

# Battle for Srđ – The Strategic Defense of Dubrovnik

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## ABSTRACT

*This article will elaborate on the dynamics of the Siege of Dubrovnik and analyze its implications with special emphasis on the Battle for Srđ. Based on the theory of (military) defense strategy, the focus is on the defense of the city of Dubrovnik in the 1991 war with special reference to the Battle for Srđ (on December 6, 1991). By analyzing military documents, as well as the documents of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague (ICTY), historical sources, interviews with participants in the war in Dubrovnik, and scrutinized media reports, this article aims to determine how crucial the Battle for Srđ was in the overall defense of the city of Dubrovnik in 1991*

**Key words:** war history, Siege of Dubrovnik, Battle for Srđ, military strategy, defense strategy

## Introduction

The article is organized as follows. After the theoretical elaboration of the military (defense) strategy, the analysis of the Siege of Dubrovnik highlights the earlier context of the city of Dubrovnik in its historical forms, namely the status of independence of Dubrovnik through the centuries with the special emphasis on defense and Srđ fortification. This is followed by an analysis of the historical and geostrategic reasons for the aggression on Dubrovnik and the military aspects of the Siege of Dubrovnik and the Battle for Srđ. Based on this, the course of the Battle for Srđ is shown chronologically. The last part of the paper presents the strategic consequences of the Battle for Srđ for the overall defense of Dubrovnik.

## Theoretical Background

### *Military (defense) strategy*

War is an organized politically instrumental phenomenon. Each side requires a strategy in order to gain its goals, whether they were to attack or defend. In war, the strategy is the rationalist process that tries to create coherence between the political aims of war and the military aims in war<sup>1</sup>. Grand strategy is a chain of political and military ends and means<sup>2</sup>. Military strategy is defined as “the direction and use made of force and the threat of force for the purpose of policy as decided by politics”<sup>3</sup>. It’s important to note that military strategy is not the same as military doctrine, even though is often mistaken as one.

Military doctrine is a key component of grand strategy. Military doctrines are important because they affect the quality of life in the international political system and the security of the states that hold them<sup>2</sup>. They are an important part of the building material for military strategy. It represents central beliefs or principles for how to wage war in order to achieve the desired military ends<sup>5</sup>. Military doctrine can be also defined as focusing military strategic capabilities to determine strategic objectives and desired final results, required military action, allocating resources, and restraining such allocations as directed by political leaders<sup>5</sup>. Koziej says that military doctrine has three different emphases: guaranteeing security at the expense of other countries and reducing overall security; guaranteeing national security by equalizing a threat and stabilizing overall security; guaranteeing national security by increasing other countries’ sense of security, consequently weakening sources of threat<sup>5</sup>. Posen explains that military operations can be broken into three different categories: offensive, defensive, and deterrent. The offensive aims to disarm an adversary, the defensive aims to deny an adversary the objective that he seeks, while the deterrent aims to punish an aggressor<sup>2</sup>. As a part of national security, countries usually have their defense strategy developed. It is a political and military chain of means, goals, and theories of how one country should protect itself. That means identifying possible threats and to design political, economic, military, and other means to eliminate the danger. Certainly, every defense strategy exists so that it can benefit a security interest of a country, but only if it’s integrated with the political goals and if it responds to changes in technology, opponent’s capacity, and political

situation<sup>6</sup>. At the end of the 1980's the situation in the former Yugoslavia started changing rapidly. Social changes in the former Yugoslavia, starting 1974 Constitution and introduction of political pluralism made democratic changes in Croatia possible<sup>7</sup>. The fall of the Berlin Wall, the breakdown of the former Soviet Union, and the democratic pressures that were coming from both the west and east had a strong impact on the events that radically changed the future of the former Yugoslavia<sup>8</sup>. After multi-party elections in Croatia and Slovenia in 1990, it became evident that these events meant the beginning of the end of Yugoslavia<sup>7</sup>. Croatia declared independence in June 1991. But the decision wasn't accepted lightly as European Community asked Croatia for a three-month moratorium on the decision. During that time, the Federal government, led by the Yugoslav National Army (JNA), started the war against Slovenia first, and Croatia next<sup>7</sup>. Cigar claims that the Serbo-Croatian war was the tradition of modern-day inter-state wars to set up a new country, for Croatia, and enlarge its state, for Serbia. To achieve its goal, the JNA<sup>a</sup> pursued a strategy of using its mobile forces to control the main transportation arteries and isolate individual regions in Croatia. Also, the Yugoslav Navy supported an attempt to seal off Croatia's coastline, while attacking ports. In addition, Serbia worked to prevent Croatian recognition by the International community<sup>9</sup>. On the other side, the Croatian defense relied on the police forces at the beginning but started forming armed forces, the Croatian National Guard which was founded in 1991 and was under the leadership of the Ministry of Defense<sup>b</sup> <sup>10</sup>. Because it was disarmed, Croatia relied on police and military forces and fought a limited war. The challenge was to respond everywhere with limited forces and the Zagreb government adopted a static defense initially. The siege and reduction of JNA garrisons became a key element of Croatian strategy<sup>9</sup>.

The development of the military led to the outline of the defense strategy which was determined by:

- State policy- which was aimed at creating an independent and sovereign state, with minimal human and material losses with a combination of diplomatic and military activities
- Military strategy- was reflected in the Croatian defense strategy, where Croatia initially adopted a total defense strategy, but gradually abandoned it as the war progressed and replaced it with a state defense strategy.
- The international community- expressed its interest in ending the war by sending UNPROFOR peace-

keeping forces to Croatia. The international involvement had a strong impact on Croatian defense strategy. By accepting their arrival Croatia expressed an interest in ending the war and reintegrating its occupied territories<sup>7</sup>.

The beginning of the war was hard for Croatia and its citizens. On 22 November 1991, the Agreement of the JNA withdrawal was signed, they were to leave Croatia and be positioned at least 20 kilometers east of the Croatian border, but the withdrawal didn't happen. The army attacked villages, towns, and places of cultural importance<sup>11</sup>. One of those cities was Dubrovnik, a city protected by UNESCO heritage since 1979.

#### *Historical background of Dubrovnik*

Dubrovnik, the city founded in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, has had an extensive and colorful history. Starting from the friendly relationship with Byzantine Empire from c.800 till 1205, being under Venetian rule from 1205 to 1358, and its autonomous development under Hungary and relationship with Ottoman Empire until 1526 didn't stop Dubrovnik to become a prominent and independent city-state called the Republic of Ragusa which lasted until 1808. Madunić writes that the long survival of the Republic was the consequence of its peculiar geopolitical position and skillful diplomatic maneuvering than its military strength. One of the key factors of the Ragusan defense system was its fortifications that covered all the key points of the territory, but also the armed forces and small supportive infrastructure, and a set of well-supplied magazines and stores of war materials <sup>12</sup>.

The entrance of French troops in 1806 meant the end of the Republic. The official abolishment was two years later when Dubrovnik became part of the French Empire. Dubrovnik retained a significant role in Napoleon's campaign strategy to the east. He stressed the position, maritime significance, and cultural contributions of Dubrovnik and planned to invest in the construction of fortifications in the area<sup>13</sup>. They began building the fort Imperial on the hill Srđ that would protect the city from the north. Even though the building of the fort started in 1808, with the help of the local population, the fort was finished in 1812. After the fall of Napoleon, in 1815, the Dubrovnik region was annexed by the Habsburg Empire. Austrians continued to upgrade and strengthen the fortress and walls. To them, this fortress was very important due to its proximity to the Ottoman Empire. However, in 1882 the Austrians occupied Bosnia and Herzegovina and Dubrovnik ceased to be a border town and the fort lost its military function<sup>12</sup>. But, because of its immense geostrategic position, Srđ remained an important part of the fortification system of Dubrovnik. During the time of Napoleon's conquests, numerous fortification forts on Srđ were built: forts Delgourge, Strinčjera, and Imperial. The line of defense of Dubrovnik on the stretch of Brgat-Žarkovica, Bosanka-Srđ was repeated during the Croatian War for Independence 1991/92. when military operations for the occupation of the City were conducted from these positions during the Serbian-Montene-

<sup>a</sup> Before the war, JNA claimed about 250,00 active-duty personnel, of which 70 000 were in Croatia already. Order of battle included 1850 main battle tanks. 500 armoured personnel carriers, over 2000 pieces of towed and self-propelled artillery, 489 fixed-wing combat aircraft and 165 armed helicopters<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>b</sup> In the early days of war, in late June 1991, Croatian Army, that is the National Guard numbered 10,000 men, while the Ministry of the Interior had 40,000 men (active and reserves). Special and antiterrorist units had 4000 men and National Defence numbered about 90,000 men<sup>10</sup>.

grin aggression. Many areas were significantly damaged but the fortresses on Srđ again served as exceptional strategic points while suffering numerous damages themselves<sup>14</sup>. Srđ was very important in the defense of Dubrovnik. While the surroundings were occupied by Serbs and Montenegrins, only the Imperial was in the hands of the Croatian Army. The largest attack on the fortress and Dubrovnik by the Serbian-Montenegrin army was launched on December 6, 1991. The fighting around Imperial lasted all day and the few defenders there managed to withstand the attack<sup>15</sup>. This historical background and data on fort Imperial are important in the further analysis of the battle and defense of Srđ in 1991, which was crucial in the overall defense of Dubrovnik.

#### *Historical and geostrategic causes of the aggression on Dubrovnik*

The scholars<sup>16–22</sup> generally agree that the roots of the aggression on Dubrovnik should be sought long before 1991. Some scholars are looking for a reason to attack Dubrovnik in historical events. According to Raguž Dubrovnik was the subject of interest of the Serbian state for centuries. Raguž argues that it was especially evident at the end of the 19th century when the Serbian state was internationally recognized and the aspiration to incorporate the south Adriatic into the new Serbian state appeared. Then, the Serb-Catholic movement also began – as a great investment of financial resources in propaganda activities to gain the population of the Dubrovnik region<sup>21</sup>. According to Banac Dubrovnik was torn between two streams that tended to usurp the cultural dimension of the city, one stemming from the Illyrian Movement and the other one led by Vuk Karadžić. These tensions over the cultural monopoly of Dubrovnik had a strong ideological background<sup>16</sup>.

Dubrovnik, even before it became the Republic of Ragusa, was of great interest to Serbia. Due to its interest in Dubrovnik's harbor, king Stephen Uroš II. Milutin was determined to convert Dubrovnik to a Serbian seaport. A Ragusan force sent against him was defeated and the King marched forward and tried to capture Ragusa itself. But the citizens were prepared, and the city was put in a state of defense. The massive walls and well-armed battlements baffled the Serbian king, and with the help of the Venetians, they defeated the enemy and restored peace. There were several more attacks on Dubrovnik in 1301 and 1317 but ended with the treaty. Afterward, King Stephen Dušan granted the city an accession of territory which was of great importance to the Ragusans<sup>23</sup>. The relationship between Serbia and Dubrovnik wasn't in the focus until the early 1900s, when certain communities from Dubrovnik, members of the church hierarchy considered themselves to be Serbs of Catholic faith and started to serve the political objectives of the dynamic Serbian state. In one of their writings, they claimed that the development of medieval Dubrovnik was described thus: "the Roman and Serbian tribes fused; but the Slav element would prevail to the extent that the emerging city adopted

a Serbian name". The equation of 'Serbian' and 'Slavic' was exploited in Serbian political claims, enabling the author to claim that Dubrovnik was an ancient Serbian commune<sup>24</sup>. Ivo Banac argues that the Orthodox cleric Đorđe Nikolajević (1807–96) was the most significant figure promoting the claim that the Serbs were a nation of three faiths and that the city was thus 'Serbian'<sup>25</sup>.

With God's help, this time next year Dubrovnik will be the capital of Montenegro, and the Summer Games will be held in Niksic. (Unknown Montenegrin army reservist<sup>19</sup>.)

With the coming of Slobodan Milošević to power, the idea to incorporate Dubrovnik into the space of greater Serbia was reactivated again.

In addition to the mentioned historical causes, the aggression in Dubrovnik in 1991 needs to be observed through the geostrategic position of Dubrovnik, which is the largest city in the southern Adriatic. The area of the Dubrovnik coast includes a long and narrow coastal belt and islands in the south of Croatia. On the other hand, the permanent geostrategic weakness is the depth of the territory, which is very small, only about 14 km, and somewhere only 1 km<sup>26</sup>. Therefore, the aggression on Dubrovnik was not carried out according to the usual model of the coordinated action of insurgent Serbs and the JNA, but the area was exposed to attacks from eastern Herzegovina, and then from Montenegro<sup>27</sup>. The terrain of the wider Dubrovnik area is hilly and inaccessible, which also was a great challenge in the organization of the defense of Dubrovnik. On the other hand, it has also presented certain problems for the aggressor. With the land borders between Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Montenegro (in 1991 both still part of Yugoslavia), Dubrovnik and the surrounding area found themselves isolated. The southernmost part of Croatia is separated by the BiH's sea corridor at Neum. Furthermore, the geographical area around the city is very mountainous and unsuitable for military operations, creating a significant supply problem which was to limit the number of forces involved. This meant that, in the case of a JNA attack from the neighboring republics, Croatia's assistance would be limited to what could be transported to the area by sea<sup>28</sup>. Years before the war, Dubrovnik developed an important airport and seaport and became a cultural tourist center. In addition to factories that operated before the war, such as "TUP" (Carbon Graphite Products Factory), "Radeljević", "Jadranka" factory, "Orlando" bakery in Dubrovnik, leather factory in Župa, "Agrokoka" in Banići; saltworks and oyster production in Ston and the dairy industry in Konavle, in the Dubrovnik area there were no other major industrial plants. On the other hand, focus on tourism and culture proved to be a disadvantage at the beginning of the war because apart from the barracks on Prevlaka, the military resort in Kupari, and smaller barracks on Šipan and Mljet, there were no other JNA military facilities. However, Dubrovnik was surrounded by the large military capacities of the JNA: the headquarters of the naval sector in Kumbor (Montenegro), military garrisons in

Trebinje and Bileća, and military airports in Mostar and Titograd (Podgorica)<sup>26</sup>.

Dubrovnik, as the largest city in the southern Adriatic – was the key to conquering the area because there was the geostrategic position of Serbia as a continental state that wanted access to the Adriatic Sea and Dubrovnik's strategic location was in Serbia's plan to expand its borders. The Dubrovnik/Southern Dalmatia Campaign was part of a larger military action. According to General Marinović<sup>26</sup>, the plan was for Southern Dalmatia to be attacked by forces coming from two directions – Montenegro and Sarajevo/Mostar.

However, the attack and siege of Dubrovnik were shocking to most of the international community, especially the citizens of Dubrovnik. Considering the fact there was no significant Serb minority in Dubrovnik, the war was not expected to take place in Dubrovnik. Another important fact is that Dubrovnik is a “UNESCO-listed ‘masterpiece of human creative genius’<sup>29</sup>, which made the siege more shocking, especially in the context of the destruction of monuments. However, according to Pavlović<sup>19</sup> the political leaders of Montenegro and the military brass of the JNA rationalized the aggression on Dubrovnik as a necessary move toward protecting the territorial integrity of Montenegro and Yugoslavia and preventing a potential conflict along ethnic lines, as well as stopping the so-called unconstitutional secession of Croatia. According to Marijan, there is no military explanation for aggression against Dubrovnik. He argues that the reasons for the attack on Dubrovnik must be sought elsewhere; perhaps in the mentality that had for centuries advocated the right to neighboring lands<sup>18</sup>. According to military strategic views, the attack on Dubrovnik is unclear to many analysts. As Domazet-Lošo<sup>20</sup> claims, the explanation that the operation in that area did not “round up” or win in favor of “Greater Serbia” cannot be accepted, but only wanted to reach the territory that would later be the subject of bargaining when they began negotiations in peace. Referring to JNA General Veljko Kadijević, Domazet-Lošo further claims that the southernmost part of Croatia was one of the two operational bases for the attack on the Slano-Ploče gravity center, i.e. it was the area from which the JPA forces were to raise to central Dalmatia and Split<sup>20</sup>. The geostrategic importance of the attack on Dubrovnik in the military plans of the JNA is emphasized by General Veljko Kadijević when he claims that the Trebinje-Herzegovina group (the most important group in the attack on Dubrovnik) had the task of liberating Prevlaka, blocking the wider region of Dubrovnik from the mainland and being ready for actions towards the mouth of the Neretva. Kadijević argues that the group completed the task efficiently and quickly. There were uncontrolled and arbitrary actions in actions around Dubrovnik that caused damage. “Namely, there was my explicit order fixing the line through which our units were not allowed to go closer

“...” At the same time, with strong forces from the region of Hercegovina, block Dubrovnik from the mainland and break out into the Neretva valley, thus cooperating with the forces advancing on the Mostar-Split route<sup>30</sup>

to Dubrovnik. That line – out of range of mortars and medium-range artillery from fire positions in Dubrovnik – was established because it was clear that the Croatian army would use Dubrovnik from where it would beat our units to either beat them in Dubrovnik or suffer losses from their fire without responding to them. Despite repeated warnings, some units crossed the line by forcing the fleeing Croatian army. However, in the old Dubrovnik, the JNA did not return fire even though it was beaten. A counterweight was created to the blocked JNA garrisons in the depths of Croatia, and the outbreak in the Ston-Neum region posed a serious threat of advancing towards Split in cooperation with the Mostar group.<sup>29</sup> In his statement, General Marinović said: “...” I believe that the JNA had originally moved against Dubrovnik with the idea that it would be an easy territorial acquisition. They felt like no one in Dubrovnik would fight and that these were hotel workers, waiters, tour guides, etc. who had no stomach for warfare. ... 'I am sure,' the General continued, "that the JNA believed that if they came in with force and occupied Dubrovnik, the people of the city would accept their offer to create a 'Dubrovnik Republic' and then just go back to the business of tourism. They tried to sell this idea of a 'Dubrovnik Republic' as a sort of autonomous area within the Greater Serbia!' The citizens of Dubrovnik were not interested<sup>31</sup>.

### Military Aspects of the Siege of Dubrovnik and the Battle for Srđ

At this point, it is sufficient to define the siege of Dubrovnik as a military engagement fought between the JNA under the command of Pavle Strugar, Miodrag Jokić, Milan Zec, and Vladimir Kovačević<sup>32</sup> and Croatian forces defending the city of Dubrovnik and its surroundings during the Croatian War of Independence<sup>33</sup>. According to Ljubojević; Jerman and Bovan, the aim of the attack was to secure control of this area in Croatia, detach it from Croatia, and “annex it to Serbia/Montenegro and other areas intended for Serb control in Croatia and Bosnia”. JNA invaded the Dubrovnik area from Montenegro, Bosnia, and even parts of Croatia, surrounding the city in order to conquer it<sup>22</sup>. Marijan (2001, pg. 168) argues that JNA Lieutenant General Pavle Strugar, made a public offer to move the inhabitants of Dubrovnik out of the city at the end of October, but the offer was rejected, and the surrounding city was attacked with mortar fire, most intensively at the beginning of December 1991.

Mainly, from October 1991 until May 1992 virtually all of the Commune of Dubrovnik was occupied – only the city of Dubrovnik, part of the east bank of Rijeka Dubrovačka, and the Napoleonic fortress on Srđ remained in Croatian hands. In May, the Federal Army retreated from the western half of the Commune, but only in October 1992 did it withdraw from the eastern zone<sup>35</sup>. As already mentioned, the geographical position of Dubrovnik was extremely unfavorable for the organization of defense, and the Dubrovnik hinterland consisted of places with a majority Serb population, such as Popovo polje and Trebinje.

Most of the paramilitary units that carried out the aggression on Dubrovnik will come from the Dubrovnik hinterland. The balance of power at the beginning of the conflict was disproportionate.

In the previous chapter, it was stated that Croatia led a limited war, due to the lack of military force and the usage of the police. Total defense strategy (which represents a security and defense policy combining military forces with, usually, a well-developed civil defense structure. It usually adopts an operational doctrine of "territorial defense" which sees the protection of the national territory and the civilian population as the main task for the armed forces and Civil Defense<sup>36</sup>) was adopted as the only logical choice, due to the circumstances. Dubrovnik wasn't an exception. The defense of Dubrovnik was mainly organized locally. The main force for defending the city was the police, with 200 members of the police, 37 members of the special forces, and 150 back-ups<sup>26</sup>. The defense altogether was far weaker in numbers, with about 400 poorly armed Croatian defenders and about 70 men in reserve. They made up only one military unit, consisting of two companies, which would later form the 163rd HV Brigade. This unit was composed of volunteers and a small company of active members of the ZNG under the command of Colonel Ivan Varenina. Croatian defenders had lightly armed small arms, including hunting rifles, and a small amount of artillery. The artillery was reduced to only seven 82 mm mortars, two 120 mm mortars, and two 76 mm "ZIS" cannons. In November 1991, Dubrovnik was defended by exactly 923 defenders<sup>37</sup>. That number was constantly declining due to injuries and deaths. On December 1, 1991, there were 881 defenders. Also, it is necessary to emphasize the importance of the arrival of volunteers from Omiš, Kaštel, Sinj, Ploče, Metković, and Opuzen, who later joined the defense of the Dubrovnik area<sup>38</sup>. The command role in the defense of the city was taken over by General Nojko Marinović who had previously served as commander of the Trebinje garrison, but at the beginning of the war in Croatia, as a Croat, he joined the Croatian side. In contrast to the Dubrovnik defense forces, the enemy army was composed of units that were part of several JNA corps (2nd Titograd (Podgorica) Corps, Mostar Corps, 37th Užice Corps, Trebinje 472nd Brigade), 9th Naval Sector of the JRM from Kumbor, Montenegrin Territorial Defense and Territorial Defense of the City of Trebinje and various volunteer units<sup>37</sup>.

The aggressor military force consisted of 30,000 heavily armed soldiers, 100 tanks, 50 armored personnel carriers, about 120 pieces of artillery weapons of various types and calibers about a hundred aircraft, and the Yugoslav Navy (JRM) under the command of Admiral Mile Kandić. As previously mentioned, JRM attempted to seal Croatia's coastline by barricading Adriatic ports and supplying artillery support to units of the naval sector and infantry troops in their attacks on Dubrovnik, Split, Zadar, Šibenik, and Ploče. In southern Croatia, two operative groups of the federal army collaborated with the navy. Their activities in the direction of Dubrovnik were coor-

inated by two operative groups (forces of the 2nd Podgorica corps and 9th naval sector Boka) for southern Herzegovina and Dalmatia. The offensive on Dubrovnik began on the 1st of October. The village of Ravno in eastern Herzegovina suffered relentless Serb aggression; it was burned to the ground and its inhabitants were driven out. By the 5th of October Prevlaka was cleansed. The pressure of Dubrovnik followed, and it was surrounded and cut off from the rest of Croatia<sup>34</sup>.

The main commander of the attack on Dubrovnik and its surroundings was Lieutenant Colonel Pavle Strugar. These units were filled and strengthened by members of the Trebinje territorial defense and various Chetnik volunteer units<sup>38</sup>. To coordinate the attack on the south of Croatia, the 2nd Operational Group of the enemy forces was formed with a protruding command post in Kifino selo near Trebinje<sup>37</sup>. Based on the analysis of UN documents<sup>32</sup>, during the siege, Dubrovnik and the Old Town were subjected to scattered bombardment in October and November, and the population of the region shrank to about 15,000 in December 1991. The worst single bombardment on the Old Town, mainly with mortars, took place on 6 December and will be analyzed below.

The worst attack on Dubrovnik was on the feast of St. Nicholas, December 6, 1991, and people of Dubrovnik regularly mention this day without a year. "It is a date until and from which counts time in their narration of the war"<sup>39</sup>. Kriste states that that day over 600 different projectiles fell on the Old Town, 19 people were killed and over 60 were wounded. An artillery attack that was launched upon the Imperial Fortress on the Srđ hill happened suddenly because negotiations for the ceasefire for the southern Croatian area (from Dubrovnik to Ploče) were underway in Cavtat between a Croatian delegation led by Davorin Rudolf, Pero Kriste, and Ivan Cifrić and the representatives of JNA led by Miodrag Jokić and were expected to be concluded that day<sup>40</sup>. According to the testimony of Davorin Rudolf<sup>17</sup> given in his book "Rat koji nismo htjeli", the mentioned representatives started negotiations in Cavtat on December 5th. As they did not agree on the issues related to the blockade and unblocking of the port of Dubrovnik, they agreed orally that the hostilities would stop immediately, and the negotiations were to continue the next day, at 10 am. However, it dawned on December 6, 1991. Instead of easing the signed armistice, the city and its people experienced the greatest war destruction and losses. Artillery shells scattered throughout the city numbered in the thousands, more than 600 fell on Dubrovnik's historic center – and not far from the city, on the hill Srđ, a handful of defenders with all their might save the last line of defense, the Imperial Fortress.

The chronology of the Battle for Srđ<sup>d</sup>, with accompanying photographs showing the course of the battle, is set out in the book "Zagonetka pobjede". According to the book the battle began in the early morning hours, at about 5:45

<sup>d</sup> Battle for Srđ is the name of the war operation to defend Dubrovnik on the hill Srđ during the Homeland War

a.m., an artillery strike began on the Imperial Fortress at Srđ. The first grenades hit the guard positions of the Croatian forces and the JNA continued with artillery fire. At the same time, a tank attack began – one tank, supported by infantry, started from the east, from the village of Bosanka, and the other from the west, from the old fortress of Strinčjera. Due to heavy shelling, the defenders of the Imperial fort could not get out, so the JNA with infantry came to positions from which it could control the area around the fort, all its approaches, and openings. A small number of defenders, who had used up their ammunition, took refuge in the security of the fort. At one point, it was heard on the radio that the aggressor was planning to inject military poison into the fortress. So the defenders were in a seemingly hopeless situation.

However, a turnaround followed. From several positions, Dubrovnik began an organized artillery attack on the aggressor who remained in the open space of the fortress. In addition to the cannonade from Dubrovnik, two groups of Croatian infantry forces moved towards Srđ, which had a significant impact on the outcome of the battle. After furious fights and great losses, a cease-fire was officially agreed upon. Negotiations were held by phone from the hotel Orsula with Miodrag Jokić. The attacks were stopped around 12:30 and after losses in manpower and equipment, the JNA began withdrawing from the plateau of Srđ Hill<sup>26</sup>.

### The Strategic Consequences of the Battle for Srđj

The initial success of the aggressor turned into a debacle and the aggressor's forces did not reach the interior of the fortress. They remained exposed to concentrated fire from city districts Montovjerna, Bogišić park, Solitudo, and from inside the fort. The enemy retreated and sought a truce but only while taking the dead and wounded. In the end, the aggressor lost the Battle for Srđ and suffered heavy losses<sup>e</sup>. After their plan failed, retaliation began with heavy artillery at the center of the historic old town and other city districts. The Dubrovnik area, including the Old Town, was exposed to an artillery attack for more than ten hours. Aggressor took advantage of the armistice while bombing the defenders in the city district of Sustjepan<sup>f</sup>. The leadership of JNA persistently denied the responsibility for the attack – there were different statements, from the Croatian party attacking the old town itself to putting the blame on their unit that was not controlled. However, by analyzing the documents and statements of political and military representatives and the testimony of the participants in the Battle for Srđ, it was clear that it was a planned attack. They used artillery and tank support. There was also a threat from a battle poison.

<sup>e</sup>Officially, they had five dead and 16 wounded soldiers to be pulled out of the clash zone. According to "Glas Trebinja", December 1991<sup>26</sup>

<sup>f</sup>Members of the Croatian Army Miroslav Buntić and Šaban Islamovski, as well as members of the 2nd Sinj Battalion of the 4th ZNG Brigade, Marko Bitunjac, and Mario Zelenika, were killed in heavy fighting and artillery attacks on Sustjepan. Twelve defenders were then wounded<sup>41</sup>.

The leadership of the JNA was "unavailable" all morning. So, they waited for the report on the success of the attack. During the largest bombings, around two o'clock in the afternoon, a radiogram arrived for Minister Rudolf from Admiral Miodrag Jokić stating that Jokić regretted the difficult and "incidental" situation that had occurred and that he had not ordered the bombing on 6 December 1991. General Kadijević even ordered an investigation to determine responsibility for the events of that day. Interestingly, the radiogram states that Vice Admiral Jokić will not be able to continue negotiations that day with the Croatian side due to going to Belgrade for consultations with General Kadijević<sup>17</sup>. On the other hand, Srđ represented a key point around which difficult fights were waged during November. In all attacking plans, JNA strategies stated Srđ as a goal that must be conquered as a prerequisite for forcing the surrender of Dubrovnik. When he writes about the siege of Dubrovnik, Pavlović<sup>19</sup> argues that in spite of its advantages in manpower and equipment the JNA did not succeed in forcing the surrender of Dubrovnik. Although the damage was enormous, especially to cultural heritage, the total occupation of Dubrovnik was successfully avoided by defending Srđ. Also, that this is one of the biggest battles in the Homeland War is confirmed by the separate statements of politicians, journalists, and defenders who were involved in the events of December 6, 1991. Davorin Rudolf (in 1991 Minister of Foreign Affairs) stated that the Battle for Srđ was a decisive battle for the southern part of Croatia. According to Rudolf's statement, achieving a truce was extremely important for the fate of Dubrovnik. The destruction of the city has been stopped and the consolidation of Croatian defense has been enabled<sup>17</sup>. A similar statement was made by the commander of the defense of Dubrovnik, general Nojko Marinović who stated how December 6 was the beginning of the end. There were sporadic attacks by smaller groups, but the aggressor no longer moved forward. Croatian army had moved forward<sup>26</sup>. Stipe Puđa was a war correspondent from Dubrovnik and he stated that was the battle that saved Dubrovnik and the integrity of Croatia. If the fortress on Srđ had not been defended and if Dubrovnik had fallen after Vukovar, the big question is whether they would have Croatia today<sup>42</sup>.

### Conclusion

This article dealt with the military (defense) strategy and dynamics of the siege of Dubrovnik with special emphasis on the Battle for Srđ. After thorough research, based on different sources – documents, military, media, and especially oral interviews with the defenders who participated in the battle, it can be concluded that the Battle for Srđ was the one that defended Dubrovnik. The defenders of the city led a limited war with not enough military power and initially adopted a total defense strategy that included a small number of army individuals, special police units, and civil volunteers. Nevertheless, December 6, 1991, marked a turning point in the war in Dubrovnik.

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## BITKA ZA SRĐ – STRATEŠKA OBRANA DUBROVNIKA

### SAŽETAK

U članku se na temelju teorije strategije (vojne) obrane, razmatra dinamika opsade Dubrovnika i analiziraju njezine implikacije s posebnim naglaskom na bitku za Srđ (6. prosinca 1991.). Analizirajući vojnu dokumentaciju, kao i dokumentaciju Međunarodnog kaznenog suda za bivšu Jugoslaviju u Haagu (ICTY), povijesne izvore, intervju sa sudionicima rata u Dubrovniku te pažljivo proučene medijske napise, ovaj članak nastoji utvrditi koliko je ključna bila bitka za Srđ u ukupnoj obrani grada Dubrovnika 1991. godine.

