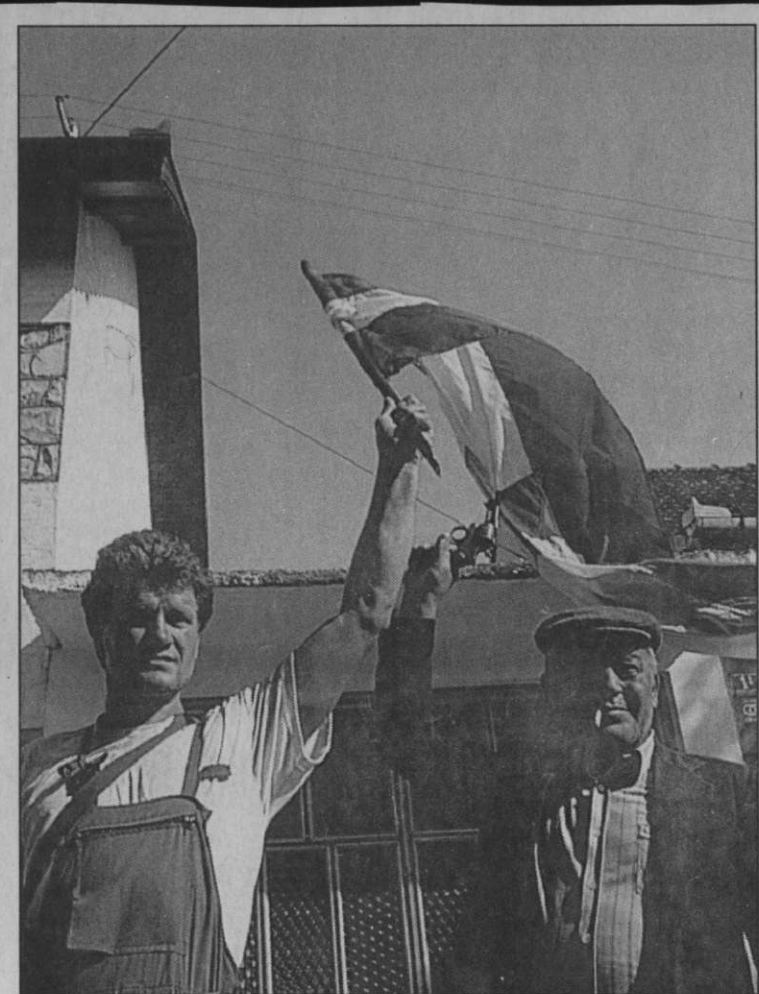




The advance: Croatian national guardsmen move into Tenja across neatly-kept gardens to flush out Serbian guerrillas



The enemy: armed Serbs wave their own flag in defiance

IT STARTED as a typical summer's day in Osijek, a prosperous market town in eastern Croatia on the banks of the gently meandering Drava river. In the main street a few of the less excitable locals sat beneath the umbrellas of the cafés with their cold drinks and giant ice cream cocktails. They watched, appalled but fascinated, as the Croatian National Guard were taunted by the enemy.

The guardsmen squatted on the backs of theatrically camouflaged lorries and slowly swivelled their ancient heavy machine-guns as fighters from the Yugoslav air force screamed back and forth, so low that it seemed they would slice off the Croatian national flag fluttering from the roof of the town hall.

Men with grim, determined faces shouted, jumped into cars and screeched off, leaving the air heavy with the smell of burning rubber. Then there was a thump as a shell crashed into a housing estate nearby. More men raced off to investigate and returned, a few minutes later, to report that a missile of some description from the federal army had hit an apartment, though, miraculously, no one had been injured. Then it was rumoured, wrongly, that the army tanks which were positioned around the town in the cornfields were advancing. More men roared off to search for exact details.

It turned out that the big event was taking place just outside the town in the village of Tenja, till now a peaceful community of 3,500 Croats and 4,500 Serbs. Here, several hundred Croatian militia, in smart uniforms and armed with a formidable array of rocket-propelled grenades and mortars were attempting – and failing – to take the Serbian-held part of the village.

They were confronted by several hundred Serbs, fierce-looking men in T-shirts and overalls. And, because nothing is ever clear-cut in this part of Croatia, where the ethnic map is a

The battle for a divided village

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On one bloody summer's morning the full horror of Croatia's battle for independence descended on the tiny village of Tenja. It was witnessed by **Simon Freeman** and photographer **Paul Lowe**

crazy jigsaw of Croats, Serbs, Hungarians and Czechs, there was also the federal army. They rolled into Tenja with tanks and armoured personnel carriers at midday, ostensibly to separate the two sides but, in fact, to ensure that the Serbs were not beaten.

The fighting lasted through the afternoon until, with both sides exhausted, a ceasefire was declared. During the ceasefire, the Serbs were busily congratulating themselves on fending off the Croats. One, a sweaty, chubby little man in a Hawaiian shirt and open sandals, who said that his name was Miro, appeared to exert an ill-defined authority over the rag-bag army. As he inspected his guard posts, encouraging his unshaven, exhausted men, he pointed out to me how each Croat had been killed.

"We expect another attack. This is no problem. See what we can do," he said, picking up a blood-stained Croat guardsman's hat. The final casualty toll, as far as it was possible to establish amid such a blitz of propaganda

from all sides, was four Croat militia or guardsmen dead and another 27 injured. Four Croat civilians also died, although how that happened, if it did, was uncertain. The Serbs also lost men but refused to discuss how many.

It had been brutal and savage, a house-to-house battle without mercy. Ambulances dispatched by the Croats were attacked by Serbs, perhaps because they feared the Croats were shipping in reinforcements. A Croat unit was isolated, caught between the army and the Serbs, and retreated into a house. It is not known if they tried to surrender but it is indisputable that the army did nothing to help save them and that they were blown apart, needlessly, by the Serbs. Next day, the body of a guardsman was still lying, a mass of black, blood and flies, in front of the house. He was holding a grenade and must have leapt out from cover in a desperate attempt to drive the Serbs away. The handful of outside observers who were in the village at the height of

the fighting, described a surreal, gruesome nightmare of noise and screams.

Animals – mainly pigs and dozens of dogs – which had been abandoned by their owners were running amok, squealing with fear at the clack-clack of machine guns and explosions.

A Norwegian journalist was shocked by the depth of hatred on display: "They are complete fanatics. It is incredible to see such things in what is supposed to be Europe. It is more like Lebanon."

This type of encounter, in which no prisoners are taken and no rules of combat are observed, now seems to be the inevitable fate for this area of Croatia. It is hard to see how the escalating violence can be halted. The ethnic hatreds and fears are so embedded by history – and so unscrupulously exploited by politicians – that only a miracle will prevent more, and bloodier, versions of the battle for Tenja between the republic's 600,000 Serbs and the majority Croats.

And the real truth about an incident

such as this will never come out. Deciding who was to blame for the battle in Tenja is impossible. Several days earlier the authorities in Osijek told the villagers to leave their homes because the militia and the National Guard were expected to attack soon to wipe out the Serbian extremists, the Chetniks, who had infiltrated recently by crossing the Danube from Serbia.

Most of the Croats fled, as did the Serbian women and children. Then the Croats attacked. That much is plain.

But it is harder to be sure whether the Serbian fighters who were left were locals, as they insisted when I spoke to them after the battle, or, as the Croats argue, whether they had come from Serbia to provoke violence.

One Serbian certainly lived in Tenja, unless he was also an accomplished actor. He was crying as he pointed to his house, now just a blackened shell, and said that he had lost everything.

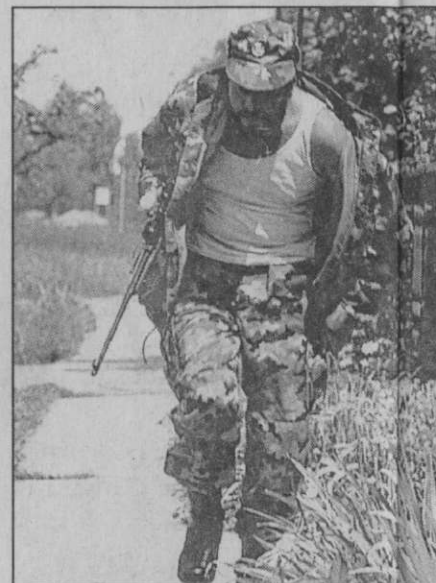
But, on the other hand, there was also evidence of manipulation by Belgrade in the shape of two men who said that they were journalists, an explanation that sat uneasily with their obvious grasp of the fundamentals of urban warfare. After the battle the accusations flew across the barricades which separated the two sides. The Serbs talked of the Second World War and of the massacres of their people by the Ustashi fascists and swore that they would never agree to be part of an independent Croatia.

A few hours later a Croatian militia car was hit by a rocket – fired, so the Croats claimed, by the federal army. One man was killed and three were injured. The Tenja ceasefire looked as if it must, soon, crack.

The battle for Slovenia last week, which claimed around 50 lives, was short, disciplined and, by the standards of warfare, civilised. What is already happening, every day, on the rolling plains and in the villages of eastern Croatia, is horribly different.



The action: Croatian troops shelter behind a wall from Serbian snipers



The fear: a Croat dashes for cover



The wounded: Red Cross workers aid casualties during a ceasefire