

Croats look for sweet revenge

OBSERVER 14/7/91

Mark Frankland in Zagreb watches as thoughts turn to casting off 'Balkan barbarism'.

'THEIR tanks may be able to enter Zagreb, but when they've no more gas the crews will have to pop out, and then it's man-to-man. They can make a Beirut out of our city, but they can never win.'

Such fighting talk is more of an indication of the Croatian mood than serious military forecast, though it did come from a deputy Defence Minister. Croatia's plan for holding off the Serbs and the Yugoslav army — in the Zagreb propaganda the two are indistinguishable — is rather different.

The first step, soon to be achieved, is the deployment of European Community 'monitors' in Croatia. Zagreb expects four teams of five members each, enough, it is calculated, to ensure the Yugoslav army returns to barracks and stays there.

There were 40,000 Yugoslav troops in Croatia before the trouble began. Today there are more and they have swung into blocking positions around many Serbian communities. Once rid of the army, Croatian police will go in and 'finish off the Serb extremists', estimated here to number little more than 2,000, including Serbs from outside Croatia. Freed of their bad example, ordinary Serbs, this optimistic argument runs, will accept the new Croatia.

And if the Yugoslav army does not withdraw, and the conflict widens? 'I don't think,' says one of Croatia's President Franjo Tudjman's advisers, 'that Europe would wait 20 years till Croatia became a new Lebanon. If Western troops can be sent to Kuwait, why not to the heart of Europe? I don't exclude a European military intervention, and we would even welcome it.'

Convinced that a profound wrong has been done their country, Croatia's leaders see nothing odd in expecting Europe to support it, and even fight alongside it. A European military intervention, in Croat eyes, could only be directed against the more numerous Serbs and Yugoslav army.

But there is more to Croatia than injured innocence. When President Tudjman met the European Community troika in Brioni a week ago he tried to show them a map of the



'Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori': Croat national guardsmen race into position under fire during skirmishes around Bovora./Photograph by David Stewart-Smith.

neighbouring Yugoslav republic of Bosnia, only to be told to put it back in his briefcase. The European foreign ministers said redrawing the Yugoslav map was not their business.

Croatia disagrees. Bosnia is a miniature Yugoslavia: 40 per cent Muslim, but with important Serb and Croat communities. Most Bosnian Croats live next to the thin strip of Croatia's Dalmatian coast. Independent Croatia would be strengthened by their incorporation, and indeed they are already organised in Tudjman's party, the Croatian Democratic Community.

The president's advisers explain that Bosnian leaders suffered from the 'illusion' that they could survive 'on the basis of the sovereignty of their citizens'. Foolish Bosnia. For Croatia, as for Serbia, nations are the only rightful heirs to the ruins of Yugoslavia. If Zagreb has its way, a rump Muslim state of Bosnia will become a buffer between Croats and Serbs. That this

could be achieved only by large-scale transfer of populations seems of little concern.

If Bosnia's Croats are to rejoin their independent fatherland, why should Croatia's Serbs not return to Belgrade's care? In Zagreb, that is a madman's question. 'The Serbs must accept Croatia as their own country,' explained a young woman lawyer. 'Just as the children of US immigrants accept America as theirs.'

A peppery Roman Catholic priest offered an even more curious comparison. 'When a new power comes, you obey it or leave, as happened to the British settlers when Kenya and Rhodesia became independent.' Croats, like Serbs, are convinced they have suffered worse than anyone else in Communist Yugoslavia. Deep in self-pity and self-admiration (though no more so than the Serbs) they have little energy to imagine the feelings of others.

Typically, the Croatian Catholic church sees nothing

odd in the front page of the June issue of its youth monthly, *Us*, which has a photograph of smiling Croat soldiers and the words '*dulce et decorum est pro patria mori!*' (it is a sweet and fitting thing to die for one's country). The church, too, is in the business of nation-building, and west Europeans who express surprise are pounced upon for selfishly denying others what they achieved long ago themselves.

The church blames Serbian orthodoxy for the almost total lack of communication between them. 'We try sin-



cerely,' insists the peppery priest, 'but we find no response. They always come to us as accusers.'

The accusations concern the wartime Croat fascist state of Ante Pavelic, which on occasions offered Orthodox Serbs the choice of conversion or death. Accusations are the last thing Croats are ready to accept from Serbs, for as the woman lawyer explained, 'we are not on the same level'. A government member takes a foreign visitor on to a balcony to show the grand sweep of buildings that an ancestor built during Croatia's last years in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Hapsburgs are heroes again; saviours who might have kept Croatia from entrapment in 'Balkan barbarity'.

Those Croats who are uneasy about their government's tactics do not question that Serbia's Slobodan Milosevic is the prime troublemaker. But they argue that the Croatian nationalism he triggered is making its own

mistakes. Tudjman is cautious, certainly no crypto-fascist (like his Prime Minister he was a Tito partisan) 'but he loses control of himself when he talks of Croatia's 1,000-year nationhood'.

His government, a critical Croat argued, 'has not been sensitive to the fears of the Serb minority. Serbs did suffer a tragedy in wartime Croatia. And many who suffered are still alive. If you create an independent Croatia you must show from the start that it is a real democracy and not anti-Serbian.'

Tudjman nevertheless failed to visit a single Serbian town. He allowed Zagreb's 'Victims of Fascism Square' to be renamed the 'Square of Croatian Kings', although that was bound to unsettle Serbs. When Croat MPs made life impossible for their Serbian vice-president, Tudjman did not help him or dissuade him from resigning.

And while the President may be cautious, others are not. 'I took a taxi the other

night,' said a woman who works for the government, 'and the driver said he wanted to kill all Serbs. "Not all?" I said. "Yes, all," he answered, and I got scared he might even think to kill me too.'

Maps of Greater Croatia bearing a photo of Pavelic in fascist uniform are on sale each evening in Zagreb's main square. It is not easy to keep Croatian territorials in the countryside, armed with guns and unaccustomed power, under perfect control. Croatia has a clear agenda for next month's talks under EC auspices. They can only be between 'sovereign republics' (some, *pace* Bosnia, more sovereign than others), for Yugoslavia is a 'phantom state', its government serving no purpose beyond 'technical support'. The collective presidency's only role is to keep the army in barracks.

'If the talks fail we won't be guilty,' announced one of the president's men. 'And Europe will then have the moral obligation to help us.'