



Ca' Foscari
University
of Venice

Master's Degree programme
In
Comparative International Relations
"D.M. 270/2004"

Final Thesis

Wolves of Belgrade
Russian combatants in the Bosnian War

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Matriculation Number 882923

Academic Year

2021 / 2022

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Abstract

Tra il novembre 1992 e l'ottobre 1995 circa 700 combattenti russi hanno preso parte alla guerra in Bosnia ed Erzegovina combattendo al fianco delle truppe dell'esercito della Repubblica Serba di Bosnia.

Questa tesi mira ad analizzare i diversi aspetti dell'impegno di questo gruppo di stranieri nel conflitto. Viene analizzato il loro coinvolgimento operativo, cioè l'impatto diretto che hanno avuto sul campo, cercando di risalire ai teatri di battaglia dove sono stati impiegati, alle operazioni a cui hanno partecipato e all'influenza che hanno avuto sull'andamento della guerra. In secondo luogo, si cerca di indagare il tipo di supporto politico e ideologico che è stato dato a questi combattenti da parte di gruppi e partiti politici della Federazione Russa e, in particolare, se e in quale misura la politica russa sia stata coinvolta nel loro reclutamento nel e nel supporto nella guerra in Bosnia. Vengono inoltre analizzate le motivazioni personali che hanno portato questi uomini a combattere in una guerra lontana e per un paese diverso dal loro. Successivamente si prendono in esame le pratiche commemorative e celebrative messe in atto in Repubblica Serba di Bosnia e in Repubblica di Serbia per ricordare e onorare il coinvolgimento di questi combattenti russi nella guerra in Bosnia ed Erzegovina. Si evidenzia inoltre come questi combattenti e le pratiche commemorative dedicate al loro impiego siano oggi legati a istituzioni e organizzazioni delle repubbliche secessioniste ucraine di Donetsk e Lugansk.

Questo lavoro vuole essere il primo studio specifico in lingua inglese sul coinvolgimento di combattenti russi nella guerra in Bosnia ed Erzegovina, partendo dagli studi in lingua bosniaca ed inglese che invece hanno toccato solo marginalmente il fenomeno.

A questo scopo è stata svolta una ricerca sul campo in Bosnia ed Erzegovina e nella Repubblica di Serbia della durata di cinque mesi, nel corso della quale è stato possibile accedere a diverse risorse primarie inedite. La ricerca in Bosnia si è svolta principalmente a Sarajevo, dove è stato possibile consultare l'"Archivio dell'Istituto per le indagini sui crimini contro l'umanità e il diritto internazionale a Sarajevo" (Arhiv institutazaistrazivanje zlocinaprotiv covjecnosti i medjunarodnog prava u Sarajevu)

dell'Università di Sarajevo (UNSA) e l'archivio della "Biblioteca nazionale e universitaria della Bosnia-Erzegovina" (Nacionalna i univerzitetska biblioteka Bosne i Hercegovine). In questo contesto si è potuta sviluppare ulteriormente la tesi grazie al confronto con colleghi e professori dell'Università di Sarajevo e dell'Istituto per le indagini sui crimini contro l'umanità e il diritto internazionale a Sarajevo. È stato inoltre intervistato Semir Mujkic, editore capo della sezione bosniaca del Balkan Investigative Report Network, una rete di organizzazioni non governative che promuovono la libertà di parola e i diritti umani nell'Europa sud-orientale e che rappresenta la fonte di notizie in inglese più attendibile e indipendente nei Balcani occidentali.

La ricerca è stata svolta anche nelle città di Višegrad e di Belgrado, dove è stata raccolta documentazione iconografica del processo commemorativo dedicato ai combattenti russi in Bosnia ed Erzegovina. In queste città si sono analizzate targhe, monumenti, cippi funerari e icone sacre dedicate a loro.

Oltre alla ricerca sul campo è stata svolta una ricerca online, per raccogliere il maggior numero possibile di testimonianze giornalistiche, di fonti primarie collegate alla United Nations' International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia e testimonianze dirette dei combattenti russi relative al loro intervento in Bosnia ed Erzegovina.

In questa tesi verrà quindi analizzata la presenza sul campo dei combattenti russi, cercando di offrire una panoramica più completa possibile sul loro coinvolgimento, sulle motivazioni che li hanno spinti a prendere parte a questo conflitto, sul supporto politico ricevuto e sulle celebrazioni e commemorazioni relative al loro intervento. Quest'ultimo punto, nello specifico, vuole essere un modo per sottolineare come il loro impiego nella guerra in Bosnia ed Erzegovina non sia un fenomeno circoscritto al passato, ma continui invece ad avere echi e ripercussioni considerevoli anche nella situazione attuale: diversi ex combattenti russi che hanno preso parte al conflitto in Bosnia ed Erzegovina, fanno oggi parte delle istituzioni delle repubbliche separatiste Ucraine del Donbass, oppure di organizzazioni ad esse strettamente legate. Con questa tesi si cerca anche di sottolineare come l'estrema varietà delle motivazioni che hanno spinto cittadini russi a combattere volontariamente in Bosnia siano estremamente variegata dal punto di vista sociologico, psicologico e antropologico: problemi con la legge, necessità economiche, puro ideologismo, eccetera.

Punto nodale di questa tesi è cercare di dirimere una questione estremamente divisiva nella discussione accademica e politica relativa a questo argomento: se attribuire a questi combattenti russi lo status di “volontari stranieri” o di “mercenari”. Queste due definizioni e le relative connotazioni che comportano vengono utilizzate arbitrariamente a seconda della provenienza di chi descrive il loro coinvolgimento militare: nel caso in cui il punto di vista sia vicino allo schieramento della Repubblica Serba di Bosnia i combattenti saranno definiti “volontari”, mentre se il punto di vista è vicino alla Federazione di Bosnia ed Erzegovina, ci si riferirà a loro come “mercenari”, sottolineando in questo modo la connotazione positiva o negativa del loro intervento sul campo. Quindi: quale delle due accezioni con cui ci si riferisce comunemente a loro è corretta o accettabile?

Per quanto è stato dato verificare, non è dunque possibile definire i combattenti russi “*tout court*” né come “volontari stranieri” né come “mercenari”. L’unico fattore che è possibile ascrivere loro, come gruppo, è la ricerca di una “*raison d’être*”, di un modo per risultare importanti per sé stessi e per altre persone, impossibile da trovare in patria in seguito alla crisi ideologica ed economica che ha seguito il crollo dell’Unione Sovietica.

In conclusione, con questa tesi si vuole dimostrare che le definizioni di “volontario” o di “mercenario” non siano facilmente applicabili in una situazione così complessa e con un così grande numero di variabili soggettive e sociali in gioco, quale il coinvolgimento di centinaia di cittadini russi nella guerra in Bosnia ed Erzegovina. Per questa ragione, in questa tesi si vuole sostenere come sia più appropriato descrivere i russi che hanno combattuto in Bosnia ed Erzegovina come “combattenti”, evitando in questo modo sia la connotazione negativa che caratterizza il termine “mercenario” che quella positiva e celebrativa del termine “volontario”.

Introduction

“Sarajevo will be, everything else will pass”

Đorđe Balašević

I write these words as the first missiles hit Kharkov and Kyiv. As I read the news on my phone, I look out the window and see the bullet holes still visible in the houses in front of my apartment. In *many* of the houses in front of my window, to be precise. I am in Sarajevo, where I am doing a research period for the very purpose of writing this thesis on the involvement of Russian combatants in the Bosnian war. I am thinking to myself, what a timing. I am looking out the window of my house set on the slopes of mount Trebević and time seems to have stopped thirty years ago, when from this very mountain Serbian troops were raining bullets and shells on the city, just as it happens today in Ukrainian cities. It may be suggestion, it may be the rainy weather that grips Sarajevo almost constantly these weeks, but today the air seems to be thick and heavy, and not because of weather conditions, but because of what is happening in Ukraine is affecting the human condition here. It is as if the Russian missiles have reopened a badly healed wound in the memory of the people of Sarajevo. Certainly, this affected me, who decided a year ago to write a thesis on the involvement of Russian combatants in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Especially it affected me, who chose to write this thesis precisely from a desire for knowledge born out of studying the Ukraine crisis. And, just today, thinking about how this thesis began almost makes my head spin.

Thirteen months ago, when I started this project, I knew little about the history of the Russian combatants in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, to be honest, I did not think I even knew too much about this war, having spent the last few years specializing in other conflicts, more or less recent, and certainly distant, at least geographically, from the Balkans. But there has always been in me a certain attraction, unintentionally morbid I dare say, to this war. I joined a boy-scout group in my hometown when the war

had not been over that long, in 2005, at the age of eight. At that time, the older boys, who were about my current age at the time, would go to help rebuild and generally volunteer in Sarajevo and, once back home, would spend afternoons trying to explain to us young kids what had happened in that part of the world that was so close but felt so neglected by the rest of Europe. Clearly, while it is difficult to grasp the complexity of the political, ideological, and so on layers of the Bosnian war after (almost) two college degrees, I don't think anyone expected that I could do any better at eight years old. In all honesty, I don't think even most of my older friends who had been to Sarajevo fully understood what had happened in Bosnia ten years earlier. Similarly, and at the same time, I remember my parents and relatives talking often about what had happened in Sarajevo and Bosnia, but as in my scout group, it always ended with "the situation there was so complicated that no one will ever understand anything about it." Obviously, time has passed, and that was not the only cathartic event of my childhood or adolescence, but that oversimplified, and all in all sad, answer that much of the world around me shared has remained etched in my memory as I formed my interests, academic and otherwise. In recent years, in fact, I was becoming particularly interested in the Russian Federation's use of asymmetric assets in pursuit of its political and economic interests abroad. Specifically, the famous and phantom "Wagner Group" that was talked about quite a extensively by mainstream and underground media before the Russian invasion of Ukraine.¹ While I was writing a short article precisely on the phenomenon of Moscow-linked mercenaries², I became interested in the conceptual boundary between mercenary and volunteer fighter and how difficult it is, in the most confusing and controversial recent conflicts, to agree on which of the two groups certain foreign combatants belong to. Also coming from a bachelor's degree in sociology and political communication, a sociological, as well as historical, analysis of this phenomenon seemed more and more interesting.

This led me to focus with particular attention on Euromaidan and what has been described as the "low-intensity conflict" that followed the crisis in Crimea and Donbass. The thing that had struck me early on and made me take my first steps toward analyzing

¹ Center for Strategic & International Studies (2020). *Band of Brothers: The Wagner Group and the Russian State*.

² Cozzi, L. (2020, November 20). *Il grande gioco di Mosca: la nuova proxy war strategy russa e il mercato delle forze di sicurezza private*.

this topic, had been the fact that in looking up some of the names of the main commanders of the Donetsk and Luhansk separatist forces, their names appeared in virtually every conflict in which the Russian Federation had taken part since its inception in 1991. Names such as Alexander Borodai, Viktor Zaplatin, and Igor Girkin (whom we will see well into the pages of this thesis) and several others had fought together from Transnistria to Chechnya, but, in the little information that could be found with an initial search, they all attached particular importance to their involvement in the fighting in Bosnia and Herzegovina as “foreign volunteers”, as they described themselves. But why this? And why was so little known about their involvement in Bosnia? Could it be that after more than fifteen years since I had first heard "no one will ever figure it out" no one had analyzed the involvement of these individuals, again at the center of (what was already the) most violent conflict in Europe last year?

Almost. A few brave (and biased) newspaper articles from the 1990s and even fewer (but even braver) Bosnian academic publications analyzing the presence of Russian combatants in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. But surprisingly, or perhaps not so much, only one single academic publication in English language from outside Bosnia. And here we come back to the badly healed scar I am feeling throbbing in Sarajevo. It is not so much the scratches and bruises from the bombs still on the houses, those bother us "outsiders" more than the locals. The real scar is the sense of abandonment on the part of the international community, the failure of international institutions like the UN that were supposed to save Bosnia and instead failed to live up to their own promises. And that scar throbs because Sarajevans see how the same is happening in Ukraine. Regardless of the sending of arms by "Western" countries, there in the eyes of the people of this city history repeats itself similarly to what happened 30 years ago. One more militarily and economically powerful state attacks another, and the UN with its Security Council is even more powerless this time. It is a pain that is felt every day, even as the weeks pass since the invasion began.

On the first or second day after the invasion I was in front of the Sarajevo Faculty of Political Science, and with a group of friends we were talking about what was happening in Ukraine, when a man passed by us. He was in his 50s, and I distinctly remember his words when he told us, "It should have happened to the Ukrainians first, at the time of the war here at our place they supported the embargo. An eye for an eye...." Clearly I

never thought that this event was representative of the entire population of Sarajevo, but to me was the first moment when I realized fully that the topic on which I was researching on was something not purely stuck in the past, but on the contrary was extremely contemporary and impactful also for the city I was living in.

The war in Ukraine for Sarajevo, however, is not just despair and resentment. It is also solidarity and closeness, probably in a less glossy way than the rest of Europe will ever be able to express. One of the most moving experiences I have had in this city, where almost every museum and art scene revolves around the war and siege experienced in the 1990s, was at an exhibition called "Imagine: Reflections on Peace" organized by "The VII Foundation" in Sarajevo. This exhibition used historical photos taken in some of the conflicts that have marked the World in recent years, including the one in Bosnia and Herzegovina, to explore "the themes and challenges of peace building through an immersive look at societies that suffered - and survived - violent conflict."³ Next to the photos taken in recent months in Ukraine, the latest unfortunate addition to the exhibit, one could read this open letter, written by a survivor of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and I want to quote it below:

"Dear friends. Humanitarian organizations here in Sarajevo are collecting aid for you, and I am sitting in front of the closet in my apartment trying to remember what you would be needing the most now. It's not my warm socks or my jacket or my warm boots that you most need now. It's my now 30- year-old T-shirt imprinted with a slogan that kept me up during the 1,425 days that Bosnian Serbs fired at will and held my city under siege with no water, no food, no electricity, no heating, and no communication with the outside world. I wore that shirt and read its message as more than 2 million shells fell on our heads, and I dodged countless bullets but 11,000 of my neighbors didn't. The T - shirt says: Sarajevo will be, everything else will pass. Bad times are ahead of you, my friends. But weapons are being sent so you can defend yourself and the values you stand for. We Bosnians fought back then. for the same values, but the world imposed an arms embargo on us. It did not understand what the fight. was about in Sarajevo. Thank God, it understands now in Kyiv. You are going to be hungry, thirsty, cold and dirty. You will lose your homes, friends and family members, but what will hurt the most will be the lies. Lies that you are somehow to blame for what is happening to you. Lies that you are actually doing. what is being done to you. Those lies will poke countless holes into your hearts, but without stopping them from beating and without freezing them. I see they just destroyed your TV tower. Ha! They want to keep you in the dark

³ VII Foundation (2020). *Image: reflections on peace*. SparkPress.

just as they kept us. in the dark. They want to turn the lights off so we cannot see what they are doing to you. Write down everything! Record it! One day it will define your history, explain what happened to Ukrainians who are yet to be born, and most likely, end up being used as evidence and proof in a court against those trying to kill you. In the dark times that are ahead of you, you will lose faith sometimes and be overwhelmed by exhaustion. But I'm writing to you from the future and I'm telling you: You will prevail just as we did. I was supposed to be dead, but I survived, and I multiplied. I am going to take my grandchildren for a walk tomorrow. You will one day too because I can see in you the same: resilience I saw here. I hear you singing your anthem while pushing tanks away with your bare hands. Over time you will sing, as we did, new songs about your courage during this plight. You will recite poetry not yet written and you will come up with your own slogans that will keep you alive. For now, I am sending you the most precious thing I have. It's my slogan, a bit modified for you: Ukraine will be, everything else will pass."

This is the face of Sarajevo that impressed me most, the face that expresses great dignity and empathy, and a great desire to exist in the present and the future.

If the motivation for the writing of this thesis in the initial phase was just a mere curiosity, and obviously sense of duty linked to my academical career, with the progression of time and as I gathered resources, it evolved into a real need. A need to explain to myself how such a numerically small phenomenon as the involvement of Russian combatants in the Bosnian war could have a huge impact over a just a few decades.

When I started writing this thesis, I thought I would only be doing an academic exercise, although I clearly already realized the importance and seriousness of the topic I had chosen. However, the events that followed February 24, 2022, and the subsequent reaction of the city in which I live changed my perception of it. Analyzing the intervention of Russian combatants in Bosnia and the motivations behind their intervention no longer seemed like just something crystallized in history (as indeed nothing ever is), but more as a first spark on dry straw that grew into a fire.

Research

The research for the sources for this work presented some critical issues. The academic production (at least in English) on the intervention of Russian combatants in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina is practically nonexistent. It was only possible to find three academic publications that touch the subject. The first, which also devotes some

attention to the phenomenon of Russian combatants, though not as a main subject, is Levin's article "Neopanslavism: The Russian-Serbian relationship" found in Bianchini and Paul's publication "The Yugoslav War, Europe and the Balkans: How to achieve security?".⁴ This resource provided an opportunity to find several very useful pieces of information that would otherwise have been very difficult to obtain. Regarding this source I must point out a possible critical issue. It was possible to confirm by cross-checking with other sources most of the information in this article, others in a partial way, and others could only be found in this text. In the course of the thesis I will indicate those that could not be confirmed, in any case given the academic provenance of the text, namely the University of Bologna, it seemed legitimate to rely on this text despite this limitation.

The only other academic text in English that touched on the subject and that I was able to find, although not with a specific focus on the subject, is the seventh chapter of the second volume of the book "*The Aggression Against The Republic Of Bosnia And Herzegovina-Planning, Preparation, Execution*"⁵ by Professor Smail Čekić of the University of Sarajevo and former director of the "Institute for the Research of Crimes Against Humanity and International Law." In contrast to Levin's publication, precisely because of the place of origin of the text, it was possible for me to find and use in turn much of the sources used by Professor Čekić, sources that, given the archival nature, would otherwise have been impossible for me to find. I was also able to interface with the professor himself and his assistant Osman Sušić who directed me in the collection of these sources.

During my stay in Bosnia and Herzegovina it was also possible to find a publication in Bosnian with a specific focus on the involvement of Russian combatants in the Bosnian war (and from his point of view "mercenaries), written by a former major of the army of the republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This text is "ruski i grčki plaćenici u ratu u Bosni i Hercegovini" (Russian and Greek mercenaries in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina),

⁴ Levin, I. (1995). *Neopanslavism: The Russian-Serbian relationship*. In S. Bianchini & S. Paul (Eds.), *The Yugoslav War, Europe and the Balkans: How to achieve security?* (1st ed., pp. 73–82). Ravenna, Longo Editore.

⁵ Čekić, S. (2005). *The Aggression Against the Republic Of Bosnia And Herzegovina-Planning, Preparation, Execution: Vol. II*. Sarajevo, Institute for the Research of Crimes Against Humanity and International Law.

written by Aziz Tafro.⁶ As extremely interesting as it was from my point of view that there was a specific publication on the topic I was analyzing, the approach with this source presented at least one serious critical issue: being a personal publication of the author. For this reason it is not likely to imagine any verification (or peer-review) of the publication by someone other than the author. During my research period in Sarajevo I tried to get in touch with the author himself, to try to verify the sources he had used to write this book, but, to put it mildly, he was quite averse to any kind of contact.

Indeed, I was also fortunate enough to win the call for an Erasmus+ mobility period for study and research in Sarajevo at the University of Sarajevo (UNSA), which was if nothing else the most interesting part of the research (at least from my point of view as a researcher). During this five-month period, I had the opportunity to gain access to several researchers and personalities who had addressed the topic such as PhD doctor Ermin Kuka, a researcher and external relations manager at UNSA's Institute for the Research of Crimes Against Humanity and International Law, who shared with me his recent publication in Bosnian "*Genocid u Višegradu*"⁷ (genocide in Višegrad) in which he analyzed, although again not as the main focus, the intervention of Russian combatants in the area of the Višegrad municipality during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In addition to Dr. Kuka, with the help of Institute for the Research of Crimes Against Humanity and International Law researcher Haris Suljovic, I had the opportunity to access first-hand archival material collected over the years from the institute's archives. During my first few weeks in Sarajevo, I also interviewed the editor-in-chief of the BIRN BiH Hub in Sarajevo, Semir Mujkic, which allowed me to get a better look at the commemorative practices of the intervention of volunteer combatants currently implemented in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I was also able to access the archives of the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where I collected journalistic material from the war years from the *Oslobođenje* newspaper, not otherwise available.

Thanks to information obtained from these people, I visited several places that were central to the period when Russian combatants were present in Bosnia. Specifically, I collected photographic material in the city of Višegrad where I visited a war cemetery,

⁶ Tafro, A. (2014). *Ruski i grčki plaćenici u ratu u Bosni i Hercegovini*. Sarajevo, Author's own publication.

⁷ Kuka, E. (2018). *Genocid u Višegradu*. Sarajevo, Izdavač.

two monuments, and a church. I also collected photographic material in Belgrade, the capital of the Republic of Serbia, where I was able to visit an Orthodox church where there is a plaque bearing the names of Russian combatants who died in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The result of this photographic documentation was crucial for the creation of the fourth chapter of this thesis, where we will look at it specifically.

Otherwise, an extensive online search was conducted where it was possible to find various texts, newspaper articles, blogs, diaries, books or videos where memoirs of Russian combatants had been published, or analyses of their employment and impact on the region.

Thesis questions

Given how little the phenomenon of Russian combatants' intervention in Bosnia and Herzegovina had been analyzed by academia (at least in English), I decided to structure the paper around ... questions:

- What was the real operational impact of Russian combatants in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina?
- Was there substantial Russian political support? If so, by whom? And how extensive?
- Is it possible to give an answer to the academic (and political) discussion regarding the definition of their intervention as volunteers or as mercenaries?
- Is the intervention of these combatants being commemorated today and has it been in the past? If so, what are the commemorative practices that have been implemented so far in Bosnia?

The first two questions will be attempted to be answered in the first and second chapters, respectively. The third question is answered mainly in the first, second and especially in the third chapter. The fourth, on the other hand, is specifically answered in the fourth chapter. An attempt will be made to try to answer the first two of these questions with an analysis conducted by considering media reports, archival material, accounts and memoirs by the combatants themselves, and academic articles described above. For what regards the third and fourth chapter, we will continue with an analysis

of the same type of sources just described, in conjunction with the use of interviews and photographic material collected during the field research in Sarajevo.

In this work we will deal, as mentioned in the third question, with the instrumentalization of the definition of the foreign combatant in the context of the intervention of Russian foreign combatants in the Bosnian war, so it is necessary to clarify the terminology used in the chapters: in order to use a neutral term, for much of this thesis we will refer to foreigners involved in the conflict as "foreign combatants." To understand why, it will be provided here a brief introduction to the difference between "foreign volunteer" and "mercenary".

Regarding the term "foreign volunteer", reference is made to Arielli and Rodogno's definition: "foreign volunteers are defined as individuals who served in a military force of a state or an entity other than their own state of nationality or residence. Moreover, their service was not motivated primarily by the pursuit of material gain."⁸ For what regards instead the most accepted definition of "Mercenary" we will refer to the "Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), 8 June 1977" article 47, comma 2 (c, d, e, f) "A mercenary is a person who: is motivated to take part in the hostilities essentially by the desire for private gain and, in fact, is promised, by or on behalf of a Party to the conflict, material compensation substantially in excess of that promised or paid to combatants of similar ranks and functions in the armed forces of that Party"; is neither a national of a Party to the conflict nor a resident of territory controlled by a Party to the conflict; is not a member of the armed forces of a Party to the conflict; and has not been sent by a State which is not a Party to the conflict on official duty as a member of its armed forces".⁹

Apart from the theoretical definition, must be remembered that the term "mercenary," from the time of Macchiavelli's *The Prince*, has been associated with despicability and lack of any kind of humanity, so much so that they are willing to kill for money and not for ideals. Just defining a combatant as a mercenary immediately turns him into a

⁸ Arielli, N., & Rodogno, D. (2016). Transnational Encounters: Hosting and Remembering Twentieth-Century Foreign War Volunteers—Introduction. *Journal of Modern European History*, 14(3).

⁹ International Committee of the Red Cross (1977). *Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I)*. Article 47. Geneva, International Committee of the Red Cross.

criminal in the eyes of public opinion.¹⁰ At the same time, the “foreign volunteer” has been mostly associated with a positive figure, bearer of rightful ideas and bravery (although this is often nothing more than a propaganda illusion).¹¹

Although the difference in terms of definition is substantial, their application is indeed easily manipulated. The mere intentions of individual combatants are often not self-evident and difficult to generalize, since if considering foreign combatants as a group with homogeneous motivations, it is easy to categorize them one way or the other and instrumentalize the resulting meaning. We will analyze better this distinction with two examples in the first chapter.

Similarly, we did not want to use the term “foreign fighter” because, precisely as a result of the recent conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, the term has taken on a meaning as negative as that of mercenary, which is directly linked to the imagery of terrorism of Islamic fundamentalist matrix,¹² although at least distant from the topic under analysis in this thesis. In any case, we wanted to start with a term devoid of any negative (or positive) connotation. Thus, “Foreign combatant” is intended in this work as “a foreigner taking part in the fighting in another nation” describing only the action and not the ideological or economical purposes of the person.

Thesis structure

The structure of the thesis is divided into four chapters. The first chapter is an analysis of the operational intervention of Russian combatants in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the second, political support for Russian combatants is analyzed. The third chapter considers the perception of their involvement by some of the most representative combatants. Finally, in the fourth chapter, the commemorative practices of Russian combatants involvement in Bosnia and Herzegovina are analyzed. In

¹⁰ Percy, S. (2008). *Mercenaries: The History of a Norm in International Relations*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 10.

¹¹ Cancian, M. F. (2022). *Foreign Volunteers in Ukraine: Warcombatants or Propaganda Tools?*.

¹² Arielli, N. (2012). In search of meaning: Foreign volunteers in the Croatian armed forces, 1991-95. *Contemporary European History*, 21(1).

conclusion, an analysis of the results is presented, while suggesting how to enhance and encourage further research on this topic.

Chapter I

Eagles, Wolves and Cossacks: the operational employment of Russian combatants in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina

*“When a man hath no freedom to fight for at home,
Let him combat for that of his neighbours;
Let him think of the glories of Greece and Rome,
And get knock’d on the head for his labours.
To do good for mankind is the chivalrous plan
And is always as nobly required;
Then battle for freedom wherever you can
And, if not shot or hanged, you’ll be knighted”*

LORD BYRON

The phenomenon of the volunteer foreign combatant in the 20th century

The recent conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Donbass have brought the phenomenon of foreign combatants and their importance in conflict contexts back to the attention of the media, political discussion, and academia. But the participation of foreigners in theaters of war is not new. Selecting as a starting point the 19th century, in the Mexican-U.S. War (1846-1848) a whole battalion of volunteers of Irish, Italians, Poles, and other European Catholics fought for the Mexican army.¹³ Several British, Italians, and Serbs fought in the Greek War of Independence (1821-1829).¹⁴

The concept of the volunteer foreign combatant essentially defined the great wars of the first half of the last century: World War I and II, the Russian Revolution (1917-1923) and, especially, the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) making the famous republican

¹³ Johnson, T. V. (2006). To Take up Arms against Brethren of the Same Faith: Lower Midwestern Catholic Volunteers in the Mexican-American War. *Armed Forces & Society*, 32(4), 532–548.

¹⁴ St Clair, W., & Beaton, R. (2008). *To Bring Freedom and Knowledge to Greece*. In *That Greece Might Still Be Free: The Philhellenes in the War of Independence* (1st ed., pp. 155–163). Open Book Publishers.

international brigades a paradigm of the intervention of foreign volunteers.¹⁵ Throughout these conflicts the term "volunteer" gradually acquired a heroic, often romantic meaning, essentially becoming to the most synonymous with righteousness and representing a defender of democratic ideals.

In any case, very often volunteer units fought for ideals that were anything but democratic.

The infamous bombing of Guernica was carried out precisely by the Condor Legion and the Legionary Air Force, the "volunteer corps" sent by the two fascist states to fight in Spain alongside the Nationalist troops.¹⁶

In contrast, in the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, although again many foreign combatants participated on each side of the conflict, the interpretation of their involvement is unclear. As anticipated in the introduction, the foreign combatant involved in the Western Balkans, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, was and still is often framed as a "foreign volunteer" by the media and academical publications close to the side for which they had fought, while if one is describing a foreign combatant from the opposing faction this becomes "mercenary," despite the fact that, for example, the salary that was reserved for them was decidedly low, as we will see later in the chapter.

To clarify the different interpretations of the volunteerism and mercenaryism, two historical examples are most relevant to understanding the correct framing of these phenomena.

The Spanish Civil War and the foreign volunteers

The Spanish Civil War was characterized by enormous foreign involvement on both sides of the conflict (if it is possible to simplify it enough to reduce it to just two sides). After the unsuccessful attempt by the rebel armies to capture Spain's major cities, labor unions and civilian groups, mostly Marxists, anarchists or in general more or less leftists, opposed the nationalist coup. Republican resistance to the fascist attack spurred a great many young people from all corners of the World to fight to defend Republican and

¹⁵ Arielli, N., & Rodogno, D. (2016). Transnational Encounters: Hosting and Remembering Twentieth-Century Foreign War Volunteers—Introduction. *Journal of Modern European History*, 14(3).

¹⁶ Haulman, D. L. (2018). Firebombing Air Raids on Cities at Night. *Air Power History*, 65(4), 37–42.

democratic Spain and to stem the threat of the fascist international.¹⁷ Until the Madrid government president's decision to disband the International Brigades in 1938, foreign volunteers were always glorified by the Republic (at least in the official narrative) and subjected to particularly cruel treatment by the Nationalists.¹⁸

On the other side of the fence, the insurrection against the Republican government was framed as a holy war to "defend Spain from the Reds." The Nationalist forces brought together all the country's reactionary forces: ultra-Catholics, Phalangists, royalists and simple conservative military. This fairly heterogeneous ensemble offers a cross-section of the reality of the European conservative right at the time. This proto-Francoist force refused to accept the concept of a democratic state that had created the weak and fragile post-Treaty of Versailles Europe. The question of the intervention of volunteers in the nationalist ranks is certainly different from that related to the Madrid government. First, Germany and Italy sent "volunteer expeditionary corps," then regiments or at any rate combat units of their respective regular armies. Thus, the difference between "volunteer expeditionary corps," term often used by the armed forces of a certain country to define units belonging to a national army and sent "voluntarily" by the government of the same country, and "volunteer," understood as an individual and consequently satisfying the characteristics present in Arielli's definition quoted in the introduction of this thesis, should be noted. In addition to these corps, some 2,000 individual volunteers joined the Nationalist forces effectively bringing little contribution to the conduct of military operations. Always poorly regarded and treated with condescension by the nationalist staff and Franco, by the end of the conflict their intervention was almost eliminated from the official history of the war that the Caudillo regime proposed.¹⁹

The example of the Spanish Civil War helps to identify two phenomena: the importance of the analysis of the motivations that drive the intervention of the individual volunteer

¹⁷ Kruizinga, S. (2020). Fear and Loathing in Spain. Dutch Foreign Combatants in the Spanish Civil War. *European review of history*, 27(1-2), 134-151.

¹⁸ Tremlett, G. (2021). *The International Brigades: Fascism, Freedom and the Spanish Civil War*. New York, Bloomsbury Publishing, 463.

¹⁹ Keene, J. (2010) *Fighting for God, for Franco and (most of all) for Themselves: Right-Wing Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War*. In C. G. Krüger & S. Levsen (Eds.), *War Volunteering in Modern Times: From the French Revolution to the Second World War*. Palgrave MacMillan, 212.

(or in our case, combatant) in order to be considered as such and the possible media/propaganda narrative linked to the intervention of foreign volunteers as a legitimizing event of the conflict understood as a war of defense of ideals sacred to the faction in question. The Republicans, especially as they were in tactical and strategic inferiority, exploited and encouraged the intervention of foreign volunteers as a key element of war propaganda, at least in the first two years of the conflict. In contrast, the Nationalists, also to avoid a widening of the conflict and direct involvement of foreign powers that remained neutral (as France and the British Empire), always tried to minimize the involvement of individual volunteers.²⁰

The Congo Crisis and the Mercenary War

The introduction of mercenaries into the ranks of regular troops is certainly nothing new in history, but since the creation of the great national armies with the Napoleonic Wars the phenomenon had gradually disappeared for almost one hundred years (at least on a macro scale).²¹ In the Congo Crisis, we see a return of the phenomenon of mercenaryism, with a massive deployment of mercenary forces from both sides of the conflict.

A few days after declaring independence from Belgium on June 30, 1960, the newborn Republic of Congo entered a ferocious civil war. Like many other post-colonial internal wars, the definition itself of "internal" is most of the times only a mirage. Over the course of a few months, the conflict found itself mirroring the factional division characteristic of the international community of the Cold War period, becoming, along with the Cuban Missile Crisis, one of the tensest periods between the two "blocs".²² For more than half a century, the Kingdom of Belgium had kept the country in conditions of extreme economic and cultural backwardness. In a country of more than thirteen million people, in 1960, there were no more than thirty university graduates and not a single European-

²⁰ Tremlett, G. (2021). *The International Brigades: Fascism, Freedom and the Spanish Civil War*. New York, Bloomsbury Publishing, 614

²¹ Percy, S. (2008). *Mercenaries: The History of a Norm in International Relations*. Oxford University Press, 99.

²² Baker, P. (2013). *Mercenaries and the Congo Crisis*. *Saber and Scroll*. 9, 2(1), 89.

trained Congolese lawyer, doctor or judge.²³ At the country's proclamation of independence, the political situation was critical, to say the least. The newly elected government had a very weak parliamentary majority, with 24 percent of the total vote and an opposition made up of a platform of parliaments based on the country's various ethnic groups. On the other hand, the *Force Publique*, the very violent colonial gendarmerie corps on which the government's control of the eastern regions depended, was kept in a condition where Congolese gendarmes were not allowed to advance beyond the rank of sergeant, leading over the years to an ever-increasing level of dissatisfaction among the troop. The system collapsed just five days after independence. After a meeting with Congolese non-commissioned officers, the Force commander made it clear that neither pay nor hierarchical status would change for them, regardless of the change in political regime. This provoked an immediate mutiny of Congolese gendarmes, who poured into the streets of the city of Thysville, spreading panic among the European inhabitants.²⁴ The force mutiny marked the beginning of the collapse of the Congolese state and the government inability to maintain order over the nation. To this followed the unauthorized dispatch of Belgian paratroopers to quell the mutiny, protect the Belgian nationals and economic interests. In the chaos that followed, the Katanga region, the richest in the country due to its mineral reserves, declared secession from the country and with the support of the Belgian mining company Union Miniere (directly representing most of the Belgian government economic interests in Congo) began to arm its own military force.²⁵

The issue particularly relevant to our study comes at this turning point. Republic of Congo central government, led by Patrice Lumumba, appealed to the United Nations for operational support from the Blue Helmets peacekeepers. At the same time, the rebel government in Katanga, aware of the lack of competent Congolese officers and supported by the wealthy mining company, began hiring European mercenaries with combat experience. This enabled the rebel faction to acquire that much-needed leadership skills in conflict situations.²⁶ The mercenaries hired by Union Mines came

²³ Dieder Gondola, C. (2002). *The history of Congo*. Westport, Greenwood Press, 116

²⁴ Baker, P. (2013). *Mercenaries and the Congo Crisis*. *Saber and Scroll*. 9, 2(1), 90.

²⁵ Mockler, A. (1987). *The New Mercenaries: The History of the Hired Soldier from the Congo to the Seychelles*. Paragon House.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

mainly from France, Germany, and South Africa. They had fought in Algeria, fresh from the failed Foreign Legion mutiny, or in command positions in the Wehrmacht or SS.²⁷

The building of a strong sense of national unity and the increasing centralization of coercive power in the hands of nation-states had led to the fading of the supply of mercenary troops. With the institutionalization of the post-World War II system of international law, however, the inability of states belonging to the international community to "legally" resolve political disputes through the instrument of violence or, more properly, war had led back to the creation of a market for mercenaryism.²⁸ At first glance, precisely, it might seem that mercenaryism is a purely economic phenomenon, where the only link binding the mercenary to the employer is that of the money involved in the contract of hire. For a good period of history, the issue could be somewhat summarized in this way,²⁹ but in the 20th century the employment of mercenaries inevitably takes on a political character as well, and the Congo crisis is precisely a good example of this. The inability of Belgium, and later good part of the Western bloc, to intervene directly in the Congo Crisis and stem a potential economic and political crisis led the Western world to fight this war not with its own armies, but with mercenaries hired from private companies (a system that would become standard for both sides as the Cold War continued).³⁰

Mercenaries, as the Congolese example underscores, guarantee the possibility of performing brutal, ethically questionable actions or fighting for causes that would not be acceptable if fought by national armies, especially in the eyes of public opinion and the international community.³¹ At the same time, the use of them for these actions, has made sure to create around the mercenary of the 20th century a reputation, if possible, even worse than it had in the past.³² Not only is the mercenary willing to kill and die for money, but he does so in the most brutal and a-moral ways. As in the example under

²⁷ Baker, P. (2013) *Mercenaries and the Congo Crisis*. *Saber and Scroll*. 9, 2(1), 92.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 98

²⁹ Percy, S. (2008). *Mercenaries: The History of a Norm in International Relations*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 90.

³⁰ Baker, P. (2013). *Mercenaries and the Congo Crisis*. *Saber and Scroll*. 9, 2(1), 98.

³¹ Percy, S. (2008). *Mercenaries: The History of a Norm in International Relations*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 12.

³² *Ibid.* 59.

analysis, mercenaries in the Congo were used to oppress a newly independent nation, serving the interests of the former colonial power through a mining company.³³

As we can see in the very brief analysis of this conflict, the definition of mercenary, especially in the twentieth century, carries with it a set of considerations and moral evaluations completely opposite to those generally associated with the "foreign volunteer."

Russian Combatants' Operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina

The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina can be said to have begun on March 31, 1992, when the Yugoslav People's Army (Jugoslovenska Narodna Armija - JNA), Serb Democratic Party (Srpska Demokratska Stranka - SDS) authorities, and paramilitary formations began attacking those Bosnian towns and villages considered to be part of the Serb nation-state.³⁴ Since late September 1991, the Bosnian branch of the SDS had begun to declare several municipalities as "Serb Autonomous Regions" attempting to link them together under and enclose them in an independent entity called "Republika Srpska" ("Serb Republic").³⁵ This was to ensure that the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina could not secede from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (*Socijalistička Federativna Republika Jugoslavija* - SFRJ) while maintaining territorial integrity.³⁶

In addition to the JNA, units of the Serbian Ministry of Interior (Ministarstvo Unutrašnjih Poslova - MUP), the Army of Republika Srpska, and other various Serbian units, many foreign combatants took part in the conflict by joining Serbian forces. Most of these foreigners came from Orthodox-majority-countries: Russia, Ukraine, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, to name a few.³⁷ Of these, those who contributed the most in terms of numbers and operational significance in the conflict were the Russians, although sources differ on the precise number of these combatants.³⁸ The Russian press of those years

³³ Baker, P. (2013). *Mercenaries and the Congo Crisis*. *Saber and Scroll*. 9, 2(1), 92.

³⁴ Baker, C. (2015). *The Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s*. Palgrave MacMillan, 57.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Čekić, S. (2005). *The Aggression Against The Republic Of Bosnia And Herzegovina-Planning, Preparation, Execution: Vol. II*. Institute for the Research of Crimes Against Humanity and International Law, p. 1005.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

reported that their numbers varied over the years of the war, from 45-60 to 250-300 combatants present at the same time in Bosnia.³⁹ Thus, considering a period of normal operational rotation between 1992 and 1994, the Russian press estimates a maximum of 700 in total.⁴⁰ Taking instead Bosnian press sources, such as the Sarajevo daily *Oslobođenje*, as a reference, about 2,500 Russian combatants were simultaneously present in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1993,⁴¹ and about 2,000 in 1994.⁴² From the documents that have been possible to retrieve in the Archives of the Institute For The Research Of Crimes Against Humanity and International Law in Sarajevo (Arhiv Instituta za Istrazivanje Zlocina Protiv Covjecnostii Medjunarodnog Prava u Sarajevu – AIIZ), and the accounts of former Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Armija Republike Bosne i Hercegovine - ARBiH) officers as reported by Aziz Tafro "in the period between 1991 and 1995 "an average of 700 Russian mercenaries fought in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and a total of more than 10,000 paid Russians passed through the Republika Srpska Army".⁴³ In any case, it is difficult to give an exact number of all Russian combatants who participated in hostilities, as many used pseudonyms during the war or permanently changed their names thanks in part to receiving official documents from the SFRJ in return for their efforts.⁴⁴ What is apparent from these accounts is that the number of Russian combatants certainly exceeded several hundred.

The arrival of the first Russian combatants in Bosnia and Herzegovina

The first organized Russian arrivals to Belgrade and Serbia in general began as mentioned, in 1991, while the first visits in organized groups to the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina began in the first weeks of 1992, with the support of a certain "Republika Srpska Bureau" based in Belgrade.⁴⁵

³⁹ Levin, I. (1995). *Neopanslavism: The Russian-Serbian relationship*. In S. Bianchini & S. Paul (Eds.), *The Yugoslav War, Europe and the Balkans: How to achieve security?* (1st ed., pp. 73–82). Ravenna, Longo Editore, 75

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Bikić, M. (5 March 1993). Partizani (opet) na Ozrenu. *Oslobođenje*. p.4.

⁴² *Oslobođenje*, (1 March 1994). Ruski plaćenici u BiH. *Oslobođenje*. p.6

⁴³ Tafro, A. (2014). *Ruski i grčki plaćenici u ratu u bosni i hercegovini*. Sarajevo, Author's own publication, 32.

⁴⁴ Kuka, E. (2018). *Genocid u Višegradu*. Sarajevo, Izdavač, 63.

⁴⁵ Čekić, S. (2005). *The Aggression Against The Republic Of Bosnia And Herzegovina-Planning, Preparation, Execution*: Vol. II. Institute for the Research of Crimes Against Humanity and International Law, 1005.

Let us focus momentarily on this "Republika Srpska Bureau". During my field research in Sarajevo I managed to retrieve a document from the AIIZ describing this Bureau. This document consisted in an affidavit given by Republika Srpska Army General Đorđe Đukić (assistant commander of General Ratko Mladic) after being arrested by ARBiH forces in 1996. In it, general Đukić said that the "Republika Srpska Bureau" was established in Belgrade in 1992, although it was not clear to the general by whose order.⁴⁶ I quote below the description of the Bureau, made by the professor Čekić using the same source I retrieved "The first chief was Dutina, and then Momcilo Mandic. For a time, the Bureau was formally under jurisdiction of the "Government" of the Republika Srpska, and later on, by the decision of R. Karadzic, president of the Republika Srpska, it was promulgated into an "institution of the republic, not the Government". It was located on Mose Pijade St., in the Federal Commodities Reserves Building, and it had some 25 employees. The Bureau was dealing with the issues related to the needs of citizens [of Republika Srpska], and resolving a number of issues for the needs of the collaborationist Republika Srpska. Thus, this body provided various travel documents and organized visits for the representatives of the Republika Srpska to other countries, then, reception of humanitarian aid from Yugoslavia and abroad, taking care of the injured after they are released from hospitals and rehabilitation centres, arrivals of foreign journalists and politicians who visited Republika Srpska, and the like. Major Djogo was in charge of resolving all of the military issues for the needs of the Army of Republika Srpska in Belgrade. In February 1993, he was injured on Mt. Jahorina, from where he was transported by a JNA helicopter into Belgrade and was taken to the Military Medical Academy for treatment. After rehabilitation, he took over the aforementioned duty at the Bureau. All arrangements or linkages were secured through him by which military conscripts were returning to Republika Srpska. In this way, people were mobilized with the use of force and taken to the Bijeljina Barracks (4,500 mobilized for the Republic of Serb Krajina, and 1,500 for Republika Srpska, where, after they received military clothing, they were taken by vehicles into the units they were deployed in)".⁴⁷

⁴⁶ N.d. (1996, n.d.). *Svedočenje Đorđa Đukića Đorđe Đukić*, Inv. No. 5342, Arhiv institutazaistravanje zlocinaprotiv covjecnosti i medjunarodnog prava u Sarajevu, University of Sarajevo.

⁴⁷ Čekić, S. (2005). *The Aggression Against The Republic Of Bosnia And Herzegovina-Planning, Preparation, Execution*. Vol. II. Institute for the Research of Crimes Against Humanity and International Law, 1005-1006.

The arrivals of Russian Combatants were especially organized thanks to Yaroslav Yastrebov, the key man in moving Russian combatants to Bosnia and Herzegovina who, as Kuka explains “Groups of three people were greeted in Belgrade by a courier called Brada, who transferred them to Bosnia and Herzegovina. The first Russian volunteer detachment, based in Trebinje, numbered about five people and lasted until December 1992”.⁴⁸

The first Russian combatants to arrive were about 15.⁴⁹ In those early stages, the idea of creating an independent Russian-only detachment was not yet a concrete idea.⁵⁰ That is why between November and December 1992 the first Russians were merged into the paramilitary group of "Beli orlovi" (White Eagles), also known as "Osvetnici" (Avengers) or "Šešeljevci" (Šešelj Men).⁵¹ The last battle name is a decidedly thinly veiled reference to the connection with the Serbian Radical Party (Srpska Radikalna Stranka - SRS) founded in 1991 by Vojislav Šešelj, still its chairman. Šešelj was a key figure in the involvement of far-right paramilitary groups in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with some authority over a large number of these groups, although a direct hierarchical link between the paramilitary forces and the Serbian politician could not be found.⁵²

In any case, the "White Eagles" were a group composed mainly of Serbs who boasted the name "Chetniks", the name of the Serbian monarchic-nationalist movement that emerged in the 1940s. The “Eagles” were famous for fighting by waving a flag representing the famous skull- and-crossed-bones, bearing the inscription "За краља и отаџбину; слобода или смрт" (For king and fatherland; freedom or death) and wearing the traditional fur hat and long beards, typical of the Chetnik movement. Emblematically enough, the coat-of-arms of the "White Eagles" was the same as the coat-of-arms of the Republic of Serbia, namely the double-fronted eagle with the four "S" in a red shield with a white cross.⁵³

⁴⁸ Kuka, E. (2018). *Genocid u Višegradu*. Sarajevo, Izdavač, 63-64.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Čekić, S. (2005). *The Aggression Against The Republic Of Bosnia And Herzegovina-Planning, Preparation, Execution*. Vol. II. Institute for the Research of Crimes Against Humanity and International Law, 1006.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (2016, March 31). *Trial Judgement Summary for Vojislav Šešelj*. Unified court database, International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

⁵³ Tanner, M. (1997). *Croatia, a Nation forged in War*. New Heaven, Yale University Press, 245

As stated in a United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) document, "The White Eagles group, also called "Beli Orlovi," was a group of volunteers/paramilitaries commanded by Dragoslav Bokan, a member of the Serbian National Renewal ("SNO") Party. The White Eagles were traditionally considered as being an elite unit and counted as its members notably men posted in the Mostar municipality. The insignia and uniforms of the White Eagles varied and were not regulated".⁵⁴

It is difficult to trace the actions of individual Russian combatants within mixed units such as this paramilitary group, but it is possible to trace the battles and crimes in which the "White Eagles" took part during the period when several Russians were actually part of the group. Examples include the Višegrad massacre and the war rapes and participation in ethnic cleansing in the villages of Foča and Gacko.⁵⁵

In addition to the "White Eagles," other accounts tell of the presence of Russian combatants in mixed units in the fall/winter of 1992.

The first example is an account of an interrogation of a Ukrainian prisoner of war from the Army of the Republika Srpska released by the ARBiH press center in 1992, and cited by Čekić, in which we read that in the Serbian offensive against the city of Jajce in October 1992 were present some Russian foreign combatants, although it is not possible to trace to which unit these belonged. It also states that the Ukrainian foreign combatant, prisoner in that moment, along with 15 of his Russian, Romanian and Ukrainian comrades were hired by a specialized agency based in Belgrade and were to receive a total of 3,000 German Marks after the eventual fall of Jajce.⁵⁶

Another press release from the ARBiH Press Center, cited again by Čekić, makes it clear that in the first two weeks of November 1992 in the vicinity of Vogošća on the northern outskirts of Sarajevo some 200 Russian combatants were identified. These ones participated, among others, in the attacks on Mount Žuč⁵⁷ at that time framed in the

⁵⁴ International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (2016). *Trial Judgement Summary for Vojislav Šešelj*. Unified court database of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

⁵⁵ International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia (2000). *Testimony of Witness 192*. International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia. Transcript Nr. 000327ed., p. 915.

⁵⁶ Čekić, S. (2005). *The Aggression Against The Republic Of Bosnia And Herzegovina-Planning, Preparation, Execution*. Vol. II. Institute for the Research of Crimes Against Humanity and International Law, 1006.

⁵⁷ Mount overlooking the city of Sarajevo

Sarajevo-Romanija Corps of the Army of Republika Srpska.⁵⁸ Unfortunately, during the field research in Sarajevo it was not possible to directly access sources from the ARBiH press center, but the overall impression given by Cekic's publication, despite the general feeling of a strong bias of a Bosniak point of view (for example the combatants are always described as "mercenaries" starting with the title of one of the chapters of his book, called "Foreign Mercenaries"), is that of a unbiased use of generally hard-to-find primary sources such as testimonies and official documents of the army of Republika Srpska, that are extremely valuable for the analysis of the recruitment and operational involvement of Russian combatants in the Bosnian war.

The First Russian Volunteer Unit

Russian combatants were initially framed in volunteer detachments directly dependent on the Army of Republika Srpska, starting with only five combatants precisely in the town of Trebinje, in Herzegovina.⁵⁹ In the command documents of the 4th Podrinje Light Infantry Brigade (4th Podrinjske Lake Pješadijske Brigade) of Republika Srpska, sent to the command of the Republika Srpska Drina Corps - Department of OB Affairs reads, "During the day, a certain 'Brada' from Belgrade, for whom we have information that he is a history professor by profession, employed in a high school in Belgrade, and a native of Čajniče, is engaged in bringing Russians [...] He also offered to bring a number of Russians to Rudo⁶⁰".⁶¹

After this first experiment of sending Russian combatants to some unspecified units in Trebinje and to the paramilitary group of the "White Eagles", the dispatch and operational subdivision began to be structured in a more organized way. On September 1, 1992, the first unit composed entirely of Russians was formed in Herzegovina, called Русский Добровольческий Отряд or РДО-1 (First Russian Volunteer Unit). The unit consisted of a dozen combatants, reaching a maximum of fifteen at its peak,

⁵⁸ Čekić, S. (2005). *The Aggression Against The Republic Of Bosnia And Herzegovina-Planning, Preparation, Execution*. Vol. II. Institute for the Research of Crimes Against Humanity and International Law, 1007.

⁵⁹ Kuka, E. (2018). *Genocid u Višegradu*. Sarajevo, Izdavač, 63.

⁶⁰ Town in eastern Bosnia, on the border with Serbia.

⁶¹ Komanda 4.PLPBR, *Organ za OB poslove*, 14 April 1993, Inv. No. 9-12943, Arhiv institutazaistrazivanje zlocinaprotiv covjecnosti i medjunarodnog prava u Sarajevu, University of Sarajevo.

commanded by ex-Russian Navy Marine Valery Vlasenko (Валерий Власенко) who had previously fought in Transnistria, in the Bender sector.⁶²

The arrival of the Russian combatants in Bosnia was organized by Cossack captain Александр Кравченко, who described in an interview with Nedim Hasić, quoted by Kuka, their process of joining the fighting units: "They gave us passports, it was easy through tourist companies, they bought a ticket to Belgrade, and they were already waiting for us in Belgrade. There they put us in hotels, and then transported us to Bosnia. Later, when larger detachments of volunteers arrived, buses came to pick them up."⁶³ It emerges also that Yugoslav and Republika Srpska intelligence services were aware of the arrival of the Russian combatants, but they never took action to stem or stop the event.⁶⁴

It is unclear whether the passports referred just above are to be considered forgeries or simply whether the Republika Srpska Bureau was involved in helping the combatants in the process of applying for passports and various visas.

Organizational support in Russia to mobilization of combatants

Organizational assistance in Russia to the Serbs was provided by various people and organizations:

- The National-Republican Party of Russia (Национально-Республиканская



Партия России - НРПР) of Nikolai Nikolaevich Lysenko (Никола́й Никола́евич Лысе́нко), one of Russia's most influential far-right parties in the early 1990s. Although not avowedly fascist, its program, slogans, writings, and rallies of its leader hint at overtly fascist positions.⁶⁵

The armed wing of the НРПР, the "Russian Legion" (Русский Легион) took part in several military operations, first in Transnistria and Georgia

⁶² Поликарпов, М. (2014). *Оборона Донбасса: Игорь Стрелков, Ужас Бандеровской Хунты*. Книжный мир, 13.

⁶³ Kuka, E. (2018). *Genocid u Višegradu*. Sarajevo, Izdavač, 76.

⁶⁴ Поликарпов, М. (2014). *Оборона Донбасса: Игорь Стрелков, Ужас Бандеровской Хунты*. Книжный мир, 13.

⁶⁵ Прибыловский, В. (1993). *Словарь новых политических партий и организаций России*. Москва, Панорама, 60.

(Нерсесов, 2008) and later in Bosnia and Herzegovina, led by Lysenko's personal assistant, Sergey Malzev (Сергей Мальцев).⁶⁶

- The National-Popular Party (Народно-Социальная Партия - НСП) of Yuri Belyaev (Юрий Беляев), an avowedly fascist party,⁶⁷ organized the transfer to Bosnia and Herzegovina of several dozen combatants, who went to form a detachment called "the Russian National Legion" (Русского Национального Легиона).⁶⁸ Belyaev and the Russian National Legion will be more thoughtfully analyzed in the third chapter.



- The Russian National Unity (Русское национальное единство - РНЕ) created by Alexandr Petrovich Barkashov (Алекса́ндр Петро́вич Баркашóв).⁶⁹ Not necessarily describable as a political party, but rather as a neo-Nazi paramilitary group (and note, not fascist, but Nazi as declared by Barkashov himself "Do not call me fascist, I'm a Nazi").⁷⁰ Men recruited by the РНЕ and specifically by Yaroslav Yastrebov (Ярослав Ястребов), a lieutenant of Barkashov, later purged from the group and physically eliminated by his former comrades, were sent to Bosnia in early February



⁶⁶ Levin, I. (1995). *Neopanslavism: The Russian-Serbian relationship*. In S. Bianchini & S. Paul (Eds.), *The Yugoslav War, Europe and the Balkans: How to achieve security?* (1st ed., pp. 73–82). Ravenna, Longo Editore, 75.

⁶⁷ Прибыловский, В. (1993). *Словарь новых политических партий и организаций России*. Москва, Панорама, 57.

⁶⁸ Williams, C. J. (12 April 1993). Cold Cash Fuels Russian Fighting Spirit in Bosnia: Mercenaries: Some battling alongside rebel Serbs are ex-soldiers. But many simply needed a job. *Los Angeles Times*.

⁶⁹ Прибыловский, В. (1993). *Словарь новых политических партий и организаций России*. Москва, Панорама, 114.

⁷⁰ Levin, I. (1995). *Neopanslavism: The Russian-Serbian relationship*. In S. Bianchini & S. Paul (Eds.), *The Yugoslav War, Europe and the Balkans: How to achieve security?* (1st ed., pp. 73–82). Ravenna, Longo Editore, 75.

1992, among the first to arrive in the country. They later joined the "Czarist Wolves" (Царские волки) detachment, that we are going to introduce and analyze in the next sub-chapter, and then formed an independent one of their own.⁷¹

The Tsar's wolves arrive in Bosnia and Herzegovina

On November 1, 1992, the Second Russian Volunteer Detachment (Русский Добровольческий Отряд - РДО-2), better known by the battle name "Tsar's Wolves" (Царские волки), was formed in Višegrad, on the banks of the Drina River.⁷² The detachment became part of the army of Republika Srpska (VRS), framed in the Višegrad Brigade and operating as a sabotage unit.⁷³ Their headquarters were in Okolištima, a hamlet of the Višegrad municipality on the left bank of the Drina.⁷⁴

In the documentary "Anđeo sa gore Zaglavak" (Angel from the Mount Zaglavak), at minute 1:30 Lieutenant Colonel Luka Dragičević, commander of the VRS 2nd Podrinje Light Infantry Brigade, describes the arrival of the new Russian combatants in November 1992 "Sometime in the first half of November 1992, the first group of Russian volunteers arrived, 12 of them, young and apparently it could not be said that any of them was older than 20 years, although it turned out that there were some who were older".⁷⁵

The name "Tsar's Wolves" was given by the monarchists/ Tsarists who fought in the ranks of the detachment, also bearing the Russian imperial flag, black, yellow and white with the imperial eagle in the center.⁷⁶

The РДО-2 was commanded by Siberian Alexander Mukharev (Александр Мухарев), battle name "Ac" ("Ace"), who, like several of his fellow detachment members, had combat experience from deployment in Transnistria.⁷⁷ In fact, many of these combatants had fought against Moldovan units near Kitskany and Bender, in the

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Kuка, E. (2018). *Genocid u Višegradu*. Sarajevo, Izdavač, 64.

⁷³ Поликарпов, М. (2014). *Оборона Донбасса: Игорь Стрелков, Ужас Бандеровской Хунты*. Книжный мир, 16.

⁷⁴ Kuка, E. (2018). *Genocid u Višegradu*. Sarajevo, Izdavač, p. 64.

⁷⁵ Православни филм-Не Кради Отаџбину (2014). *Анђео са горе Заглавак-Анђео са горе Заглавак-АНГЕЛЫ СА ГОРЫ ЗАГЛАВАК*. [Video].

⁷⁶ Поликарпов, М. (2014). *Оборона Донбасса: Игорь Стрелков, Ужас Бандеровской Хунты*. Книжный мир, 14.

⁷⁷ Гиркин, И. (1999). Игорь Гиркин. Боснийский дневник. Спецназ России.

Transnistrian region, between the spring and summer of 1992.⁷⁸ Мухарев's deputy commander in the РДО-2 was Igor Girkin (Игорь Гиркин), battle name " Shooter " ("Стрелков "), recently famous as one of the commanders of the Donbas separatist forces, as we will see better in the third chapter of this thesis. A convinced royalist, in Bosnia he was called " Tsarist Officer " ("Царский офицер ") by his Serbian comrades-in-arms because of his ideological conviction and stern poise.⁷⁹

Members of РДО-2 received uniforms and weapons from Serbian arsenals.⁸⁰ Mukharev obtained first-rate combat equipment from the command of the 5th Podrinje Light Infantry Brigade of the Republika Srpska Army.⁸¹ As stated in a document dated February 20, 1993, this was the equipment reserved for the "Tsar's Wolves":

⁷⁸ Поликарпов, М. (2014). *Оборона Донбасса: Игорь Стрелков, Ужас Бандеровской Хунты*. Книжный мир, 14.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Kuka, E. (2018). *Genocid u Višegradu*. Sarajevo, Izdavač, 65.

⁸¹ Komanda 5. PLPBR (20 February 1993). *Spisak naoružanja koje duži "As" sa svojim ljudima*, Inv. br. 9-12944, Arhiv institutazaistravanje zlocinaprotiv covjecnosti i medjunarodnog prava u Sarajevu, University of Sarajevo.

KOMANDA 5. POBBINJSKE LPBR
Datum: 20.03.1993. Godine

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S P I S A K
NAORUŽANJA KOJE DUŽI "AS" SA SVOJIM LJUDIMA I TO:

1. Puška 7,62mm Automatska	14.konada	sa brojevima
Komplet rapovi i noževi i		696773, 696779, 696775, 696777
sa jednim kompletom municije.		696789, 696790, 696788, 696787
		696785, 403030, 166620, 167003
		166610, 407440,
2. Pištolj 7,65mm M-80	komada - 3.	sa brojevima
Metaka 7,62 mm pištoljskih "	50	297925, 304209, 239916.
3. Pištolj 7,62mm M-57	komada 1.	broj: 239-916
- Metaka 7,62mm pištoljskih	16.	
4. MB 82mm M-31 kompl. sa priborom	kom. 2.	Broj: 19-21, 438.
Municija 82mm. za MB	kom. 30.	
5. Kombinezoni maskirni	komada 12.	
6. Zavoј prve pomoći	komada 30.	
7. Ašovčiči sklapanjući	komada 8.	
8. Kapa planinarska	kom. 5.	
Prsluk maskirni	kom. 10.	
Vjetrovka maskirna	kom. 10.	
Pantolone maskirne	kom. 10.	
Podkapa	kom. 11.	
Čošulje	kom. 17.	
Pačviri	kom. 16.	
Čuče duge	kom. 16.	
Transportne vreće	kom. 16.	
Šemperi	kom. 12.	
Čarape vojničke	pari 10.	
Čizme kožne	pari 9.	
Ranac vojnički	kom. 5.	

Izdao: Tonislav Kečković, s.r.

Prinio: "AS"

Tačnost podataka ovjerava:

MINISTARSTVO OBRANE
IZ OBLASTI VOJNOG PROMETA PROTI
NELEGITIMNOG PROMETNOG PRAVA
S A R A Ž E V O

Šifra: 9-12944



TEHNIČAR K-DANTA
Sa zadatku
[Signature]
Milivoje Jakić

That is, 14 automatic rifles, 4 pistols, 2 mortars with 30 rounds of ammunition, and various clothing, following the classic equipment style of Yugoslav and Serbian light infantry brigades.⁸²

The PĐO-2 begins combat operations

Shortly after deploying to the Višegrad area in November 1992, the Second Russian Volunteer Detachment, equipped and armed as seen in the previous paragraph, began operations of reconnaissance and sabotage of the positions of the combatants of the First Glorious Visegrad Brigade of the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Prve slavne višegradske brigade Armije Republike Bosne i Hercegovine), which had tasks

⁸² Ibid.

of fighting the VRS units in the area of Višegrad and protecting the Bosniaks civilians expelled from Višegrad and the villages near the city.⁸³

The first noteworthy military operation began in late November 1992. The PДО-2, under the direct orders of the General Staff Command of the Army of Republika Srpska, began attacking the defense lines of the First Glorious Višegrad Brigade of the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina with the goal: "[...] of capturing the hill of Orlin and 'liberating' the villages: Počivala, Holijak and Pretišće. The mercenaries were given the task of strike groups consisting of nine Russians and one Serb. During the attack on the village of Holijake, on December 3, 1992, the mercenary Nimenko Andrey Nikolaevich (Нименко Андрей Николаевич) was killed, and Igor Kazakovskiy (Игорь Казаковский) was seriously wounded".⁸⁴ During the battle the "Tsar's Wolves" were surrounded and targeted by ARBiH sniper fire.⁸⁵

In December 1992 the PДО-2 reached the number of 14 personnel and began to encounter some internal problems.⁸⁶ As is often the case in units not directly linked to the classical military hierarchy of regular armies, thus in volunteer or mercenary units where combat participation is effectively "voluntary," Russian combatants began to have problems in choosing their commander.⁸⁷ The fact that they had lost two comrades-in-arms during the first military operation, as well as the presence of several members with superior education and technically suited to assume the role of commander,⁸⁸ undoubtedly threw fuel on the fire.

According to Strelkov's testimony in Polikrapov's book Russian combatants in that period were mainly employed to improve the morale of the Serb militias. Surely for some components of the Republika Srpska leadership, the idea was to exploit for propaganda purposes any kind of support from abroad, even in small numbers as in the case of the Russian combatant's case. It must be emphasized that, as we are going to see a little further in the chapter, the reality was often quite different from the theory. Serbian and

⁸³ Kuka, E. (2018). *Genocid u Višegradu*. Sarajevo, Izdavač, 66.

⁸⁴ Tafro, A. (2014). *Ruski i grčki plaćenici u ratu u Bosni i Hercegovini*. Sarajevo, Author's own publication, 42.

⁸⁵ Гиркин, И. (1999). Игорь Гиркин. Боснийский дневник. *Спецназ России*.

⁸⁶ Поликарпов, М. (2014). *Оборона Донбасса: Игорь Стрелков, Ужас Бандеровской Хунты*. Книжный мир, p. 15.

⁸⁷ Ibid. P. 15-16.

⁸⁸ Гиркин, И. (9 November 2000). Игорь Гиркин. Боснийский дневник. *Спецназ России*

Russian units repeatedly struggled to find a way to cooperate. In some cases the RDO went so far as to accuse Serbian fellow soldiers of deliberately avoiding giving them combat support, thus leading to the deaths or serious injuries of Russian combatants.⁸⁹ Can be supposed that, at least for some, Russian intervention might have had a "morale boost" meaning for the Serbian militias, but surely this was not the goal of the Russian combatants, who if anything, were interested in helping the Serbs in combat, but not in serving as moral support.

The Cossack Detachment

In late 1992 the Republika Srpska Army High Command had the idea of activating a new unit of Russians, specifically Cossacks, in Višegrad.⁹⁰

In 1992 a Cossack named Alexander Zagrebov (Александр Загребов) had distinguished himself in combat on the Serbian Krajina front. Contacted by Republika Srpska authorities, Zagrebov helped set up a detachment of about 50 men, all Cossacks⁹¹, from the Volga, Rostov, and Moscow regions. On January 1, 1993, the unit officially became part of the Republika Srpska Army order of battle, on the Višegrad front and in support of Serb units on the Goražde and Srebrenica fronts.⁹² The unit was named "First Cossack" (1-й Казачий), led by Zagrebov, and from January 1, 1993 went to reinforce the РДО-2.⁹³ The Cossack detachment, as the "Tsar's Wolves", had also been designated as a light infantry unit with sabotage and reconnaissance assignments.⁹⁴

Between the two detachments, however, there was already bad blood early on. First, pay was different between Russians and Cossacks: a Cossack was generally paid 400 German Marks (DM) per month, while a Russian private soldier was paid 150DM per

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Поликарпов, М. (2014). *Оборона Донбасса: Игорь Стрелков, Ужас Бандеровской Хунты*. Книжный мир, 16.

⁹¹ The ethno-national implications of this Cossack unit will be explained and explored in depth in chapter three of this thesis.

⁹² Заплатин, В. (31 March 2004). Казаки среди добровольцев на Балканах в конце XX века. *Русская народная линия*.

⁹³ Tafro, A. (2014). Ruski i grčki plaćenici u ratu u Bosni i Hercegovini. Sarajevo, Author's own publication, 43-44.

⁹⁴ Kuka, E. (2018). *Genocid u Višegradu*. Sarajevo, Izdavač, 68.

month and an officer 300DM.⁹⁵ Although it has not been possible to retrieve sources explaining why there was this difference in pay, it can be assumed, however, that since the wages of Russian combatants⁹⁶ were paid by the Republika Srpska authorities, and since there is at least one testimony that it was the president of Republika Srpska Karadžić himself who strongly wanted the involvement of Cossack combatants,⁹⁷ it is possible that this had led to a substantial difference in pay.

Just about the pay of the Russian combatants, it is noteworthy that all Bosnian sources coming from the side of Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina that it has been possible to retrieve, refer to the Russian combatants as "Mercenaries," despite the fact that they never refer to how much they were paid, neither in absolute terms nor by comparing the pay of the Russians with the Serb soldiers. On the other on the other hand, in the memoirs of the combatants, in their diaries or in sources close to the Serbian side, much emphasis is placed on how symbolic the combatants' compensation was and they are referred to solely as "volunteers".

The second reason of the tension between the Cossack and the Russian detachments was that the former detachment was immediately given a BRDM Armored Personnel Carrier (APC), while the latter would never receive any, giving the impression that they were considered inferior fighters.⁹⁸ For these reasons, among rivalry in carrying out their almost identical combat tasks, their joint operations did not work particularly well.⁹⁹

Right from the start the "First Cossack" was sent on a mission that was controversial to say the least. On January 12, 1993, the Cossack detachment was assigned an operation to attack the village of Tvrtkoviće, near Višegrad and make it "scorched earth".¹⁰⁰ The village was entirely looted and set on fire.¹⁰¹ A Cossack combatant named Ganievsky

⁹⁵ Levin, I. (1995). *Neopanslavism: The Russian-Serbian relationship*. In S. Bianchini & S. Paul (Eds.), *The Yugoslav War, Europe and the Balkans: How to achieve security?* (1st ed., pp. 73–82). Ravenna, Longo Editore, 76.

⁹⁶ Поликарпов, М. (2014). *Оборона Донбасса: Игорь Стрелков, Ужас Бандеровской Хунты*. Книжный мир, 16.

⁹⁷ *Serbian Epics* (1992). London, BBC. [Video].

⁹⁸ Поликарпов, М. (2014). *Оборона Донбасса: Игорь Стрелков, Ужас Бандеровской Хунты*. Книжный мир, 16.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

¹⁰⁰ Kuca, E. (2018). *Genocid u Višegradu*. Sarajevo, Izdavač, 68.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

Vasily Viktorovich (Ганиевский Василий Викторович) lost his life in the operation.¹⁰² Testimony to the operation can be read in an official letter from the VRS 2nd Podrinje Light Infantry Brigade sent to the Drina Corps Command of the Republika Srpska Army on the 13th of January 1993, where an official request was made for a day of leave for some Cossack combatants intent on taking part in the funeral of their comrade who died in combat.¹⁰³ The letter read, "On January 12, 1993, we carried out combat operations, which we informed you about. In that action, we had wounded and died, and one of the killed combatants is also a Cossack. Considering that 13 Cossack combatants were in the Skela Brigade last year, our Cossack combatants are asking for 13 combatants from Skelani to come to Višegrad for the funeral. The funeral will take place in Višegrad on January 14, 1993 at 1:00 PM".¹⁰⁴ In addition to this, the correspondence just cited suggests how in addition to the "First Cossack", other Cossacks were deployed in other areas of operations (such as Skelani as reported in the letter) in other units at the same time, of which, unfortunately, no sources could be found.

In the Report on the deployment of the 2nd Podrinje Light Infantry Brigade command sent to the command of the Drina Corps of the army of the Republika Srpska on 20 January 1993 reads, among other things: "Intervention company, Cossack platoon and Russian platoon are deployed in the area of Okolišta / Home / and are engaged for intervention and execution of active b/d." ¹⁰⁵

After the first operation in Tvrtkoviće, commander Zagrebov was wounded in combat and transferred to the military hospital in Užice, returning to Russia after making a full recovery.¹⁰⁶ In his place, Trofimov Mikhail Viktorovich (Трофимов Михаил Викторович) took command of the detachment. With the losses suffered by both the "First Cossack" and the PДО-2, in March 1993 there was an attempt of merging the two units into a new

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Komanda 2. PLPBR (13 January 1993). *Oslobađanje kozaka za sahranu*, Inv. br. 9-12945, Arhiv institutazaistrazivanje zlocinaprotiv covjecnosti i medjunarodnog prava u Sarajevu, University of Sarajevo.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Komanda 2. PLPBR (20 January 1993). *Linija dodira- raspored naših snaga*, Inv. No. 9-4846, Arhiv institutazaistrazivanje zlocinaprotiv covjecnosti i medjunarodnog prava u Sarajevu, University of Sarajevo.

¹⁰⁶ Kuka, E. (2018). *Genocid u Višegradu*. Sarajevo, Izdavač, 69.

single detachment called the "Second United Russian Volunteer Detachment."¹⁰⁷ Given the bad blood already running between the two units, tensions continued to rise.¹⁰⁸ The situation came to a climax when deciding who should lead the detachment, with a strong rivalry between Alexander Mukharev of the PДО-2 and Viktorovich of the "First Cossack".¹⁰⁹ The situation ended in bloodshed when a group of Cossack combatants, under orders from Viktorovich, attempted to assassinate Mukharev.¹¹⁰ The commander of the PДО-2 survived the attack and according to some sources fled to Russia shortly afterwards¹¹¹ according to others, he was discharged and moved to Višegrad as a civilian.¹¹² Following this event, most of the members of the "Tsar's Wolves" were transferred to the Tuzla operations sector.¹¹³ In any case, what can be seen from this series of events just analyzed is that the Russian combatants were far from being a tightly knit group united by ideological motivation. To even call the tension between the two detachments a rivalry is reductive considering the attempted murder of a fellow combatant and compatriot.

With the transfer of PДО-2 members, the Cossacks remained the only unit composed solely of Russian combatants in the Višegrad area of operations. At this point the "First Cossack " was divided into two platoons, each led by its own Ataman, the traditional Cossack rank for the commander of a Cossack military and tribal unit. One of these was the Don Cossack Gennady Kotov (Геннадий Котов), also a veteran of the Transnistria war.¹¹⁴ His platoon successfully completed several sabotage operations, but after repeating a sabotage action several times in the same sector, he was killed in combat and some of his comrades were wounded.¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁷ Tafro, A. (2014). *Ruski i grčki plaćenici u ratu u Bosni i Hercegovini*. Sarajevo, Author's own publication, 53.

¹⁰⁸ Поликарпов, М. (2014). *Оборона Донбасса: Игорь Стрелков, Ужас Бандеровской Хунты*. Книжный мир, 17.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Кука, Е. (2018). *Genocid u Višegradu*. Sarajevo, Izdavač, 70.

¹¹¹ Tafro, A. (2014). *Ruski i grčki plaćenici u ratu u Bosni i Hercegovini*. Sarajevo, Author's own publication, 53.

¹¹² Поликарпов, М. (2014). *Оборона Донбасса: Игорь Стрелков, Ужас Бандеровской Хунты*. Книжный мир, 18.

¹¹³ Кука, Е. (2018). *Genocid u Višegradu*. Sarajevo, Izdavač, 71.

¹¹⁴ Заплатин, В. (31 March 2004). Казаки среди добровольцев на Балканах в конце XX века. *Русская народная линия*.

¹¹⁵ Поликарпов, М. (2014). *Оборона Донбасса: Игорь Стрелков, Ужас Бандеровской Хунты*. Книжный мир, 17.

In March 1993, the composition of the Cossack detachment changed dramatically. The Republika Srpska Army command imposed on foreign combatants detachments under its command a rotation of up to two months of operational employment on the battlefield, after imposing them to leave the battlefields for a certain time.¹¹⁶ In early March, therefore, a new group of thirty mostly Cossack combatants reached Višegrad from Moscow, Rostov-on-Don, St. Petersburg, and Siberia. Many of these were on their first active combat service.¹¹⁷ By the rules of the Cossack social-military hierarchy, men on their first combat deployment, called in Cossack jargon "Мужик" (mužik, more or less villager in the sense of civilian) must be assigned to specific training units. Therefore, the detachment was divided into three groups: the Cossacks, the mužik and a mixed group (this last one for numeric needs).¹¹⁸

On April 12, 1993, members of the "Second United Russian Volunteer Detachment," under the orders of Viktorovich, attacked the positions of the First Glorious Višegrad Brigade of the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina on the Zaglavak and Stolac mountains.¹¹⁹ As reported in an interview of "Mreža - politički magazine" with a Russian ex-combatant, "At 7:15 a.m., the battle on Zaglavak Mountain began. Somewhat earlier, the battle began on the Stolac mountain, where Vladimir Sofanov, Konstantin and Dmitry Popov were killed."¹²⁰ In the same offensive Alexander Kravchenko (Александр Кравченко), one of the most respected and experienced Russian veteran combatants in the area, was seriously wounded in combat by shrapnel.¹²¹

That of Zaglavak and Stolac, is considered one of the toughest battles for Republika Srpska Army forces on the Višegrad Front.¹²² Heavy ARBiH mortar shelling against the positions of Russian combatants, casualties, wounded, and especially the lack of tactical support from Serbian units, brought the detachment to a new critical point.¹²³ A new crisis over the unit's command led to an irreparable internal split: several combatants

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 18.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 18.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 19.

¹¹⁹ Kuka, E. (2018). *Genocid u Višegradu*. Sarajevo, Izdavač, 75.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 71.

¹²¹ Ibid., 72.

¹²² Гиркин, И. (9 November 2000). Игорь Гиркин. Боснийский дневник. Спецназ России.

¹²³ Поликарпов, М. (2014). *Оборона Донбасса: Игорь Стрелков, Ужас Бандеровской Хунты*. Книжный мир, 19.

left Bosnia for good to return to Russia, others moved to the Sarajevo front, where fighting continued to intensify. Only a few Russians remained in the Višegrad sector, being incorporated into Serb units of the Army of Republika Srpska.¹²⁴ As we just saw, mutual suspicion between the Russian and Cossack detachments had now reached its peak, leading to a total inability (or unwillingness) to operate together in the same theater of battle. This further confirms what was pointed out just above, namely how much the Russian ultranationalist narrative (which we will see in detail in the next chapter) was in fact, precisely, just propaganda, and how the few Russian combatants were in fact very disunited among the various units, especially between Russians and Cossacks.

Further confirmation of the recognition of the presence of the Cossack detachment by the authorities of the Republika Srpska can be found in a fragment of the video reportage "Serbian epics" by Polish director Pawel Pawlikowski (1992). In this reportage produced by the BBC, the reporter (and director of the video), offers an up-close look at Republika Srpska's highest offices and moments of daily life on the Serb battle lines. For our interest, from minute 30:20, Republika Srpska President Radovan Karadžić and controversial Russian writer Эдуард Вениаминович Савенко, known to most under the pseudonym Eduard Limonov, exchange views on the valor of Serbian troops. Between minute 36:30 and minute 38:00 the conversation between the two is as follows (I quote the dialogue in full here): << L: "Fifteen countries against you... And you resist. I repeat again, we Russians we should take example from you." L: "There are people of my blood, of my region that they really admire you (Serbs)... I found the right word now, that is admiration." L: "Everybody when I was in the front... everywhere, Serbs ask when the Cossacks will come. They want to [come], the only problem is money..." K: "we can resolve this, that's not a problem." L: "... they are poor..." K: "I think that in the next few days 400 (Cossacks) will come. We already paid some... tickets.">>¹²⁵

Speaking of his time in Višegrad, before being transferred to Tuzla with the rest of the РДО-2, Russian combatant Igor Girkin reported this in an interview with the Srpska.ru

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Serbian Epics (1992). N.d., BBC. [Video].

portal, a Russian website of ultranationalist and panslavist orientation: " We were dilettantes then, but we all really wanted to fight, probably even more than those Serbs who surrounded us until then. We performed those tasks that in that area, in Višegrad, no one could do anymore. No one but us could do the reconnaissance. From that point of view, we were the unit with the highest combat capability in the Second Podrinje Light Infantry Brigade".¹²⁶

Sarajevo and Tuzla Frontlines

As seen in the previous paragraph, part of the "Tsar's Wolves" had been transferred to the Tuzla sector of operations, where positional warfare was underway between February and March 1993.¹²⁷ The РДО-2 were assigned with assault force tasks, or rather "tactical offensive operations tasks".¹²⁸

The Russian combatants chose as their commander a certain " Edik " ("Эдик"), a senior Soviet Army veteran with experience in Afghanistan who arrived in Bosnia in late 1992.¹²⁹ In the past, Эдик had been head of a reconnaissance-artillery battalion of the Airborne Forces (Воздушно-десантные войска - ВДВ; Air-landing Forces) and had received the Order of the Red Star and the medal "За отвагу" (For Courage).¹³⁰ The detachment remained in the vicinity of Tuzla until the end of March, carrying out various Shock and Awe and disruptive operations against the ARBiH forces.¹³¹ The equipment and numerical composition of the unit remained about the same as in Višegrad: no armored personnel carriers, one mortar, and mainly light infantry brigade equipment and structure.¹³²

In early April 1993 the unit was relocated to Ilidža, a municipality directly bordering that of Sarajevo substantially where the Bosnian capital's famous international airport, the

¹²⁶ Gorazdeonline.ba (4 December 2019). Ko su ruski dobrovoljci i plaćenici koji su ratovali u Višegradu: Sudionici zvjerstava i pljački. *Gorazdeonline.ba*.

¹²⁷ Поликарпов, М. (2014). *Оборона Донбасса: Игорь Стрелков, Ужас Бандеровской Хунты*. Книжный мир, 19.

¹²⁸ Tafro, A. (2014). *Ruski i grčki plaćenici u ratu u Bosni i Hercegovini*. Sarajevo, Author's own publication, 57.

¹²⁹ Поликарпов, М. (2014). *Оборона Донбасса: Игорь Стрелков, Ужас Бандеровской Хунты*. Книжный мир, 20.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid., 21.

¹³² Ibid.

site of heavy fighting in 1993, is located. They remained in this area for only a few days, unable to come to an understanding with the Serb units and command there.¹³³

After a short time, they were then transferred to the Goražde sector of operations (in eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina), specifically to the village of Podgrab, where the PДО-2 was placed under the Prača command where it conducted numerous operations against ARBiH units in the Goražde area. In late May 1993, after the required two months of service, Эдик left Bosnia and Herzegovina to return to Russia. In his place, captain Mikhail Trofimov (Михаил Трофимов), also a veteran of the war in Afghanistan and experienced in airborne units, took command. A week after arriving in Bosnia, Трофимов died in his first combat operation on June 7, 1993, in a sabotage mission beyond enemy ARBiH lines.¹³⁴

After this last military action, a certain calm fell on the front for the PДО-2's Russian combatants the rest of the summer, such that in August 1993 the "Tsar's Wolves" detachment suspended operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The PДО-2's black-yellow-white Tsarist battle flag was deposited in the Holy Trinity Church in Belgrade, and the four remaining soldiers in the unit transported Trofimov's corpse to Odessa.¹³⁵

The Wolves and the Legionaries

In the winter/spring of 1993, as relations between the PДО-2 and the "First Cossack " were reaching their critical point, a new unit of Russian combatants had begun to be established in the village of Skelani, positioned along the course of the Drina on the border with Serbia and very close to the village of Srebrenica.

In a mostly classified ICTY document, a JNA reservist present in Skelani at that time reports the following about the Special Unit Corps present in the area in 1993: "In Skelani the Special Unit Corps was deployed. The Special Unit Corps consisted of: 63rd Parachute Brigade with about 40 men, 72nd Special Brigade from Belgrade with about 50-60 men, the Guards Brigade, 80 Russian volunteers, one or two Chetnik companies from the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) and if I recall well there was also the Special Police

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Гиркин, И. (9 November 2000). Игорь Гиркин. Боснийский дневник. Спецназ России.

¹³⁵ Поликарпов, М. (2014). Оборона Донбасса: Игорь Стрелков, Ужас Бандеровской Хунты. Книжный мир, 21.

from Serbia possibly from Special Operation Unit JS or Special Anti-Terrorist but I would not be so sure about this. Last I remember that before going to Skelani we (my unit) had to remove our patch on the uniform to be replaced with the patch of the VRS. The order was that we did not have to carry with us any document, and I mean military ID, dog (identify) tags, and more precisely nothing that could suggest that we were coming from Serbia".¹³⁶

It was a new paramilitary detachment called Russian National Legion (Русский Национальный Легион) linked to Yuri Belyaev PSP party.¹³⁷ This "legion" was united and animated even more than the other detachments by a great closeness to monarchist and fascist ideals.¹³⁸ Led by Alexander Alexandrov (Александр Александров), a veteran of the war in Transnistria, the Russian National Legion took part in the fighting in the siege of the city of Srebrenica together with Serbian troops and a unit of Greek volunteers. On May 21, 1993, after weeks of fighting, the commander of the unit, Alexandrov, was mortally wounded by the explosion of an anti-personnel mine. This event, together with the stress of the intense fighting led the Legion to disband permanently, with most of the group's members returning to Russia.¹³⁹

It should be noted that many of the combatants we had a chance to analyze until now were returning to Russia after the two-month rotations imposed on them by the VRS, even though it couldn't be found in any of the sources that the return to Russia was imposed by the Republika Srpska army authorities. It was not possible to find particular accounts of the motivations behind this choice so common among the combatants, but it could be ascribed to the often young age of the combatants, often their first experience on the battlefield, and the extreme psychological conditions imposed by a conflict such as the one in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This, all the more so considering the

¹³⁶ Coo, P. & Pastore Stocchi, P. (2009). Public redacted version of K73 statement. International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia. Witness Information Nr. 04654681.

¹³⁷ Williams, C. J. (12 April 1993). Cold Cash Fuels Russian Fighting Spirit in Bosnia: Mercenaries: Some battling alongside rebel Serbs are ex-soldiers. But many simply needed a job. Los Angeles Times.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Поликарпов, М. (2014). *Оборона Донбасса: Игорь Стрелков, Ужас Бандеровской Хунты*. Книжный мир, 21.

difficulty in cooperating with the Serb forces and the tension between the Russian and Cossack detachments.

Other units with Russian combatants in Bosnia in the period between 1993 and 1994

In addition to the PĐO and Cossack detachments, the activity of several hundred other Russian combatants was highlighted in the period between '93 and '94 on various fronts of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In January 1993, near Mount Žuč, ARBiH forces reported the presence of more than 200 Russian combatants among the ranks of the Sarajevo-Romanija Corps of the Army of Republika Srpska, while in February 1993 an entire detachment of 600 Russian combatants arrived in Kalinovik, while a so-called "special" group of 17 Russian combatants identified as former members of the special forces arrived in Zvornik, on the border with the Republic of Serbia, and was immediately transferred to the Srebrenica sector of operations, where one of the most intense offensives of 1993 was underway.

¹⁴⁰

The Bosnian daily *Oslobođenje*, reports that in the early months of 1993 some 2,500 Russians were simultaneously present in Bosnia and Herzegovina among the ranks of the army of Republika Srpska, 150 of them on Mount Majevisa near Tuzla.¹⁴¹ It is also reported that in the offensive against Teocak in March 1993, Serbian artillery pieces were operated by Russian combatants.¹⁴² Although the units they belonged to are not specified at the tactical level (units such as regiment, brigade, or detachment these Russian combatants were part of), from the tasks they were assigned to, such as the arming of artillery pieces and the number of combatants makes one imagine that most of the time, they were not referring to the Cossack and PĐO detachments mentioned earlier.¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Čekić, S. (2005). *The Aggression Against The Republic Of Bosnia And Herzegovina-Planning, Preparation, Execution: Vol. II*. Institute for the Research of Crimes Against Humanity and International Law, 1008.

¹⁴¹ Bikić, M. (5 March 1993). Partizani (opet) na Ozrenu. *Oslobođenje*. p.4.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Čekić, S. (2005). *The Aggression Against The Republic Of Bosnia And Herzegovina-Planning, Preparation, Execution: Vol. II*. Institute for the Research of Crimes Against Humanity and International Law, 1009.

In early 1994, again in the *Oslobođenje* newspaper, reference is made to the arrival of 2,000 Russian combatants in Ilijaš, northwest of Sarajevo, and in Grbavica, a district of the Bosnian capital.¹⁴⁴

Former member of the special forces of the Army of the Russian Federation Igor Vasilievich Guskov trained special units of the Army of Republika Srpska near Bijeljina between 1993 and 1994. In October 1994 he was redeployed to northwestern Bosnia, to Drvar, and took part in the Mount Grabez offensive near the town of Bihać.¹⁴⁵

End of greater Russian combatants' involvement

By the end of 1993, the involvement of Russian combatants in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina began to decline in terms of numerical involvement. New arrivals dropped dramatically, and with the disbanding of the "Tsar's Wolves" many of the combatants who had been present on the front returned to Russia.¹⁴⁶ For a few months the few remaining members of the PДО-2 (although there are no official figures on the actual number of members of this new detachment) merged into a new detachment, the PДО-3. This unit operated mainly between Ilidža and Sarajevo from fall 1993 to fall 1994, often in joint operations with the paramilitary group "Beli Vukovi" (White Wolves), even though their involvement is almost not covered at all, perhaps because of the very slight number of combatants of this detachment. This very group would become the last landing place of Russian combatants in Bosnia, when the last PДО also disbanded in the late 1994.¹⁴⁷

The information that could be retrieved for this paragraph comes almost entirely from a blog created and edited by a former member of the unit itself. Since it has not been possible to find other sources, I have decided to rely only on this one and expose its contents, but for what regards the White Wolves it would be possible to extend the search enormously being able to retrieve other resources.

¹⁴⁴ *Oslobođenje*, (1 March 1994). Ruski plaćenici u BiH. *Oslobođenje*. p.6

¹⁴⁵ Čekić, S. (2005). *The Aggression Against The Republic Of Bosnia And Herzegovina-Planning, Preparation, Execution*: Vol. II. Institute for the Research of Crimes Against Humanity and International Law, 1008.

¹⁴⁶ Поликарпов, М. (2014). *Оборона Донбасса: Игорь Стрелков, Ужас Бандеровской Хунты*. Книжный мир, 23.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

The "White Wolves" were a special unit of the VRS formed on Mount Jahorina (near Sarajevo) in May 1992 as a scout detachment.¹⁴⁸ The detachment was founded by Miloš Vukadin known by the battle name of "Švabo". This first commander was killed in early 1993 and replaced by Srdjan Knežević, who would become (in)famous himself by commanding both the Republika Srpska Army's "Jahorina" battalion and directly commanding the "White Wolves" detachment.¹⁴⁹ This unit, although initially conceived as a high readiness reconnaissance detachment of the 1st Romanija Brigade, in December 1994 and 1995 its members, all veterans from Serbia, Russia and generally from Orthodox-majority countries, spent two months of intense training on Mount Jahorina to be converted into a special forces group of reconnaissance-objective acquisition. This task consists of getting as close as possible to enemy positions, often as close as 20, 30 meters, and from there directing artillery fire on the enemy positions. After the artillery barrage, these combatants would storm the enemy positions, engaging in hand-to-hand combat.¹⁵⁰

During the training period on Mount Jahorina the "White Wolves", also reinforced by the Russians who remained after the disbandment of PĐO-3 and earlier units, reached as many as 70 combatants. The detachment's first major battle was that of Mala Orlica (a high ground in Sarajevo cantonment) in May 1995, after which, between 14 wounded, one killed and several discharged, the number of personnel rose to a total of 30, a number that would not be exceeded again until the end of the war.¹⁵¹

After Mala Orlica the "White Wolves" remained deployed until mid-August 1995 in the Sarajevo sector of operations between the Trebević Heights and the village of Trnovo, carrying out counteroffensives in defense of the road between Lukavica and Pale. Between late August and mid-September 1995 the "White Wolves" were moved to Trebinje to fight the joint forces of the Croatian Defense Council (Hrvatsko vijeće obrane - HVO. Armed Forces of the Croatian Community of Herzeg-Bosnia) and the Croatian Army. In late September the detachment was transferred back to the Sarajevo-Romanija sector, participating in the last major battle for control of Goražde. The war for the "White Wolves" ended on October 11, 1995 on the slopes of Mount Hum, the high

¹⁴⁸ Belivukovi.com (2022). *Beli Vukovi*.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

ground famous for the presence of the Sarajevo television tower, one of the symbols of the siege of the Bosnian capital.¹⁵²

In the four years of the war the losses of the "White Wolves" amounted to "215 wounded and 18 dead".¹⁵³ Referring instead to the total number of combatants in the unit, in the same blog it is stated that "87 volunteers passed through the unit, of which one was a Greek, a Romanian, a Czech, an Italian, a Frenchman, four Bulgarians and the rest were brothers from Serbia and Russia", thus with a large presence of Russian combatants.¹⁵⁴ In this regard, there is certainly room for more in-depth future analysis of the involvement of combatants of other nationalities among the "White Wolves" and Republika Srpska army forces in general.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

Chapter II

Political and ideological support for Russian combatants in Bosnia

The intervention of Russian combatants in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as we have seen, may not have had an overwhelming numerical impact, but it has had a considerable impact on the nationalist rhetoric of some political groups, both on a larger scale on the general interpretation of the relationship between Serbia and Russia, their shared history and their "destiny." In this sense, the participation of Russian combatants is only the superficial and most manifest part of a strong financial and organizational connection between some political and military forces of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Serbia. Beyond the veil represented by the intervention of combatants lies a series of very close relations between some political entities of these two countries. A real pro-Serbian lobby was present in Russia in the 1990s, with an impressive extension of the spectrum of activities.¹⁵⁵

It should be specified that, especially in the first lines of the next subchapter, reference is made to a number of theoretical and factual elements that for reasons of space and content I have chosen not to analyze in detail in this thesis, as the Pans-Slavist connection between Russia and Serbia in the 1990s and the political and societal structure in both of these two countries.

Presence of ultranationalist Russian politicians in Serbia and Bosnia

With the fall of the Soviet Union, the political landscape of the newly formed Russian Federation was filled with a constellation of neo-fascist and new right radical nationalist political parties, movements and groups. This set of Russian political forces, which are termed "national-patriotic",¹⁵⁶ composed a large part of the political opposition to the El'cin government in the first half of the 1990s.¹⁵⁷ Many of these political groups, in order

¹⁵⁵ Levin, I. (1995). *Neopanslavism: The Russian-Serbian relationship*. In S. Bianchini & S. Paul (Eds.), *The Yugoslav War, Europe and the Balkans: How to achieve security?* (1st ed., pp. 73–82). Ravenna, Longo Editore, 74.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁵⁷ Chafetz, G. (1996). The Struggle for a National Identity in Post-Soviet Russia. *Political Science Quarterly*, 111(4), 661–688.

to gain strength and to discredit the government, constructed a political narrative that took the most rigid and populist features of the Pan-Slavic ideology,¹⁵⁸ including, mainly, the creation of a strong, almost hegemonic, Slavic culture, as opposed to the "Germanic" or "European" culture,¹⁵⁹ and help the "Slavic brothers" in emancipation against the "Turks" descendants of the Ottoman Empire, historical enemy both of the Russian empire and of Serbia.¹⁶⁰ With this construction of an ideological enemy and common historic background, it was possible for these political groups to construct a populist rhetoric that had a considerable effect on younger people and veterans of the Soviet military, the most affected by the crisis that followed the political change from the USSR to the Russian Federation.¹⁶¹

The placement of the figure of the enemy in the "Turks" was, clearly, not accidental. Coincidentally, the rhetoric used by the Serbian forces in constructing the enemy in the Bosnian Muslims was very similar to the one used by the national-patriotic forces and thus allowed for the two sides to come closer.¹⁶² Indeed, the idealized concept of the "historic brotherhood and military alliance between Serbia and Russia" was an easily expendable point in terms of political narrative for both Russian national-patriotic forces and for the Serb nationalists, fostering a closer relationship between these two political realities. Suddenly, being interested in the development of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina became of great importance and political relevance to most of the national-patriotic movements.¹⁶³

The connection between Russian national-patriotic political movements and the Serbian Government began with the final act of the fall of the Soviet Union, between 1991 and 1992 with a series of unofficial visits to Belgrade by first Soviet and then Russian politicians and public figures. Among the first to undertake these visits were Valentin Sergeyevich Pavlov (Валентин Сергеевич Пáвлов), Ruslan Imranovich Khasbulatovt (Руслáн Имранович Хасбулáтовт) Nikolai Ivanovich Ryzhkov (Николай Иванович

¹⁵⁸ Sakwa, R. (2002). *Russian Politics and Society*, 3rd ed. London, Routledge Books, 369.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Shenfield, S. D. (2001). *Russian Fascism: Traditions, Tendencies, Movements*. New York, M.E. Sharpe, p. 234.

¹⁶² Ibid, 80.

¹⁶³ Sakwa, R. (2002). *Russian Politics and Society*, 3rd ed. London, Routledge Books, 178.

Рыжков). Pavlov was the prime minister of the Soviet Union between January and August 1991 and later a banker, but most importantly one of the key figures in the attempted coup of 1991.¹⁶⁴ Khasbulatov was an economist and Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federal Socialist Republic and later of the supreme soviet of the Russian Federation. Was also one of the leading opponents of Russian Federation President Boris Nikolaevič El'cin (Борис Николаевич Ельцин).¹⁶⁵ Ryzhkov was the head of the Economic Department of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union of the Central Committee between 1982 and 1985 and later a leading figure in the Soviet government. In the 1990s he remained in politics in the Russian Federation and especially became the major opponent of El'cin in the 1991 elections.¹⁶⁶

In the case of the three politicians shown above, the dynamic of the visits was always the same: justification of the trip as a book presentation (later revealed to be nonexistent or never marketed), visit along the Adriatic coast, paid for by private companies closely linked to Serbian political elites.¹⁶⁷

Each of these personalities was accompanied to Belgrade by KGB general Nikolai Chetvericov (Николай Четвериков) also director of the agency for copyright protection in the Russian Federation, making it easy to justify visits to Serbia using the motivation of book presentations.¹⁶⁸

These early meetings were followed by many more, by personalities represented by even more extremely nationalist, national-communist, neo-fascist (or neo-nazi), or in general national-patriotic parties or movements. By 1993 there were many visitors, including: Alexander Andreyevich Prokhanov (Алекса́ндр Андрее́вич Проха́нов), editor of the daily Den' (День - Day), famous for being the liaison and communication platform of the major fascist and national-communist political movements and parties and openly

¹⁶⁴ Levin, I. (1995). *Neopanslavism: The Russian-Serbian relationship*. In S. Bianchini & S. Paul (Eds.), *The Yugoslav War, Europe and the Balkans: How to achieve security?* (1st ed., pp. 73–82). Ravenna, Longo Editore, 79.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ А. Батурин & С. Грызунов (6 November 1993). Югославский след российских парламентариев. *Известия*.

anti-Semitic;¹⁶⁹ Aleksandr Gel'evič Dugin (Александр Гельевич Дугин), esotericist philosopher of fascist orientation, founder of the National-Bolshevik Party together with the aforementioned Eduard Limonov. He was and still is a promoter of a "refined mystical Nazism."¹⁷⁰ Eduard Limonov who, as we have seen in the first chapter, visited Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1993 meeting with the president of Republika Srpska Karadžić. Limonov proposed on more than one occasion that the Russian Federation support Serbian efforts at least with a general or by sending an atomic bomb;¹⁷¹ Major-General Viktor Ivanovich Filatov (Виктор Иванович Филатов), who, after his military career, opened a monarchist-fascist-oriented journal called "Military-Historical Journal". He was also "War Minister" of the shadow government prepared by the National Salvation Front (Фронт национального спасения - ФНС) to take control of the government of the Russian Federation in the context of the 1993 Russian Constitutional Crisis. Known to be a staunch anti-Semite;¹⁷² General Vladislav Alekseyevich Achalov (Владислав Алексеевич Ачалов), who was the former commander of a paratroop division in Afghanistan, as of other military units in Europe, and commander of the entire Soviet Airborne Forces Group from 1989 to 1991.¹⁷³

According to Levin "at least one every ten opposition deputies went on a journey to Yugoslavia between the end of 1992 and autumn 1993" often meeting with personalities such as Milošević or Šešelj.¹⁷⁴ As we also saw in the previous chapter, what the Serb hosts sought was often ideological support on which to rest their nationalist rhetoric and, on the other hand, economic and material support for the military effort.¹⁷⁵ Unfortunately, it has not been possible to find sources that would make it possible to

¹⁶⁹ Headley, J. H. (2016). *The Russian Federation and the Conflicts in Former Yugoslavia, 1992 – 1995*. London, University of London Press, 85.

¹⁷⁰ Levin, I. (1995). *Neopanslavism: The Russian-Serbian relationship*. In S. Bianchini & S. Paul (Eds.), *The Yugoslav War, Europe and the Balkans: How to achieve security?* (1st ed., pp. 73–82). Ravenna, Longo Editore, 78.

¹⁷¹ Balkanist.ru (23 December 2019). Эдуард Лимонов: снимаю шляпу перед Петером Хандке. *Балканист*.

¹⁷² Sneider, D. (2 March 1993). Russia Denies Report of Arms Sales to Serbs. *The Christian Science Monitor*.

¹⁷³ Headley, J. H. (2016). *The Russian Federation and the Conflicts in Former Yugoslavia, 1992 – 1995*. London, University of London Press, 86.

¹⁷⁴ Levin, I. (1995). *Neopanslavism: The Russian-Serbian relationship*. In S. Bianchini & S. Paul (Eds.), *The Yugoslav War, Europe and the Balkans: How to achieve security?* (1st ed., pp. 73–82). Ravenna, Longo Editore, 75.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

better understand what the content of these visits was, how long they lasted, and the specific place where they took place; only approximately were they held, at least officially, on the Adriatic coast. There is evidence, however, that by having greater access to Russian journalistic sources of the time a more thorough analysis could be conducted in this regard.

The main political movement connected with close ties to Serbian nationalist political groups was the aforementioned National Salvation Front. It was founded on October 24, 1992, in Moscow, by a conference attended by more than 3,000 communists, socialists, and right-wing nationalists, bringing together, as we have seen, personalities from the most extreme bangs of these political movements united by opposition to the "internationalist" openness and "weak foreign policy" of the Russian government.¹⁷⁶

The political idea of this coalition of forces was defined as "national-patriotism."¹⁷⁷

Only four days after its creation, ФHC was declared unconstitutional by President El'cin, the first political movement to be banned in the Russian Federation since the failed coup of 1991. After the Russian Constitutional Court lifted the declaration of unconstitutionality, ФHC led the military resistance to the September/October 1993 constitutional crisis/coup, in a somewhat paradoxical situation in which a group of nationalists defended parliament from the liberal government's tanks. The Front was later outlawed on October 4, 1993, after the coup failed.¹⁷⁸

The unique "unholy alliance" between communists and Nazi-fascists and the unique mix of Soviet patriotism, populism, and Russian nationalism with hints of the monarchical past attracted a considerable number of voters, although within the front there was a clear conflict over a fundamental decision: to refound the Soviet Union, according to the communists, or to hark back to the tsarist past and declare the re-foundation of the Russian Empire, according to a large part of the ultranationalists.¹⁷⁹

As we saw in the previous chapter, the three political movements that had been

¹⁷⁶ Sakwa, R. (2002). *Russian Politics and Society*, 3rd ed. London, Routledge Books, 179.

¹⁷⁷ Tolz, V. (1992). Russia: Westernizers Continue to Challenge National Patriots. *RFE/RL Research Report*, 1, no. 49: 1-9.

¹⁷⁸ Sakwa, R. (2002). *Russian Politics and Society*, 3rd ed. London, Routledge Books, 178.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, 179.

catalysts for sending Russian combatants to the Bosnian war were part of, or were very close to, the most extreme nationalist fringe of ФHC and were based on the neo-monarchical idea of re-founding the Russian Empire and based part of their nationalist ideology on the concept of "Panslavism".

The origins of the Panslavist ideology

The nationalist political ideology (or even cultural movement) defined as "Panslavism" crystallized, like many other nationalist movements, in the Nineteenth Century as a consequence of the diffusion in academic and literary circles of the ideas proper to Romanticism and, to a certain extent, also as a consequence of the Napoleonic wars and the wars of independence in the Balkans.¹⁸⁰

In Russia, it took hold with defeat in the Crimean War (1853-1856) as a nationalist reaction to aggression and betrayal by Central and Western European states.

Specifically, the ideology was based on the political views of an idealistic separation of "cultural and historical populations," according to which the Slavic people differed from the Germanic-Roman European people. Consequently, the Slavs were to unite and defend themselves from "European" military, cultural, and political oppression.¹⁸¹

This idea spread mainly as a legitimization of Russian expansionist plans for a certain circle of politicians and military men in the 1860s and 1870s and peaked with the Russo-Turkish War (1877-1878). Panslavism, at least in Russia, entered a period of decline until the beginning of World War I in reaction to German imperial expansion and the activity of the "Pangermanic League." With the end of the tsarist era and the beginning of the socialist era in Russia, Panslavism was branded as anti-revolutionary, regarded as a subversive ideology, and consequently banned.¹⁸²

With the socialist interlude in Serbia/Yugoslavia and Russia/Soviet Union, Panslav ideology was banned only to be revived with the collapse of socialism in these countries in the early 1990s.

¹⁸⁰ Halecki, O. (1958). The Renaissance Origin of Panslavism. *The Polish Review*, 3(1/2), 7–19.

¹⁸¹ Tchoubarian, A. (1994). *Nikolai Danilevsky's Russia and Europe*. In Tchoubarian, A. *The European Idea in History in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. 1st ed, p. 1-5.

¹⁸² Ibid.

The "Neopanslavism"

We have seen how the united nationalist-communist front's opposition to the El'cin government was particularly fierce and its main point was to recreate a strong nation (either as the Soviet Union or as the Russian Empire) and sought every opportunity to discredit the Russian government, pointing it out as "Atlanticist" or generally too deferential to the West.¹⁸³

The perfect opportunity came in 1991, when the Federation voted in favor of a series of resolutions approving greater UN intervention in the war in Croatia, criticizing Serbian-led military operations.¹⁸⁴ This, coupled with the decision of the European Community (EC) to recognize the independence of Slovenia and Croatia, led to a wave of resentment among the Russian people, who became increasingly convinced of the loss of importance of their nation and the fragility of their government's foreign policy, almost a puppet in the hands of the United States.¹⁸⁵

This popular sentiment proved to be an excellent opportunity for ФHC and Russian ultranationalist political movements in general, which were not slow to ride the wave by dusting off, rewriting, and instrumentalizing pan-Slavic ideology by making sure to create a "negative consensus" around the Yugoslav question.¹⁸⁶

The ideas and themes to which Russian nationalist rhetoric particularly clung were the glorification of the natural "native warrior" Slavic qualities, the remembrance and glorification of the battles in which Serbs and Russians had fought together under the effigy of the two-faced Byzantine eagle, Russian intervention in aid of the Serbs in the Russo-Turkish war (without considering that the war had nothing to do with helping Serbia). All this had a strong propagandistic character, as the historical events referred to in this glorification of the "Slavic-Orthodox brotherhood" between Serbia and Russia were only the result of careful cherrypicking. In this demonstration of the "manifest destiny" of alliance and cooperation, no reference was made to Serbian collaborationism in World War II and the strained relations between the Soviet Union

¹⁸³ Silber, L., & Little, A. (1997). *Yugoslavia: Death of a Nation*. New York, Penguin Books.

¹⁸⁴ Cohen, L. J. (1994). Russia and the Balkans: Pan-Slavism, Partnership and Power. *International Journal*, 49(4), 814–845.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Levin, I. (1995). *Neopanslavism: The Russian-Serbian relationship*. In S. Bianchini & S. Paul (Eds.), *The Yugoslav War, Europe and the Balkans: How to achieve security?* (1st ed., pp. 73–82). Ravenna, Longo Editore, 81.

and Yugoslavia, let alone proposing a more objective view of the Russo-Turkish war.¹⁸⁷ This selective rewriting of history led to the production of pseudo-scientific papers, even from more than reputable academic bodies, such as the statement by a researcher at the Institute of Slavic and Balkan Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Il'ya Chislov (Илья Числов), that "If we look at European history, we can see how its center moves from South to North: from Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome to the Holy Roman Empire of the German people. Now it is time for the Slavs, it is time to take the leadership of European culture and civilization".¹⁸⁸

According to Levin, the cornerstone of neo-Panslavism would be the typical thesis of the Russian ultranationalist movements of the early 1990s that the West, headed by the United States of America would act in the shadows to establish a new world order controlled by international Jewish capital. This situation would create the essential and perfect conditions for the Russian and Serbian peoples to unite symbiotically and fight a kind of holy war against the United States of America and Europe, in a mutual encouragement to take up arms and resist the Western Zionist order.¹⁸⁹

Neopanslavism as a reaction to the uncertainty and suffering generated by the sudden collapse of Soviet values can be seen as a sub-typology of xenophobia. As is often the case in situations of political or economic crisis, political groups seek to unite the most straggling and fragile bangs of the population with xenophobic and chauvinist rhetoric, generating precisely the ethnic/exclusionary nationalism we have seen Hoffman describes.¹⁹⁰ Uniting an ethnic group by tying it to a geographic territory to which it has a "divine right" and denying ownership of that territory to "foreigners" allows it to construct a sense of identity-based on denying rights to an artificially created "enemy." In this way, by showing negativity toward other ethnicities or other nationalities, one seeks to demonstrate love for one's nation and to push a sense of community based on hatred toward a specially constructed enemy. Nothing new or original as Umberto Eco

¹⁸⁷ Sakwa, R. (2002). *Russian Politics and Society*, 3rd ed. London, Routledge Books., 360

¹⁸⁸ Levin, I. (1995). *Neopanslavism: The Russian-Serbian relationship*. In S. Bianchini & S. Paul (Eds.), *The Yugoslav War, Europe and the Balkans: How to achieve security?* (1st ed., pp. 73–82). Ravenna, Longo Editore, 80.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Hoffmann, S. (1995). *The Crisis of Liberal Internationalism*. *Foreign Policy*, 98, Spring.

himself said, arguing that "The only thing that can unite a nation is its enemies," especially after situations of defeat and in a multi-ethnic context such as the Russian Federation or Yugoslavia.¹⁹¹

This is precisely what happened in Yugoslavia: the artificial creation of the figure of an enemy through the artificial creation of violent contexts between previously perfectly peaceful groups of citizens, regardless of their different ethnicities or nationalities.¹⁹²

The rhetoric of xenophobic hatred (re)inaugurated in Yugoslavia served perfectly to complement the nationalist rhetoric of the Russian far-right political movements: the re-creation of the figure of the Turkish enemy in the contemporary Bosnian community allowed the nationalist parties to base their narrative on the opposition of a broad Slavic ethnic community to the religious enemy that had characterized much of the imperial era.¹⁹³

In addition to simple legitimization, the xenophobic rhetoric and similarity in ethnic variety between Yugoslavia and the Russian Federation also allowed for the creation of worrying scenarios in the short-term future by the Russian nationalist political narrative.¹⁹⁴ This was to make communication to those weak fringes of the population mentioned above even more effective. The multi-ethnic/multinational composition of the state, in particular the coexistence of a strong Slavic/Orthodox and Muslim component in certain regions, made it possible to conjure up scenarios of past wars and inter-ethnic frictions that had long since been dormant but were easily revived.¹⁹⁵ All this together with the unconditional attribution of the responsibility for the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and especially for the suffering of the 'Serbian brothers' to the weakness of the foreign policy of both Gorbačëv and El'cin was a final warning to the Russian people: if the Russian Federation continued to follow weak leaders like El'cin, and to forget the ethnonational identity, a violent collapse of the nation would occur as

¹⁹¹ Eco, U. (2020). *Costruire il nemico*. Milano, La Nave di Teseo, 6.

¹⁹² Gagnon Jr., V. P. (2006). *The Myth of Ethnic War: Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s*. Cornell University Press, p. 35.

¹⁹³ Верховский А., Прибыловский В. And Михайловская Е. (1996). Национал-патриотические организации в России. История, идеология, экстремистские тенденции. Москва, Институт экспериментальной социологии.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Gagnon Jr., V. P. (2006). *The Myth of Ethnic War: Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s*. Cornell University Press, p. 35.

it did in Yugoslavia.¹⁹⁶

As it was written in an editorial of Prokhanov 's newspaper Den' "The Serbian experience is extremely important for us since it is directly connected with Russia's destiny. Today all Russian patriots, all Russian people must engage themselves, strongly and passionately, to pull down the wall between Serbia and Russia. Is not only Serbia that needs this. We ourselves need it most of all. We have to take up the torch of their national revolution and carry it here." ¹⁹⁷

As we have said before, we must remember that these ultranationalist currents arose in a period of extreme social and values crisis among the population. In Russia the mortal wound of national pride coincided with a feeling of 'defeat without suffering', similar to that of the 'Mutilated Victory' that had been the very foundation of Italian proto-fascism in the 1920s.¹⁹⁸ This sentiment had led the Serbs and Russians to feel robbed of the manifest destiny of greatness that had been promised to them by socialist rhetoric, as they had quietly passed from greatness as world powers to 'developing economies'.¹⁹⁹ With these premises, nationalist movements and parties instrumentalized the most radical rhetoric of the Pan Slavist ideology so to have a stronger influence in that part of the Russian society composed of the deluded and lonely minds, both young people deprived of the image of the future and the sense of belonging that they had been promised and that all before them had had, and of ex-servicemen who had fought for a good part of their lives for ideals that had vanished forever from one day to the next, but will see this aspect better in the next chapter. The ФHC was a clear response to this sentiment and neo-pan Slavism was the perfect ideology for extreme right-wing politicians who aspired to achieve control of the country by exploiting the dissatisfaction of the Russian people. Based on these ideological and political assumptions, sending Russian combatants to Serbia was intended to create a new historical precedent that could be glorified and referred to in the nationalist rhetoric of Russia's national-patriotic parties.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁶ Sakwa, R. (2002). *Russian Politics and Society*, 3rd ed. London, Routledge Books, p. 232.

¹⁹⁷ День (10 June 1992). N.d., p. 6.

¹⁹⁸ Rumer, E. B. (1994). *The Ideological Crisis in the Russian Military*. Santa Monica, National Defense Research Institute, 25.

¹⁹⁹ Cohen, L. J. (1994). Russia and the Balkans: Pan-Slavism, Partnership and Power. *International Journal*, 49(4), 814–845T.

²⁰⁰ Sakwa, R. (2002). *Russian Politics and Society*, 3rd ed. London, Routledge Books, 177.

Economic and logistical support to the Russian combatants in Bosnia

In addition to ideological legitimization, the question arises as to how Russian political movements could financially finance the involvement of Russian combatants in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as it was not an operation sponsored by state institutions, let alone a direct involvement of the Army of the Russian Federation.

In this regard, information is even scarcer and more fragmentary than that on the operational involvement of combatants. While official documents of the Army of the Republika Srpska or the ARBiH, newspaper reports, or some (few) academic analyses are present regarding the latter, the economic aspect has been analyzed even less. Since support for these combatants was given by extremist and opposition political movements, the traces left behind are deliberately few and the public statements were extremely few. In the following section, it was only possible to find three sources, one archival, one journalistic, and one academic, that had sufficiently explored the topic.

Banks and financial institutes

We have seen in the previous chapter how Russian combatants in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina were paid in German Marks, proportional according to the rank of the combatant and with a consistent difference between Russian and Cossack combatants. But who was paying them anyway?

An official document of the command of the 2nd Light Infantry Brigade, Army of the Republika Srpska, dated 20 September 1993, states that a Cossack combatant of the "First Cossack" named Sergei Sukharev²⁰¹ was authorized to spend 200 DM on Coffee, Cigarettes, and Tobacco.²⁰² This, assuming that the soldier was above the rank of private and below that of officer, allows one to assume that the payment of wages of Russian combatants was the responsibility of the army of Republika Srpska.²⁰³ In an article in the newspaper *Den'*, in an interview with an (anonymous) Russian combatant wounded in Bosnia and returned to Russia, we read 'In Russia there are organizations with the

²⁰¹ Чосич, В. (2017, June 27). Российские добровольцы в вооружённых силах Республики Сербской.

²⁰² Komanda 2.PLPBR (25 April 1993) *Uvjerenje majora Bore Antelja, komandanta 2. laka pješadijska brigade*, Inv. No. 08-357/93. Arhiv institutazaistraživanje zlocinaprotiv covjecnosti i medjunarodnog prava u Sarajevu, University of Sarajevo.

²⁰³ Kicherova, M. (13 October 2003). The Fate of Russian Volunteers in Bosnia. *Pravda.ru*.

precise commitment to solve the material problems of injured and disabled volunteers [...] They are given a pension and if they die, their families will have significant financial support [...] However, they do not have to fear the situation in which survivors from the Afghan War found themselves: those people do not even have the money to buy a wheelchair. For us there is a foundation which even has a current account in a bank'.²⁰⁴ One must bear in mind that the Den' newspaper, as we have seen above, was the newspaper closest to the ultranationalist political parties and movements, so there would undoubtedly be the possibility of overestimation of the reported information. While it is possible that there was indeed a disability fund (or a "pension" as called by the combatant in the source just quoted) and a system to take care of the families of Russian combatants who died in combat, no further sources could be found to further analyze this point. In any case, even the Los Angeles Times, in an interview by Carol J. Williams to Yuri Belyaev while he was deployed in Bosnia with his Russian National Legion, reports that 'The Russians are fed, clothed and armed by Serbs and paid a "token" salary of about \$155 a month', but at the same time also reports that "[Belyaev] says money for his recruits comes from like-thinking businessmen at home in St. Petersburg and in lucrative Serbs. Petersburg and in lucrative Serbian enterprises like the private banks closely allied with the Belgrade regime".²⁰⁵

Concerning the 'Serbian Enterprises' mentioned by Belyaev, no account could be found that could be connected with the foraging of Russian combatants, but about the "like-thinking businessmen at home in St. Petersburg." Levin finds a connection with Valery Neverov (Валерий Неверов), the fifth most influential businessperson in Russia in 1993 and chair of the multisector group "Hermes", considered to be one of the main campaign financing bodies of the ultranationalist right.²⁰⁶

Smuggling of light and heavy weapons from Russia to Serbia

Another link between the Russian Federation and Serbia is related to the unfortunately too little analyzed case of the massive smuggling of heavy and light weaponry from the

²⁰⁴ День (10 June 1992). N.d. День, p. 6.

²⁰⁵ Williams, C. J. (12 April 1993). Cold Cash Fuels Russian Fighting Spirit in Bosnia: Mercenaries: Some battling alongside rebel Serbs are ex-soldiers. But many simply needed a job. *Los Angeles Times*.

²⁰⁶ Levin, I. (1995). *Neopanslavism: The Russian-Serbian relationship*. In S. Bianchini & S. Paul (Eds.), *The Yugoslav War, Europe and the Balkans: How to achieve security?* (1st ed., pp. 73–82). Ravenna, Longo Editore, 75.

arsenals of the former Soviet army. In fact, in the 1990s, with the withdrawal of Soviet troops from East Germany, much of the equipment of the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany (Группа советских войск в Германии - ГСВГ) was smuggled by its commanders to the black market or other countries.²⁰⁷ In our specific case, in an interview by journalist Paul Klebnikov with former General Lieutenant and politician Alexander Ivanovich Lebed (Александр Иванович Лебедь) found that a considerable part of the armaments of ГСВГ was sold to Serbia (and partly to Croatia), with the connivance and approval of the commander of the group, General Matvey Prokopyevich Burlakov (Матвей Прокопьевич Бурлаков) and the Minister of Defence of the Government of the Russian Federation, General Pavel Sergeevich Grachev (Павел Сергеевич Грачев).²⁰⁸

The trail is unclear and no official documents are available, let alone judicial inquiries or trial reports, but what is known is that the journalistic investigation of this scandal led to the murder of the Russian journalist who was covering the case, Dmitry Yuryevich Kholodov (Дмитрий Юрьевич Холодов) of the Moskovskij Komsomolets (Московский комсомолец) and was one of the least analyzed, and definitely most controversial, reasons that some sources say led to the First Chechen War.²⁰⁹

In this regard, an article in the Christian Science Monitor, a non-religious daily newspaper linked to the Cristian Science Church, citing an investigation by London's "The Observer" on 28 February 1993, reported that "Russians had agreed to sell \$360 million worth of arms, including tanks and sophisticated anti-aircraft missiles. It is said that Russian soldiers and technicians had already been sent to operate the missile batteries in an area of Croat-Serb fighting' offering one of the first investigations into the case of Russian army high officers selling thousands of Soviet Army arms and equipment to the black market and smuggling to other states."^{210 211} Members of the

²⁰⁷ Klebnikov, P. (2000). *Godfather of the Kremlin: Boris Berezovsky and the Looting of Russia*. San Diego, Harcourt, 41.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Douglas, F. & Braun, S. (2008). *Merchant of Death: Money, Guns, Planes, and the Man Who Makes War Possible*. Wiley.

²¹¹ Sneider, D. (1993, March 2). Russia Denies Report of Arms Sales to Serbs. *The Christian Science Monitor*.

government of the Russian Federation, such as the spokesperson of the Russian Ministry of Defence Vladimir Beketov (Владимир Бекетов), categorically denied the incident dismissing the allegations claiming that the Observer may have been referring to the visit of General Filatov, which we analyzed above (and that were already known by the Russian public at the time) and that the Russian government had nothing to do with arms smuggling.²¹²

This brings to mind how the political situation (both domestic and foreign) in Russia was rather fragmented into different forces. Was it only the ultranationalist monarchist opposition that wanted to send combatants and weapons to Serbia, or did the Russian government want it too? And if so, why would the government on the one hand pass resolutions for UN Blue Helmets to intervene in response to Serbian operations and on the other hand send arms to Serbia?

It must be noted that the political composition was confusing, to say the least, El'cin 's government had had to foil two coups in its first two years of existence alone, and the political legitimacy of the government was far from good.²¹³

Regarding the combatants, no sources could be found to confirm that the Russian government was in agreement with the nationalist groups' decision of recruiting and sending combatants to Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is certain that the government was not the direct organizer, and some sources that we have seen only suggest that the government was aware of this. On the other hand, it must be acknowledged that El'cin had to contend in those years with a somewhat fragmented parliamentary composition and with the political and popular legitimacy of his government always in the balance.²¹⁴ Some have suggested how foreign policy decisions such as the UN resolution mentioned just above were in order not to completely alienate Russia from the international community and Western economic aid.²¹⁵ Wanting to take into consideration the source suggesting that the government was aware of the sending of combatants and material support from the National-Patriotic Forces to the Serb forces, it would still come across as some incoherence of the government. at least from the standpoint of domestic

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Silber, L., & Little, A. (1997). *Yugoslavia: Death of a Nation*. New York, Penguin Books, p. 311.

²¹⁴ Sakwa, R. (2002). *Russian Politics and Society*, 3rd ed. London, Routledge Books, 369.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

politics, officially siding against neo-Panslav rhetoric and unofficially tolerating the sending of combatants and weapons seems of little political use.

What emerges in another reportage is that elements of the armed forces of the Russian Federation, and to a lesser extent, elements of the government organized allowed illegal arms smuggling in favor of various nations in governments and political groups in Africa, Asia and to Serbia and Croatia in Europe.²¹⁶ Especially this last point seems crucial to hypothesize that the government of the Russian Federation was not interested in materially supporting Serbian forces in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It remains an open question how much government forces knew about sending Russian combatants to Bosnia, a point that could not be explored in detail with the sources found for this thesis.

As far as what has resulted from the analysis so far, for the time being it can be argued that support for Russian combatants came almost solely from national-patriotic political groups and related individuals.

²¹⁶ Klebnikov, P. (2000). *Godfather of the Kremlin: Boris Berezovsky and the Looting of Russia*. San Diego, Harcourt, 41.

Chapter III

Personal Motivations of Russian Combatants

The resources available to a researcher to analyze foreign combatants' point of view are admittedly limited. It is generally difficult to make contact with former combatants, for various reasons, such as fear of exposure to political or legal repercussions, aversion to the idea of being interviewed, or simply personal indisposition. In the specific case of this thesis, no former combatants were willing to be interviewed, possibly in part due to the reasons just said, but also due to the unfortunate coincidence in time that part of the research for this thesis was conducted just after the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This especially since, as I will report a little further in the chapter, several of these Russian combatants now have contacts with or are directly part of the Donbas separatist forces.

However, I was able to find online and written testimonies written by a few combatants themselves after their involvement in Bosnia and Herzegovina ended. In any case, it should be noted that post-conflict memoirs published by the combatants themselves often offer a potentially distorted description of wartime experiences, specifically regarding possible crimes committed during the war. An attempt was made to balance the combatants' self-perception with an analysis of the available journalistic accounts, albeit few and focused on only a few individuals.

The following three subchapters are a close look at the three combatants whose personal motivations related to involvement in Bosnia and Herzegovina could be found in detail.

Yuri Belyaev and the Russian National Legion

As seen in the previous chapters, Yuri Belyaev was a central figure in the Russian ultranationalist movements of the 1990s.²¹⁷ Unlike almost all other leaders of these movements, however, Belyaev went to fight in the Bosnian war himself, becoming one

²¹⁷ Прибыловский, В. (1993). *Словарь новых политических партий и организаций России*. Москва, Панорама, 57.

of the Russian combatants we are analyzing in this thesis. Returning for a moment to the political structure of the National-Popular Party, it must be pointed out that until 1994 it was led by Nikolay Lysenko (Николай Лысенко). Actually, at this early stage Belyaev did not directly lead the party in its political fraction, but mostly controlled its main political-military entity, namely the Russian Security Service (Служба безопасности России).²¹⁸ Before personally going to Bosnia and Herzegovina, through this section of the party, Belyaev organized a recruitment center in St. Petersburg, which was in charge of recruiting and transferring Russian combatants to Serbia, by smuggling them across the Bulgarian-Serbian border.²¹⁹ Belyaev argued on several occasions that the intervention of Russian combatants in Bosnia was necessary, not only as an act of solidarity with the 'Slavic brothers' but above all as a proving ground and as training for the same kind of inter-ethnic conflict that he believed would break out in the Russian Federation within a few months.²²⁰ In an interview with the Los Angeles Times, Belyaev declared: "This is good preparation for us. It is very important that we get experience in the Yugoslav conflict for when this situation occurs in Russia".²²¹ Again in 1993, in another interview he claimed that "World War III is beginning in Bosnia", thus alluding to the fact that the Bosnian and the Yugoslav conflicts in general would spread like wildfire to the Russian Federation and the rest of the world.²²² Belyaev often tried to use the concept of ethnic clash as a lever to use in its political narrative, playing on the people's fears of the "stranger" and the "different" in the building of a figure of an enemy to fight and fear.²²³ In this regard, it should be noted that in 1993 Belyaev was tried by the St. Petersburg Criminal Court for inciting inter-ethnic hatred in the Russian Federation and while fighting in Bosnia and Herzegovina, was found guilty.²²⁴ Therefore,

²¹⁸ Shenfield, S. D. (2001). *Russian Fascism: Traditions, Tendencies, Movements*. New York, M.E. Sharpe, 235.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 250

²²⁰ Verheyde, N. G. (24 June 1993). The escalation of Russian volunteers in Bosnia and Herzegovina. *B2 Daily Europe*.

²²¹ Williams, C. J. (12 April 1993). Cold Cash Fuels Russian Fighting Spirit in Bosnia: Mercenaries: Some battling alongside rebel Serbs are ex-soldiers. But many simply needed a job. *Los Angeles Times*.

²²² Некрасов, И. (2003). Супермены в Папах. *Русский вопрос*. 2003 (4).

²²³ Eco, U. (2020). *Costruire il nemico*. La Nave di Teseo, 6.

²²⁴ Williams, C. J. (12 April 1993) Cold Cash Fuels Russian Fighting Spirit in Bosnia: Mercenaries: Some battling alongside rebel Serbs are ex-soldiers. But many simply needed a job. *Los Angeles Times*.

a motivation for his involvement in the first person, and not only for recruitment, was identified as a desire to escape from the prison that awaited him in Russia.²²⁵

Going back to the interviews with Belyaev during his involvement in Bosnia, an article in the Belgian Brussels Analysis Centre² quotes Belyaev as saying “we will also have to go to war in Russia soon. Our party needs officers trained and experienced in warfare. Yugoslavia is a good ground”.²²⁶ Similarly, Belyaev claimed that the reason for his involvement, like that of his Russian National Legion comrades, was mainly ideological, stating that “Our role here is primarily ideological. Serbs and Russians are both Slavs, and our presence at the Serbian side sends a message to their enemies”.²²⁷ It should be pointed out that in the political rhetoric of the National-Popular Party, the “enemies of Russia” were identified with the same ones that were also the “enemies of the Serbs”, i.e. the “Black Hordes” that according to this rhetoric were the Bosnian Muslims, called derogatorily “Turks” who were descendants of the Serbs arch-enemies, i.e. Ottomans and, again according to the ultra-nationalist rhetoric of the party, ready to do anything to annihilate the Christians, the only people legitimized to control the nation (and possibly the world).²²⁸

But it is precisely here that the issue branches out. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the ideological side played an extremely important role in the construction of a political narrative that could involve as much as possible that segments of the population we have talked about: the veterans and the disillusioned youth. In addition to ideological reasons, however, some facts suggest that Belyaev's motivations were also economic. Indeed, Yuri Belyaev was not only the leader of the Russian National Republican Party's Russian Security Service and later its military fighting formation, the 'Russian National Legion', but also the leader and owner of the private military and

²²⁵ Некрасов, И. (2003). Супермены в Папах. *Русский вопрос*. 2003 (4).

²²⁶ Verheyde, N. G. (24 June 1993). The escalation of Russian volunteers in Bosnia and Herzegovina. *B2 Daily Europe*.

²²⁷ Williams, C. J. (12 April 1993). Cold Cash Fuels Russian Fighting Spirit in Bosnia: Mercenaries: Some battling alongside rebel Serbs are ex-soldiers. But many simply needed a job. *Los Angeles Times*.

²²⁸ Shenfield, S. D. (2001). *Russian Fascism: Traditions, Tendencies, Movements*. New York, M.E. Sharpe, 234.

security company (PMSC)²²⁹ 'Rubikon'.²³⁰ This was the actual private company that had supported the recruitment center aforementioned and recruiting directly some Russian combatants, mainly from the St. Petersburg region, such as the commander of the РДО-1, Valery Vlasenko.²³¹ The Rubikon company is to be regarded as the first Russian PMSC and an illustrative case of the security situation in Russia in the 1990s, as it would usher in a season of sprawling privatization of security in Russia.²³² Months of clashes between Chechen, Georgian, Ukrainian and Russian gangs in Moscow and St. Petersburg together with the collusion between politics, private industry, and organized crime in the early 1990s had led to an extreme level of paranoia.²³³ Criminals most often killed each other, but it was not uncommon for public figures to end up in the crosshairs of gangs or assassins hired by rivals.²³⁴ Politicians, industrialists, and prominent public figures thus began to set up their own PMSCs, as Klebnikov describes in his investigative report on Boris Abramovich Berezovsky (Борис Абрамович Березовский) "Russia under Yeltsin was still a police state: the telephones were tapped, confidential documents were exposed, individuals were subject to intense surveillance-albeit a police state that had been privatized. Huge numbers of specialists from the old Soviet security and law-enforcement apparatus (KGB, GRU, MVD, and so on) took jobs in the private sector. Every large financial-industrial group created its own mini-KGB, usually known as the "analytical department," staffed with people who were good at collecting information, eavesdropping on rivals, and stealing documents."²³⁵

Often, however, this was not only limited to intelligence, but also to armed security, right afterward. This is why elements with direct combat experience were extremely

²²⁹ For a better understanding on the emergence of PMSCs: Petersohn, U. (2017). Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs), Military Effectiveness, and Conflict Severity in Weak States, 1990-2007. *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 61(5), 1046-1072.

²³⁰ Владимирив, М. (2014, October 15). *Русские добровольцы в Югославии: невоспетые герои*.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Sukhankin, S. (2019). *From "Volunteers" to Quasi-PMCs: Retracing the Footprints of Russian Irregulars in the Yugoslav Wars and Post-Soviet Conflicts*.

²³³ Klebnikov, P. (2000). *Godfather of the Kremlin: Boris Berezovsky and the Looting of Russia*. San Diego, Harcourt, 22.

²³⁴ Ibid., 302.

²³⁵ Ibid., xii.

sought after, especially given the complete lack of individual security protection of these public figures by the public security forces.²³⁶

Belyaev himself, before entering politics with the Russian National-Popular Party, was reported to have been responsible for mafia collusion and as a participant in several criminal scandals in the St. Petersburg area.²³⁷ In the course of an investigative report published in 2002, some reporters supported the idea that the Rubikon company was not a simple PMSC, but rather an instrument "preparing a nationalistic cadre composed of professional military personnel [and] former officers from various security services [...] This was to prepare and train people capable of carrying out terrorist acts and wage para-military operations."²³⁸ It should also be noted that, according to a study of the Warsaw Institute "the Rubikon company remained under the authority of the Federal Counterintelligence Service" (Федеральная служба контрразведки Российской Федерации – ФСК)²³⁹ until 1995,²⁴⁰ a detail that underlines how the nature of this PMSC was certainly economic, but also political and not necessarily only linked to the extreme right-wing opposition. The involvement of the state security service would indeed suggest a certain condescension on the part of certain Russian institutional forces, although given the complicated stratification and political composition of Russian institutions of that period, it is difficult to have a clear and definite view, especially in the absence of documents that can confirm this.

Igor "Strelkov" Girkin and the РДО-2

Among all the controversial personalities seen so far, that of Igor 'Strelkov' Girkin stands out. Over the past 30 years, he has been (in this order) first a combatant in Transnistria and Bosnia and Herzegovina, then in both Chechen wars, a GRU undercover agent, commander of the separatist forces in the *Donbas*, and finally a politician.²⁴¹

²³⁶ Sukhankin, S. (2019). *From "Volunteers" to Quasi-PMCs: Retracing the Footprints of Russian Irregulars in the Yugoslav Wars and Post-Soviet Conflicts*.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Соловьев, Д. (9 July 2002). Обыкновенный петербургский фашизм. *FLB - Freelance Bureau*.

²³⁹ Successor of the Soviet KGB and predecessor of the current Federal Security Service (Федеральная служба безопасности Российской Федерации - ФСБ)

²⁴⁰ Bryjka, F. (2019). *Russian "Contractors" In the Service of the Kremlin*.

²⁴¹ Mezzofiore, G. (25 July 2014). Igor Strelkov: Key MH17 Crash Suspect Linked to Massacre of 3,000 Bosnian Muslims in 1992. *International Business Times*.

Strelkov's past is shrouded in a fog of mystery, despite the fact that he is now a somewhat public figure in Russia. Some sources claim he was born on 17 December 1970²⁴² and graduated from the Moscow State Historical Archives as a historian just before joining the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation for military service between June 1993 and July 1994.²⁴³ This creates quite a few temporal inconsistencies with his academic and military training, since prior to June 1993 Girkin certainly served in Transnistria between June and July 1992 and he was regarded as an officer of the PДО-2 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as we have seen, between November 1992 and March 1993.²⁴⁴

Regardless of his academic and military education, it is certain that Girkin participated, as far as is relevant to this thesis, in the Bosnian war in officer ranks (most probably as a captain), earning himself a reputation as a staunch royalist. This ideological conviction of his is also immediately apparent in his diaries from the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, published in the extreme right-wing journal "Завтра" (Zavtra, Tomorrow).²⁴⁵ In the first lines of these diaries Girkin himself, together with the magazine's editorial staff, emphasizes that from his point of view "Russian volunteers are fighting in Yugoslavia. They are volunteers, not 'soldiers of fortune'. They were not mercenaries in Bosnia, where, with weapons in hand they fought on the side of the Serbs."²⁴⁶

In his diaries, while Girkin described the Serb method of assaulting enemy villages, and especially referring to the crimes committed against civilians, we read "[T]he Russians heard enough about the atrocities of the Serbs from themselves, and although Muslims and Croats are no better, it did not make the most favorable impression anyway. Yet the conviction prevailed: we must protect ordinary Serbs, for whom [...] there is nowhere to run and who are not involved in any atrocities."²⁴⁷ This distancing from the war crimes of Serb paramilitary units is somewhat implausible, even if not surprising. Some survivors of the torture and mass rapes carried out around Višegrad between 1992 and

²⁴² Стрелков И. И. (2014). Стрелков Игорь Иванович - Герой Славянского Мира. [VKontakte] N.d.

²⁴³ Marples, D. R. (22 July 2017). Igor Strelkov: Moscow Agent or Military Romantic?. *E-International Relations*.

²⁴⁴ Скоморохов, Р. (20 May 2014). Портреты века: Игорь Стрелков. *Военное обозрение*.

²⁴⁵ Гиркин, И. (9 November 2000). Игорь Гиркин. Боснийский дневник. *Спецназ России*.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

1993 have confirmed that the PДО-2 (a unit of which Strelkov was a member at the time) had assisted the paramilitary Avengers group in carrying out these crimes.²⁴⁸ As the PДО-2 was a relatively small unit (at its maximum of 30 members) and Girkin was an officer in that unit, it is impossible to think that he was unaware of this fact. Furthermore, in the documentary “Na Drini Krvavi Višegrad” di Huseinović, a rape survivor called Mevluna Jašarević, reports that Russian soldiers were inside the room in the Vilina Vlas spa-resort where torture and rape, and the subsequent suicide of a famous local beauty queen, Jasmina Ahmetspahić, took place.²⁴⁹ Mrs. Jašarević describes in the documentary how a Russian soldier held Mrs. Ahmetspahić by her blouse, full of bruises and blood, just before she managed to unbutton her blouse and consequently jumped out of a window from the third floor of the resort.²⁵⁰ Girkin would have had no interest whatsoever in highlighting this event, in which his fellow soldiers, if not himself, had participated in war crimes. Likewise, however, he would also have had no need to write his own memoirs, except to heroize the deeds of his unit by making them an example of righteousness and patriotism to follow. Strelkov had never made it a secret that he hoped for the return of a great united Russia and romanticizing a group of combatants as the narrative foundation of a new nation was a common strategy of many Russian ultranationalists.²⁵¹

Viktor Zaplatin and the “First Cossack”

An important numerical component of the Russian combatants in Bosnia and Herzegovina were the Cossacks, who were strongly advocated directly by the president of Republika Srpska Radovan Karadžić.²⁵² The original Cossacks were mainly Russian peasants, but also Ukrainians and Jews, who from the sixteenth century onward ran away from serfdom to live a free life in the borderlands of the southern steppes, especially around the area of the river Don and of the cities of Rostov, Krasnodar, Stavropol, and Kalmykia, in the geographic area commonly called as Kuban (Кубань), remaining way beyond the control of the Russian state. Over the centuries, the Cossacks

²⁴⁸ Pavlovic, S. (2014). *Commander Strelkov's Bosnian Connection?*.

²⁴⁹ Pravda Bosna. (2014). *Na Drini Krvavi Višegrad*, (57:40-59:40). [Video].

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Cobb, R. (2017). *Navalny-Strelkov Debate Inadvertently Highlights Key Similarities Between Alexei Navalny and Vladimir Putin*.

²⁵² *Serbian Epics* (1992). N.d. BBC. [Video].

had won a series of privileges, putting themselves at the service of imperial institutions when necessary, with which, however, they always maintained an ambivalent relationship given the empire's desire to control this untamed population.²⁵³ The Cossacks managed to remain relatively independent until, in the 18th century, the imperial institutions succeeded in forcing them into a state of subjection, at least formally, to the Russian state.²⁵⁴ It should be noted, however, that the narrative of the Cossack as the emperor's *longa manus* and of the special bond between the empire and the Cossacks, without mentioning the various frictions and clashes between these two realities, is a propaganda construction made by opponents and victims of the tsarist regime and, despite the contrived construction, this interpretation of Cossack values is still the prevailing one today.²⁵⁵

This did not earn them a great reputation with the birth of the Soviet Union, where they were often considered enemies of the revolution and summarily executed.²⁵⁶ As a result, until the mid-1980s, the Cossacks experienced discrimination and estrangement from society, leading to a total ban on the expression of Cossack identity.²⁵⁷

With the *glasnost'* implemented by Gorbachev in the last years of the Soviet Union, the Cossack identity returned to public expression in the Krasnodar area. If at first, this seemed only a nostalgic quirk linked to a few fanatics, the phenomenon of 'Cossack revivalism' began to seem more realistic when a group of Soviet army conscripts stationed in Krasnodar rebelled against the order to leave for Azerbaijan to suppress the local independence movement. During this rebellion and in subsequent protests, the crowd of rebels began to chant the return of the Cossacks and sing songs belonging to Cossack folklore, calling for a renewed unity of the Cossack peoples.²⁵⁸ The fear of the emergence of an armed Cossack political movement led the Soviet forces to co-opt the

²⁵³ Shenfield, S. D. (2001). *Russian Fascism: Traditions, Tendencies, Movements*. New York, M.E. Sharpe, 74.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 75.

²⁵⁵ McNeal, R. H. (1987). *Tsar and Cossack, 1855-1914*. New York, St. Martin's Press, 154.

²⁵⁶ Makhno, N. (2007). *Memoirs of Nestor Makhno: The Russian Revolution in Ukraine*. Edmonton, Black Cat Press, 12.

²⁵⁷ Shenfield, S. D. (2001). *Russian Fascism: Traditions, Tendencies, Movements*. New York, M.E. Sharpe, 76.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 76

Cossacks within the regional institutions of the Kuban area.²⁵⁹ This system was also adopted by the administration of the Russian Federation after the collapse of the Soviet Union.²⁶⁰

The reintegration of the Cossacks into Russian society and Russian political, administrative, and military life led to a regained sense of pride and importance for the Cossack community, eventually mobilizing up to 5 million people in a movement of revival of the Cossack culture in the first half of the 1990s.²⁶¹

In this Cossack revivalist movement of the 1990s, several values were found in common with Russian ultranationalist movements. As the director of the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Sciences Valery Tishkov argues, “the Cossack movement was part of a broader 'neo-totalitarian' and 'anti-modernist' revolution in the northern Caucasus that also comprises such phenomena as reactionary Islamism among the Chechens”.²⁶² Another characteristic was the belief in the existence of a Western conspiracy to impose a new world order led by the Jews, a belief shared by many ultranationalist Russian politicians.²⁶³

Some situations in particular gave new vigor to the traditional military social structure of the Cossack community. In 1991, chairman of the Krasnodar Regional Council of People's Deputies Nikolai Kondratenko reintegrated the Cossacks into the administrative structure of the regional government. Cossacks were employed to enforce order, patrol the streets and to teach horse-riding and “traditional Orthodox morality in schools” and, in some localities, the old “ataman administration” system has been reintroduced.²⁶⁴ Similarly, in the St. Petersburg region, far from being a traditional Cossack settlement, General Viktor Vlasov, himself of Cossack descent and head of the

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 74-75

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 75-77

²⁶¹ Toje, H. (2006). Cossack Identity in the New Russia: Kuban Cossack Revival and Local Politics. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 58(7), 1057-1077.

²⁶² Tishkov, Valery (1997). *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict in and after the Soviet Union: The Mind Aflame*. London, Thousand Oaks, CA, and New Delhi, Sage Publications, Chapter 11.

²⁶³ Shenfield, S. D. (2001). *Russian Fascism: Traditions, Tendencies, Movements*. New York, M.E. Sharpe, 76.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 77.

Russian North-West Transportation Police, introduced armed Cossack Patrols on intercity trains.²⁶⁵

Although not representative of the entire Cossack revival movement, this brief summary offers a glimpse into its more militaristic component, which certainly influenced the Cossack combatants under analysis in this subchapter.

For these combatants, although they rarely made comments or wrote memoirs about their involvement in Bosnia, for all those that could be analyzed directly or indirectly, it is possible to say that they had a strong sense of belonging to the ethnic Cossack community, most of them coming indeed from the Kuban-Krasnodar region, often making much reference to the military-tribal past.²⁶⁶

So, what can be drawn from the information that has been possible to retrieve about Cossack combatants in Bosnia?

What we do know is that they were better paid than the ethnically Russian soldiers²⁶⁷ and that special arrangements were made directly with the Cossack communities for them to fight in Bosnia.²⁶⁸ Certainly, given the fanaticism of some actors involved in the Bosnian war, the symbolic power of having Cossack units was unparalleled. This was because, in the eyes of the Russian ultranationalists, the Cossacks represented the vanguard of tsarist nationalism as a symbol of the Tsar's power, precisely because of that propaganda construction seen above.²⁶⁹

As regards the Cossack combatants' point of view, as mentioned, there are not many sources that take into account the views of individuals, except for one particular case, which is that of Viktor Zaplatin (Виктор Заплатин), for whom it was possible to find a single online collection of memoirs and to gather information on his personal point of

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ Заплатин, В. (31 March 2004). Казаки среди добровольцев на Балканах в конце XX века. *Русская народная линия*.

²⁶⁷ Levin, I. (1995). *Neopanslavism: The Russian-Serbian relationship*. In S. Bianchini & S. Paul (Eds.), *The Yugoslav War, Europe and the Balkans: How to achieve security?* (1st ed., pp. 73-82). Ravenna, Longo Editore, 80.

²⁶⁸ *Serbian Epics* (1992). N.d. BBC, (36:30-38:00). [Video].

²⁶⁹ Shenfield, S. D. (2001). *Russian Fascism: Traditions, Tendencies, Movements*. New York, M.E. Sharpe, 78.

view through an interview with Semir Mujkic, chief columnist of the Sarajevo BIRN BiH Hub.²⁷⁰

Viktor Zaplatin was first a member of the 7th VDV division in Afghanistan and later a colonel in the Cossack troops in Transnistria, Abkhazia, and Bosnia.²⁷¹ Zaplatin was one of the organizers of the recruitment and transfer of the “first cossack” from Russia to Bosnia, acting as a liaison between Cossacks linked to the militarist fraction of the Cossack revival movement and former army comrades.²⁷² For what appears in his memoirs, it seems that the act of initiating the recruitment process was mostly his initiative, later also supported by some political movements.²⁷³ In the course of the preparations, Zaplatin was assigned the operational command of the detachment, while, as we have seen, Zagreb remained the senior officer, with liaison duties with the Serb command. Gennady Kotov was designated as deputy commander of the detachment. All these personalities were considered extremely convinced of the ideological correctness of their involvement in Bosnia, especially Zaplatin, who according to Semir Mujkic was, and remains, fanatically convinced of the importance of the Cossack role in supporting the Serbian “Slavic and orthodox brothers”.²⁷⁴ This, as will also be seen more specifically in the next chapter, led Zaplatin to make the Cossack involvement his personal battle, which continues to this day. One of his comments in a 2013 interview, in reference to the post-Dayton political tensions between Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, is illustrative: “The Serbian nation is defending itself, but this is interpreted as separatism and war crimes, I think that the independence of Republika Srpska is inevitable. The Serb people must decide their own fate. It is very important that the friendship between the Serbs and Russia always be a top priority. We must always help them by all possible means.”²⁷⁵ It has not been

²⁷⁰ BIRN, the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, is a network of local non-governmental organisations promoting freedom of speech, human rights and democratic values. <https://birn.eu.com/>

²⁷¹ Mujkic, S. (22 May 2019). Ukraine War Veterans Bind Russia and Bosnian Serbs. *Balkan Insight*.

²⁷² Заплатин, В. (31 March 2004). Казаки среди добровольцев на Балканах в конце XX века. *Русская народная линия*.

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Mujkić, S. (2022). Involvement of Russian Combatants in the Bosnian war and current-day commemoration practices. Interviewed by Lorenzo Cozzi [Personal Interview]. BIRN BiH Hub Sarajevo, 15 February 2022.

²⁷⁵ Vukicevic, J. & Coalson, R. (2016, October 18). Russia's Friends Form New 'Cossack Army' In Balkans. *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*.

possible to find any sources to refute Zaplatin's ideological conviction, neither during the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina, nor nowadays, but on the other hand several journalistic sources, including Mujkic himself, have described Zaplatin as extremely close to Vladimir Putin.²⁷⁶ Other sources, such as Radio Slobodna Europa, have pointed out that Zaplatin is the coordinator of a pro-Serbian and pro-Putin group of Cossacks in Kotor in Montenegro, under the direct supervision of Aleksandr Borodai (Алекса́ндр Борода́й), a former comrade-in-arms of Zaplatin and Girkin in Transnistria and the coordinator of the initial stages of the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014.²⁷⁷ This can underline how much Putin's government of the Russian Federation instrumentalized the ideological radicalization that came for these combatants after the experience in Bosnia and in later wars to meet his external policies ambitions, especially with regards to the Donbas crisis and later Ukrainian War.

Why did they fight?

What conclusions can be taken from what we have just analyzed? As remarked by Michael Jackson "there were as many reasons to go to Spain as there were man who went".²⁷⁸ Although many fewer than the ones that had volunteered in the Spanish Civil War, even for Russian combatants in Bosnia and Herzegovina this consideration certainly remains significant. As we have seen in the three examples of combatants' experiences in this chapter, despite the ideological common denominator which the three combatants described as their main motive, to a closer analysis their motivations were actually extremely varied. Belyaev's problems with the law, Girkin's Transnistrian past, and Zaplatin's regained sense of ethnicity, for example, are already extremely different reasons to take part in a war as a foreign combatant. It is possible to imagine that indeed the ideological factor was a major motivation for the combatants, at least on a superficial level.

²⁷⁶ Mujkić, S. (2022). Involvement of Russian Combatants in the Bosnian war and current-day commemoration practices. Interviewed by Lorenzo Cozzi [Personal Interview]. BIRN BiH Hub Sarajevo, 15 February 2022.

²⁷⁷ Kešmer, M. (22 March 2022). Od Bosne do Ukrajine ista lica među ruskim dobrovoljcima. *Radio Slobodna Evropa*.

²⁷⁸ Jackson, M. (1994). *Fallen Sparrows: The International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War*. Philadelphia, The American Philosophical Society, 42.

However, we saw that many of them were very young or veterans of the Soviet army,²⁷⁹ precisely those sections of society most affected by a strong identity and ideological crisis after the fall of the URSS²⁸⁰. It is reasonable to assume that, as in other similar cases,²⁸¹ the reasons of their involvement at the sociological and psychological level were much more complex.

As argued by the sociologist, philosopher and anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu, the search for a “*Raison d'être*” is crucial for individuals struggling to emerge from indifference, solitude or insignificance and simply they are struggling to have the possibility to find a “feeling of counting for others, being important for them”. For people passing through such a moment of crisis, especially men coming from some kind of traditional background, living these kinds of experiences could mean find a meaning again and then “a justification for existing”.²⁸² And right in this process, according to Arielli, two very exceptional things can be noted about foreign volunteers, or in our case combatants: “First of all, their quest for meaning could not be fulfilled, for whatever reason, in their home society, so it was intentionally sought out abroad. Second, this search transpired in a military context”.²⁸³

For what regards the first point, given this feeling of abandonment by the Russian political, economic and state systems, the option of looking outside of the country borders is clearly an option. Then consequently follows a possible explanation for the choice of the military context. The romantic rhetoric of a man going to war after he lost everything is nothing new, and the myth of camaraderie and empowerment of the military life is something that is used everyday in the military recruiting campaigns all over the world.²⁸⁴ Reasonably, having reached this point in the analysis, one would come to the conclusion that this camaraderie may not have worked particularly well as far as

²⁷⁹ Православни филм-Не Кради Отаџбину (2014). *Анђео са горе Заглавак-Анђео са горе Заглавак-АНГЕЛЫ СА ГОРЫ ЗАГЛАВАК*, (1:45). [Video].

²⁸⁰ Rumer, E. B. (1994). *The Ideological Crisis in the Russian Military*. Santa Monica, National Defense Research Institute.

²⁸¹ Arielli, N. (2012). In search of meaning: Foreign volunteers in the Croatian armed forces, 1991-95. *Contemporary European History*, 21(1).

²⁸² Bourdieu, P. (2000). *Pascalian Meditations*. Cambridge, Polity, p. 24.

²⁸³ Arielli, N. (2012). In search of meaning: Foreign volunteers in the Croatian armed forces, 1991-95. *Contemporary European History*, 21(1).

²⁸⁴ Loyd, A. (2002). *My War Gone By, I Miss It So*. London: Black Swan, p. 54.

most Russian combatants were concerned. Focusing, for example, on the tensions between the Cossack and Russian detachments, or on the fact that most of the combatants we could see in the accounts in the first chapter were returning home after "only" a two-month rotation, then it doesn't seem that these combatants got that heroic experience that they might have wanted. Unfortunately, there are not many post-war accounts about the combatants' perception of their involvement in Bosnia, and the only ones that can be found are of those few ones that became involved in some sort of nationalist political activity themselves after coming back home, as Girkin and Zaplatin. Possibly, the only common point that can be found in all of the Russian combatants is their will and desire to engage actively in conflict.²⁸⁵

²⁸⁵ Arielli, N. (2012). In search of meaning: Foreign volunteers in the Croatian armed forces, 1991-95. *Contemporary European History*, 21(1).

Chapter 4

Commemorative practices.

With the conclusion of the war and the return of Russian Combatants to their homeland (for the most of them) and the division of the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina into two separate political entities essentially based on the ethnic differences created before the war and exacerbated by it, the celebration of the intervention of foreign Combatants became an extremely political affair. Despite the small number of Russian Combatants and their relatively limited operational contribution during the conflict, their intervention was celebrated in various ways by the institutions of Republika Srpska with monuments and plaques in various cities, cemeteries, and a day dedicated to their memory. These events led to quite a few disputes between the entity of Republika Srpska and the entity of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Višegrad Monuments

Monument and tombstones in Megdan cemetery in Višegrad

On November 5, 2011, a monument dedicated to the memory of Russian Combatants who died in combat in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina between 1992 and 1995 was unveiled at the Megdan War Cemetery in Višegrad.²⁸⁶ The monument is a sculpture depicting an Orthodox cross and was created by Belgrade sculptor Nebojsa Savovic.²⁸⁷ At the base of the sculpture is a pedestal on the sides of which can be read "In memory of the Orthodox brothers – Russian volunteers who died for the republic of Serbs in the Patriotic Defensive War of 1992-1995. Вечная Слава и Бог простит их души! У знак сећања на православну браћу руске добровољце пострададе за Републику Српску у одбрамбено-отазбинском рату 1992-1995 године. Нека им је вечна слава и Бог да им думу прости!" (which can be translated with "In memory of the Orthodox brothers - Russian volunteers who died for the republic of Serbs in the Patriotic Defensive War of 1992-1995. Eternal Glory and God will forgive their souls! A symbol of remembrance to the Russian Orthodox Brother who suffered for Republika Srpska in the Patriotic Defensive War of 1992-1995. Eternal glory to them and may God forgive their souls!")²⁸⁸ The names of 37 Russian Combatants who died in combat in the war in Bosnia and

²⁸⁶ Cozzi, L. (2022). "Monument to the Russian Volunteers", Višegrad. Personal Photograph.

²⁸⁷ Россия Освободится Нашими Силами (2011). *В Вишеграде открыли памятник русским добровольцам.*

²⁸⁸ Cozzi, L. (2022). "Detail of the Monument to the Russian volunteers' pedestal", Višegrad. Personal Photograph. Personal Photograph.

Herzegovina between 1992 and 1995 can also be read on the sides of the pedestal.²⁸⁹ The monument was unveiled by a group of veterans from Russian and Cossack detachments, some families of the combatants who died in combat in Bosnia, and several representatives of the Republika Srpska government, including the Minister of Labor and Protection of Veterans and Disabled Petar Jokic.

The cemetery also contains the graves and headstones of several Russian Combatants. Those of Dimitri Popov (Дмитрий Попов)²⁹⁰, Vladimir Sofanov (Владимир Софанов)²⁹¹, and Nimenko Andrei Nikolayevich (Нименко Андрей Николаевич)²⁹² bear on the front their name and the name of the surviving family members of theirs, while on the back they bear the inscription "захвална српска отаџбина" (Grateful Serbian Fatherland)²⁹³. The tombstone of the combatant Konstantin Bogoslovsky (Константин Богословский) bears an inscription on the front bearing these verses in Russian "иногда на земле вдруг рождаются чудные звезды они ярко сгорают окставляя нечальными нас навсегда" (roughly translatable as "sometimes wonderful stars are suddenly born on earth, they burn brightly, leaving us uncreated forever").²⁹⁴ This tombstone as well bears the inscription "захвална српска отаџбина" on the back.²⁹⁵ All these tombstones bear the inscription "русский доброволец" (Russian volunteer) on the front.²⁹⁶ Also in the cemetery there are two tombstones of two Cossack Combatants. The first, whom we have already met several times in the course of this thesis, is Kotov Gennady Petrovich (Котов Геннадий Петрович). The front of his tombstone reads "казачий полковник" (Colonel Cossack) and the names of surviving family members.²⁹⁷ On the back are the verses in Russian "Не верьте братцы смерти нет из душ сплетается рассвет и будет снова озарен младенца непорочный сон... Спи спокойно сын дона" (roughly translatable as "Believe not, brethren, no death from souls weaves the dawn and the baby's pure sleep shall be illuminated again... Sleep well, son of the Don"²⁹⁸ The last tombstone is that of Ganievsky Vasily Viktorovich (Ганиевский Василий Викторович). This one bears on the front only the inscription "Казак" (Cossack) along with the

²⁸⁹ Cozzi, L. (2022). "Monument to the Russian volunteers' pedestal", Višegrad. Personal Photograph. Personal Photograph.

²⁹⁰ Cozzi, L. (2022). "Dimitri Popov's tombstone", Višegrad. Personal Photograph.

²⁹¹ Cozzi, L. (2022). "Vladimir Sofanov's tombstone", Višegrad. Personal Photograph.

²⁹² Cozzi, L. (2022). "Nimenko Andrei Nikolayevich's tombstone", Višegrad. Personal Photograph.

²⁹³ Cozzi, L. (2022). "Rear side of the three Russian combatants' tombstones", Višegrad. Personal Photograph.

²⁹⁴ Cozzi, L. (2022). "Front side of Konstantin Bogoslovsky's tombstone", Višegrad. Personal Photograph.

²⁹⁵ Cozzi, L. (2022). "Rear side of Konstantin Bogoslovsky's tombstone", Višegrad. Personal Photograph.

²⁹⁶ See notes 290, 291, 292 and 294.

²⁹⁷ Cozzi, L. (2022). "Front side of Kotov Gennady Petrovich tombstone", Višegrad. Personal Photograph.

²⁹⁸ Cozzi, L. (2022) "Rear side of Kotov Gennady Petrovich tombstone", Višegrad. Personal Photograph.

name of the family members²⁹⁹ and the inscription "захвална српска отаџбина" on the back.

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Figure 1: "Monument to the Russian Volunteers" in Megdan cemetery. Cozzi L., Višegrad, 2022.

²⁹⁹ Cozzi, L. (2022). "Front side of Ganievsky Vasily Viktorovich tombstone", Višegrad. Personal Photograph.

³⁰⁰ Cozzi, L. (2022) "Rear side of Ganievsky Vasily Viktorovich tombstone", Višegrad. Personal Photograph.



Figure 2: Pedestal Inscription on the "Monument to the Russian volunteers" in the Megdan cemetery, side 1. Cozzi L., Višegrad, 2022.

Figure 3: Pedestal Inscription on the "Monument to the Russian volunteers" in the Megdan cemetery, side 2. Cozzi L., Višegrad, 2022.

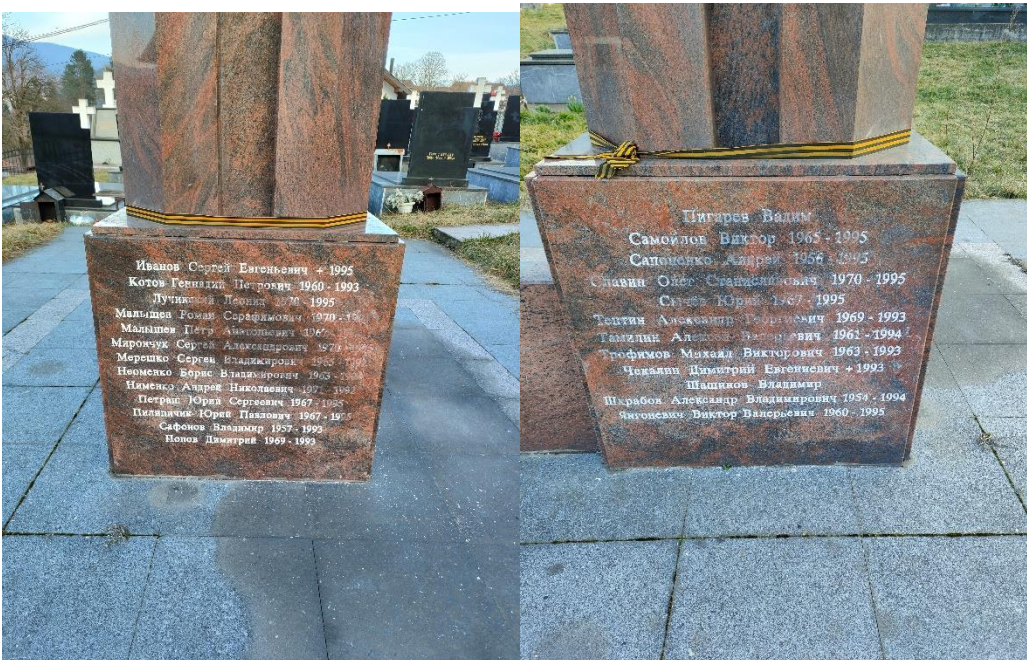


Figure 4: Pedestal Inscription on the "Monument to the Russian volunteers" in the Megdan cemetery, side 3. Cozzi L., Višegrad, 2022.

Figure 5: Pedestal Inscription on the "Monument to the Russian volunteers" in the Megdan cemetery, side 4. Cozzi L., Višegrad, 2022.



Figure 6: Front side of Konstantin Bogoslovsky's tombstone. Cozzi L., Višegrad, 2022.

Figure 7: Front side of Nimenko Andrei Nikolayevich's tombstone. Cozzi L., Višegrad, 2022.



Figure 8: Front side of Popov and Sofanov's tombstones. Cozzi. L, Višegrad, 2022.

Figure 9: Rear side of Bogoslovsky's tombstone. Cozzi. L., Višegrad, 2022.



Figure 10: Front side of Kotov's tombstone. Cozzi L., Višegrad, 2022.

Figure 11: Front side of Viktorovich's tombstone. Cozzi L., Višegrad, 2022.



Figure 12: Rear side of Kotov's tombstone. Cozzi L., Višegrad, 2022.

Cross on Mount Grad.

On April 12, 2017, a monument dedicated to the Russian and Serbian Combatants who fought for the army of Republika Srpska in Višegrad between 1992 and 1995 was unveiled on Mount Grad, a hill overlooking the city of Višegrad.³⁰¹ The monument depicts a five-and-a-half-meter-high Orthodox cross and has a memorial plaque at the base with an Orthodox cross and two inscriptions.³⁰² The first reads “Поинулим руским добровољима и борцима врс” (“to the dead Russian volunteers and VRS Combatants), while the second reads “Спомен подиже захвални српски народ са Косова и Метохије, Р. Српске Крајине и Републике Српске” (“The memorial is erected by the grateful Serbian people from Kosovo and Metohij, Republika Srpska Krajina and Republika Srpska”).³⁰³ A group of Russian veterans of the Bosnian war and members of the 12t of April Veterans Association from Mitrovica in Kosovo were present at the unveiling ceremony of the memorial.³⁰⁴ The unveiling ceremony was organized by the Republika Srpska government Committee for Fostering the Traditions of Liberation Wars, the Republika Srpska Veterans' Organization, and the municipality of Višegrad.³⁰⁵ Also present at the ceremony was The Republika Srpska's Assistant Minister of Labor and Veterans Affairs Dusko Milunovic, who commented on the inauguration saying that "the history of Serbian-Russian relations was centuries long [...] "The most important thing was the moral and military support that the Russian people offered the Serbs at all their critical moments." ³⁰⁶

³⁰¹ Kovacevic, D. (12 April 2017). Bosnian Serbs Unveil Monument to Russian War Volunteers. *Balkan Insight*.

³⁰² Cozzi, L. (2002) "Russian Volunteers monument on Mount Grad", Višegrad. Personal Photograph.

³⁰³ Cozzi, L. (2002) "Detail of the Russian Volunteers monument on Mount Grad", Višegrad. Personal Photograph.

³⁰⁴ Kovacevic, D. (12 April 2017). Bosnian Serbs Unveil Monument to Russian War Volunteers. *Balkan Insight*.

³⁰⁵ Ibid.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

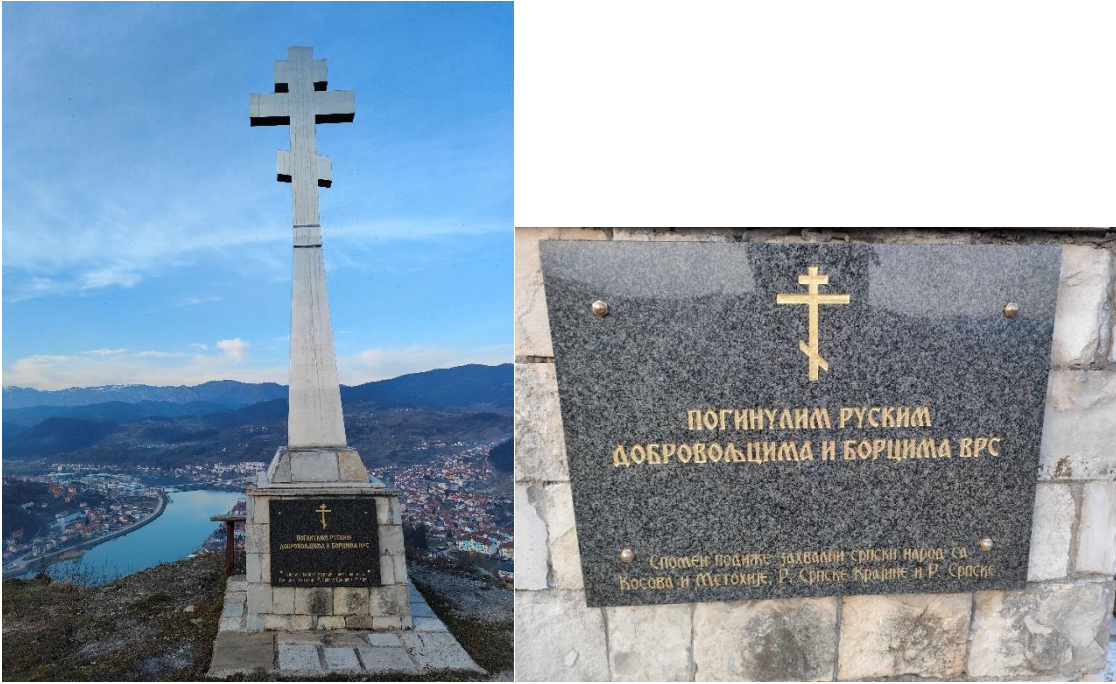


Figure 13: "Cross dedicated to the Russian volunteer"s on Mount Grad, overlooking Višegrad. Cozzi L., Višegrad, 2022.

Figure 14: Detail of the plate on the cross. Cozzi L., Višegrad, 2022.

Temple of the Holy Prince Lazarus and the Kosovo Martyrs and the Icon of "Our Lady of Port Arthur"

A city within a city was built in Višegrad in 2014. This one, named Andrićgrad in honor of the famous Bosnian writer, was built as a film/urban project by famous director Emir Kusturica and thanks to funding from Republika Srpska.³⁰⁷ An Orthodox church, now the city's cathedral, named after Serbian Prince Lazar Hrebeljanović and the martyrs of Kosovo, was built in one of Andrićgrad's main squares. As stated on the official web page of the Orthodox church in the Višegrad municipality, "The temple is dedicated to the Kosovo martyr Holy prince Lazarus and the other Serbian heroes who perished with him. [...] The founder and builder of the temple is the professor Emir Kusturica and also the Government of the Republic of Srpska with the help of many good people and philanthropists."³⁰⁸ The church was consecrated on June 28, 2014, to celebrate Gavrilo Princip and the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand.³⁰⁹ The ceremony was attended by Prime Minister of the Republic of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić and then-President

³⁰⁷ Jukic, E. M. (26 June 2014). Serb Leaders to Open 'Andrićgrad' for WWI Centenary. *Balkan Insight*.

³⁰⁸ Српска православна црквена општина вишеград митрополија добробосанска (2022). *Храм Светог цара Лазара и Косовских мученика*.

³⁰⁹ Jukic, E. M. (26 June 2014). Serb Leaders to Open 'Andrićgrad' for WWI Centenary. *Balkan Insight*.

of Republika Srpska Milorad Dodik, while Bishop Grigorije of Zahumlje-Herzegovina and Primorje celebrated the consecration of the church, also awarding the Order of the Holy King Milutin to Dodik and Kusturica.³¹⁰ On the website of the Orthodox church in the Višegrad municipality, there is a section of the site describing the "forgotten extermination of 6,000 Serbs in the Drina Valley by the infamous ustasha 'Black Legion,'" pointing out that this "Black Legion" consisted of a large number of Muslims.³¹¹ In addition to the choice of name, which would seem at least provocative in a city like Višegrad, considered by the ICTY to be the scene of "one of the most comprehensive and ruthless campaigns of ethnic cleansing [of Bosnian Muslims] during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina"³¹² and especially considering the xenophobic nationalist rhetoric we have already analyzed in which the Ottoman "Turks" fought in the Battle of Kosovo were associated with the Bosnian Muslims fought by the Serbs in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The relevance of this church for the purpose of this thesis is given by an icon that can be found inside the temple. In fact, an Orthodox Icon of "Our Lady of Port Arthur" is located here.³¹³ This icon bears two plaques at its base. In the first one is the inscription "Дар народ России в воспоминание подвига русских добровольцев" (translatable to "Gift of the people of Russia in memory of the feat of Russian volunteers").³¹⁴ The second one, on the other hand, reads "Будет отвезена в дар храму на военной кладбище г. вышеграда в боснии и герцеговине, где похоронены русские добровольцы, защищавшие православных на балканах. Написана на пожертвовния простых людией россии" (Translated to "Taken as a gift to the temple at the military cemetery in the city of Višegrad in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Russian volunteers who defended the Orthodox in the Balkans are buried. Made thanks to the donations of ordinary people in Russia. ").³¹⁵ The icon depicts "[T]he Most Pure Virgin where She holds a cloth with the Image of Christ Not-Made-By-Hands in Her hands."³¹⁶ The story is described on the official page of the Saint Elizabeth Convent in Minsk "A sailor named Theodore Katansky who visited Kyiv Lavra Caves in 1903 told other believers about it. He had been a hero of the defense of Sevastopol during the Crimean War. The old sailor related that he had seen the Mother of God with an image of Christ Not-Made-By-Hands in a dream after praying for Russian sailors who

³¹⁰ Novosti (2014, June 28). Vučić: Razvoj samo u miru, nikome ne želimo zlo. *Novosti.rs*.

³¹¹ Српска православна црквена општина вишеград митрополија добробосанска (2022). *Да се не заборави дринска гробница 6,000 срба*.

³¹² Kovacevic, D. (4 April 2017). Bosnian Serbs to Honour Russian Volunteer Combatants. *Balkan Insight*.

³¹³ Cozzi, L. (2022). "Icon of Our Lady of Port Arthur in the Church of St. Lazarus and the Kosovo Martyrs", Višegrad. Personal Photograph.

³¹⁴ Cozzi, L. (2022). "Detail of the description plate of the Icon of Our Lady of Port Arthur", Višegrad. Personal Photograph.

³¹⁵ Cozzi, L. (2022). "Detail of the gift not of the Icon of Our Lady of Port Arthur", Višegrad. Personal Photograph.

³¹⁶ The Catalogue of Good Deeds (2018). *What is the Port Arthur Icon of the Mother of God*.

served in the Far East. The Blessed Virgin appeared to him surrounded by Angels and saints. Our Lady comforted the sailor and told him that Russia was soon to enter into a devastating and difficult war, full of losses and troubles, along its coastal borders. That was why She ordered to have Her icon painted and sent to Port Arthur. Brought to the walls of the distant city and naval base, the holy image was meant to help the Orthodox triumph over the pagans and inspire Russian soldiers and sailors to fight bravely. "³¹⁷ The story related to the making of this icon seems to be particularly relevant as to the symbolic reason why it may have been chosen as a donation, given the continuous reference to the Orthodox Christians' battle against the "Turks" or, as in this case, against pagans in general. It must be stressed, however, that no written or oral evidence could be found to confirm this supposed correlation.



Figure 15: Temple of the Holy Prince Lazarus and the Kosovo Martyrs. Cozzi L., Višegrad, 2022.

Figure 16: Icon of "Our Lady of Port Arthur". Cozzi L., Višegrad, 2022.

³¹⁷ Ibid.



Figure 17: First description plate of the Icon. Cozzi L., Višegrad, 2022.

Figure 18: Second description plate of the Icon. Cozzi L., Višegrad, 2022.

The "Day of Russian Volunteers" in Republika Srpska

The "Day of Russian Volunteers" is an event celebrated annually in Republika Srpska and included in the entity's official calendar of important historical events. It is celebrated every year on April 12,³¹⁸ the day when Konstantin Bogoslovski, Vladimir Safonov and Dmitry Popov died in the Battle of Mount Zaglavak, as analyzed in the first chapter of this thesis. It was not possible to identify the year of the entity-wide establishment of this day of celebration, but according to the journalistic accounts that could be found, it is safe to say that this day has been celebrated every year since at least 2017.³¹⁹ Although the day is celebrated throughout the entire entity of Republika Srpska, the center of the commemoration is Višegrad and specifically the Megdan cemetery, which has already been analyzed above.³²⁰

Every year, at least since 2017, the celebration in Višegrad has been attended by several political figures from the Republika Srpska, often several representatives of the self-proclaimed Donetsk

³¹⁸ Kovacevic, D. (4 April 2017). Bosnian Serbs to Honour Russian Volunteer Combatants. *Balkan Insight*.

³¹⁹ Kovacevic, D. (12 April 2017). Bosnian Serbs Unveil Monument to Russian War Volunteers. *Balkan Insight*.

³²⁰ N1 Sarajevo (12 April 2021). Controversial "Day of Russian Volunteers celebration takes place in Višegrad. *N1info*.

People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic and former Russian Combatants. In 2017 were present Assistant Minister of Labor and Veterans Affairs Dusko Milunovic³²¹ and the president of the Višegrad chapter of the Bosnian Serb Army war veterans association Milisav Vasic.³²² Participants in 2019 included Radomir Graonic, Deputy Minister of Labor and Veterans Affairs of Republika Srpska,³²³ Milan Torbica, an adviser to Milunovic and a veteran of the war,³²⁴ Savo Cvjetinovic, president of "Zavet" ("Oath"), a Bosnian NGO that focuses on "maintaining Serb-Russian community relations and friendship, which is registered in Bosnia and has representatives in Russia"³²⁵, Viktor Zaplatin and Aleksandar Kravchenko, two Russian combat veterans of the Bosnian war whom we have already met in the previous chapters, and Alexei Sosonny (Алексей Сосонный), head of the Office of the Union of Donbas Volunteers.³²⁶ It is necessary to devote a couple of lines to the Zavet organization. This has been described by its Bosnian representatives as an organization of modest means, but it should be pointed out that Zavet has sections in St. Petersburg and Moscow, where the representative is Vladimir Sidorov (Владимир Сидоров).³²⁷ Sidorov, as written in a BIRN article, is a "A lawyer, Soviet army veteran and former mercenary, Sidorov has his own political career, too, as a member of the far-right Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, LDPR, whose leader, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, was sanctioned in February 2015 by the EU for 'actively supporting' Russian military operations in Ukraine."³²⁸ Sidorov was photographed in 2014 in the Luhansk People's Republic with a rifle in his hand and in military clothing.³²⁹

The celebration of the "Day of Russian Volunteers" has not been without criticism from the other Bosnian entity, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and from state institutions. In 2021, the state Prosecutor's Office of Bosnia and Herzegovina has opened an investigation into plans to celebrate a "Day of Russian Volunteers" after a report from the association "Women Victims of War."³³⁰ It was not possible to verify whether the prosecutor's office has arrived at any final ruling. What is certain is that in both 2021 and 2022 celebrations took place regardless of this investigation, moreover with the participation of the mayor of the city of Višegrad Mladen

³²¹ Kovacevic, D. (12 April 2017). Bosnian Serbs Unveil Monument to Russian War Volunteers. *Balkan Insight*.

³²² Kovacevic, D. (4 April 2017). Bosnian Serbs to Honour Russian Volunteer Combatants. *Balkan Insight*.

³²³ Mujkic, S. (22 May 2019). Ukraine War Veterans Bind Russia and Bosnian Serbs. *Balkan Insight*.

³²⁴ Ibid.

³²⁵ Fokus.ba (2019, May 22). Srpsko-ruski "zavet" dobrovoljaca Višegrada i Donbasa. *Fokus.ba*.

³²⁶ Сосонный, А. (2018). *Алексей Сосонный: Моторола был из тех, на кого хотелось равняться*.

³²⁷ Mujkic, S. (22 May 2019). Ukraine War Veterans Bind Russia and Bosnian Serbs. *Balkan Insight*.

³²⁸ Ibid.

³²⁹ Ibid.

³³⁰ Kovacevic, D. (9 April 2021). Prosecutors to Probe Day Honoring Russian Combatants in Bosnian War. *Balkan Insight*.

Đurević, Dusko Milunovic, and representatives of the NGO Zavet.³³¹ During my research period in Bosnia and Herzegovina, I visited the city of Višegrad trying to get an interview with Đurević, who although he said he was willing to receive me, once he arrived at the city hall he gave up the interview.

Plaque in the “Church of the Holy Trinity” in Belgrade

In addition to monuments and celebrations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, there is at least one memorial element outside the country, specifically in the Republic of Serbia, at the Church of the Holy Trinity. Built in 1924 in Transmajdan, near the famous St. Mark's church, with the approval of the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church Dimitrije, it served as a center of aggregation for the Russian Orthodox community of Beograd, which in the 1920s made up about 10 percent of the city's population.³³² It should be noted that this large number of Russians in Belgrade was to be attributed to the exodus of Russians close to the tsarist regime or at any rate first-hour opponents of the Bolshevik forces during the 1917 revolution.³³³ Despite a considerable reduction in the Russian population in Belgrade over the decades, the Church of the Holy Trinity remained one of the symbols and landmarks for the Russian nationalist-monarchist movement, both in and outside Serbia. This is because, among other reasons, in the basement of the church is located the "Museum of Military Glory," which houses an extensive collection of battle flags, banners, medals, and various objects from various White Army regiments. Even more important to Russian royalists is the tomb of Pyotr Nikolayevich Wrangel (Пётр Николаевич Врангель), known as the Black Baron, the last commander of the White Army in the Russian Civil War and one of the strongest personalities in the white movement in exile.³³⁴

Because of this symbolic importance to the monarchist movement, as we saw in the first chapter, the Church of the Holy Trinity had been chosen by the РДО Combatants as the end point of their involvement in the Bosnian war, depositing their battle flag there.³³⁵ A memorial plaque had also been erected at this site in 1995 with the names of the first ten Russian Combatants to have participated in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.³³⁶ The plaque was consecrated by Serbian Patriarch Pavle.³³⁷ The plaque was destroyed following severe damage to the church during the 1999 NATO bombing of Belgrade when several bombs directed at the

³³¹ Регион, С. (12 April 2022). Данас је дан руских добровољаца. Република српска памти. *Правда.rs*.

³³² Ивкину, М.М. (9 August 2000). 80 лет русской церковной общине в Югославии. *Независимая газета*.

³³³ Ibid.

³³⁴ Ibid.

³³⁵ Поликарпов, М. (2014). *Оборона Донбасса: Игорь Стрелков, Ужас Бандеровской Хунты. Книжный мир*, 22.

³³⁶ РТРС (15 December 2016). У Београду осветана спомен-плоча руским добровољцима. *РТРС*.

³³⁷ Ibid.

Serbian Radio and Television building also hit the Church of the Holy Trinity.³³⁸ The church was renovated in 2000, and on December 15, 2016, the plaque was also reconstructed, this time including the names of Russian Combatants who died in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina.³³⁹ The consecration ceremony was attended by the families of the victims, the Ambassador of Belarus to Serbia Vladimir Chushev (Уладзімір Чушаў), representatives of the Russian Embassy in Serbia, the Minister of labor and protection of veterans and invalids of the Republika Srpska Milenko Savanovic, and others.³⁴⁰ It is noteworthy that this was the only memorial event for the Russian combatants who fought in Bosnia and Herzegovina known to have had the overt participation of representatives of Russian institutions, not just nationalist political movements. Savanovic commented, "When it was most needed, and that was when the survival of the Serbian people was defended in the areas affected by the war in the 1990s, then the Russians volunteered and came, and many of them gave their lives for Serbia."³⁴¹ The Vicar Bishop of the Serbian Patriarch Arsenij and the head of the Russian Orthodox Church in Serbia, Archpriest-Staurophore Vitaly Tarasyev (Виталий Тарасьев) also held a memorial service for The Russian Combatants. Bishop Arsenij commented that "Slavic blood and language and, the deepest foundation, our Orthodox Church are at the foundation of [our] brotherhood." Archpriest-Staurophore Vitaly Tarasyev said that the Serbian people suffered genocide three times in the 20th century and pointed out that in all three terrible events-the First and Second World Wars and the wars of the 90s, Russians were on the side of Serbs and of the sister Serbian Orthodox church.³⁴²

Impact of the commemoration of the Russian combatants

What has been analyzed in this chapter allows us to conclude that the involvement of Russian combatants is a phenomenon that is far from exclusively related to the past, but on the contrary is currently extremely relevant, especially in the political context of Bosnia and Herzegovina. We see how the authorities of Republika Srpska have made the involvement of Russian combatants a strong communicative tool. As has often been the case, the celebration of foreigners involved in a civil war finds a large space in postwar nation political communication.³⁴³ The celebration of dead Russians combatants, the establishment of a day dedicated to the memory of Russian combatants, and the construction of monuments have strong political significance in the context

³³⁸ Tuda-Suda.by (2019). *Церковь Святой Троицы*.

³³⁹ Джурович, Н. (2016, December 15) Освящение плиты русским добровольцам в Храме Святой Троицы в Белграде. *srpska.ru*.

³⁴⁰ РТРС (15 December 2016) У Београду освештана спомен-плоча руским добровольцима. *РТРС*.

³⁴¹ Ibid.

³⁴² Ibid.

³⁴³ Rein, R. (2012). A Belated Inclusion: Jewish Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War and Their Place in the Israeli National Narrative. *Israel Studies*, 17(1), 24–49.

of the never fully relaxed political relations between the two Bosnian entities. The choice to establish much of the monuments in Višegrad has no small symbolic value, considering that, according to the ICTY, in this town took place one of the most extensive ethnic cleansing against the local Bosniak community.³⁴⁴ It should also be kept in mind that many of the ceremonies were attended by former combatants, now directly connected to associations and institutions linked to the armed forces of the Ukrainian separatist regions of Donbas and Luhansk. In these ceremonies, representatives of Republika Srpska government institutions, such as Milunovic, publicly expressed their admiration for these former, giving an indication of the political positions certain of representatives of Republika Srpska.³⁴⁵ Given the verified ties between these political groups in the separatist regions of the Donbas led by the former combatants and the Kremlin,³⁴⁶ the phenomenon of celebrating the intervention of Russian combatants in the Bosnian war appears to be a celebration of the entire asymmetrical system of persecuting Moscow's political targets abroad.³⁴⁷

³⁴⁴ Kovacevic, D. (21 April 2021). Bosnian Serbs Honour Russian Volunteer Combatants Despite Criticism. *Balkan Insight*.

³⁴⁵ Mujkic, S. (22 May 2019). Ukraine War Veterans Bind Russia and Bosnian Serbs. *Balkan Insight*.

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

³⁴⁷ Lo, B. (2018). Going legit?: The foreign policy of Vladimir Putin. *Lowy Institute for International Policy*.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that the involvement of Russian combatants in the Bosnian-Herzegovinian war is not the most significant in numerical and operational terms, this thesis has allowed us to find that their use has become extremely relevant in nowadays bosnian society.

The extent of the operational impact of Russian combatants in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been decidedly limited. In 1995, the army of Republika Srpska consisted of tens of thousands of troops.³⁴⁸ As we have seen, Russian combatants were never more than a hundred simultaneously present on the battlefield and, by the end of the conflict, about 700 had fought in the country.³⁴⁹ The result of the operations carried out by them was also never particularly incisive, even according to the combatants own reports, except in the case of the White Wolves, a unit designed from the start as a "special force". From the accounts of the combatants themselves, as for example in Girkin's diaries, becomes visible that the combatants were often first-timers, very young boys and on their first deployment in the field. Most of the times these operations led to a relatively high number of casualties.³⁵⁰

From the analysis of combatants' memoirs arises that they did not have a great impact on the VRS' troops morale and that relations between Russian detachments and Serb units were often very strained.³⁵¹ Although, with more in-depth analysis and interviews with Serb troops who fought alongside the Russians it would be possible to get a more complete picture of this phenomenon, the extreme subjectivity of this aspect makes any general consideration difficult.

It also turns out how political support for the combatants' involvement was decidedly uneven. First, it should be noted that the research done for this thesis exposed how there was never any official recognition or support from Russian government forces for the intervention of Russian combatants in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The only support

³⁴⁸ Levin, I. (1995). *Neopanslavism: The Russian-Serbian relationship*. In S. Bianchini & S. Paul (Eds.), *The Yugoslav War, Europe and the Balkans: How to achieve security?* (1st ed., pp. 73–82). Ravenna, Longo Editore, 75.

³⁴⁹ Kuka, E. (2018). *Genocid u Višegradu*. Sarajevo, Izdavač, 63.

³⁵⁰ Гиркин, И. (9 November 2000). Игорь Гиркин. Боснийский дневник. Спецназ России.

³⁵¹ Поликарпов, М. (2014). *Оборона Донбасса: Игорь Стрелков, Ужас Бандеровской Хунты*. Книжный мир, 19.

that could be identified at the political level came from Russian monarchist and in general national-patriotic parties. The emblematic case is that of Belyaev's Russian National Legion, the armed wing of the Russian National-Popular Party, where political support from his party was complete, to the point that actually the Legion was a prolongment of the party itself. In other cases, it was possible to see how support was tied more to individual political figures, as seen in chapter two. The question that remains open is how aware government forces were of the existence of a group of Russian citizens fighting in Bosnia. In this thesis, it was possible to see that some forces involved in recruiting and supporting the combatants were linked to state institutions of the Russian Federation. This is the case with Belyaev's PMSC Rubikon, which some believe was linked in part to the Russian FSB.³⁵² Similarly, the smuggling of military equipment authorized with the connivance of some elements of the army and government of the Russian Federation as seen in the second chapter was directed, among other countries, to the Republic of Serbia. It was widespread and was not directed solely at Serbia, but with more sources it would be possible to see if there were also some other specific reasons behind the approval of this smuggling.

The evidence available to study these phenomena has been sufficient to take an in-depth look at the political support of national-patriotic movements, but there certainly remains room to delve specifically into the degree of interest in combatants by Russian government institutions.

In addition, it was also possible to analyze combatants' personal perceptions of their involvement in Bosnia. As seen in chapter three, the motivations that drive people to take part in a conflict abroad can stem from various motives. This potentially makes any possible conclusions that could be valid for the entire group of combatants simplistic, overly general and, above all, wrong. To obtain truly representative results would require a thorough analysis of the perception of most combatants before, during, and after involvement in the war, but this is clearly nearly impossible.

However, in this particular case, it was possible to draw at least one conclusion that with some approximation could be applied to the entire group of Russian combatants. These

³⁵² Bryjka, F. (2019). *Russian "Contractors" In the Service of the Kremlin*.

individuals were searching for meaning for themselves, to "make sense of their lives" in a foreign, hostile, and wartime context. Whether this meaning was ideological, economic or for any other reason, it had not been possible for them to find it in Russia. This led 700 Russians to think that their involvement in the war in Bosnia was the best prospect for them at that time in their lives.

Related to this in a way is also the commemoration of the involvement of Russian combatants in Bosnia, at least from their perspective. The publications of memoirs, the associations for the memory of Russian combatants, and their active participation in commemorative events make clear that the "search for meaning is an ongoing process that applies not only to the present and future but also to the interpretation of the past".

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The commemorative practices are varied, though especially concentrated in the Bosnian entity of Republika Srpska. Regardless of how the employment of Russian combatants has had little operational impact in the war, their commemoration became very important from the perspective of the Republika Srpska's nationalist narrative. The creation of an official day and monuments dedicated to the combatants' celebration shows how much political weight has been attached to this phenomenon since the end of the war. Since there is no common national perception in Bosnia on the intervention of foreign combatants, their commemoration is always controversial, in this case, in the eyes of the entity of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

This controversy brings us to the last conclusion that could be drawn from this analysis. Were these combatants foreign volunteers or mercenaries?

The answer is not a clear yes or no. As far as could be observed, the factor of voluntary involvement was prevalent considering that the "search for meaning" is the trait that most likely united the Russian combatants. In any case, it is not possible to describe the entire group as volunteers. For some of them the "search for meaning" came primarily from economic necessity and a lack of job prospects in Russia and not from ideological reasons.³⁵⁴ Similarly, it is difficult to define the whole Russian combatant group as

³⁵³ Arielli, N. (2012). *In Search of Meaning: Foreign Volunteers in the Croatian Armed Forces, 1991- 95. Contemporary European History*, 21(1), 1-17.

³⁵⁴ Williams, C. J. (12 April 1993). Cold Cash Fuels Russian Fighting Spirit in Bosnia: Mercenaries: Some battling alongside rebel Serbs are ex-soldiers. But many simply needed a job. *Los Angeles Times*.

mercenaries. Referring to the definition of the Geneva Convention that we saw in the beginning of this thesis, the mercenary "is motivated to take part in the hostilities essentially by the desire for private gain and, in fact, is promised, by or on behalf of a Party to the conflict, material compensation substantially in excess of that promised or paid to combatants of similar ranks and functions in the armed forces of that Party".³⁵⁵ Given that the salary the combatants received was little different from that of the Serbian troops themselves, this definition could not apply to their case.³⁵⁶

The conclusion that can be drawn for the case of the Russian combatants in Bosnia and Herzegovina is that a generalized definition of their employment as "volunteers" or "mercenaries" would be too simplistic and would give a wrong and overly biased perception of them, especially in a context where the dispute over this definition still has, unsurprisingly, such political value. Even more so, given how little their involvement has been studied, each of these two definitions does bring a considerable bias to the analysis of their presence in the war.

I could also see this in my own research. I had begun studying the phenomenon of Russian foreign combatants for this thesis by personally referring to them as "mercenaries". Initially, this had led me to an extremely negative perception of their employment, where they came from, and their reasons for taking part in the conflict, way before having actually analyzed their involvement in the war.

On the contrary, I believe that in this case the use of a neutral definition such as "combatants" allowed this phenomenon to be analyzed more objectively and unbiased, without having to give their involvement a definition that is not entirely representative and might have an over positive or negative connotation.

This work allowed an overview of the involvement of Russian combatants in Bosnia and Herzegovina for the first time, offering insight into their operational employment,

³⁵⁵ International Committee of the Red Cross (1977). *Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I)*. Article 47. Geneva, International Committee of the Red Cross.

³⁵⁶ Levin, I. (1995). *Neopanslavism: The Russian-Serbian relationship*. In S. Bianchini & S. Paul (Eds.), *The Yugoslav War, Europe and the Balkans: How to achieve security?* (1st ed., pp. 73–82). Ravenna, Longo Editore, 77.

support from Russian political movements, their personal motivations, and the commemoration of their intervention in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I did so by analyzing both sides of the conflict, the pro-Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the pro-Republika Srpska side, offering an overview of the different interpretations and definitions of Russian combatants' involvement. The research showed how there is still plenty of room for further analysis, for each of the aspects touched upon in this thesis: local perceptions of Russian combatants' involvement, the level of interest and awareness of the E'cin government regarding the involvement of Russian citizens in the Bosnian war, memorial practices, their relevance in contemporary political communication, and so on.

As it turns out, some of the combatants who were in Bosnia in the 1990s are thirty years later leading units, associations or entire armies in Ukrainian separatist regions, and this underscores how the study of their early experiences of combat and exposure to radical political ideals are, now more than ever, of great relevance.

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