



A Serbian woman stands behind the bullet-riddled windows of the bus station at Glina, south of Zagreb. Federal troops occupy the town, with tanks guarding the border between Serbia and Croatia at Oraz, two miles from Croatian territory

Young men in no rush to join old battle

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Tony Barber finds some signs of hope amid the violence and ethnic hatreds in eastern Croatia

THE last Serbian town before you cross into eastern Croatia is Sid, pronounced *Sheed*. There, last Wednesday, I asked a middle-aged woman about the bloody clashes that had gone on for a week across the border between Croatian militiamen and armed militants of the Serbian minority. "Please write the truth. The Croats are killing our children without mercy," she said.

Near Tovarnik, the village marking the border, there were two Serbian checkpoints. At the second, a policeman pointed to the sign on my car saying *Shtampa* (press) in Serbian Cyrillic script. "I'd take that out if I were you," he said. He meant that the Croats across the frontier, who use the Latin scripts, might not appreciate it.

Once in Croatia, it was clear that tensions had risen dramatically since I had last visited the area six weeks ago. Then, between Tovarnik and Borovo a few miles up the road, there had been only one Croatian checkpoint, manned by uniformed police. Now I was stopped repeatedly, usually by young men in jeans and T-shirts who, perhaps unnerved by the Serbian plates on my car, pointed their Kalashnikovs at me and ordered me out. They were civilians drafted into Croatia's National Guard, the embryonic army of the republic which declared independence on 25 June.

After a conversation by walkie-talkie, one long-haired youth told me to drive behind him to the vil-

lage of Sotin. We took a turning by a maize field that led to farmhouses defended by guardsmen equipped with rifles and field telephones — a Croatian military base. The commanders would not give their full names. One, a policeman in normal life, flashed an identity card with the surname Horvat (which means Croat).

Another, who said his name was Ivan, said: "The Serbs are a brutal mafia. They shoot indiscriminately. If we capture Serbs, we don't kill them. But the Chetniks [Serbian guerrillas] gouge out the eyes and slit the throats of their prisoners." It was a mirror image of the claim made by the Serbian woman in Sid.

The commanders refused to say how many men they had under arms. But Horvat said they had "enough forces to deal with the Serbian bandits". They claimed the Yugoslav army, whose officers are mostly Serbian by nationality, had supplied arms to Serbian irregulars in Croatia.

Borovo is populated mainly by Croats, but just outside the town lies the Serbian village of Borovo Selo. There, in early May, a Serb-Croat gunbattle left 15 people dead. In the past two weeks there have been explosions and fierce exchanges of fire. A waitress in a Borovo cafe remembered my last visit. How are things, I asked. "Worse," she grimaced. "There are problems every day. Two Na-

tional Guardsmen were killed yesterday," said a young man.

The Yugoslav army had completely sealed off Borovo Selo. Using a small telescope I saw the tanks lined up on either side of the road, ready to annihilate any vehicle that dared approach. "You can try to go to the village but we can't guarantee your safety," said the local commander, Tomislav Puzak.

I went for a Turkish coffee and brandy at his headquarters. "We don't want to use our guns," he sighed. "I am not a soldier, I'm a plumber. I have one daughter who is a nurse. The other is studying biology. And here I am with a Kalashnikov. It's not normal."

Ivan Simic, 30, was a roofer who had worked in Germany. "I came back at the start of last year. Now my two brothers are coming back to defend their country. *Serbien — Scheiss.*"

These experiences, in one of Yugoslavia's most ethnically inflamed regions, might suggest a Serb-Croat bloodbath rivalling that of the 1940s is inevitable. Passions seem too high, weapons too easily available. But some evidence suggests otherwise.

Mladen, a Croatian friend, has been called up by the Yugoslav army. Luckily, he is abroad. He will not be coming back. He does not want to serve in the federal army, the Croatian National Guard or anything else.

There are many Mladens in Croatia, Serbia and the other four republics — apolitical men who are horrified at the prospect of losing their lives in a conflict stirred partly by ethnic rivalries they regard as ancient history.

If young Serbs and Croats have heroes, they are Bruce Willis and Michael Douglas, not General Blagoje Adzic, the Serbian chief-of-staff of the Yugoslav army, or Franjo Tudjman, the Croatian President. In pop music, videos

and cars, the younger generation of Yugoslavs has, to some degree, a common language that was denied its parents and grandparents. That may not lessen the desire of, say, a young Croat for independence, but it means there is more reluctance to shed blood than appears at first sight.

Another sign of hope emerged last week when mothers of conscripts besieged government buildings across Yugoslavia demanding that their sons be re-

leased from service. Even in Serbia, opinion is more divided about the value of fighting than is suggested by the strident statements of the republic's communist leaders and blood-thirsty press.

The communist, mainly Serbian, army generals see the crisis in apocalyptic terms: a life or death struggle for Serbia. But even they appear to be divided. Some want to preserve Yugoslavia in its entirety, including Slovenia, even though almost no Serbs live there.

Others emphasise the cause of "Greater Serbia", which means Slovenia could leave but Serbia would assert its control over ethnic Serbs in other republics, especially Croatia and Bosnia.

If the generals maintain their grip on federal policy, the ultimate nightmare of a Serb-Croat war may still happen. But an equal danger is that hostilities will degenerate into scrappy conflicts short of full-scale war in which, village by village, the death toll mounts by a few dozen every month and neither side is shocked enough to call a halt.