the effect of alienating even mainstream journalists who didn’t like the attempts to censor them.

Many of the country’s intellectuals and university professors also supported Otpor after Milošević passed a University Law which restricted their freedom.

More and more people got involved with Otpor, who organised week-long training sessions for small groups to enable them to take creative, nonviolent action by themselves. These training sessions were repeated hundreds of times and more and more people became active. At its peak, late in 2000, Otpor had more than 60,000 active members.

For more than a year Otpor organizers worked on winning over the army and the police. Gaining converts from the army, made up largely of draftees was easier; winning over the police was harder. However since there was a constant trickle of arrests the police got to know that the enemy was just a group of peaceful, young people who wanted to get rid of a non-democratic regime. As the resistance grew the police started to wonder whether taking orders from commanders close to Milošević might be a bad career move.

In June 2000, Milošević passed a law that would allow him to run for another term as president and set an early election date for September 24th. Otpor launched two major propaganda campaigns for the election. In the first they printed the words “He’s Finished!” on stickers, t-shirts’ and posters and in the second they printed “It’s time” to bring out as many voters as possible. Otpor knew that the more voters there were, the less likely that any fraud would be effective.

As the elections neared, the government called Otpor an “illegal terrorist organisation”. Police stormed its offices taking away computers and filing cabinets. Just after the police visit, organisers announced they would be restocking their offices with membership files and they invited the public to come and witness their act of resilience. At the appointed time, in front of press photographers and hundreds of spectators, Otpor members began unloading what appeared to be heavy boxes of paperwork. The police quickly moved in to confiscate the materials but to their dismay and public embarrassment found that the boxes were completely empty! The crowds cheered the activists as they were arrested and the heavy-handed policing generated a new round of recruits for Otpor’s training programmes.

Otpor had helped to create a political party called the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS) and, at the election on September 24th 2000, 80% of the population voted for the candidate Vojislav Koštunica. Results showed that Koštunica had won 50.24% of the votes to Milošević’s 37.15% but the Federal Election Commission claimed that Koštunica had not won a majority and said there would have to be a run-off election on October 5th. Even the Serbian Orthodox Church urged Milošević to step down and asked the police and army to defend the opposition victory.

200,000 people came together in demonstrations in Belgrade and many people demonstrated in other major cities across Serbia to support Koštunica’s victory. At the same time, Otpor leaders met with groups of police and agreed that ally police forces would obey orders and turn up but not carry orders out against protesters.

Coal miners in the Kolubara mines that produced coal for half the country’s electricity went on strike and Belgrade’s mayor called for general strikes across the country. Citizens shut down cities and production with strikes, barricades and civil disobedience.

This all culminated on October 5th 2000 in a massive rally of hundreds of thousands of people in Belgrade. People came from all over the country bringing bulldozers to push down the police blockades. This is how the resistance became known as the “Bulldozer Revolution”. Hundreds of people stormed the parliament building while many of the police and army stepped aside. Defrauded ballot papers were found in one of the rooms and scattered out through the windows. Milošević had lost all of his power.