

The Tanks of July

Yugoslavia's Army pulls back in Slovenia, but its fight for Croatia could unleash a 'bloody mess'

Yugoslavia took one step back from disaster last week, and still seemed poised for two steps forward. A momentary calm settled on the breakaway Republic of Slovenia after local militiamen armed with shoulder-fired missiles held off government tanks and MiGs. A cease-fire brokered by European leaders took hold, and Slovenia sent home more than 2,300 government prisoners captured during the battle for control of its border crossings into Austria, Italy and Hungary. But tension was rising in the neighboring Republic of Croatia, which also seeks to secede. If history is any guide, civil strife there could make Slovenia look like a sideshow. Said a senior U.S. official in Washington: "I'm afraid we're in for a bloody mess."

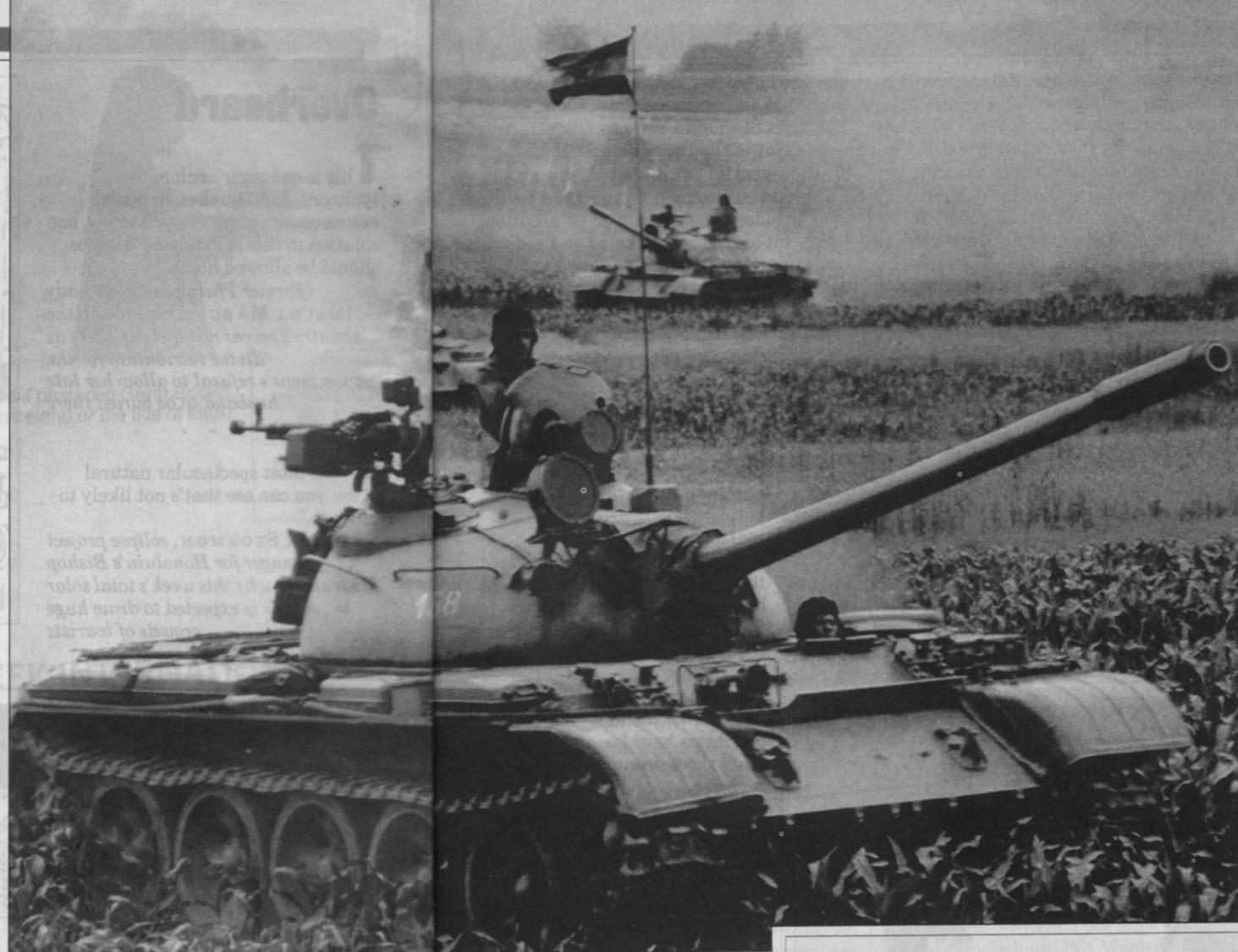
As always in this jerry-built confederation, each outbreak only masked a deeper conflict. Slovenia and Croatia are Western-oriented republics, moved to declarations of sovereignty by the changes sweeping Eastern Europe in the last two years. Opposing them is the powerful Serbian Republic, one of the region's last bastions of orthodox communism, and the Yugoslav People's Army with its Serbian-dominated senior-officer corps. The confrontation is at once ideological and ethnic: a combustible mix fed by centuries of grudges and feuds, including a full-scale civil war that took place under the umbrella of World War II.

Now the future hinges on the generals, for whom Yugoslav unity is virtually an article of faith. And last week the central government seemed powerless to restrain them. It was without a commander in chief for seven weeks until international pressure forced Serbia to let Stipe Mesic, a Croat, take his turn as head of the eight-member federal presidency, effectively controlled by the Serbs. Mesic promised that "the Army will remain in its barracks." It was a pledge of doubtful value.

Army Chief of Staff Gen. Blagoje Adzic, a Serb whose family was killed by Croat militiamen during World War II, made plain his intent to ignore civilian control. "Depoliticized and confined to barracks, the Army would lose its soul and its popular spirit," he said.

Tank deployment: Even as Mesic struggled to put together a cease-fire in Slovenia, the generals were preparing for the next battle. In a three-pronged pincer movement, they deployed 180 additional tanks and armored personnel carriers in Croatia. It is a volatile landscape. Croatia's substantial Serbian minority opposes independence bitterly. Dozens of people have been killed since May in clashes between Serbian guerrillas and Croatian police, at least as many as have died in Slovenian fighting. The tank deployment seemed to be a crude reminder of the Army's pro-Serbian tilt. And in the Serbian capital of Belgrade, the republic's volatile President Slobodan Milosevic warned Serbs to prepare for war and "the defense of their country."

The conflict in Croatia has intensified since the June 25 declaration of independence. In Zagreb last week, tanks rolled against protesters who had barricaded an army barracks. They crushed cars and burst through barriers, some flaming from Molotov cocktails thrown by protesters. At least one man was killed. Three more were killed when troops fired on a crowd that pelted them with rocks as they returned to their barracks. Croats claim it is all part of an Army strategy for "creeping occupation" of their territory. "The Serbian generals have exploited us for 30



years!" screamed one elderly man during a demonstration in Zagreb.

In Slovenia, government officials claim to have intercepted a devious Army plan for the creation of a greater Serbia. Called Entrenchment '91, the plan purportedly calls for Serbian nationalists, known as Chetniks, to provoke clashes with the Croatian police, giving the federal Army an excuse to move in and occupy Serb enclaves. Western diplomats say Entrenchment '91 may not be just another Balkan rumor. Last week a fight between Chetniks and police left 30 dead in Borovo, on the Croatian side of the Danube, in the bloodiest single ethnic battle yet. Following similar outbreaks, the Army has occupied more than a dozen towns along Croatia's southern and eastern borders in the last six months. Arcing from Knin in the west to Vukovar in the east, these towns stretch across the Serbian region of Croatia. "These are effectively the frontiers of a greater Serbia," said a Western diplomat in Zagreb. "It's a blatant land grab."

All-out war: Croatia is the real trigger to an all-out war in Yugoslavia. Its cultural divisions with Serbia are deep. Before 1918, when Serbia gained dominance within the new Yugoslav state, Croatia was ruled by Austria's Hapsburg dynasty; Serbia had been part of the Ottoman Empire. During World War II, a fascist puppet government in Croatia slaughtered some 350,000 Serbs. After the Nazi defeat, Serbian Partisans murdered 100,000 Croatian prisoners of war. A separatist Croatian government

elected last year has restored some of the symbols of the fascist Ustashi regime and attempted to "purify" the language. It has forced ethnic Serbian policemen to sign loyalty oaths. At the same time, the 600,000 ethnic Serbs, 12 percent of the republic's population, are trying to create their own "autonomous province of Krajina" inside Croatia but allied with Serbia. The Croatian defense force reportedly has distributed automatic weapons to civilians in the border regions. Many Serbian villages have stockpiled ammunition, much of it provided by Belgrade.

Now the fight threatens to spread still further. Austria sent troops to its border after Yugoslav jets, on bombing runs against Slovenia, strayed into its territory. Up to now the Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina, southeast of Croatia, has been quiet. But last week Serbs in Bosnia declared themselves part of Krajina—which could inflame the region's large Croatian population. Farther south, in the province of Ko-

A Prelude to the Next Battle?



Troops 'running amok': Tanks on the move, Croatian casualty of an encounter with federal forces

PETER TURNLEY FOR NEWSWEEK (TOP); JASMIN KPRAN—GAMMA-LIAISON