

Peasants set to defend right to be Serbian

By Robert Fox in Trpinja, eastern Croatia

THE FLAG with the red star fluttering from the combine harvester in the middle of the barricade proclaims the tiny village of Trpinja to be a piece of Croatia that is forever Serbian — at least as far as its peasant defenders are concerned.

The harvester and two large harrows block the road and no traffic is allowed to pass to the main market town of Osijek guarding the River Drava where it meets the Danube. Only a favoured local few are allowed to pass into the village.

"The British press! BBC! Liars, all liars! We Serbians do not need them. They are wrong about us and our army," shouted the guard commander, a huge roughshaven figure. A sentry in dungarees nods vigorous approval, while a companion sneaks off into the maize field to take up a firing position.

The cohort is anxious for us to be gone, and soon. Closer inspection reveals the reason. After a day of negotiating dozens of checkpoints manned by Croatian, Serbian or Yugoslav federal forces this is the most professional position we have seen.

Behind the agricultural roadblock men with army rifles man trenches, with embrasures reinforced with

sandbags. Fifty yards down the road a second system of firing positions covers this front line, and several hundred yards to the left a heavy machine-gun has been mounted in a farm trailer.

The arc of fire covers the length of the road approaching the village from the east. In the maize and wheat fields, observation posts and trenches are half-hidden. At least some must conceal heavy support weapons such as machine-guns, and possibly mortars; these are professional defences.

There are signs that the Serbian communities, backed by armed militiamen and elements of the predominantly Serbian army, are preparing to defend their turf, especially in mixed enclaves on Croatia's fringes.

This is the new focus of Yugoslavia's crisis; the main act of a drama that some have feared since the death of Tito. Now the choice is between a bloody marriage, which is the Serbian option for continuing the present federation, or a messy divorce, which might eventually fulfill the dream of independence of the Croats and their allies.

"We are the democratic roadblock," boasted the Cro-

atian National Guardsman looking across at the Serbs defending Trpinja. "Those Serbs over there are not democratic."

Democratic or not, the Croatian Home Guard forces in the villages of Borovo Natalje and Borovo Selo seem less prepared and trained than the Serbian sentries eyeing them through binoculars across the fields.

The three villages at Borovo have seen action on two days and nights this week, but it was mostly sounds and a spectacle, rather than fatality in the ripening corn.

On Wednesday, hundreds of rounds and hand grenades were loosed off in Borovo Natalje. Banijska Nova with its neat houses among the blooming roses is now the street of a thousand pockmarks from Kalashnikov bullets, bazookas and bombs.

A patrol of Croatian National Guards eagerly showed broken windows, blasted walls, garden gates and doors which were riddled.

"Look the Chetniks [Serbian guerrillas] have spared the houses where the Serbs used to live," hisses Mikail Horvat. "They only struck the homes of the Catholics" — meaning the Croats.

It seems inevitable that the ethnic divide is coloured by religion and ideology; the Croats believe the Serbs are either Orthodox or communist, whereas they are Catholic and nationalists.

In a garden shed a new patrol of guardsmen had set up an observation post to spy on the predominantly Serbian village of Borovo Selo. "No I don't know any Serbs over there," said Drogan, 25, a former waiter, now professional guardian of his country.

"I only speak to them with this," he added tapping his new machine-gun. "Actually I haven't fired it at all or been in a fight yet," he said.

Most of the weapons appear to be new. Their sights look as if they have not been zeroed, let alone the weapons fired in anger. There is a tragi-comic air in the platoon's deployment. Bullet holes in several of the gates look as if they were from weapons fired by defenders inside, rather than by marauding bands from neighbouring village.

Elsewhere it appeared that a good percentage of the bullet holes were caused by the Croats firing at shadows in the trees and the maize.

The Serbian bandits have

gone, said a young guard. And now they are protected by two federal army tanks prowling the banks of the Danube in the middle distance.

The town of Borovo has a population of 10,000, with another 10,000 in the neighbouring villages of the predominantly Serbian Borovo Selo and Borovo Naselje, which is mostly Croatian.

In the town of Borovo, Tomi Savic, 31, has seen it all, and now he has had enough. He is sending his family to Stuttgart, Germany.

He says the trouble has been brewing for more than 20 years, and it will not disappear quickly.

"There have always been brawls in the bars between Serbs and Croats. Now this is much worse, because there are so many guns about the place.

"I will tell you this, and I think this is why someone like you from northern Europe cannot understand Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia is obsessed with the Second World War.

"We cannot forget what happened then, the division of brother against brother in the war of the partisans and the Ustashi [Croatian fascists]. Germany can now start forgetting the war, but we can't."