

'They'll kill us all one day. I'm so afraid'

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Steve Crawshaw witnesses a fierce battle in Osijek, Croatia, that reveals how bloody a war between Serbs and Croats would be

IVICA REPUSIC, a Croat policeman known to his friends as "the Hulk", lay in a pool of blood in the middle of a dusty road, with two bullets in the head. Not long after, Zivko Peulic, a Serb, who had killed him, also lay horribly curled inside the burnt-out, machine-gunned ruins of his house, on the outskirts of the university town of Osijek. It was just another day in the grisly war which is growing daily in Yugoslavia, and which threatens to turn into a conflagration on a staggering scale.

In Osijek, European Community agreements seem an exotic irrelevance, as the country's conflict gains a momentum not seen since the Second World War, when ethnic hatred accounted for hundreds of thousands of deaths. Yugoslavia has slipped out of the headlines. But the war here has not ended — it has scarcely begun.

Yesterday was the first time the conflict had spread to Osijek, the provincial capital of Slavonia, eastern Croatia, where Serbs and Croats are mixed. The intensity of the battle for that one house was a reminder of just how bloody a Serb-Croat war may prove.

The Croats claimed that the house, near the town's football stadium, was occupied by a Serb "terrorist gang" of six or seven. The Croats said they had received a tip-off that the occupants were preparing an attack by the Chetniks, the Serb extreme nationalists. By the time we arrived at 6.30am, the gunfire and explosions, which had woken us at intervals throughout the night, had continued for almost five hours. But Croatian calls for the "Chetnik" surrender were met only with answering gunfire.

The owner of the house next door, too frightened to give her name, was in tears. "Everyone ran away. But I couldn't run fast enough. They'll kill us all one day. I'm so afraid."

Again and again, automatic fire rang out. Grenades and molotov cocktails were hurled into the house, which a few minutes later went up in a great swirl of black and orange flames. Even then, the occupants were determined not to surrender. Ivica Repusic died when he thought the fight was almost over. Instead, the occupants wanted to surrender only to the army — which, for the Croats, seemed tantamount to letting the gunmen walk free, as the army's "peacekeeping" role has often been clearly pro-Serb.

By now, there were several dozen armed Croat police and special forces surrounding the house and its "Chetnik gang". No force was too strong. Next to attack was an armoured personnel carrier, which lumbered up the road, then turned its heavy ma-



chine-gun fire on the remains of the house. The APC then moved in as an improvised bulldozer, piling up the rubble of the house.

Finally, at noon, just as it seemed that nobody inside could still be alive, a voice was heard insisting there would be "no surrender". Yet more machine-gun fire, and then complete silence.

But, as the Croat forces moved in, there was no sign of the "gang". There was just Zivko Peulic, dead, with his Kalashnikov — and his mother, Liubica, severely wounded. Croats talked of a basement where the rest of the gang had hidden, but by last night no such hideout had been found.

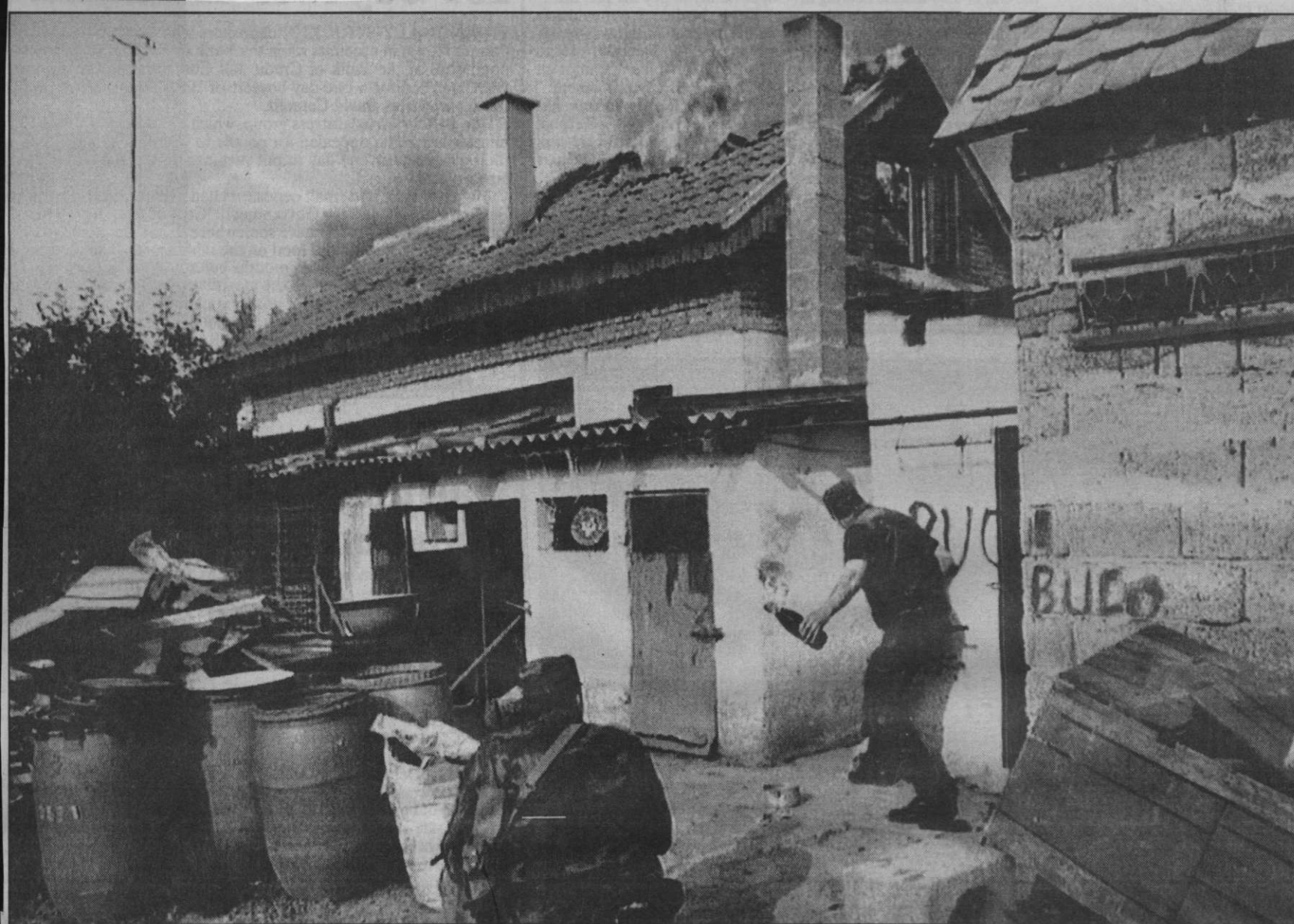
Thus, the provisional scorecard yesterday was "only" two. But the violence is rising daily. Last week, the town of Borovo exploded in renewed violence, with a gun battle between Croat security forces and Serbs. There was a pitched battle at the weekend in the village of Tenja, where it is thought seven people died. The village of Celje is a burnt-out shell, a no-go area surrounded by the army.

The casualty figures in Croatia are greater than those in the short war launched by the Yugoslav army against Slovenia. Croat officials say around 90 have died on the Croat side in the last three months. But, most alarmingly, every death only hardens the resolve of both sides. Serbia is likely to portray yesterday's events as a deliberate attempt by Croatia to instil terror in the Serb population by destroying Serbian homes. Croatia in turn sees every clash with gunmen as proof that the Serbs are — to use the phrase that is heard so often — "animals".

Slobodan Milosevic, the nationalist Serbian President, has warned of his country being under threat, and has in effect threatened to annexe areas of Croatia where Serbs are "in danger". The Croat leader, Franjo Tudjman, has so far shown almost equally little desire for compromise.

For Suzana Calosevic, the slight, soft-spoken doctor who came to certify Repusic as dead, it was the fourth time she had carried out such a duty in recent days. "It is terrible. But I think it will be worse. Now, I am losing all hope."

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Croats surrounding the house in Osijek yesterday that they claimed had been occupied by a Serb 'terrorist gang'. One man died in the attack Photograph: David Rose