

Ready to do battle in the villages divided by hate

From ANNA PUKAS on the border of Serbia and Croatia AROUND dawn the people of Vukovar came out to wave as the convoy of tanks, armoured vehicles and trucks roared past.

It stretched for 25 miles and took more than three hours to pass through this border village.

A Serbian woman in her fifties implored me: 'Tell your country the truth. Yugoslavia doesn't want war but the Croats, they want it. They are killing our children without mercy.'

Five hundred yards away, a track-suited young Croatian with a Kalashnikov flung across his chest said: 'Of course they call it their army. Three quarters of officers are Serbs. They are the expansionists. We Croats only want to stay in our territory.'

The Serbs and Croats have always been neighbours and have always hated each other. Now both sides feel they have reached the final showdown.

They have divided villages where both live, setting up rival road blocks and barricades.

Now they have guests in town, possibly as many as 5,000 federal army troops commandeering farmhouses

and barns, ready to defend Serbia if the conflict spreads.

In the border village of Tovarnik, which is split half and half, troops hung around smoking endlessly. They are reservists, not regular troops, and were clearly not forming attack positions.

They are believed to have up to 200 T34 tanks, the same model the Soviets sent into Berlin in the last war and still one of the most manoeuvrable ever made.

The Croats have their hunting rifles and grenades — no defence against the artillery which just one of the tanks could unleash.

But what they lack in fire-power, they claim they make up for in numbers and a bottomless reserve of national pride.

We will die for our freedom

FRANC PUKL clambered under a tanker laden with petrol and attached the deadly charge — a bag of high explosives attached to a long thin fuse cable.

With their crude but lethal barrier primed, he and six fellow Slovenians await the tank invasion the republic is bracing itself for.

Stationed 20 miles south west of Ljubljana, they are one of the many small defence units ready to put their ageing

Kalashnikovs and anti-tank launchers into action.

Pukl, 22, and his 21-year-old friend Viktor Tancig were conscripts in the army. Now they oppose men they once served with.

Tancig summed up their defiance: 'If we go back now we will never be independent. We know that some of us must die.'