

# Return to life on the edge

HALF A DOZEN tanks stand in the shade of the huge, old plane trees in the town park. The windows of the bus station, now closed, are riddled with bullet holes. At the Bridge Café, all the windows are smashed after a shoot-out in which two Croat policemen were killed last week.

At the main police station, dozens of Croatian police sit holed-up, surrounded by the military force of the federal army, which renders them powerless. Fifteen of their colleagues were taken hostage by Serbs, and have not been seen since.

In the early hours of yesterday, there was another explosion — this time, in a tyre depot. There is shooting every night. Life in Glina pretends to go on, but with difficulty. At the hospital, all but 20 of the 115 staff have fled. Those who stayed are all Serbs. But the Serbs, too, suffer from the violence: one elderly woman was shot dead last week. This is life in one not so remarkable Croatian town.

From Steve Crawshaw in Glina

Glina is in the Krajina — literally “the territory on the edge”, which has a large Serbian population. It was once the front line that separated the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires. Now, it is tipped on the edge of disaster, which looms with what seems like sickening inevitability.

A doctor at the hospital — like many others in Glina who did not want his name to be used because of fears of violence — declared: “Everything we learned in the history books is repeating itself. All the garbage of our past is coming to the surface of our lives.”

One indication of just how unpleasant that history has been can be found near the tanks, at an ugly building called the Memorial House. It, too, has been shot up. The house commemorates an event that took place in Glina 50 years ago last month — and which forms part of a grisly past which

the new, independent-minded Croatian government has been eager to ignore. About 1,200 Serbs were locked into the church, which was then burnt down. Somehow, one man survived. The memorial was built on the site where the church once stood.

The Glina killings were just one of a series of atrocities committed by the fascist Ustashe regime, representing an independent Croatia, which slaughtered tens of thousands of Serbs. Rather than loudly condemn Ustashe crimes, Franjo Tudjman's government insists that old history should not be raked over. It is not an approach that lends itself to creating a conciliatory atmosphere. The silence over events of 50 years ago poisons relations between Serbs and Croats today.

Croatia has not yet acknowledged that a public coming to terms with its past would be a

clearer testimony of democratic credentials than the silence about what the Ustashe stood for.

It is in places like Glina that the true tragedy of Yugoslavia lies. With good will on all sides, Slovenia's problems could yet be solved. In Glina, nothing can be done for either side. One Serb, more sceptical than most, declared: “The Communist party destroyed our brains. Now, we try to find our roots.”

The Croatian countryside, especially in the mixed areas of the Krajina and Slavonia in the east of the republic, provides constant reminders of the seething violence which is set to explode further. That violence has been fuelled by nationalist leaders in Zagreb and Belgrade. But their rhetoric fell on fertile ground: festering wounds that have been covered up for four decades are reopening, and will be almost impossible to heal.

Gavran, 26, has a Serbian father and a Croat mother, and feels lost amid the conflict. No compromise is allowed. “Croats tell me I must be a Croat. Serbs tell me I must be a Serb. Here, in Glina, there are Serbian streets and Croat streets. Only one in a million people is like me, and cannot find a side.”

Milan Kovac, the deputy mayor, is a Serb who has what he regards as a simple remedy for Croatia's aspirations to independence: “Croatia can be independent — but without Krajina.” For Croatia, that loss of territory would be as unthinkable as it is for Serbs to accept that Croats might break away, taking Krajina with them.

But many in Glina, Serb or Croat, would agree with Mr Kovac's view of the future. “I think it will be worse. There are so many unsolved problems. Full-scale war could certainly happen here.”

■ **BELGRADE** — Ethnic Albanians in the autonomous province of Kosovo may leave the federation if Slovenia and Croatia secede, Ibrahim Rugova, the leader of the Democratic Alliance of Kosovo Province, the largest opposition party, said yesterday, AFP reports.

