

Slovene mouse escapes with the cheese

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opponents ready for a second round.

The busloads of Serbian mothers from Belgrade who were forced to walk across a minefield to reach their uniformed offspring at the Yugoslav federal army barracks at Vrhnika were accomplices in a propaganda juggling act carried on by both sides.

The Slovenes appealed charitably but patronisingly on radio for clothes for the PoWs. The Serbian media praised the bravery of Serbian motherhood in the face of the aggressor. The mothers scolded jealously from their buses at the shoppers in the relatively prosperous streets of the Slovene capital.

But nothing could hide the Serbian humiliation as Yugoslav tanks were loaded on to Slovene transporters and carted back to their bases while their crews were piled into coaches under the supervision of Slovene police. They could keep their tanks, they could hold on to their guns, but nothing could save their face.

Although it would not admit it, the Slovene territorial defence force has been as surprised as anybody by the ease of its apparent victory over the regular army. In the end, most accept, it came down to morale. Dr Anton Bebler, professor of political science at Ljubljana University and adviser to the government on the psychology of the federal army, is sure the will to fight made the critical difference.

"They know this is our country, not theirs," he said. "If need be, we would have fought them in the streets of Ljubljana until our city was rubble. We know the territory; they do not. We would have fought a guerrilla war, on horseback if we had to, in the hills and from the forests."

It is a serious threat in a forested, mountainous country. Bebler is believed to have been the architect of a "Swiss defence tactic", though he acknowledges with a grin that the Swiss have not been much tested. He does not underestimate the military capability of General Blagoje Adzic, the Belgrade strongman who has threatened to crush Slovenia, but dismisses him as a "tribal primitive", a "Serb from Herzegovina."

By the time of his second air raid, on Tuesday afternoon,



Soldier, go home: a Yugoslav federal army man, tense in a hostile country. They can keep their guns and tanks but nothing can save their face, say the Slovenes

Cesen, the PR man, was already enough of a veteran to stay in his office drinking wine rather than joining his staff in their air-conditioned bunker.

It is not that he has got used to it: "Dear me, no. I wake up every morning with a stone in my stomach. The tension is terrible. Believe me, this will take its toll in years to come.

We will all get ulcers."

Slovenia's atmosphere of Ruritania with a toytown capital has been intensified by the contrast with the suspended threat of violence; on Tito Avenue — soon to be renamed, like many other streets called after communist heroes — the barricades of buses and articulated lorries

guarded by militia contrasts with the flashing neon sign above advertising holidays in Majorca and Fred Perry sportswear.

But Cesen would not like anybody to take him for a softy; the crisis has stiffened his middle-aged, middle-class backbone: "We are organised; we can fight; we will win. We

are not part of the Balkan mess; we are part of Europe."

The government, too, is pushing hard for Slovenia's acceptance as an exception to the quagmire it fears will inevitably develop out of the demise of Yugoslavia.

They are grateful for the support of their former fellow subjects of the Hapsburg em-

pire across the frontier in Austria and northeast Italy, and determined to get recognition and eventual membership of the European Community.

But it is not just the vague promise of an abstract Euro-future that has tempted the Slovenes out of Yugoslavia. There is also a gut reaction

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against an imposed communism that is only a generation old.

Every summer Cesen goes out to help his cousin, Janes Babnik, on his farm outside Ljubljana. Babnik has his own reasons for wanting independence: the government has promised it will restore the land appropriated by the communists after the war.

When the fighting began, Babnik and his wife watched as the federal army helicopters roared up the valley: at tree height: "Then our boys shot a couple down and they stopped flying."

Amid the cautious confidence, however, Lojze Peterle, the mild-mannered environmentalist Christian who last year became Slovenia's first freely elected prime minister, is wary about the diplomatic influence still wielded by Yugoslavia, a state he regards as Serbia in sheep's clothing: "They still have the embassies, the seats at international negotiating tables, whereas we have nothing. It is still very dangerous for us."

But in the current evolving state of European politics, everybody accepts that anything is possible. The Slovene crisis is exciting keen interest in the Soviet breakaway Baltic republics; but so much have things changed that a Lithuanian and a Russian correspondent were heard jointly discussing last week the evils of communist imperialism.

For most Slovenes, in this eye of the hurricane, the greatest fear is that their link with Croatia could turn into the bind of a three-legged race, handicapping their own bid for separation. The Croats' position, with their large Serbian enclaves and complicated border, is far from clear-cut.

There are many Slovenes who would now prefer to sever the link and press home the advantage. The camaraderie of danger has bound the nation closer together than ever. "It is very exciting, you know, despite the danger, even in the air raid. Down there in the shelter, we got to know one another well. I am going to organise a picnic for everyone in September, I hope." The unspoken codicil is that September is a long time away.