

# Slovenia awakes to the sirens of war

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From Marcus Tanner  
in Ljubljana

AIR-RAID sirens once again wailed in Ljubljana at midday yesterday. The Slovene capital found that a real war had finally begun. The MiGs that swooped low over the city caught everyone by surprise. For many people, it was the first time they had ventured out of their homes since the big attack scare last Sunday.

Shopping or sitting drinking a cup of cappuccino in one of the many shady cafés that dot the cobbled streets of the old town, people unwound in the summer sunlight in an air of quiet relaxation.

Screeching low over the city, the passage of the MiGs was followed by three terrific bangs, which knocked out windows and shook the buildings in the city centre.

As the air-raid sirens wailed, the streets rapidly emptied. Cups of coffee were left undrunk on the tabletops of cafés, and restaurants bolted their doors shut and pulled down the shutters. Within minutes, only the police cars remained on the streets, racing across the city in search of damage.

In the air-raid shelter where I took refuge, it was as if we were living through a 1940s newsreel of life in London or some other war-time city. There were lost children, clutching their teddybears and bawling, in search of their parents. One girl was hysterical and refused the entreaties of her mother and father to go into the shelter, because she could not take her dog.

She held the trembling animal in one arm, beating off her equally hysterical parents with her one free fist. But most pathetic of all was the sight of the elderly, hob-

bling slowly through the throng and trying not to fall over. A large contingent of nurses waited by the door, dressed in their comforting-looking starched white caps. Most of the old folk remained hopelessly bewildered.

One confused old woman was trying to carry the chair that she had been sitting on outside with her into the shelter. Another old woman had fallen over, probably after the explosion caused by the MiGs, and was bleeding copiously from her forehead.

At first, many people thought the explosions were caused by the MiGs breaking the sound barrier. In fact, the planes had carried out an air attack on the television transmitters located on top of Ljubljana Castle.

Until then, it had seemed that the lunacy was about to be dispelled, like a peculiarly bad dream, with a couple of sharp words from the visiting troika of EC foreign ministers.

I had got used to the sight of young boys — kids, who in another country would have been in school or hanging around bars and discothèques — standing on the street corners with their sub-machine-guns. But that all changed around noon, when I realised Ljubljana had been attacked in the first air raid conducted on any European city since the end of the Second World War.

The first things to go were the light entertainment programmes on Slovene Television. They were

replaced by round-the-clock war reports from the front-line, which were interspersed with warnings about what to do in the event of an air raid. After a couple of radio and television transmitters were destroyed by the air force, screens started to black out completely for short periods.

It seemed odd that the air force had bothered with their air attack on Ljubljana Castle, since the effect was so obviously counter-productive. The army could presumably blast its way into Ljubljana through the barricades if it really wanted to.

Although people were clearly terrified by the sirens and the explosions, the feeling that will probably endure is not likely to be fear of the Yugoslav army, but a deep anger and hostility towards the perpetrators of this onslaught.

The question that looms in one's mind is: "What next?" Already the lights have started dimming periodically, perhaps because the power station at Krsko has been shut down. Only the plentiful supply of Austrian-style cooking in the hotels has not yet been affected.

Yesterday, the Economics Minister delivered a glum warning that the blockades put up on the roads to stop the "occupational forces" from moving were affecting the movement of food supplies too.

The idea of a war going on in snug, civilised Slovenia always had an air of complete unreality. It was as if one had heard of a war with tanks and air raids breaking out in the Cotswolds. But yesterday the air of unreality was fading fast.



Mothers of federal army soldiers protest outside the Belgrade parliament to demand their return from Slovenia

Photograph: Oleg Popov/Reuters