

DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES OF WAR IN BOSNIA AND WAR IN UKRAINE

DOI: [10.58867/ISPY9418](https://doi.org/10.58867/ISPY9418)

Late February 2022, and early April 1992. These are the starting dates of the two largest European wars for decades. They were both preceded by conflicts which have cost thousands of lives; the war in Croatia in 1991 and the war in eastern Ukraine in 2014. Does the earlier conflict – the Bosnian War of 1992-95 – tell us anything about the present conflict? Are there any ‘lessons’ to be learned, any warnings to be heeded?

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Keywords: Balkans, Bosnian War, Russia,
Russian Invasion of Ukraine, Ukraine.



TPQ

Summer 2023

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This article was first published digitally on Wednesday, 27 April 2022.

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The differences between the two conflicts are probably a better place to start. Ukraine’s conflict has two parties, Bosnia’s had three. Ukraine is undergoing invasion; Bosnia’s was internecine warfare, albeit that two of the three groups involved had strong outside backing. This came from Tudjman’s Croatia and Milosevic’s Serbia.

It is also worth examining the war’s stated and actual objectives. In Bosnia, it was very directly about population expulsion – certainly from the Serb side – accompanied and aided by mass murder. There was also an attempt to destroy the very idea of a multi-ethnic, multi-confessional Bosnia. This involved the cultural destruction of the country; two well-known examples being the shelling of Sarajevo’s National Library (by Serbs) and the destruction of Mostar’s Stary Most bridge (by Croats).

The stated Russian war aims in Ukraine – to protect Russian speakers from supposed Nazis – are absurd and obscene. Outside commentators are unsure of what President Putin is attempting; is this about seizing Ukraine’s offshore gas reserves, or about creating a second Belarus, i.e., a vassal state? Whatever it is (assuming there is a clear rationale in Putin’s head), the wanton destruction now taking place does look like an attempt to wipe this very idea of Ukraine off the map of Europe. This does seem reminiscent of the earlier conflict.

An obvious difference is the flow of arms. In Bosnia, there was an arms embargo, which hurt the government forces and benefited the Serbs, who were armed by the Yugoslav National Army. As for Ukraine, Western arms are flowing freely into the country, even from sources that previously would not have sent military equipment.

The unity of the Ukrainians is also a notable contrast, for now. Bosnian government forces had their own internal conflicts, even a breakaway region, Bihac. It is to be hoped that this unity is maintained in Ukraine, though it will surely become strained as the war drags on. It would be terrible to see rivalries emerge and even infighting among Ukrainian groups if there are splits. In conflicts, moderates often lose out to radicals.

A notable aspect of the Bosnian War was the number of volunteers who joined the various sides. There has been a long tradition of irregular warfare in the Balkans; Chetniks (among Serbs), Kacacks (among Albanians) Bashi Bouzouks (among Ottomans) and Komadija (among Bulgarians and others). Many were half-bandit; the Hudjuk figure was also a long presence in the region. These various groups gained (typically a well-earned) reputation for ill-discipline and brutality. This reputation, which would evoke terror in civilians, especially women, was an aspect of psychological warfare.

Those who volunteered to fight in Bosnia (and previously Croatia) were of different strands. Many were adventurers and extremists, especially those who fought with Croatian units. Russians and Greeks fought with the Serbs, and did Serbs from Serbia itself, and the Serbian diaspora. Many of these Serbian volunteers were attached to notorious paramilitary groups, led by warlords and war criminals such as Arkan (Zeljko Raznatovic) and Vojislav Šešelj. These groups were greatly feared for their brutality.

The Bosnian government forces had volunteers from the Middle East. These so-called Mujahedeen were exaggerated in numbers and impact. They were, however, a propaganda coup to the Serbs, who sought to portray the war as confessional, Orthodox Christianity against Islam.

The war in Ukraine has also attracted large numbers of foreign volunteers. Estimated in thousands for the Ukrainian government, many westerners, some of them are of Ukrainian descent. This large and diverse influx has drawn comparisons – somewhat inevitably – with Spanish Civil War.¹

In fact, there have long been volunteers fighting in Donbas. While Serbs have been fighting in these breakaway regions since 2014, their numbers are not significant in the context of the full invasion that we are currently witnessing. “Those volunteers cannot make a considerable difference now as they did in 2014 or 2015. The military operation is now more extensive. They are just a small drop in the ocean,” according to Predrag Petrovic, of the Belgrade Center for Security Policy.² Two more significant groups are joining the Russian offensive. These are the shadowy mercenaries of the Wagner Group, and the much-discussed Syrian mercenaries, although as of early April, there was little evidence of their presence.³ There is an

1) See J Oliver Conroy, “Among the Americans fighting in Ukraine,” Guardian, 14 April 2014. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/14/americans-fighting-in-ukraine>

2) Nermina Kuloglija and Azra Husaric, “Serb Volunteers Answer Call to Fight in Ukraine,” BIRN, 8 March 2022. Available at <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/03/08/serb-volunteers-answer-call-to-fight-in-ukraine/>

3) Presence, that is, in Ukraine. According to Kareem Chehayeb, they are arriving in Russia. See his “In Syria, Russia leads effort to recruit fighters for Ukraine,” Al Jazeera, 1 April 2022. Available at

element of psychological warfare at work here, as with the often-cited presence of Chechen fighters. Nonetheless, these groups are likely to be more effective than the Russian conscripts, and possibly even more inclined to commit atrocities.

The atrocities are in little doubt.⁴ The looting of homes may have brought ridicule on the Russian troops, but the wanton destruction of urban areas and the indifference towards civilian casualties are certain war crimes. Mariupol has now been added to the list of siege-targeted cities, which also includes Beirut, Vukovar, Sarajevo, and Grozny. Many other Ukrainian cities may face the same dreadful fate as war continues. This under the leadership of native Leningrader, a city that endured 1,000 days of siege by the Nazis.

The allegations of rape carry a very strong echo of Bosnia. The crimes against women were a core aspect of that conflict: it was not excessive behaviour by some troops, it was systematic like campaigns such as the Rape of Nanking, or Bangladesh's Independence War. It was the use of rape in Bosnia and Rwanda that led to the recognition of rape as a war crime. It was with impunity that Russian (and other Soviet) troops waged a campaign of rape on the women of defeated Germany in the 1945.⁵ Their descendants are now doing the same in Ukraine.

Bosnia was also a conflict that created hundreds of concentration camps. Elsewhere a colleague and I have argued that we may see a particularly brutal policy of incarceration in Ukraine, namely that people will be shipped across the border into Russia.⁶ With the withdrawal of Russia from the Council of Europe, there will be no legal oversight of Ukrainian civilians/prisoners of war who forcibly taken to and jailed in Russia. In addition, if large numbers of people are detained, a camp system will develop in the Russian-occupied Ukraine, where people will be held before being transported into Russia. Ukrainian colleagues have confirmed the existence of a so-called 'filtration camp', where Russian forces 'screen' detainees, deciding who will be imprisoned. Given the vast crimes of Hitler's and Stalin's regimes, concentration camps have a unique resonance in the European imagination. Even the term 'filtration camp' is chilling.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/1/in-syria-moscow-leads-effort-to-recruit-fighters-for-ukraine>

4) See, for example, Human Rights Watch of 3 April 2022. Available at

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/03/ukraine-apparent-war-crimes-russia-controlled-areas>

5) "Between 150,000-200,000 'Russian babies' were born in Soviet-occupied zone of Germany in 1945-46, and these figures make no allowance for the untold numbers of abortions, and as result of which women died along with their unwanted foetuses." Tony Judt, *Postwar, A History of Europe Since 1945* (London: William Heinemann, 2005): 2021.

6) Judith Pallot and Brendan Humphreys, "Will Russia put Ukraine dissidents into camps?," *Russian Riddle*, 17 March 2022. Available at https://ridl.io/en/will-russia-put-ukraine-dissidents-into-camps/?fbclid=IwAR3as403SwZoT5z2xYv_hLl5kOalX5zyv11TTir4u73ph_g-rri8_nzSdBJo

Both conflicts have produced huge number of refugees. Bosnia produced some 2 million refugees, both internally and externally displaced. That was with a population of only 4 million. Ukraine has a population of over 40 million, and already close to 5 million have left the country, while a further 7 million are internally displaced. Some refugees in Poland and elsewhere are now returning home out of desperation.⁷ There was a tragic precedent here in Finland; many of the Karelians displaced by the Winter War returned to their villages and farms, only to be forced out again – and permanently – by the renewed hostilities of the so-called ‘Continuation War’. Even if something similar does not transpire, there are reports of vast number of landmines left behind by Russian troops in areas from which they retreated.⁸

This callous disregard for civilian lives does point to a Bosnian precedent; the possibility that senior Russians will face prosecution for war crimes. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) was one positive outcome of Bosnia’s war. Imperfect as it was, it set a good precedent. The International Criminal Court (ICC) already opened an investigation in February, although neither Russia nor Ukraine are members of the ICC. That aside, Putin and his complicit lieutenants know they are marked men.

7) See Lorcan Lovett, “‘All I can do is pray’: the Ukrainian women going home despite the danger,” *Guardian*, 20 April 2022. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/apr/20/ukrainian-women-going-home-despite-the-danger>

8) See, for example, John Ismay, “New Russian Land Mine Poses Special Risk in Ukraine,” *New York Times*, 6 April 2022. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/06/us/politics/russia-ukraine-land-mines.html>