

# No neat tie-in between these rival republics

IMPRESSED by the neat scarves worn by Croat soldiers in the Habsburg army, Napoleon took the scarves back to France and named them after the enemy: "Cravates", he called them, after the Croats' own word for Croatian — *Hrvat*. To Croats, it must seem a disappointing form of international recognition.

Like the neighbouring republic of Slovenia, Croatia has been bashed back and forth like a ping pong ball over the centuries, suffering from invasions by French, Mongols, Turks, Venetians and other assorted conquerors.

Apart from their long history of invasion, however, the Croats have little or nothing in common with their Slovene neighbours. This week's frantic discussions in the West as to whether to recognise "Slovenia and Croatia" is seen by most analysts of the region's affairs as a dangerous red herring. Both may now be under threat from the federal Yugoslav army, but their aspirations towards independence cannot be equated with any ease.

"Slovenia is the only part of Yugoslavia that could conceivably make a really clean break," says Mark Wheeler, a lecturer at London University's School of Slavonic and East European studies.

"The Croats' democratic credentials are in no way as impressive as those in Slovenia. And the Croats are simply not in a position to withdraw from the federation without hideous consequences."

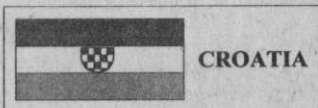
He is referring to the presence within Croatia of 700,000 Serbs, mostly Orthodox Christians, among an overall population of five million, most of them Roman Catholic. Despite centuries of living side by side, the two sides remain bitterly opposed, leaving Croatia a tinderbox for civil war.

"What has happened in Slovenia could turn out to be merely a sideshow compared with what could occur in Croatia," says Mr Wheeler. "You could call it a case of 'You ain't seen nothin' yet.'"

The Serbs in Croatia have been shaking in their shoes since Croatian nationalist Franjo Tudjman won the republic's first free elections since the Second World War last year at the head of the HDZ, the strongly Croatian nationalist Christian Democratic Union.

Watching the near-Nazi straight arm salute of his followers, and the fiery shouts of: "Franjo, Franjo," the Serbs could be forgiven for recalling the public demonstrations of support for Hitler or Mussolini.

The free elections have been somewhat forgotten as Mr Tudjman has built up an authoritarian regime not entirely dissimilar to the communist one he replaced.



Franjo Tudjman

"A regime ostentatious in its chauvinism," is how Mr Wheeler euphemistically puts it.

There have been few moves towards the promised privatisation of the economy and Mr Tudjman has taken an almost communist-like grip on the republic's media, using the republic's press largely as his party's mouthpiece.

Since the elections, Mr Tudjman has overawed the opposition, including the former Communist party, now known as the Party for Democratic Change, and the third-placed Liberals. He continues to refer to Croatia as a "Christian wall against the infidels," a phrase first used against the Ottoman Turks, but now in currency as a slight against the republic's Serbian minority.

Mr Tudjman is a former communist, a former general who fought with Tito's partisans against the Nazis. But his strong Croatian nationalist views led to his imprisonment, twice, by Tito. While his rise to the Presidency of Croatia left the minority Serbs trembling with fear, he himself insists he is a Christian Democrat and likens himself to Mr Bush, Mrs Thatcher and Chancellor Kohl.

Currently protected by federal army tanks, many of the minority Serbs in Croatia say they would flee their homes if the tanks pulled out. Almost half a century has not dulled the memory of the massacres of Serbs by the pro-Hitler *Ustashe* regime during the Second World War.

The Croats, in turn, still refer to their Serbian neighbours with venom as "Chetniks", after the Serbian group that killed Croats in reprisal for the wartime massacres.

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