

# Serbia torn between loyalty and fear of bloodshed

**Laura Silber reports from Belgrade on how the country's Serbs feel betrayed by their nationalistic communist leaders**

THE SERBS, often painted as the agents provocateurs in the unrolling Yugoslav crisis, are in reality torn between fear of the current bloodshed and fierce loyalty to their republic, the largest in the federation.

While many are glad to see the federal army at last descending on the rebel republics of Slovenia and Croatia, they also rage at what they see as the incompetence and powerlessness of their own institutions.

Hysterical scenes in the parliament on Tuesday in Belgrade, the Serbian and federal capital, illustrated these conflicting emotions.

Hundreds of parents whose sons are serving in the federal army stormed the assembly, screaming and cursing at the deputies in a confrontation that was carried live on television.

A 51-year-old mother cried: "I want my son back. Give us weapons, so we can fight instead."

As a 35-year-old history teacher pointed out: "The weeping mothers did not demand peace. Instead they showed their collapse of faith in the Yugoslav army. The demonstrators now want to take matters into their own

hands. They no longer believe in any institutions. "It was tragicomic. Their fear is completely understandable, on the one hand, as many conscripts have been killed. But, on the other hand, the crowds took over parliament and demanded weapons. It all shows how remote is the chance for any peace or democracy in Serbia."

Serbs, who three years ago rallied around Mr Slobodan Milosevic, the Communist leader who conjured up and then rode a wave of nationalism to become the president of the republic, now feel betrayed. Their fanatical support for Mr Milosevic has crumbled into disillusion because they feel he has failed to return to Serbia the dominant position within Yugoslavia which they feel it deserves. Now they lack any political direction or hope of a peaceful solution to Yugoslavia's troubles.

"Serbia was the last to hold elections and remains communist," said Mr Mihajlo Kovac, a

parliamentary deputy. "We suffer this stigma both in Yugoslavia and abroad. This government and these times are a national catastrophe for Serbs."

Serbs see themselves as the heirs to Yugoslavia. They often point out that Serbia fought on the winning side in both world wars, while Croatia was first part of Austro-Hungary and then ruled by a pro-fascist regime during the Second World War.

They feel angry and betrayed by the Slovenes. "The army defended them in 1953, when the northern part of Slovenia (Zone B) was under dispute with Italy," said a Belgrade journalist. "They then welcomed the Yugoslav army. But now the Yugoslav army is called a fascistic occupying force."

Most Serbs seem ready to accept that Slovenia will secede. But they blame the tiny western republic for forcing the crisis to a head, which

they fear will drown Yugoslavia in a blood bath. They say the Slovenes should have backed down from their declaration of independence in the interests of peace, not only in Slovenia but throughout Yugoslavia and in Europe.

Belgrade residents, believing war to be imminent, are buying stores of flour and salt to prevent hunger when store supplies run out. Lines of cars snake around petrol stations as rumours persist that petrol will soon be unavailable.

While many Serbs demonstrate their anguish as tens of thousands are mobilised by the federal army, others accept this fate, regardless of their opposition to the government. Although they blame Mr Milosevic for the country's present agony, they consider themselves honour bound to defend Serbs throughout the country.

Young men are seized by the sense of obligation to defend Serbia in the face of Yugoslavia's disintegration.

A 27-year-old architect said: "I have never supported Mr Milosevic and the Communist Party.

"But I have only one country and one nation, no matter how confused. I will join to fight for Serbia."



Slovenian soldiers sheltering in the entrance of a house in the town of Dravograd as Soviet-built MiG-29s belonging to the Yugoslav federal air force flew over the area several times