
Russians and Ukrainians for the Croatian people

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Abstract

The aim of the article is to present a little-known issue of the service of Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian volunteers in the ranks of the Croatian army, Croatian Defense Forces and Croatian Council of Defense in 1991-1995.

Keywords: *Croatian Patriotic War, Croatia, Bosnia, foreign volunteers*

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During the wars in Croatia and Bosnia (1991-1995), foreign volunteers fought en masse in the armed formations of each of the parties to the conflict. The largest number of them were in the ranks of the Muslim army of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This contingent was the most homogeneous: mainly, we are talking about the “warriors of Allah” notorious over the past decades from Tunisia, Syria, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab and Islamic countries. The composition of the volunteers on the Croatian side was much

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more diverse. Here we are talking, first of all, about hundreds of volunteers from European countries (the largest number – from Great Britain), whose motivation was extremely diverse. A considerable contingent was made up of ideological fighters – nationalists, national socialists, and anti-communists. Others did not have clear political views and arrived in the Balkans, guided by considerations of justice, wanting to help the liberation struggle of the Croatian people. There were religious Catholics, there were also ordinary “adventurers”, as well as people who can confidently be called mercenaries.

On the side of the Serbs were Greek national socialists from the Golden Dawn party, Romanians, a few Bulgarians, and representatives of Western Europe, but the largest contingent consisted of several hundred volunteers from Russia and Ukraine. Their activities were widely covered by the media, and over the past three decades, a certain number of their memoirs have been published, thanks to which there is now an opinion that our compatriots in those years could only be met on the Serbian side of the front. But this is not so – volunteers from Russia, Ukraine and Belarus also fought in the Croatian and Muslim ranks. Thus, even during the war, information appeared in the Russian press that “Russian mercenaries [acting on the side of the Serbs — A.S.] who fought in the former Yugoslavia say that they often intercepted enemy radio communications in pure Russian. Those who spoke even mastered Russian Mat”.²

At the beginning of the article, let’s find out how much is known today about our compatriots who fought on the side of the Croats? In the official lists of the Association of Foreign Volunteers of the Croatian Patriotic War, there are only four Russians (unnamed soldier, killed in action, Tatiana Bielobrk, Aleksey Trishkin and Leon

²Челноков А. За что, за кого и за сколько сражаются «наши» наемники в Югославии / «Известия» N°100 (24459), 2 июня 1995 г. С. 3.

Ogordnikov, killed in action) and two Ukrainians (Albert Borovoy and Sergei Ulisti, killed in action) volunteers. At the same time, some of the mentioned surnames are distorted, and the total number of these people was actually much higher. It is difficult to determine their exact national and state affiliation – many of them, especially those who arrived during the first period of the war, still carried Soviet passports, which additionally complicates identification. So, it is very likely that both of the mentioned Ukrainian volunteers could in fact be Russian. Let's not forget about the ethnic Slavs from the Baltic countries.

Potential volunteers ready to fight on the side of the Croats appeared almost immediately after the outbreak of war. Already in the summer of 1991, the “Moscow News” newspaper wrote that they were signed up on the central square of Kiev by the retired captain of the Soviet army Vladimir Filonovsky, who managed to recruit about 50 people in the first three days. Filonovsky himself was sure that the governments of Croatia and Slovenia (where the “ten-day” war for independence was going on at that time) would support his initiative, but, in his own words, “first, they need to know about it. I have already been to the Croatian trade mission in Kiev, I hope that the publication in “Moscow News” will also speed up our deployment to Yugoslavia”. It is unlikely that this naive attempt has led to any real results. By the way, at that moment Ukraine (unlike Russia) was still part of the Soviet Union, which nominally continued to exist.

Croatian army

The most famous foreign formation of the Croatian army was the First International Platoon (FIP) operating in eastern Croatia (in the Osijek and Laslovo areas). It was created by a former Komsomol activist and a descendant of the hereditary “left” family Eduardo Rózsa-Flores (Hungarian on his father’s side and Bolivian on his mother’s). His formation “Chico” (call sign Flores) created under the impression of the international brigades of the Spanish Civil War, but volunteers of various kinds fought in his ranks: from young Croatian emigrants from Australia who deserted from the ranks of the Australian army to defend the land of their ancestors, to professional “dogs of war”. As a result, it was the latter who created an odious fame for the formation associated with low discipline, cruelty, squabbles and conflicts in its ranks. Ideologically motivated fighters in the FIP did not linger, preferring to be transferred to other units.

After the war, Flores published a list of 79 people who served in the platoon from October 13, 1991 to August 1, 1992. The most numerous groups were British, French, Hungarians (including Banat) and Croatian emigrants (as described above, mainly from Australia). The list also includes three soldiers who had Soviet passports: Vasily Sharipov, Mikhail Kaznacheev and Alexander Kozlenko, as well as Georgy Bondarev from Latvia. Croatian historian Tomislav Šulj quotes the words of the Polish FIP volunteer Trzeźbor Piekutowski, according to whom the Russians, like the Poles, sharply differed in their behavior from the rest of Flores’ fighters. Piekutovsky himself describes him as “an energetic, good commander who had a clear idea of how to organize a unit”, but the platoon, in his words, was “a small foreign legion grouped by language

differences. It seems to me that the British and Hungarians with Flores kept themselves apart, but between them, it seems, there were some quarrels. Somehow everything was unusual there, conspiratorially, a little muddy and I didn't really like this situation from the very beginning". As a result of the conflict, Trzeźbor and another Pole, Andrzej Olesniczak, at the beginning of 1992 left the FIP and transferred to Croatian units.³

It looks like the Russians made a similar decision around this time. At least two of them – Bondarev and Sharipov – in early April 1992, during the battle for Bosnian Kupres, fought in the ranks of the assault platoon of the 204th Vukovar brigade of the Croatian army. On the morning of April 10, at the very beginning of the Yugoslav counterattack on the city, during thick fog and snowfall, the assault platoon's convoy literally ran into enemy tanks. 15 soldiers were killed, among them four foreigners: The Pole Marek Pamula (who also previously served in the FIP), Sharipov, Bondarev and another Russian soldier – Leonid Ogorodnikov (probably a member of the Croatian Defense Forces (Hrvatske obrambene snage, HOS)). Today, a memorial stone has been installed at the place of their death.

In general, the formations of the HOS were very popular among foreign volunteers. There were two reasons for this: on the one hand, the Croatian Party of Rights, of which they were the armed wing, openly proclaimed the succession of the Republic of Croatia from the World War II-era Independent State of Croatia, thus ideologically attracting European nationalists and national socialists. On the other hand, its Zagreb office was located next to the train station, quick to catch the eye of arriving foreigners.

³ Šulj T. Rat Trzeźbora Piekutovskog // «Magazin za vojnu povijest» broj 32, studeni 2013. S. 59.

It was in the ranks of the IX bojna “Rafael Vitez Boban” that one of the former “Soviet” fighters from Flores, Mikhail Anatolyevich Kaznacheev (born on June 18, 1960, in Lithuania), found himself. This Russian resident of Vilnius had the rare civilian profession of an artist-restorer and had already served in the French Foreign Legion before arriving in Croatia. He enrolled in the ranks of the IX bojna on July 25, 1992 and fought in it until October 30 of the same year, and then returned for another two incomplete months the next year (from February 8 to March 31, 1993).⁴

It is known that, in addition to Kaznacheev, volunteers from Ukraine served in the IX bojna, but in general there is very little information about our compatriots in the HOS. At one time, assertions were spread in the press that among them was the founder of the Werewolf Legion organization operating in Moscow (which positioned itself as a National Socialist, but in fact was semi-criminal) Igor Pirozhok. They can be found even in the early works of a serious Russian historian and veteran of the Bosnian war (on the Serbian side) Mikhail Polikarpov, who wrote that in 1991-1992. he fought “as part of the party Ustash battalion” (that is, one of the HOS bojna).⁵ Subsequently, this information was refuted by Polikarpov himself, and now we can confidently say that it arose only based on the words of Pirozhok himself, who repeatedly demonstrated a tendency to outrageous and outright disinformation.

In the ranks of the 153rd Velika Gorica brigade also served volunteers from the former USSR: Oleg Anatolyevich Senyuk, Alexei Borisovich Trishin (who appears in the official list of volunteers as “Trishkin”), Vladimir Vladimirovich Vasiliev, Sergey Novokhatny and Lithuanian Aleksandrs Lacitais (former FIP soldier).

⁴The questionnaire of soldier of the IX bojna HOS Mikhail Kaznacheev. Document courtesy of Tomislav Šulj (Zagreb, Croatia).

⁵ Поликарпов М. Добровольцы // «Солдат удачи» №7, 1995 г. С. 14.

The Russian Vladimir and the Ukrainian Alexander (fellows called him simply “Sasha”) fought as unit of the Croatian special forces that arose after the start of the war – the bojna “Frankopan”. Both took part in fierce battles on the Pakrac front, and in the spring of 1992, Sasha became part of a 12-man commando group sent to support the Croatian offensive in Bosnian Mostar. In addition to him, the group included seven Croats (Ante Luketić, Kreša Raguž, Robioa Đuran, Tomica Baisić, Kruno Sedlar, Željko Galić and Vesselko Leba), a Slovenian – Joža, a Pole – Roman, a Frenchman Gaston Besson, and the German Thomas Linder, the commander. During May 18-20, they repeatedly attacked one of the main strongholds of the Yugoslav People’s Army in the city – “Northern Camp”. Without getting involved in close combat, the well-armed and well-equipped special forces with unexpected fire raids from different positions inflicted heavy damage on the Yugoslavs in manpower and equipment. The only loss of the “Frankopans” was the commander of the group Thomas Linder – on May 20 he was killed by a shrapnel, covering the retreat of his subordinates with fire.⁶

⁶ Bojna Frankopan // «Magazin za vojnu povijest» broj 5, kolovoz 2011. S. 62.

Croatian Council of Defense

Volunteers from the east also fought in the army of the Bosnian Croats – the Croatian Council of Defense (*Hrvatsko vijeće obrane, HVO*) in its 101st brigade. One of them was Sergei Aleksandrovich Uslistyy, who was born on July 18, 1963 in the Omsk region (in Croatian sources referred to as “Ulisti”). He enlisted in the ranks of the brigade on March 3, 1992 and served in it until his death on October 1 of that year in the eastern Bosnian village of Zborište. Two days later, this settlement was captured by the Serbs and the whereabouts of Sergei’s body remains unknown. But, probably, the corpse and documents of the soldier fell into the hands of the enemy, since his passport data and information about the place of service became known to the official Belgrade, which mentioned Uslistyy in the list of foreign citizens who participated in the battles on the Croatian side, handed to the UN office in Geneva. Together with him, his fellow Alexei Borisovich Trishin (about which we have already written earlier), born on July 6, 1964 in Novosibirsk, also appears in the document.⁷

A former Soviet paratrooper Albert Vladimirovich Borovoy (born 1967) also served in the 101st brigade. In March 1992, he reported to the Zagreb office of the Croatian Muslim Democratic Party and volunteered for the HVO there. In July of the same year Albert was last seen on vacation by another foreign soldier in a Slavonski Brod cafe. This was just before the start of a major Croatian counteroffensive in eastern Bosnia, and it is believed that in these battles he was killed by shrapnel in the Derventa area (unofficially nicknamed by the soldiers “Death Valley”), probably on July 31st. According to some reports, his wife told a friend that he had not returned from Bosnia and that she never heard anything about

⁷ „United Nations, General Assembly. Use the mercenaries as a means of violating human right and impeding the exercise of the right of peoples to self-determination.” Note by the Secretary-General. Addendum. A/50/390/Add. 1. 29 August 1995. P. 21-22

her husband again, and other information was announced on October 23, 2006 on the air of the program “Wait for me”, aired on the Russian Channel One. According to the host, Borovoy “in May 1993 came from there [from Bosnia – A.S.] home in military uniform... And then the connection was cut off. It seems that two years later he was seen in Budapest and there he worked in some bar”. A professional volleyball player, Belarusian Igor Anatolyevich Vasiliev served in the ranks of the 104th Bosanski Šamac HVO brigade since September 5, 1995. He was born on June 4, 1967 in Chisinau



and held the rank of domobran.⁸ Initially, he, together with his wife Alla and son Alexander, came to the Posavina town of Domaljevac to play for the local volleyball club “Veronika”. Igor himself said in an interview with a local newspaper: “I arrived in Domaljevac at the end of 1994 [as in the text, probably not earlier than May 1995 – A.S.] with the sole purpose of playing volleyball. But when I saw that my comrades, every single one, went to the first line of defense, I also joined their fighting ranks and became a fighter in the HVO. There they were afraid for my fate and assigned me to the artillery, to the rear, which I could not accept. Wondering what kind of fighter, I am since I don’t have a rifle? There were no Chetniks in the rear, I asked the command against whom to fight and

⁸ Xerocopy of Igor Vasiliev’s passport. Document courtesy (Zagreb, Croatia).

asked to send me to the front line. In 10 days, my wish came true”.⁹

Tatiana F. Bjelobrk, mentioned at the beginning of the article, served in the same 104th brigade. Unfortunately, we cannot say anything more about this woman. On the one hand, the information about her Russian nationality, apparently, does not raise doubts, but on the other hand, her purely Balkan surname attracts attention. Perhaps in Bosnia, Tatiana married a Croat.

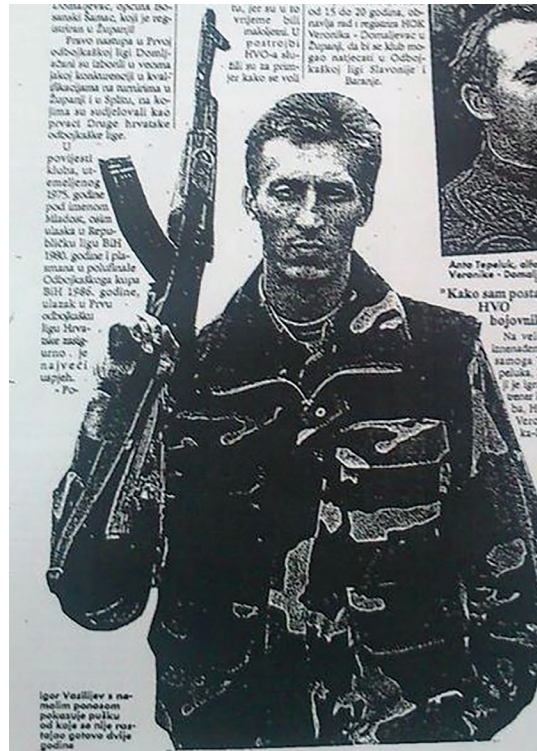
A volunteer from Russia, A., fought as a sniper on the Croatian side in Bosnia, who later recalled an episode that occurred during the hostilities in the mountains when, due to fear of heights, he lost consciousness and was mistaken by the Serbs for dead. It is also interesting that he called himself a “mercenary”.¹⁰ At the same time, we can confidently say that A. received the standard salary for Croatian soldiers in the amount of 100-200 (usually up to 150) German marks, a scant remuneration even by Croatian standards. For volunteers from Western Europe, this money could in no way serve as a significant incentive to enter the service, but for Russia, Ukraine or, for example, Bulgaria in the first half of the 1990s, in conditions of total unemployment, months of salary delays and constant price increases, the situation was different. For example, in Russia in the second half of November 1992, the exchange rate reached 280 rubles per one mark and continued to rise the following year.

⁹ Baotić A., Bjeloruski odbojkaš na prvoj crti protiv četnika! / «Panorama», 2. listopada 1996. S. 50.

¹⁰ Letter from Konstantin Semenov to the author dated August 10, 2020 / Personal archive of the author.

UNA-UNSO volunteers

Rumors about the service on the Croatian side of the fighters of the Ukrainian right-wing organization Ukrainian National Assembly – Ukrainian People’s Self-Defense (*Українська національна ассамблея — Українська народна самооборона, UNA-UNSO*) have become widespread enough. We have not yet been able to find personal data about such volunteers (although specific examples of the service of UNSO members in the Bosnian Serb army are known). At the same time, Mikhail Polikarpov writes: “In November 1994, somewhere near the town of Titov-Drvar, a group of UNA-UNSO fighters fought on the side of the Serbs. Several more fighters were nearby – but on the other side of the front, on the side of the Croats. The leadership decided to use Bosnia as a “simulator” to gain combat experience. They came here together, and then split up and chose opponents according to their political sympathies”.¹¹ After the war, Ukrainian journalist Viktoria Bondarenko, in one of her articles, quoted a certain nameless Croatian veteran who said that “Ukrainians are good fighters, two guys from the UNA-UNSO organization fought with me”.¹² It is difficult to vouch for the source of these words.



¹¹ Поликарпов М. Балканский рубеж. Русские добровольцы в боях за Сербию. М., 2018. С. 214-215.

¹² Бондаренко В. Хорватия: кирпичики войны и мира / «Зеркало недели», 24 ноября 2001 г.

Conclusion

There have been cases when Russian and Ukrainian volunteers met in battle with their compatriots who fought on the side of the Serbs. Russian historian Alexander Okorokov describes an incident that happened in Moscow already in the 2000s: “Once we met with my old friend, a special forces officer who had visited almost all the “hot spots” of the last two decades, we went to a grocery store, to buy the necessary products. Passing the meat department, my friend, casting a cursory glance at the salesman, who was cleverly carving a meat carcass, thought about it. Throughout the time that we were in the store, he constantly returned his gaze to the butcher, trying to remember something. Finally, passing the meat department for the second time, he stopped and stared at the seller. He reacted in the same way: he turned and fixed his gaze on my friend. A dozen seconds later, the butcher, a stout, rosy-cheeked Ukrainian, smiled happily and asked: “What, Major, don’t you recognize?” A few minutes of conversation cleared up the situation. It turned out that they met during the war in Yugoslavia. Both were volunteers, only my friend was on the Serbian side, and the butcher was on the Croatian side. In one of the battles, the Russian-Serbian reconnaissance group, commanded by my friend, took several Croats prisoner. Among them was a Ukrainian volunteer. According to the unwritten laws of war, foreign volunteers, from the point of view of the opposite side – mercenaries, were subject to execution. The same fate awaited the Ukrainian. But something that my comrade could not explain forced him not to kill the prisoner, but to send him along with others to the headquarters. And now, ten years later, potential enemies ate together, rejoicing at the meeting, recalled the war and drank for those who did not return from the battle”.¹³

¹³ Okorokov A.V. Русские добровольцы. М., 2007. С. 5-6.

In general, Russian volunteers who served on the Serbian side fought against the Croats, preferring to act against the Bosnian Muslims. Therefore, we can almost certainly say that the above-mentioned officer served in a small Cossack detachment under the command of Alexander Maramygin, which was part of the army of the Serbian Krajina.

In the bloody events of the first half of the 1990s. in the Balkans, Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians fought on both sides of the front. Undoubtedly, on the Croatian side there were still several times less than on the Serbian side, but this number was quite significant. In our work alone, more than 10 people are mentioned, but it is the first dedicated to the topic that consecrated only the tip of the iceberg. So, thanks to the kind help of the administration of the group “The collapse of Yugoslavia and the military history of the Balkans” (<https://vk.com/jugorat>), we learned the name of another of them – Vyacheslav Dzhoey, who was able to survive the war and return home. In the future, it remains to be assessed not only the total number of these volunteers, but also to reveal in more detail the circumstances of their biographies and motivation. One thing is indisputable – they have made their contribution to the establishment of the Croatian nation and state in the position that it now occupies in the Balkans, and I hope that it will still be appreciated by the government and people of Croatia.

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