

AS the threat of imminent civil war in Yugoslavia recedes, the eyes of the world turn to other trouble spots.

But beneath an uneasy peace in the Balkans, punctuated by brief but vicious skirmishes, passions still run high. The breakaway republics and Federal Army may have settled temporarily for jaw, jaw and not war, war but old wounds which have

festered for a generation have been re-opened.

Yesterday, two men were killed in an eight-hour gun battle in the eastern Croatian city of Osijek after the defence forces surrounded a house in a predominantly Serbian suburb. The renewed fighting, with Serb set against Croat, threatens the fragile European Community peace plan. But it is nothing new. Two

words — Chetnik and Ustashe — demonstrate the depth of the crisis. The words should have disappeared from the language after 1945 when the Chetniks — militant Serbian nationalists — and the Ustashe (who governed a briefly independent Croatia as Nazi puppets) were meant to have buried their differences. Together they were to rebuild a united land of the southern Slavs — which is what the name Yugoslavia

literally means — from the remnants of the Turkish Ottoman Empire (Serbia) and the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Croatia and Slovenia).

The unifying force was that both Serbs and Croats are Slavs.

Under Marshal Tito, nationalities were spread around so that no single people could dominate and, to an extent, it worked. People

inter-married and Communist atheism dispensed with the religious divide between Orthodox Serbs and Catholic Croats.

But both Tito and Communism are now dead, and boiling over to fill the void are the old, simmering enmities.

For nearly 50 years, they have been nurtured so diligently that they are now part of the genetic make-up of the Serbs and Croats.



The land torn by hate where time has healed nothing

THE SCENE in the market square in Borovo is straight from a thousand coffee table books extolling the simple, unspoiled charm of the Balkans.

Withered old ladies in black sit gossiping under shady fruit trees. Fat, swarthy men smoking filthy cigarettes noisily put the world to rights at a cafe which is little more than a hole in the wall.

How false it all is in this buried corner of north-eastern Croatia.

Just out of sight down a country lane flanked by ripe cornfields is a barricade, manned by the Croatian National Guard, dividing predominantly Croatian Borovo Naselje from predominantly Serbian Borovo Selo.

Only 300 metres away, the Serbian Territorial Defence Forces have closed off Borovo Selo to all outsiders. People like 30-year-old Tomislav Sobor and 24-year old Jana Krajevic don't cross from one to the other any more.

Tomislav is Croatian and has lived in Borovo all his life with Serbian neighbours. 'Both witnesses at my wedding were Serbian friends. Now their friends won't serve my wife in their shop,' he says.

Anger

'I have worked with Serbs in the rubber factory here for years. But for the last few months, we don't talk, because if we talk we fight. I don't like feeling this constant anger towards Serbs, but I'm driven to it. Isn't it stupid?'

On the other side of the divide, Serbian Jana, a mother-of-two, told me: 'My own mother is Croatian but my aunt — her sister — doesn't speak to her now because she married a Serb, my father.'

'I can't go to Croat shops because they abuse me. They call me a Chetnik and they might tell the Ustashe where I live. It's awful, isn't it?'

Tomislav adds: 'Fathers tell their sons about the war and they teach them to hate. It doesn't matter that both sides did terrible things to each other. Everyone knows that more Yugoslavs were killed by their own countrymen than by the Nazis or the Allies.'

'In your country, you are now friends with Germany — your former enemy — despite being two nations. In this country, between Serbs and Croats, time has healed nothing. We are obsessed with the war.'

Humble

It would be too easy to dismiss Tomislav as a humble factory worker with narrow horizons. Listen to Sasha Obrovic, a Serb whose family originates from the Borovo area of Croatia, talking about his Croat neighbours:

'They are monsters. They come in the night and slit your throat just because you are Serbian. They shoot you dead in the street because you are Serbian. They are fascist savages. The stupidity of Serbians is that we have always forgiven them and let them be part of our country.'

Sasha is highly-educated, a geology graduate from a cultured family. He is the son of a top nuclear fuels expert. At 28, he is also from the post-war generation, but he spits his



Ethnic flashpoint... Croatian militia men exchange fire with Serbian nationalists in the city of Osijek yesterday.

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From ANNA PUKAS in Borovo

words out with such hatred you realise that the venom courses through his veins.

How much more dangerous this venom is in simpler folk from villages like Borovo with an overexposure to the nastier aspects of Western culture and a thriving trade in smuggled weaponry. That's when you get the motley crew of would-be Ramboes who now man the barricades between the two halves of Borovo.

Strutting

On one hand you have Ivan Simic, a 32-year-old Croat recently returned from 20 years in Germany 'to defend my country', strutting around in combat fatigues telling people where they can and cannot go.

On the other, you have the vicious

Serbian thug wearing a belt of hand-grenades who stopped an Australian journalist coming from Zagreb, found some insignia of independent Croatia which the newsman had forgotten to throw away, and made him stand in the village square in the crucifix position for two hours while urging the local Serbs to spit at him.

In both there is an acute sense of unreality. They are over-armed and under-trained. They have seen the films, now they are acting out the script.

Together they are turning the Serbo-Croatian border into the Beirut of Europe — and there is no-one to stop them.

Not the Federal leadership of Yugoslavia, which has no credibility and no control over anyone anymore, and has admitted as much.

Not the leaders of either Serbia or Croatia whose own pathological nationalism and extreme political inexperience makes them mentally out of touch.

And not even the Yugoslav National Army, the sole federal organ in Yugoslavia still functioning as a cohesive force. Not only is it numerically dominated by Serbs but its chief-of-staff, the Serbian General Blagoje Adzic is blinded by his own hatred of Croats, who slaughtered 35 members of his family before his eyes in the War.

One can easily understand the general's disposition towards Croats, but should such a man be commander of a multi-ethnic army?

The Yugoslavs are keen on the intervention of the European Community to solve their crisis. But three times European peace brokers have come to the country, and three times they have been made to look fools.

Tomislav, Sasha and Jana all drew parallels between Yugoslavia and Britain. 'You have Northern Ireland. You should understand,' they all said.

But it's not the same. Ulster was never run by a bunch of freelance renegades armed to the teeth, not even in the early days of the Troubles.

As night falls in Borovo, the idyllic picture dissolves with the setting sun.

The gossiping old ladies are actually waiting for a bus to take them to the relative safety of the city for the night. They aren't live in their houses any more, they cry, flapping their arms at the very idea. They only come back for a couple of hours to feed their pigs.

The men at the cafe are heading indoors to batten down the shutters against another probable night of shooting and grenade-throwing. They don't want to be outdoors where the fields and orchards hide snipers, probably men who were once their workmates, and whose sons once played football with their sons.

Escape

By the time you read this, Tomislav and Jana will each have left his half of the village. Tomislav is going to relatives in Germany, and Jana will have tramped across farmland with her two little girls to take a secret night ferry across the Danube to a refugee centre in Serbia, for Serbs fleeing their enclaves in Croatia.

Both told me: 'I can't live another day like this. I have to escape.' Both say they don't know if they'll ever be back. They don't really have any faith in peace plans devised by sophisticated Westerners.

As Tomislav said: 'They never ended the last war between Serbs and Croats. Why should they stop a new one breaking out?'