Slovene mouse escapes with the cheese

by Peter Millar Ljubljana

WHEN the first air-raid alarm sounded, Boris Cesen, a 51vear-old public relations manager for the Krka pharmaceutical company, made it with his family to the hermetically sealed shelter under their 14-storey apartment block in five minutes flat.

They waited there for two hours, huddled together with 200 others, silently acknowledging the vagary of fate by which the shelter they had been forced to pay for in case of attack by Nato was now their only defence against the communists who had made

them build it. Marko Pecnik, head of local civil defence, shook his head at a world turned upside down. But he showed off with pride the water supplies, sufficient for 10 days, the barometer for measuring outside air pressure, and the underground escape tunnel. The crisis has revived Pecnik's memories of the war to such an extent that he gets up at dawn to listen to the BBC world service, or, as he says, "London calling, in Slovene and Serbo-Croat"

"Of course, we'll have to do something about that," he acknowledged, nodding at the flag of Yugoslavia furled against the wall in a corner. It did not come to the worst. In Ljubljana, still blockaded by mined barricades of buses and trucks reminiscent of the German-Italian invasion of 1941, there is a quiet optimism that - against all expectations they have got away with it; the mouse that roared has escaped with the cheese. Independent Slovenia is a reality awaiting confirmation.

It is far from certain that they are right. The federal government has submitted a series of ultimatums requiring Slovenia to cede control of frontier crossings tonight, to clear the barricades, and to return the territorial defence force to its barracks, none of which the Slovenes have the slightest intention of doing.

The people do not believe politicians from either Belgrade or Brussels, but they do believe the evidence of their own eyes. And the troops who climbed aboard buses and trains for "repatriation to Yugoslavia", cosseted by their parents, did not look like raid, on Tuesday afternoon,

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

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



Soldier, go home: a Yugoslav federal army man, tense in a hostle 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 are not part of the Balkan with the flashing neon sign above advertising holidays in Majorca and Fred Perry sportswear.

anybody to take him for a evitably develop out softy; the crisis has stiffened mise of Yugoslavia. his middle-aged, middle-class backbone: "We are organised; support of their former fellow

mess; we are part of Europe."

The government, too, is pushing hard for Slovenia's acceptance as an exception to But Cesen would not like the quagmire it fears will inevitably develop out of the de-

They are grateful for the we can fight; we will win. We subjects of the Hapsburg em-

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

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

the European Community.

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, Loize 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.