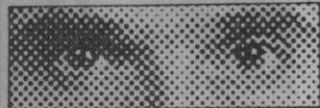


War becomes phoney peace as army withdraws

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Eyewitness

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Ed Vulliamy in
Dvorce, Slovenia

AFTER the cruelties of the phoney war come the surreal ironies of the phoney peace: on a sunny embankment, by the wreck of a federal army tank blown up by Slovenian troopers 48 hours ago, killing all its occupants, a group of Yugoslav soldiers and Slovenian militiamen mingle, chat, joke and exchange cigarettes.

They need to search a wheatfield to remove live ammunition that may have flown from the tank and mines laid by the republican rebels. A militiaman ex-

plains that the Slovenes have forgotten where they put the mines and need to brief the army sappers on their possible whereabouts. There is a political reason for the Slovenes' presence too: they have retaken control of the Croatia-Slovenia border, and the army is now their guest.

The operation is perilously nonchalant. Before the mine detectors arrive, a couple of Yugoslav soldiers saunter across the field with sticks, swishing at the corn and prodding the ground.

Even more bizarre is the fact that this scene takes place at two in the afternoon. All morning the charred remains of the tank had been the star attraction for hundreds of picnicking villagers. Children had been playing alongside the fields now being scoured for explosives.

Only 24 hours earlier this area had been under the army's iron control. Now the army has all but vanished,

literally overnight. The withdrawal from this sensitive border has been thorough, and has surprised and delighted the population on either side of the Croatia-Slovenia line.

The partial, temporary victory has made the Slovenian militiamen a markedly different lot to deal with; under pressure, they were nervy and bossy but accommodating enough; back in authority, they sport a surly, hostile arrogance to foreigners and to their own.

They have been opening up their own barricades. The operation was co-ordinated by the mayor of the nearby town of Brezice, Ivan Tomse, an agreeable personnel manager at a thermal bath resort, member of the Green party — and manifestly uncomfortable with his new paramilitary role.

The system in these little towns is that the mayor has a deputy who is generally in

charge of detailed liaison with the militia.

In Brezice, the office is held by Darko Bukovinski, who wanders into the meeting with Mayor Tomse carrying a pistol and asking to go to Ljubljana. "No!" says Mr Tomse — and they go off to chat in another room. The phoney peace seems more precarious than was thought.

Soon, however, Mr Bukovinski is back, relating with relish the surrounding of the troops at Dobova down the road, the army's air attack on their barricade on the bridge at Catez, the destruction of the local federal air base runway by mortar fire, and their successful excursion to free two Slovenian deserters from army lines.

The mayor slaps his deputy on the forearm as a caution against this talk, and says: "My aim is to establish Brezice and Slovenia without guns." But he adds a rider. "The fighting has stopped,

but this is not the end of the war. Nothing has been signed; we are independent, and that is not up for debate. The pronouncements of our parliament remain in force."

Of the groups of armed civilians who still prowl the back roads of Slovenia and Croatia, the mayor says: "It is for the police to control all these guys that you see; their guns must be caught."

On Wednesday one of two armoured cars immobilised by the militia was started up by a group of youths and driven off up country lanes by a lad in a headband and a rock and roll T-shirt called Dragan. His friend Tomas said they were taking it straight to the militia.

Yesterday, it had not turned up. Mayor Tomse said he had heard something about this, and the vehicle had been "started up by press reporters".

Missing in Brezice: one used armoured car.