

THE FALL OF YUGOSLAVIA

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The Third Balkan War



ISHA GLENNY
AUTHOR OF THE REBIRTH OF HISTORY



MISHA GLENNY

THE FALL OF YUGOSLAVIA

THE THIRD BALKAN WAR



PENGUIN BOOKS

This book is dedicated to my friends in
Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina,
Kosovo, Vojvodina and Macedonia

PENGUIN BOOKS

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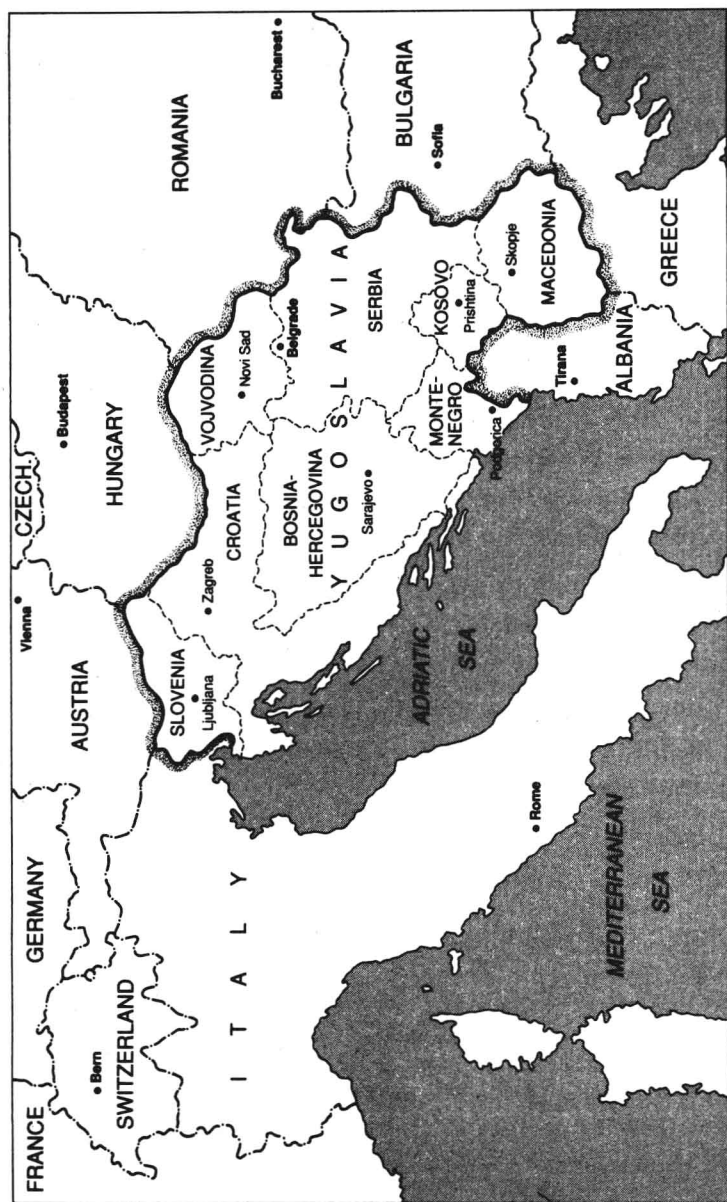
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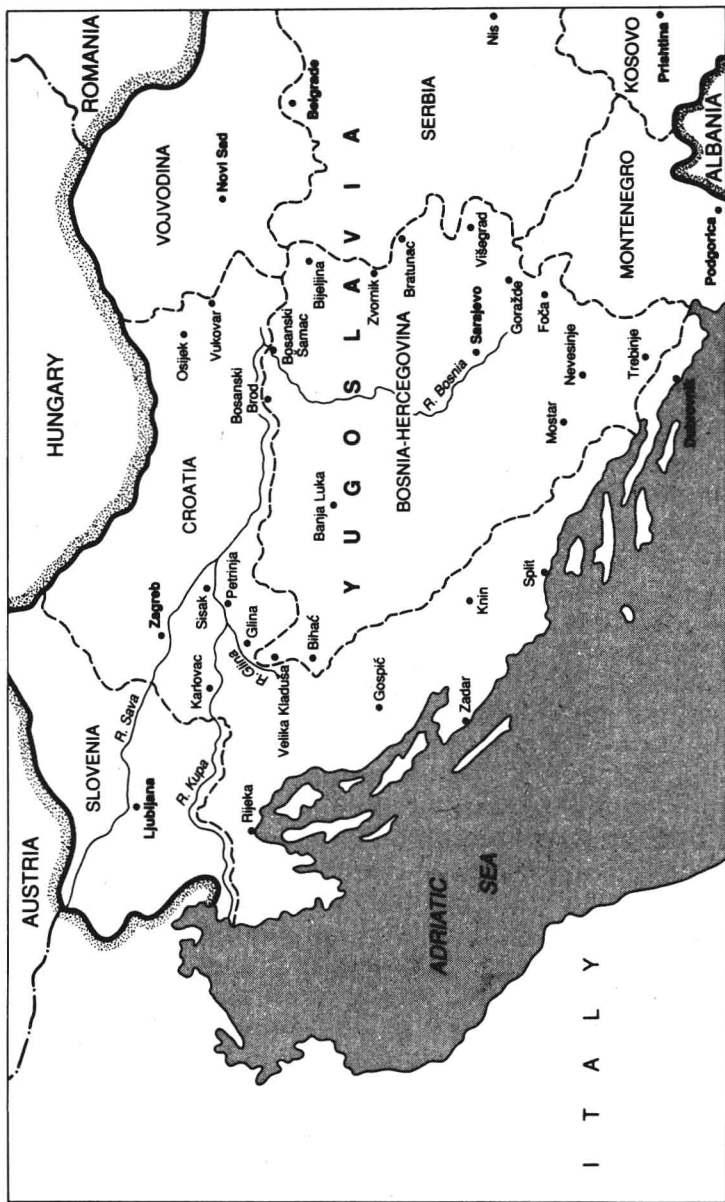
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THE FALL OF YUGOSLAVIA

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The Republics of the former Yugoslavia



The Republics of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina

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M.G.

June 1992

Preface

'All of us have had, now and then, a terrible, horrifying dream, a nightmare, from which we wake up in the middle of the night or at dawn bathed in sweat from the terror we have experienced. We're overcome by joy to find that it was only a dream and not reality. Sadly, what is happening around us today, this horror, this chaos on our soil, in the heart of Europe, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, this destruction, this killing, this hatred – this, alas, is no dream but a living nightmare.

'It is all so unreal, so inconceivable, that it is hard to grasp, at least for me. It leaves me quite unable to judge what is going on or to adopt a rational attitude towards it. It really is like that dream, that ugly nightmare. And if that is how I feel living in Belgrade, where I am threatened by no physical danger, only the psychological torture inflicted by the media, I can imagine what it must now be like for the people in Dubrovnik, Zadar, Cavtat, Knin, Glina, Sisak and especially Vukovar. I can imagine how people must feel who have lost everything they had, everything they worked for all their lives, their homes in ruins, burned to the ground – the feelings of families, mothers and fathers who have lost their precious son, sister, brother, grandmother or whoever it may be. Terrible.

'To what end, and in whose name, I ask myself (you probably do the same), this senseless nationalist imperative, which enforces membership of a nation to which you are driven and in which you are instructed by those who until yesterday were champions of the League of Communists, fighters for brotherhood and unity, secretaries of various committees from the commune to the Central Committee?

'Well, if that is the case, comrade secretaries, don't count on me: I won't go along with you. You won't teach me to hate anyone. And, to tell you the truth, the more you call on me and remind me

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of my nationality, the less I feel I belong to it. The more you appeal to my patriotism, the less patriotic I feel because of you. There you have it. That is my stand.'

Statement made by the Belgrade actor Boro Todorović to the independent television station YUTEL on 2 November 1991

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I KNIN,
AUGUST/OCTOBER 1990—JANUARY 1992:

The Heart of the Matter

Driving eastwards up steep spiralling roads, I am always struck how the paradise of Dalmatia's coast is so swiftly consumed by the forbidding mountains and stony plateaux of its hinterland. In some parts, it is only a matter of a few miles before the deep blue of the Adriatic yields to the destitute flatland surrounded by inhospitable, if spectacular Dinaric peaks. As the roads rise, the palm trees of the seafront give way to clumps of scrub. Sickly but tenacious, they inexplicably resist the winds which lash the barren rock formations. These winds, which mostly originate not from the balmy sea to the west but from the harsh continent to the east, seem to have played the dominant role in sculpting this landscape. Yet they always convey a curt but vital message of hope which persists in defiance of the grim surroundings – this is the soothing smell of pine, present even when dreadful winter cold suffocates all other signs of life. Alas, the aroma is never anything more than symbolic. By the time a small town called Knin approaches, forty miles into the interior, Šibenik, one of Dalmatia's majestic ports where in winter the temperature can tickle the low seventies, has been almost completely erased from memory by the dust which dries my throat and settles as a thick, grey mantle on my car. In ordinary times this region, Kninska Krajina, would be just another of those bleak Balkan vistas, destined to drift out of my mind as swiftly as I drive through them. But in these times, Knin is a bridge stretching from paradise to hell.

The road plunges suddenly, dipping into the town which is well protected by mountains on all sides. To outsiders, Knin is an insignificant regional blob with as much to offer as Reading or Walsall. It is a vapid town which is gloomy when it rains and oppressive when the sun blazes. When it snows, it is the coldest and most isolated place in the Balkans. Despite its intrinsic emptiness,

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when the dark ghosts of Knin began to wail, almost all Croats and Serbs responded to this call to arms. The lure of Knin proved fatal for both nations.

From the south, Knin is shielded by a grand hill which seen from the town looks like the nose to another string of mountains. In fact, if one slips round the back, the hill reveals itself to be nothing but an enormous mound, strangely adrift in this dense cluster of jagged peaks. The hill is crowned by a fortress, a tenth-century monument which thanks to repeated renovations looks youthful and sturdy. From atop the fortress, Knin looks as innocent and uninteresting as a small industrial settlement can. From here it is hard to spot the town's fascinating historical landmarks that inadvertently bear an unspoken responsibility for the revival of the conflict between Serbs and Croats. Instead, the chimney-stacks of the Tvik screw factory stand out, pumping out the foul exhaust of a forlorn and long-failing enterprise which is still the largest employer in Knin even though it no longer has any market where it can sell its shoddy nuts, bolts, nails and screws. But the outstanding features of this panorama are the railway station and the track running in and out of Knin. Thus the eye is drawn immediately to one of the keys to the entire Yugoslav conflict. Knin, with a population of just 10,000 in peacetime, is known to all as an economic backwater, underdeveloped and with little to offer. It has, however, one undisputed asset – its obstinate location as the central communications' junction between the Croatian capital, Zagreb, and the tourist magnets of Dalmatia, the geese which bless Croatia's economy with gold. With Knin outside its control, Croatia faces insurmountable difficulties in developing its tourist industry. Without Knin, Croatia is an economic cripple.

Once the place of enthronement of medieval Croatian kings, Knin is now home to a militant tradition of Serb nationalism. With the exception of a much smaller area in the region of Lika, this was the only stronghold of the extreme Serb-nationalist Chetnik movement in Croatia during the war. Everywhere else in the republic, the Serb communities and later many Croat communities identified themselves with Tito's Partizans. But it is here in Knin, where the Croats least need it, that the toughest Serbs in Croatia happen to live.

Just as Zagreb needs the Krajina, Knin without Croatia is equally

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damned. Yet the primitive, hardy peasants of the region are reared on a diet of poverty which has apparently inured them to the temptations of Croatia's economic potential. This was the fatal error that President Tuđman and his learned advisers made in the months after the victory of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) in Croatia's democratic elections of April 1990. The majority of the 600,000 Serbs in Croatia are urbanized. Before the war, they were generally well integrated into Croatian society and relations between these Serbs and the Croats could hardly have provoked the ferocious conflict which ripped through Croatia in 1991. The mellow Croat academics who helped fashion Tuđman's policy in the first months after his election were acquainted with the sophisticated Serbs from Zagreb, but their knowledge of their cousins in the country was vague and even dismissive. Yet it is these rural Serbs who control the broad swathes of countryside in Krajina, and in the other, now ravaged regions: Kordun, Banija and Slavonija. These Serbs, who did much of the fighting in 1991, are very different from their compatriots in the cities who are known rather frivolously as *Hrbi*, a conflation of *Hrvati* (Croats) and *Srbi* (Serbs). The economic horizons of the rural Serbs are limited, but the early post-feudal concepts of land and home are central to their thinking and sense of security. Passive for decades, when they believed their homes were under threat, their harmless ignorance transformed itself into something extremely dangerous. (Equally unpredictable, it must be said, are their Croat *alter egos* from the Dinaric region and from western Hercegovina, where the least compromising Croat peasants live.) Cosseted by the moderation of the urban Serbs, the Tuđman team after the elections assumed arrogantly and stupidly that the passivity and adaptability of the urban communities was the way of the Serbian world in Croatia. In Croatia's extremities of eastern Slavonija, Krajina and the region around Split and Zadar, Tuđman's government was represented by a very different type of Croat whose antipathy towards Serbs would soon lead to conflict. Tuđman's inability to recognize the complexity of Serbian society within Croatia was probably the most costly mistake he has ever made in his life. The conflict between Zagreb and Knin was not only the dispute which provoked the war, it remains the most powerful engine of fratricidal strife.

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Up on the hilltop, the fortress testifies to Knin's depressing history as disputed territory. In a report on their Dalmatian territories delivered in 1394, the Venetian senate was told that 'As a town in the regions which surround Dalmatia, Fortress Knin is more important and useful to us than anywhere else because it is the main key to the routes into Dalmatia and the main bastion preventing those who would penetrate the province, from doing so.' The various empires and states which have dominated the area have all afforded Knin's strategic position similar respect.

Throughout the seventeenth century, successive Habsburg emperors strengthened and expanded the Military Frontier (in Serbo-Croat, *Vojna Krajina*). This enormous defensive strip eventually stretched across the border lands of the Habsburg southern possessions from Dalmatia eastwards to the western edge of Transylvania in what is now Romania. It was developed both to block Ottoman expansion into Europe and in order to launch offensives against the Turks. Serb fighters in pursuit of their own political struggle with the Sublime Porte in Constantinople had frequently collaborated with the invading Habsburg forces against the Ottoman army. In the wake of one such failed Habsburg assault in the late seventeenth century, Arsenije III, the Serb patriarch of Peć in Kosovo, led 30,000 families into the Habsburg empire to escape the wrath of the janizaries, the peculiar social class which doubled as the sultan's elite fighting corps. From Vienna, the Emperor, Leopold I, agreed to allow these Serbs religious freedom and a measure of self-government. They were thus granted a charter to establish a metropolitanate in Sremski Karlovci, an enchanting little town in Vojvodina, whose many Orthodox spires still poke through lush forests.

Suspicion of Rome was a mighty force within the Serbian Orthodox Church, but the political struggle of the day was directed against the temporal lords of Islam. The fratricidal antipathy which now stains the relationship between so many Serbs and Croats can perhaps trace its roots back a long way, but its flowering has been a relatively recent development. Soon after Sremski Karlovci was founded, the Porte closed down the Peć patriarchy, the old spiritual home of the Serbian Church. Sremski Karlovci thus became a powerful symbol of the religious and political freedom which the Habsburgs granted Serbs. In return for these privileges, the Serbs

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swore allegiance to Vienna and agreed to populate many parts of the Vojna Krajina as military colonists. There had been Serbs in the Knin area before this and claims that the region was purely Croat until the settlement are disingenuous and unsubstantiated. But the migration led by Arsenije III effectively established the territorial problems between Serbs and Croats which remain, all too evidently, unsolved to this day.

The Krajina was wild country. If the Serb or Croat soldiers there were not fighting on behalf of Vienna, they were providing for their families or villages. Many became involved in banditry and the practice of merciless looting and plundering was widespread. In 1991, Montenegrin and Serb soldiers, who returned home clutching videos, malt whisky and cartons of Marlboro cigarettes from many areas of Croatia which they had defiled, were following a tradition with deep roots in the region. One reservist who was mobilized from Bosnia and stationed on the front line near the Dalmatian coast described to me how his commander from the eastern Vojvodina town of Kikinda screamed at his troops before entering a Croat holiday resort: 'If I catch anyone looting the place before I've finished, I'll shoot them!'

Partly to curb the flourishing tradition of banditry, the Habsburgs during the eighteenth century and especially during the reformist reign of Maria-Theresa embarked on a concerted effort to discipline the territories of the Vojna Krajina. They curtailed the rather generous provisions for self-rule they had afforded the Serbs. The Vojna Krajina was subdivided into military districts, each with its own headquarters. The Krajina was controlled from Karlovac, a town thirty miles south of Zagreb, which was constructed exclusively for military purposes. The Krajina soldiers were drafted into regiments, and dependency on their masters in Vienna was increased. The efficacy of the Military Frontier improved quite dramatically.

The Vojna Krajina was always ruled directly from Vienna with orders going over the heads of the Croat and Hungarian nobility. The Croats were forced to observe as large parts of what they considered the historic Triune Kingdom of Slavonija, Croatia and Dalmatia were administered by Vienna and peopled by Serbs. The Habsburgs made a certain effort to soothe the Croat wrath by placing one region under the direct jurisdiction of the Croatian Ban

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(the chief administrator). Thus the area became known as Banija. To the west of Banija and just south of Karlovac lay Kordun, a bastardization of the French, *cordonne*. Aside from Banija, the regions were ruled by *vojvode* (or dukes), who gave their name to another area of the Vojna Krajina, Vojvodina. These were the parts of Yugoslavia which ran red with innocent blood in 1991. The areas over which the Croats demanded to assume control from Vienna in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were the same over which they fought with Belgrade in the late twentieth century.

The Vojna Krajina can claim to be one of the most active and disruptive historical fault lines in Europe. Apart from forming the border between the empires of Islam and Christendom for three centuries, it is also the line of fissure between Rome and Constantinople, the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christian faiths. Without question, the economic traditions of Slovenia and Croatia to the west of this line have developed in closer harmony with Western ideas in the twentieth century, whereas to the east of the divide, the corrupt barter mentality of the Ottomans still dominates the rural economies of Serbia, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Bosnia, Montenegro and Albania. It is no coincidence that the war between Tito's Partizans and the Croat fascists, the Usthas, one of the most bestial struggles within the myriad conflicts of the Second World War, erupted largely along this strip of south-eastern Europe.

Settled in the Krajina as fighters and moulded by the Dinaric surroundings, the Serbs developed an extraordinary affinity with weaponry. Of all the region's traditions, this is probably the most enduring to this day. Children are schooled in weaponry at an early age, learning to handle and control first shotguns and later handguns before they reach their teens. Thus guns are not just a central part of the people's character. A person's standing will be enhanced and confirmed by his or her (there are many female fighters in the Krajina) ability to wield a gun. One piece of local folklore tells how every house in Krajina has three defenders. The first is a snake which lives in the roof of the house (Krajina is home to many snakes and other species attracted to semi-arid and mountainous environments), the second is houseleek, a plant which grows on and around the house and is known colloquially throughout Serbia as

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the guardian of the home (*čuvarkuća*) and the third is the gun of the house. The *Krajišnici*, as people from Krajina are called, say that the gun was born with this land and will never disappear.

In December 1991, the leader of the Krajina, Milan Babić, rejected the plan brokered by Cyrus Vance on behalf of the UN which envisaged the deployment of some 10,000 UN troops in the Krajina and other troubled districts. One of Babić's main arguments was that nobody must be permitted to disarm the *Krajišnici*. Although the Krajina's president was using this to further his own murky political aims, he knew instinctively that this logic would find almost unanimous support among the people he represents. He was correct. When I travelled to Knin in January 1992, all the people I spoke with made a point of stressing that the idea of disarming them was a dishonour in itself. During the period of civil peace which reigned for forty years after the Second World War, the guns were important aids in the economy of this rural area, but as soon as relations between Knin and Zagreb began to deteriorate, the weapons assumed a new, more sinister role.

In late September 1990, I was confronted with the Serbs' warrior consciousness for the first time. Until then, this had been parcelled in cosy tales of the Partizan struggle during the Second World War or in the myths surrounding the great nineteenth-century Serbian uprisings against the Turks and before that, the heroes of the medieval Serbian empire, in particular those who fell during the Serbian Golgotha, the Battle of Kosovo in 1389. This sugary illusion was easily shattered by the swagger and aggression which I observed in Knin.

The road from Gračac to Knin is long and lonely. There are few settlements on the way as the mountains begin to close around you. I was travelling to Knin at a time when tension in the area was still palpable following the first armed confrontation between the Krajina Serbs and the government of Franjo Tuđman which flared on the weekend of 17 August. As I approached the town, a white estate car with a Zagreb registration shot past me in the other direction at a speed which raised eyebrows even by Yugoslav standards. Perhaps this was the first sign of the looming *straža*, as the Serb guard posts on the outskirts of Knin were known. Three miles further on, where the road begins to rise slowly, my path was blocked by a