

What do you know about Montenegro?
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Montenegro was in the news in late May and early June, but it is doubtful that the vast majority of Americans know anything about this country. For those of you who do try to follow important world events, it might be helpful to know where and what kind of a place it is.

I first learned about Montenegro when I read: *The New Class*, by Milovan Djilas, a Yugoslav communist and once best friend of Marshall Tito, the country's long-time dictator. Djilas, born in the backwater province of Montenegro, described his childhood home as a place without law, where rival mafias raped and pillaged the peasants. This is a painful description of anarchy.

Of course, Tito's Yugoslavia had law and order, but Djilas criticized his country's Communism for the hypocrisy of pretending that the citizens shared equal justice. The privileged class ruled over and scammed the rest. He was put in prison for this criticism.

Montenegro (Black Mountain) began in the Middle Ages (9th century) when a new principality emerged out of what was once a Roman province, Dalmatia (home of the Dalmatian dog?). They shared south-eastern Europe with other newly arrived Slavic tribes after Rome's collapse. Although all the people in this south-eastern part of Europe were of Slavic origin (as are the Russians), history did not let them unite. One group (Serbs) was converted from Slavic paganism into Eastern Orthodox Christianity; the second group was converted into Roman Catholicism (the Croats and Slovenians); and the third were converted into Islam (Albania and Bosnia).

Their religious conversions turned them into virulent enemies of each other. This area was the one meeting place of three religions, and it did not thrive; it created anarchy until conquered by another invader, the Ottoman Turks. The region became a model of dysfunction until freed from the Ottoman Empire after World War I.

World War I actually began in that region (the Balkans) when a Serbian Anarchist murdered the Austro-Hungarian crown prince and his wife. Europe's major powers chose sides (alliances based on religion and politics (Britain, France, Russia against Germany, Austria, and Turkey)). When the war ended, in a political decision dominated by the winners of the war, a new country was created to unite all the Southern Slavic principalities, Yugoslavia (Southern Slavs).

Even this union did not thrive; the still differing regions fought with each other and one of the poorest provinces, Montenegro, was run by mafia-fascist militias. It was a terrible place.

World war II made the existential anarchy even worse. The country endured a long civil war in which partisans were either under Nazi or Communist Russian control. A talented Communist chief eventually prevailed, and he (Tito) became the puppet of the Soviet Union. He played a unique role, however. He became an independent Communist, rejecting Russian control, which over time made him acceptable to the West. Yugoslavia began to prosper, doing better than any other Soviet colonies. To reward Montenegro for their fierce anti-Nazi fighting, Tito elevated them to one of six provinces in the new Yugoslavia.

Montenegro remained poor, quarrelsome, and largely anarchistic. They had nothing that any of their neighbors wanted, so they enjoyed benign neglect. But another upheaval was on the way. Tito died in 1991, and his tireless efforts to make Yugoslavia a real country began to melt down. The pieces, based on their original religious histories, warred with each other and separated into new countries. Montenegro, which had been an Orthodox province of Serbia, declared its independence in 2006.

Two things brought Montenegro into the news recently. The first was a televised photo of a NATO meeting which welcomed two new leaders: the Prime Minister of Montenegro, who was seeking membership in NATO; and President Donald Trump, who pushed the PM of Montenegro aside so that he could be in front during the photo shoot. This display of bad manners created a flurry of global attention (negative). The second mention of Montenegro was when it defied its Russian friends by securing membership in NATO. This is a big leap forward for them. Nobody ever denied their courage.

683 words

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