

Extract from Misha Glenny's book

"The Fall of Yugoslavia"

3rd edition.

ISBN13: 978-0-140-26101-1

Chapter 4 - "July 1991 - January 1992: The Twilight Zone"

The Montenegrin leadership persuaded the JNA [Yugoslav National Army - Bob] authorities to reduce the number of reservists being deployed in the north and instead agreed to allow them to be used to push the front through Konavle to Dubrovnik. This was a brilliant tactical switch – deeply cynical, but a master-stroke none the less. The Croat resistance in Konavle was virtually non-existent. The Montenegrin reservists were sent up both from Herceg-Novci and across from Trebinje in eastern Hercegovina, which lies twenty miles east of Dubrovnik as the land rises sharply. Most of these reservists were mobilized in Niksic, a miserable industrial wasteland in northern Montenegro, and fabled as one of the most primitive and violent towns in Yugoslavia. The Montenegrin reservists sliced through Croatia's defences with the sharpness of newly-tempered steel. It was a pushover and the rewards were substantial.

Herceg-Novci is a pretty resort tucked inside the mouth of the bay of Kotor. Montenegro had enjoyed a bumper summer as all the Serbs who would otherwise have holidayed on Croatia's Dalmatian coast transferred their custom to Montenegro. But by now, Herceg-Novci was peopled only by reservists and a small band of journalists. None of the Yugoslav peoples has as close a relationship with guns as the Montenegrins, who share with their Albanian neighbours to the south a primitive and extensive clan system based around a few large, influential families. The Montenegrin coast has boomed since the internationalization of Yugoslavia's tourist industry, but the hinterland remains very poor, propping up a patriarchal and intolerant social system which has retained certain aspects of the region's violent traditions such as the blood revenge.

After some tenacious arguments with the JNA press officer in Herceg-Novci, Laura and I managed to join a group of other journalists who would travel by bus to the Croat resort of Cavtat and then on the Red Cross boat to Dubrovnik. This was only possible because a temporary cease-fire between the JNA and the National Guard had been negotiated under the auspices of the tireless European Community monitors.

About twenty-five journalists left Herceg-Novci at seven o'clock in the morning on a commandeered bus. The village, Igalo, where Tito owned a spectacular villa, is the final resort before the border. From Igalo the road rises and Croatia begins at the crown of this hill. From the minute we crossed into Croatia, the work of the Montenegrins became all too visible. They had plundered and burned every single house. Each was pock-marked with bullets or left with gaping holes from mortars and grenades. A sign directing visitors to the Konavoski Dvori, one of the finest restaurants in Croatia, lay twisted by the side of the road. The Konavoski Dvori, to which people would travel literally hundreds of miles for a meal, was obliterated. There were no contents left in any of the houses, everything had been taken by the marauding reservists. This is what had motivated the Montenegrins and led to such a dramatic turn-around in support for the war. Videos, televisions, furniture, jewellery and material goods of all other kinds flooded into Niksic and Titograd where the going price for a brand new video recorder was between fifty and seventy-five German marks.

Each village was a shrine to the animal instincts of these young men. At Cilipi airport, which services Dubrovnik, they broke into the Duty-Free shop and as one of them explained, 'We began the party of a lifetime. It lasted two days and two nights, we had endless roasted lamb on a huge spit and all the whisky, vodka, gin and cognac we liked. It was wonderful.' Just past the airport, a road sign welcoming visitors to Dubrovnik was bent back and scraping the ground. Scrawled in English on the reverse side were the words, 'United Kingdom of Serbia'. From the back of a Zastava hatchback, an unshaven soldier was passing out immaculate four-colour posters. His colleagues were distributing them around any sign, tree or house-front they could find. This was now Njegos' country – all evidence of human creativity having been pillaged and raped. It was a full week since Konavle had been taken by the army. Nonetheless, on my return, I watched how the reservists set

fire to a beautiful monastery which is one of the most impressive buildings you see as you cross the border from Montenegro - this was sacrilege on a number of levels.