

SINIŠA MALEŠEVIĆ

*Is it easy to kill in war? Emotions and violence in
the combat zones of Croatia and Bosnia
and Herzegovina (1991-1995)*

Abstract

The battlefields are spaces of death and destruction. In the combat zone soldiers fight and kill while witnessing the death of their comrades. These unprecedented life experiences are regularly shaped by strong emotional responses. In this paper I analyse the complex emotional dynamics of fighting and killing in the combat zone. I explore the war-time experiences of ordinary soldiers who fought in the 1991-1995 wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The paper is based on the interviews I conducted with the members of the Croatian Army and the Bosnian Serb Army who had direct experience of the battlefield. The focus is on the relationship between emotions and violence in the theatres of war with a spotlight on the personal experiences of fighting and killing. The paper challenges the existing interpretations of this phenomenon and argues that the killing in war is neither uniformly easy nor unvaryingly difficult but is context-dependent, variable and highly contingent. Furthermore, the acts of fighting and killing do not automatically trigger pre-existing and stable emotions but the violent processes themselves generate distinct emotional dynamics. Rather than simply following the violent actions emotions are in fact often made in the very acts of fighting and killing.

Keywords: Sociology of war; Yugoslav wars; Fighting; Killing; Emotions; Organised Violence.

Introduction

THE WARS in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (1991-1995) have received considerable attention from researchers. Much of the focus, however, has been on the macro-level causes of the break-up of the Yugoslav state, and the role of political and military elites in the mobilisation of violent nationalisms. There is also a wealth of scholarship

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Siniša MALEŠEVIĆ, University College Dublin [sinisa.malesevic@ucd.ie]

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on the perpetrators of mass scale violence and the structure of paramilitary organisations involved in ethnic cleansing and genocide. However, there is a paucity of research on the conventional military organisations, and especially on the ordinary soldiers, who were conscripted to fight in these wars. In this paper, I analyse the inter-personal dynamics of violence in the combat zones of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. More specifically, I explore the emotional processes that underpinned the acts of fighting and killing, my key research question being: How difficult is it for ordinary soldiers to kill other human beings during war?

The paper is divided into four parts. Firstly, I review the existing scholarship on emotions and violence in combat zones. Secondly, I provide some contextual information on the military organisations involved in the wars of Yugoslav succession. Thirdly, the paper outlines the methodology and the data collection procedures used in this study. Fourthly, the longest part of the paper draws on interviews with combatants who fought in these two wars, focusing on the emotional dynamics of fighting and killing. More specifically I analyse four violent processes: face-to-face killing, the observation of death and incapacitating injuries, the experience of torture and abuse, and the role of narcotics on the battlefield. Finally, the paper locates the key findings within existing debates on emotions and violence.

Emotions and Violence on the Battlefield

The combat zone is an environment that generates deep emotional reactions. Soldiers experience fear, anxiety, anger, angst, panic, pride, shame and even elation. One of the earliest scholars of combat experience, Colonel Ardant du Picq [(1903) 2006] conducted surveys among French officers in 1860s. He found that fear was a dominant emotion on the battlefield and also the main reason why many soldiers fired into the air instead of directly confronting the enemy. As du Picq [2006: 90] recognised, “man has a horror of death... He does not hear, he cannot hear any more. He is full of fear.” Du Picq’s view was that fear can be constrained through discipline or by invoking other emotional responses including shame: “the discipline is for the purpose of dominating that horror by a still greater horror, that of punishment or disgrace... Self-esteem is unquestionably one of the most powerful motives which moves our men. They do not wish to pass for cowards in the eyes of their comrades” [Du Picq 2006: 154].

20th century warfare has been characterised by similar emotional reactions. For example, Stouffer *et al.* [1949] found that the majority of US soldiers who fought in the European theatres of WWII experienced extreme fear. In this survey conducted among the infantry regiments stationed in France, 65% of soldiers declared that fear prevented them from fulfilling their military responsibilities. Similar responses were identified in surveys conducted among the US infantry in the Pacific, with 76% of soldiers admitting that they experienced violent poundings of the heart and over 50% being sick in their stomachs, with cold sweats, intense trembling and fainting feelings [Stouffer *et al.* 1949: 201].

This centrality of fear on the battlefield has been acknowledged by military organisations throughout history as it generally proved to be a major obstacle to the efficiency of fighting and killing the enemy. Most military organisations therefore introduced severe punishments for desertion and unwillingness to fight, often sanctioning the killing of “deserters” or “saboteurs” on the spot or authorising officers to implement strict punishments for those unwilling to fight. Officers were particularly concerned that fear would stand in the way of a soldier’s disposition to kill other human beings.

While fear is often perceived to be an obstacle to effective fighting and willingness to kill the enemy, anger and rage are often identified as emotions that motivate violent responses. For example, witnessing the death, incapacitating injuries or tortured corpse of a close comrade could generate intense negative feelings towards the enemy that could quickly be articulated as anger, rage and a call for revenge. In such situations, soldiers often feel a profound sense of injustice done to the individuals they feel strongly attached to. For example, Anthony Beevor [2009: 260] documents the response of a US soldier who fought during WWII’s D-Day operations: “real hatred of the enemy came to soldiers, he noticed, when a buddy was killed. And this was often a total hatred: any German they encountered after that would be killed”. A very similar reaction was expressed by Philip Caputo [1977: 231] in his memoir of the Vietnam War: “I did not hate the enemy [Viet Cong] for their politics, but for murdering Simpson [a friend]... revenge was one of the reasons I volunteered for a line company. I wanted a chance to kill somebody”. Sebastian Junger [2010: 60] noticed an almost identical response among the US soldiers in Afghanistan who became very angry after the death of a comrade, with one soldier proclaiming that: “I just wanted to kill everything that came up that was not American”. Rage and anger are also often identified with what soldiers might consider to be dishonest or deceitful military conduct on the part of the enemy. For example, when a German

prisoner of war (POW) used a concealed weapon to suddenly kill a number of US soldiers, their friends were instantly filled with rage: “roused to a state of berserk fury—We just had a hate—at the Germans, the hill, everything” [Burleigh 2011: 379].

Other powerful emotional responses associated with the combat zone are shame and guilt. Shame could also be associated with inappropriate behaviour towards the enemy and especially civilians. For example, one US soldier, who took part in the destruction of a Vietnamese village where women and children were massacred, recalled how he felt ashamed about this, yet could not resist the peer pressure: “I happened to look into somebody’s eyes, a women’s eyes, and she – I don’t know, I looked, I mean, just before we started firing, I mean, You know, I didn’t want to. I wanted to turn around and walk away. It was something telling me not to do it. Something told me not to, you know, just turn around and not be part of it, but everybody else started firing, I started firing” [Bourke 2000: 191]. Some soldiers would experience mixed feelings, with initial satisfaction quickly turning into a sense of shame or guilt. For example, a soldier who fought in the Gulf War of 1990-1991 describes his reaction after destroying two Iraqi trucks and seeing an Iraqi soldier on fire. After shooting this man his initial reaction was “a sense of exhilaration, of joy” but almost instantly he was overwhelmed by “a tremendous feeling of guilt and remorse” [Mann 2019: 13]. However, in most instances this sense of shame and guilt of being involved in killings would arise after the battle or after the end of the war. A bomber pilot who was responsible for the destruction of entire villages in Vietnam expressed in his diary entries after the mission a strong sense of shame for not feeling guilty for what he has done: “The deep shame that I feel is my own lack of emotional reaction. I keep reacting as though I were simply watching a movie of the whole thing. I still don’t feel that I have personally killed anyone... Have I become so insensitive that I have to see torn limbs, the bloody ground, the stinking holes and guts in the mud, before I feel ashamed that I have destroyed numbers of my own kind?” [Bourke 2000: 221].

Although most soldiers associate battlefields with fear, horror, anxiety and other negative emotions, some individuals find the combat zone exhilarating, elating and even joyous. An environment where one is exposed to unprecedented dangers and an almost unlimited power to decide who will live or die was seen by some individuals as the ultimate realm of freedom. In the words of one Vietnam War veteran: the war experience opened the opportunity for “violent transcendence” that led to “falling in love with the power and thrill of destruction and death dealing... there is a deep savage joy in destruction...” He described how

he was enticed by this sense of dominance: “I loved this power. I love it still. And it scares the hell out of me” [Marlantes 2011: 61-67, 160]. A very similar attitude can be found in other wars. For example, in a highly popular book, *Storm of Steel*, Ernest Jünger [(1920) 2016: 232] depicts his experience as a German soldier in WWI: “As we advanced, we were in the grip of berserk rage. The overwhelming desire to kill lent wings to my stride. Rage squeezed bitter tears from my eyes. The immense desire to destroy that overhung the battlefield precipitated a red mist in our brains. We called out sobbing and stammering fragments of sentences to one another, and an impartial observer might have concluded that we were all extatically happy”. While Jünger was a conservative nationalist who was eager to fight for Germany, almost identical views were to be found on the other side of the battlefield and among socialist thinkers such as the Belgian, Henrik de Man [1920: 198-199], who describes his own battlefield experience in the following way: “One day... I secured a direct hit on an enemy encampment, saw bodies or parts of bodies go up in the air, and heard the desperate yelling of the wounded or the runaways. I had to confess to myself that it was one of the happiest moments of my life”.

We can see, then, that the combat zone is deeply filled with emotional responses. In many respects it is impossible to envisage battlefields without the strong feelings that define the actions of ordinary soldiers and their officers. The extraordinary experience encountered in theatres of war, with the ever-present possibility of losing one’s life or witnessing deaths and incapacitating injuries of close friends, inevitably generates a situation characterised by the strong presence of very diverse emotional reactions.

This complex emotional dynamic has contributed to very different interpretations of whether killing is easy or difficult in the combat zone. Some scholars argue that most human beings avoid the use of violence and, as such, find killing abhorrent and difficult. Neo-Durkheimian military scholars, for example, argue that killing is difficult for most people because it undermines the entire moral universe that most individuals share. Being socialised in an environment that condemns violence and identifies the murder of another human being as a cardinal sin, one cannot easily shed these ethical principles and embrace the act of killing, even when prompted by legitimate authority. Hence, military scholars such as Edgar Jones [2006], Joanna Bourke [2000], David Grossman [1996], and Richard Holmes [1985] argue that, for most ordinary combatants, killing does not come naturally and is avoided wherever possible. In his analysis of the killing experiences of British soldiers during WWI, Jones [2006: 236] finds that most soldiers experienced breakdowns as a

result of killings: “The act of killing, therefore, was an integral element in the soldier’s breakdown and the fact that he had been given licence to slaughter Germans had not protected him from the stress of combat”.

Psychologists such as Jonathan Shey [2014] and Brett Litz *et al.* [2009] also find that killing in the combat zone is traumatic and difficult for most individuals. They coined the term “moral injury” to account for the situation where individuals encounter a disconnect between their moral values and the actions they are impelled to take following the orders of legitimate authorities. In other words, moral injury is a form of cognitive dissonance involving a major moral transgression that results in one’s sense of guilt, shame or anxiety. Soldiers who were involved in the killing of civilians or other actions that clash with their own moral codes are likely to experience feelings of shame and guilt in a form of moral injury. This is clear in the statement of the only US soldier convicted for the My Lia massacre in Vietnam, Lieutenant William Calley who recently stated that: “There is not a day that goes by that I do not feel remorse for what happened that day in My Lai [...] I feel remorse for the Vietnamese who were killed, for their families, for the American soldiers involved and their families. I am very sorry” [James 2009]. Shey and Litz see moral injury as a normal response to a traumatic event that has caused a temporary rapture in an individual’s ethical code.

Some micro-sociologists such as Randall Collins [2008] and Stefan Klusemann [2009] argue that killing is difficult because it interrupts the normal flow of interactional exchanges between humans. Collins points out that inter-personal violence is regularly accompanied by fear and tension that is a result of broken interaction ritual chains. As human beings attain emotional energy through their interactions with others, they tend to avoid face-to-face violence and especially killing.

In direct contrast, other scholars find that individuals can turn to violence with relative ease. Some authors such as Niall Ferguson [1998: 358] and Jesse Glenn Gray [1970: 52] insist that the two world wars show that “many men simply took pleasure in killing” and “Happiness is doubtless the wrong word for the satisfaction that men experience when they are possessed by the lust to destroy and kill their kind”. Sociobiologists such as Mike Martin [2018], Steven Pinker [2011] and Azar Gat [2006] argue that all animals, including humans, are “wired for violence” [Pinker 2011: 483] and that the use of violence helps an organism to survive and reproduce. In Gat’s [2006: 87] view “aggression is a means, a tactic... for the achievement of primary biological ends” including food, resources and mates. For Martin [2018: 1] “Humans fight to achieve status and belonging. They do so because, in evolutionary

terms, these are the surest routes to survival and increased reproduction". In this context, killing is perceived as an act that involves little or no difficulty once soldiers find themselves in the situation of danger where they kill or get killed. The rational choice theorists also view human beings as creatures that can be turned into killers with some prompting. However, rather than relying on genetic predispositions for violence, they emphasise economic self-interest. For example, Stathis Kalyvas [2006], and David Laitin [2007] explain the use of violence through the prism of economic gains and losses. Kalyvas [2006] views selective killings as a rational strategy in the context of territorial control. Hence most combatants will have no difficulty in killing their enemies if they can profit from such activity. Other scholars challenge the socio-biological and rational choice accounts while still arguing that killing in war is not difficult. For example, Michael Mann [2019: 27] argues that "men and probably women too can kill easily if ordered to by effective coercive authority, especially if the enemy is shooting at them".

These deeply polarised interpretations will be tested in the context of the wars fought in two former Yugoslav republics—Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia—between 1991-1995. Since these wars of Yugoslav succession have often been characterised as being exceptionally brutal it is important to explore emotional dynamics on the battlefields and assess the combatants' willingness to fight and kill other human beings.

Military organisations in the Yugoslav wars of succession

The wars following the disintegration of Yugoslavia have received a great deal of scholarly attention. However, researchers have largely focused on the macro level picture by zooming in on the geopolitical changes of the time, including the collapse of state socialism, the end of the Cold War, the uneven processes of democratisation, the rise of nationalist mobilisation, and the role of political elites in fomenting violence [Ramet 2006; Malešević 2002; Gagnon 2004; Baker 2015]. The establishment in 1993 of the UN International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), responsible for prosecuting serious crimes committed during the wars, shifted the analytical focus towards the human rights violations that took place during these wars. Researchers focused on the key perpetrators of war crimes responsible for the genocide and policies of ethnic cleansing. With the availability of extensive documentation collected for these trials, scholars have

produced an abundance of valuable studies on the role of political leaders and paramilitary organisations in the crimes committed during the war [Vukušić 2019; Baker 2015; Gordy 2013]. However, there has not been much systematic micro-level research focusing on the behaviour of ordinary soldiers during the war, and there is a paucity of evidence on their motivations and actions in the combat zone. This study aims to contribute towards filling that gap.

The wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina were deeply entangled. What in March 1991 started as a conflict between the Yugoslav People's Army (YPA) and the Croatian Army (CA) was by April 1992 transformed into an all-out war involving a number of additional warring parties: the Bosnian Serb Army (*Vojska Republike Srpske*, BSA), the Serbian Army of Krajina (*Vojska Republike Srpske Krajine*, SAK), the Croatian Council of Defence (*Hrvatsko Vijeće Obrane*, CCD), the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina (*Armija Bosne i Hercegovine*, ABH), the People's Defence of Western Bosnia (*Narodna Odbrana Zapadne Bosne*, PDWD), and numerous paramilitary formations. Military alliances shifted during the war according to the changing priorities of political leaders. Initially, the official Croatian and Bosnian militaries (CA and ABH) fought together against various Serb military formations (YPA, BSA, SAK). However, from October 1992 to February 1994, Croatian and Bosnian military organisations were at war with each other throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina. This war came to an end in March 1994 with the signing of the Washington Agreement, and the former adversaries were united again in fighting the Serb military formations. In August 1995, CA initiated Operation Storm that resulted in the defeat of SAK and also undermined the capacity of BSA to control much of its territory in North Western Bosnia. This military operation forced Serb political and military leaders to agree to a comprehensive peace agreement in Dayton, Ohio in November 1995 which officially ended the wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia [Malešević & O'Dochartaigh 2018; Baker 2015; Gagnon 2004].

For much of this period (1991-1995), Croatian and Bosnian Serb armies were the largest and best-armed military organisations involved in the two violent conflicts: the BSA had between 80,000 and 120,000 soldiers while, by the end of the war, the CA numbered over 250,000 soldiers¹ [Milovanović 2011: 5-7; Divjak 2001: 155; Žunec *et al.* 2013:

¹ By the end of the war, ABH has also grown to up to 230,000 soldiers. However, for much of the war, this military force was relatively small and poorly equipped due to the arms embargo that was imposed in 1991.

33; Špegelj 2001: 32]. These two armies were based in two different countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia) which were officially not at war with each other. Nevertheless, for much of the war, they were direct opponents. The most intensive periods of confrontation between these two military organisations include 1992, when the two armies clashed in Northern Bosnia and Western Herzegovina, and the second half of 1995, when CA together with Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina defeated Serbian troops and captured much of North Western Bosnia. The two military organisations were established and strived to implement mutually exclusive ideological goals. The principal aim of the CA was to liberate the whole of Croatia, initially from the YPA and later from its direct offshoot, SAK. In addition, CA was involved either directly or indirectly (through its sibling organisation, CCD) in the Bosnian conflict aimed at carving out a separate territory for Croats living in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In that process it fought both the BSA and the ABH. In contrast, BSA's principal aim was to establish a territory within Bosnia and Herzegovina that would be inhabited and dominated by the Serbian majority which then could join Serbia or rump Yugoslavia. However, despite these contrasting ambitions, both military organisations were ideologically driven by similar ethno-nationalist principles aimed at creating states for their respective ethnic groups while trampling the rights of minority groups or actively aiming to eradicate minorities from the territories under their control. The two militaries largely relied on ordinary conscripts to fill their ranks. Hence, BSA was created in May 1992 as the military force of the Bosnian Serb state (*Republika Srpska*). It was composed of the small number of Bosnian Serb officers who served in the YPA and the young Bosnian Serb recruits who were required to undertake mandatory military service. As the war intensified, the BSA called up individuals from the YPA reserve forces under Bosnian Serb control. The army also accepted a number of volunteers, but their proportion rarely exceed more than 2% of all soldiers [Milovanović 2011]. The CA was formally instituted in September 1991, having been gradually transformed from the armed police force established in April 1991 – the Croatian National Guard (*Zbor Narodne Garde*). At the beginning of the war in 1991, the military relied on volunteers, defectors from YPA, and soldiers who had previously fought with the French Foreign Legion and other foreign military organisations. By the end of 1992, CA had instituted an effective system for the recruitment of ordinary conscripts. Hence, a large majority of CA soldiers were also conscripted, although CA had more volunteers than BSA [Žunec *et al.* 2013; Špegelj 2001].

Data collection

This study is based on the primary data I have collected during four fieldwork trips to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia in June 2011, July 2012, June 2013 and August 2017. During these visits I interviewed a large number of individuals who took part in the Yugoslav wars of succession (1991-1995) but decided to focus only on war veterans who had a direct experience of combat. In this context, I conducted in-depth interviews with 35 individuals who spent significant amounts of time on battlefields in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia. The interviews included 18 former soldiers of the Bosnian Serb Army (*Vojaska Republike Srpske*) and 17 former soldiers of the Croatian Army (*Hrvatska Vojaska*), and lasted between 60 and 150 minutes. I conducted interview in the following cities: Banja Luka, Zagreb, Osijek, and Pula. The interviewees consented to take part in this project, and also gave me permission to record their interviews. The respondents were interviewed in their native languages (Croatian/Serbian) and the recordings were later transcribed and translated by me into English. Although most interviewees had no objection to having their names listed in the project, I decided to identify each responded by a pseudonym and their military affiliation only (BSA for the Bosnian Serb Army, and CA for the Croatian Army) to ensure anonymity.

The interviews focused on different aspects of combat experience including the process of mobilisation, combat action, attitudes towards the enemy side and the negotiation initiatives, and the process of demobilisation. Interview questions were open-ended allowing the respondents to lead the discussion in the direction they felt comfortable with. Since the project deals with highly sensitive issues involving memories of traumatic experiences, the respondents were given the opportunity to stop the interview process at any time, and to avoid talking about any issues they found difficult. However, most interviewees were happy to talk about their war experiences. Some even found the interview process useful and therapeutic as it allowed them to talk extensively about experiences that they had largely kept away from others for many years. Considering the sensitive nature of the research topic and the difficulty in accessing respondents, I had to use the snowball (chain-referral) non-probability sampling frame [Daniel 2011] where interviewees would recommend me to other potential interviewees as somebody they regarded as trustworthy. To avoid potential biases, the sample used broadly reflects the structure of the two military organisations with the

overwhelming majority of my respondents having been conscripted into BSA or CA, where only a small number of former combatants were volunteers. Hence, the sample used consists of 18 BSA soldiers (including 2 volunteers and 16 conscripts) and 17 CA soldiers (including 3 volunteers and 14 conscripts). The respondents also generally reflect the officer vs. private ratio with two officers in each military organisation being interviewed; the remaining 16 and 17 respondents respectively were ordinary soldiers. This is in line with the official data on the structure of these two organisations: in both BSA and CA, 98% were ordinary soldiers and only 2% were officers [Milovanović 2011; Špegelj 2001]. Most soldiers interviewed here also broadly reflect the character of the two armies in terms of military training: the majority of ordinary soldiers did not have much military training and acquired many of their military skills during the three or four years served in combat operations. In contrast, officers were largely well-trained professionals: BSA inherited its officer corps from the Serb members of the Yugoslav People's Army officer cadre (YPA) while CA officers represented a combination of former YPA Croat officers who defected before or during the war and professional Croat soldiers who were trained in the French Foreign Legion and other military organisations abroad [Žunec *et al.* 2013]. Some potential respondents were concerned that their statements could implicate them in the court cases taking place at that time at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). A number of former combatants therefore declined to take part in this project [Malešević & O'Dochartaigh 2018; Malešević 2018]. Nevertheless, most respondents were eager to share their war experiences and felt that they had not committed any crimes during the war.

Since most interviews were conducted between 16 and 20 years after the war, there is a legitimate concern that the interviewee's interpretation of battlefield experience could be "corrupted" by recent events and changed political circumstances. Furthermore, as the scholarship on PTSD and "moral injuries" demonstrates, former combatants are more likely to experience moral trauma *after* the war than *during* combat operations [Mann 2019]. Interviewees were therefore asked to differentiate between their experience during the war and at the time of interview. As will be indicated below, a number of former soldiers have re-evaluated their military experience and now express greater regret about their actions and even about their participation in the war. These interviews involved difficult and sensitive topics. As such, I am grateful to my interviewees for their willingness to share their experiences with a wider public.

Fighting and Killing in the Combat Zone

The general scholarship on the experience of fighting and killing on the battlefield is sharply divided. As has already been discussed, some researchers argue that most combatants can take life with relative ease [Mann 2019; Martin 2018]; others insist that both fighting and killing are emotionally and morally difficult acts that most humans tend to avoid [Collins 2008; Klusemann 2009]. The wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina have regularly been associated with senseless killings, often between people who knew each other and were neighbours before the war [Carmichael 2006]. The abundance of research on war crimes during these wars indicates that the members of paramilitary organisations such as the Scorpions, the Yellow Wasps and the Avengers among others were involved in the mass killing, torture and rape of civilians, and largely showed no remorse for their acts [Drakulić 2004; Vukušić 2019, 2018]. The evidence from the ICTY and other trials indicates that many of the individuals involved in the most gruesome acts of violence expressed no moral doubts when killing other humans. For example, Goran Jelisić who was apprehended in 1998 and sentenced by ICTY to 40 years for torturing and killing prisoners during the war, would approach his victims with the following words: “I can see that you are scared. It is nice to kill people this way. I kill them nicely. I don’t feel anything”. He even bragged that he “had to kill twenty to thirty people before he took his morning coffee” [Drakulić 2004: 79]. A similar attitude is present in the infamous video of executions committed and filmed by the Scorpions paramilitary. In this video one can see the Scorpions insulting their Muslim victims and then killing them without any difficulty. The victims were “lined up in tall grass, close to some holiday cottages long unused due to war and shot”. The dead bodies were then “stamped”, that is, they were again shot in the head to make sure that nobody survived. One of the perpetrators noticed a survivor and exclaimed: “For fucks” sake, this one is still breathing”, after which “the members of the unit [made] sure that the last victim [was] dead” [Vukušić 2018: 44-45]. In this 19-minute video there is no sense of hesitation expressed by the perpetrators, and killing was largely undertaken in a routine manner.

There is no doubt that this research is very valuable in helping us understand the process of killing in deeply asymmetrical situations involving the complete dominance of paramilitary groups over unresisting civilians or young POWs. We can also learn a great deal about the

social profile of mass killing volunteers. However, these studies cannot tell us much about the behaviour and emotional reactions of ordinary recruits who find themselves in violent situations. In-depth interviews with the former regular soldiers who spent a significant amount of time on the battlefield can shed more light on the emotional dynamics of fighting and killing. In this context, it is paramount to explore the processes of face-to-face killing, the witnessing of death and severe injuries of others, the personal experience of torture and abuse, and the role of narcotics in stimulating violence.

Face-to-face killing

The wars in Croatia and Bosnia resulted in more than 120,000 casualties. Although many civilians died, the majority of all casualties were in fact ordinary soldiers. In both wars, the soldier-civilian ratio of death was approximately 60% soldiers and 40% civilians². Thus, despite their perceived brutality, both wars resemble many other 20th century wars where civilian casualties were high but rarely surpassed military fatalities [Malešević 2010]. As in other modern wars, most soldiers died from artillery shells, missiles, mortars, grenades and other long-distance weapons; face-to-face killings in combat zones account for a much smaller proportion of deaths. The introduction in 1993 of the UN backed and NATO supervised no-fly zone over Bosnia, and by default much of Croatia, meant that there was no high-altitude bombing, which often accounts for large numbers of military (and civilian) casualties in wars.

In this context, face-to-face combat is rare and most soldiers had no experience of direct inter-personal fighting. Hence some interviewees describe the chaotic scenes of the long and distant frontlines: “First night [on the battlefield]... I expected god knows what is going to happen... [the experienced soldiers] told me that the shootings happen in the evening and in the morning... I loaded my gun and was waiting for the shooting to start... Should I aim at somebody or do something?... I didn't know what to do... and when the night came the shooting started from their trenches which were far away... in some places you can see them and in other places the forest is so dense and there is no visual contact at all... you see a few trenches a two hundred meters away...” (Dragan BSA). Others point out that the main threat came from long

² The Bosnian figures are more complex as they conceal a major discrepancy between the three sides involved in the conflict: a substantial majority of victims were soldiers

on the Bosnian Serb and Croat sides, while there were a greater number of civilian victims on the Bosniak/Bosnian side [Malešević 2010].

distance weapons such as grenades, missiles and shells: “You have to act as if there are no falling grenades and that is very difficult... they are not all aimed for you and that one that you can hear is not yours... the one that you do not hear will be yours” (Ivan 2, CA). Or “the first time I was on the battlefield I was slightly injured... the mortar grenade hit me... it was not terrible... but you feel fear... it was not pleasant” (Saša, CA).

In this environment of trench warfare, most combatants had no recollection of killing anybody in a direct confrontation. In fact, they were often explicit about having had no experience of face-to-face fighting. The Croatian soldiers were very clear about this: “I have never fought in the hand to hand combat [*prsa u prsa*]” (Nenad, CA); “Luckily I have never had that experience” (Saša, CA); “No, everything happened so quickly... I was responsible for the explosives, mines... mostly outside the combat zone” (Vlado, CA). The Bosnian Serb soldiers responded similarly: “I have never been in such a situation... it was more gun fighting [over trenches]” (Milan, BSA). Or “There was no such a thing, these are mostly stories... people would usually die when grenade explodes... or sniper... a very few people would die in direct [hand to hand] combat... this only happens in American movies” (Jovo, BSA). Thus, face-to-face killing was a rare event for most of these soldiers.

Even the soldiers who had some experience of close-range fighting stated that they had not killed anybody in person: “there was a fighting one on one, there was everything there but I have to say that even though I was in such situations I have never aimed at anybody and shot at him... it was mostly running [and shooting] here and there but I’ve never seen that I’ve killed anybody, I did not kill... and that makes me happy... I had those experiences, but I cannot say that I’ve killed anybody, I don’t know... it was not my intention to go and kill somebody” (Ivan 1, CA). Many combatants emphasised this emotional distance from the individualised experiences of killing.

Nevertheless, some soldiers were involved in face-to-face combat, describing it as a harrowing event: “Yes, I fought *prsa u prsa* at Olovo [a village in Bosnia]... strong emotions... horrible, horrible... you don’t know where you are shooting... kneeling, moving around... I almost killed my own comrade... aiming... then moving your gun... the worst thing that could happen... chaos’ (Dejan BSA). Or “Yes, at Matuzići [a village in Bosnia]... but this is not like in the films... you just look to save your head... literally you keep your head down like an ostrich and shoot... hoping that everything finishes quickly... that it stops... it goes through your head... run here, run there... there is no Rambo... and those who were boasting the most would look to save their own skin”

(Saša, BSA). A similar attitude was expressed by the Croatian soldiers: “Yes, a number of times, mostly in Bosnia... you wake up in the morning in a [somebody’s] courtyard and *Chetniks* [Serbian paramilitaries] were next door... so who fires first he stays alive... two yards next to each other... everything is mixed... all kinds of things would happened” (Ivan 2 CA). Or “It is only then that I realised what is war. Until then it was just a game, you have a gun and you shoot at them... and they shoot at you... until the first person dies. And then, it is hard to describe that feeling... it is a real death. That changes you, I’ve changed in one day... everything went through my head... until then I’ve only seen this on TV” (Vjeko, CA). Many soldiers thus describe face-to-face fighting as a traumatic event, a deeply negative emotional experience that they wanted to get away from as soon as possible.

As a result of this close combat experience, some soldiers were in a position to kill the enemy and see people dying. When describing how they felt following the act of killing, they expressed a wide range of emotional reactions. Some soldiers emphasised feeling bad and sad immediately after the event; others indicated that sadness or remorse came later; others still stated that they did not feel anything during the whole process. For example, one combatant was clear that he deeply regretted his actions: “Once I destroyed a tank, not once, but the first time, in Bosnia... and when the battle was over, I went to see [that tank]... and when I looked inside, I saw the cremated bodies. And this image haunts me all my life... the worst... I have nightmares... cannot sleep and suffer from PTSP... this will follow me all my life, even though I don’t feel guilty... only feel sorry... I ask myself: Why? What for? I don’t feel any more that this [war] was necessary” (Vjeko, CA). A very similar attitude was shared by other soldiers who emphasised that they had “bad feelings” after taking somebody’s life: “I did not want to hurt anybody... if it hurts me it hurts the other... I did not want to injure others... only when I had to defend myself and others” (Mile, BSA). Or “I felt bad. If a man is normal, has a limit, know what is right and what it should be and what it should not be...” (Nenad, BSA). Some soldiers experienced profound trauma: “I saw the pigs eating people... dead people on the streets... injured... everybody reacts differently... it hit me how old people urinate... they cannot control [their bladder] from fear... these scenes... catastrophe... everything to see... you have people who just pass by [the dead] or kick them... I could not sleep for months... and many older people had problems... it is not all the same, it is not something you can get used to” (Saša, BSA). For most young recruits, the act of killing

was difficult and morally disturbing. They were exposed to extreme violent situations that they had never before encountered.

However, and in direct contrast, other, more experienced, soldiers indicated that they felt nothing while killing the enemy: "I was as cool as a cucumber [*mrtav ladan*]... all dead people look the same, miserable... once I was loading decapitated corpses onto the bread track... taking them to the pathology unit to identify them... this become normal... you just move the bread baskets a bit away and drive... we had no ambulance tracks left" (Ivan 2, CA). Or "I saw people sitting around the trenches and asked only how to shoot, in bursts or not... and the shooting started... I've heard screams..." (Dragan BSA). Or "you get used to it" (Zdravko, BSA), or "you shoot... but you don't go there to see is he [dead] or not... you see he fell down... I don't care if I hit [him] or not... I did not care at all... only that I have enough time to run away, to save myself" (Boris, CA). For these soldiers, killing was a routine, an ordinary military activity that they were expected to do, and during which they tried to remain as emotionless as possible. Nevertheless, some soldiers reflected that this was not a regular human response but one engendered by the environment of war: The soldier who said that when killing he was "as cool as a cucumber" also stated that "war is an abnormal thing and we who behaved normally in war are abnormal after the war" (Ivan 2, CA). This soldier's response shows his awareness that it was the war situation, with its transformed moral environment, that generated specific emotional responses; it was not an ingrained biological given.

A number of interviewees pointed out that they had no time to reflect on their actions during the combat. It was only later that they experienced an emotional backlash. For example, one soldier stated: "You don't have time, it is only later... I did not think about it... you cannot do this... I was all bloody from [comrade's] injury... his uniform... everything... you are aware that this happens... but you pushed these things back into your memory" (Dejan BSA). Or "it did not affect me" [on the battlefield] ... it starts affecting you later, when a man calms down and leaves that situation... and regardless how strong one can be you feel it... especially if you lose somebody who was close to you... it leaves a deep scar" (Davor, CA). Here, again, we encounter another variation in the emotional response: while many ordinary soldiers were shocked by the experience of fighting and killing, and some were indifferent towards these acts, this group disassociated itself emotionally from the carnage of the battlefield but later reflected on their shared experiences with death.

These diverse emotional reactions indicate that killing does not come naturally to most ordinary recruits. Being exposed to the extremely

violent realities of the combat zone engenders intense emotional responses including fear, horror, sadness, guilt, anxiety and panic. However not all soldiers react in the same way—some had no difficulty killing while others compartmentalised their behaviour and emotional reactions. This complexity might suggest that violence does not by itself trigger emotions but that the specific situations and shared experiences (i.e. more practiced soldiers vs. inexperienced recruits) shape individual responses. In other words, rather than killing being a biological product of fear, anger or panic, the emotional responses are created in different social experiences of violence. The very acts of fighting and killing generate (mostly shared) emotional reactions. As these acts take place in varied social contexts, they are likely to create different individual and collective responses.

Observing death

Death is a defining feature of the battlefield. While many soldiers may not have been involved in the close-range killings, nearly all frontline combatants witnessed deaths and severe injuries of others. In some instances, this related to the killing of enemy combatants or even civilians. However, in most other cases, it was the death of fellow soldiers that generated strong emotional responses. The studies focusing on combat zone behaviour indicate that, for many soldiers, the sight of death and carnage on the battlefield is profoundly distressing. Witnessing the process of killing and dying is often associated with intense feelings including fear, horror, rage, sadness, disgust, panic or anger [Bourke 2000]. However, some scholars emphasise that most combatants express disdain for being involved in these violent experiences. Other researchers insist that the prolonged exposure to violence anaesthetises emotional responses, and killing and dying become routine activities. For example, Randall Collins [2008: 50] argues that even experienced officers and soldiers have regular mental and emotional breakdowns after “around a year of combat” indicating that “the effect of combat experience is not just a “hardening” but also a “softening” through psychological and physical strain”. Richard Holmes [1985: 222] finds that, in the 1944 Normandy campaign, experienced British units performed worse than new recruits. In contrast, Mann [2019: 27] argues that “soldiers rarely do more than hesitate momentarily before their first killing. After that, killing eases, restricted only by the fears induced by prolonged battles”.

The majority of Croatian and Bosnian Serb interviewees described their own experiences in traumatic terms. Encountering death was a

shock for most combatants. For example, some soldiers depicted the first combat situation in which they observed killing and dying as deeply upsetting: “we started shooting... it was a traumatic experience... shock...” (Dragan, BSA). Or “there was general panic... people see things, shoot at anything... any sound... especially at night... people break down... through a bomb, shoot several rounds... just in case... it was easy to die... you did not have to do anything wrong... people died from the lack of knowledge, experience and... from snipers” (Vlado, CA).

Some Croatian soldiers stressed the unexpected suddenness of death resulting from landmines and bombs: “Somebody stepped on the mine and three of them were injured and that was really awful to see... later I had worse experiences... several times the bomb would fell close to the bunker and would destroy everything... there were dead and wounded” (Ivan CA). Or “I worked with the mines ... and could see people wounded and dead... and you feel it... some boys experienced these situations and were in such a state that they could not perform their tasks and had to take compulsory leave or change their units” (Davor, CA). The same attitude was shared by the Bosnian Serb soldiers: “I had an experience when we were retreating and were shelled... there was a unit commander with me and he died... I also had to jump over two dead young people... ordinary recruits... young people killed by the grenade... it was difficult... when I realised what was happening... they are somebody’s children” (Zdravko, BSA). Or “grenades from the mortar around the commanding trench... two boys died from the grenade... some hundred meters from me... normally I was scared... seeing them covered up and carried away” (Dragan, BSA). We can see that most soldiers witnessed deaths that were caused by long-distance weapons.

Many interviewees were deeply affected by witnessing the death of their close friends and comrades. However, there was no uniform emotional response to these events. Some soldiers emphasised their initial shock and sadness while others referred to a variety of emotional reactions. In addition, the same individuals would display different emotional responses during and after this loss. For example, a Croatian officer reflected on his initial emotional state: “One day... in October 1991 two of us were walking, a friend who was always with me... and sniper hit him... I could not come to terms with this... I was just crying.” However, he then pointed out how this experience changed him during the war: “... when I finished crying nothing could have moved me anymore... I would attend seven or eight funerals per day [without expressing any feelings]”. After the war, he underwent another emotional change: “but now I cannot go to the funerals... last time I went [to a funeral] of my soldier

and had to look into the sky so as not to cry” (Ivan 2, CA). What one can see here is how emotional dynamics continuously change: the emotional experiences of the same individual are in constant flux, being shaped by the changing social contexts. As such, violence does not “trigger” uniform emotions; the emotional responses are moulded by social environment.

Several soldiers described how the sight of dead comrades would generate panic and fear among the inexperienced recruits: “there were a few who were praying and holding their rosary beads... some were shaking... and you could not count on them... there were about five percent of these” (Zoran, CA). Or “Some people had visions in their head and would generate panic that you cannot believe... there was everything... among 30 people one is enough to [starts shooting out of fear]... and you can get killed by your own... there was a million of these stupid cases” (Nenad, CA). Or “there was panic... when it starts [shooting] around you and people are dying you start thinking” (Dragan, BSA). The officers had to calm these soldiers down and also had to hide their own feelings when seeing their young recruits killed: “all soldiers look at their commander... what kind of pussy are you... crying there... it breaks you and after that ... no feelings... you just write down that he died and move on... how can you... you have too... it cannot be otherwise” (Ivan 2, CA). Here, again, it is possible to see the variable and changing emotional dynamics on the battlefield. Although many combatants express feelings, it is the social context and the group dynamics that shape these responses into recognisable emotions.

Other combatants described post-battle situations when a variety of emotional reactions were displayed. Some were sad, others were upset or felt guilty, while others showed no obvious emotional reactions at all. When a close comrade was killed, the rest of his unit reacted in the following way: “with the ceasefire [after the battle] everybody was silent, nobody was talking, only after a day or two somebody would boast—‘We will revenge him next time...’—but when the person who was next to you dies you ask yourself will it be me tomorrow... and what for and why... it was a dead atmosphere around” (Saša BSA).

While some combatants found the killings in the combat zone highly distressing, others described their involvement in these acts as routine and not particularly responsive. For example, one interviewee pointed out that operating a mortar and shooting from the distance allowed him to be more detached and less emotionally involved: “With a distance the man is not conscious... I did not know what was going on... I was in the artillery ... and was shooting with the mortar... [the shells] fell

somewhere but it was the least of our worries if we killed somebody” (Zoran, CA). Or “we counted the dead bodies and would in the evening just add a number of marks indicating how many people were lost... that was fashionable” (Ivan 2, CA). Or “you get used to it... the bullets... but grenades were something else” (Zdravko, BSA). Or “it is scary how quickly human beings adjust... you get used to [shooting and killing] ... and you don’t react to this... it is horrifying... just as an animal... how [quickly] human being gets used to the new conditions” (Jovo, BSA). For these soldiers, the sight of death was not disturbing. This was particularly the case with combatants who were operating large scale weapons that allowed them a degree of spatial and emotional distance from the direct killing.

The close-combat experience of the battlefield is usually characterised as highly intense. As such, many soldiers did not have time to think through their actions or the behaviour of others. Some combatants emphasised that they could not think about the dead and injured around them at all. They simply went with the flow: “you don’t think, you just go and do your bit” (Nenad, CA). Others made reference to their almost automatic fighting response: “when he [the enemy soldier] started running it was mayhem... shoot... I generally know how to control my movements but half of them [other soldiers] had no idea what they were doing from fear... It was tough... I fought and you cannot survive if you do not act [instantly]” (Boris, CA). Focusing on the job in hand allowed some soldiers to avoid engaging emotionally with the bloodshed that surrounded them.

Some interviewees also made it clear that they suppressed their emotional reactions during the battle and, in some cases, for many years after the war. When encountering the close-range violence and death of comrades, some soldiers responded in the following way: “It really saved me that I did not think about this [the battlefield experience]” (Dejan BSA). Or “you cannot forget... [these memories] are always somewhere in you and can pop up from time to time... when meeting friends and sharing [war] stories... when you start remembering” (Vlado, CA). Or “I would not go there... that is buried somewhere in me” (Nenad, CA). Some soldiers used dark and sardonic humour to reflect on their wartime experience of death: “you were lucky... it did not kill you... the end of the story... our unit numbered 115 people in August 1993 only 14 of us survived... some extensive pig slaughter [*malo jača svinjokolja*] as they would say” (Zoran, CA). The conscious blocking out of intense emotional reactions proved useful for some combatants during and immediately after the war. However, for others, the emotional price was high resulting in constant nightmares, PTSD and the ever-present burden of “moral injuries”.

As in the personal experiences of killing, witnessing the death and severe injuries of others generated a variety of emotional responses among Croatian and Bosnian Serb soldiers. Although they were exposed to similar situations of violence, their emotional reactions differed: while many young recruits were shocked, traumatised and prone to panicking, other soldiers demonstrated a degree of indifference and routine. Furthermore, the same individuals experienced diverse emotional states during battle, after battle and after the war. These findings indicate that violence by itself does not simply activate fixed and deep-seated emotions. Rather, the emotional dynamics are situational, contextual, and framed by shared collective experiences.

Torture and abuse of POWs

In addition to killing and injuring, warfare is also associated with the abuse and torture of POWs and civilians. The research indicates that the torture, rape and other forms of non-fatal abuse of enemy soldiers and civilians are linked to the soldier's level of professionalisation. Formal military organisations with well-developed disciplinary rules and regulations are less likely to engage in these activities than irregular forces [Steffens 2017]. The Yugoslav wars of succession are not exception to this principle in the sense that paramilitary armed organisations were responsible for more torture, rape and abuse of prisoners than the regular military organisations. A difference was also to be found between the more professional paramilitaries such as the Serbian Volunteer Guards, the Red Berets or the Scorpions, which systematically targeted civilians in order to ethnically cleanse specific territories, and the irregular paramilitaries such as the Yellow Wasps, the Avengers or *Leva Supoderica* which deployed extreme forms of torture without any clearly defined instrumental or strategic goals [Vukušić 2019].

Although none of the BSA and CA soldiers interviewed admitted having taken part in any such activities, a number of interviewees recognised that these practices took place occasionally. The scholarship on the ICTY war crimes shows that, although regular military and police forces were less involved in torture and rape than paramilitaries, the political and military leaderships generally did not punish individuals and groups involved in such behaviour [Vukušić 2019]. In this context, one would expect similar patterns of torture and abuse of POWs. However, the interviews with the BSA and CA combatants indicate that these practices were highly context-dependent, and linked to wider emotional group dynamics. In other words, while some military units were involved in

torture, others had no such experiences, and those where torture took place differed in terms of intensity and frequency of abuse.

Soldiers who acknowledged that torture took place showed a degree of shame and embarrassment about these practices. They tended to attribute them more to the enemy. For example, foreign volunteers were regularly blamed for torture and gruesome actions: “there were massacres and torture... especially once these Arab warriors came, these *mujahedeen*... a guy from Tuzla [city in Bosnia] told me... he was a cop... and he was disgusted with what they did” (Novak, BSA). Consequently, the foreign volunteers often experienced more cruelty than the native population: “I had a friend from Germany who came to Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina to fight, he was captured [by the Bosnian Serb Army] and was in Manjača [a prison camp] for 15 months... he was beaten so much that he lost the sense of smell and taste, when he eats now he feels nothing” (Boris, CA). When interviewees acknowledged that torture took place, they tended to implicate other military units rather than their own: “there were some on our side, the Scorpions, ... who they say, did some things from our side... but that did not happen in my unit” (Novak, BSA). Or “Some people were imprisoned, in some village, two-three of them, Croats... I came to the local shop to buy something and could see the guards standing next to the barbed fence and the big wooden door... I hear shouting coming from the inside... a lot of soldiers, I ask them what is this... and I remember this well... those people... how could they... they have not done anything to me personally so I did not have that feeling... but there were people who were thinking like me, and looked at these acts with horror” (Dragan, BSA).

In other cases, torture was associated with the interviewee’s own experience: “I was imprisoned in several camps, Vareš, Vareš Majdan, Tačin, Silos... 133 days and nights in imprisonment... they tortured me, were beating me regularly... I lost consciousness... they humiliated us, hurled insults, isolated us, put us into the dog’s house, no hygiene, hard physical labour” (Milan, BSA). Or “I was tortured by my own Croats, because I was in KOS [Yugoslav secret police]... they beat me up, 4 days in prison... they beat me with Serbs and what they did to them is impossible to describe... they (torturers) were bloodthirsty... so primitive... or just the worst people came to the fore” (Boris, CA). Thus, the patterns of torture were highly variable and context-dependent within both military organisations.

The interviewees were also keen to stress that torture was more present in some theatres of war than in others. For example, some depicted the war in Bosnia as much crueller than the one in Croatia. In

the assessment of one soldier, torture was a common practice among all warring sides in Bosnia: “everybody was persecuted by somebody else in Bosnia... those who were the majority [ethnic] group would persecute those that were minority, they were excessively bloodthirsty... Serbs by Muslims and Croats, Croats by Serbs and Muslims and Muslims by Serbs and Croats... they all used terrible methods of torture... in Croatia they were minority, maybe 10% in every unit with 1% in some units and 15% in others while in Bosnia there were 50% of those people... that is horrible... almost majority like that... I was in Herzegovina, northern Bosnia, Tešanj... they are all the same... no difference... the same mental profile... Where did this hatred come from?” (Boris, CA). Other soldiers described the dehumanising acts that took place in some combat zones but not in others. For instance, one interviewee was shocked by the treatment of dead enemy soldiers by combatants who were not from his unit: “I see dead soldiers laying on the ground and he just run over them, over dead people, that was so upsetting... I see one soldier had flask with water in his hand, he was trying to get some water before he was killed... that was one of the most upsetting scenes... when he run over this soldier with the car” (Ivan 2, CA). Others pointed to a minority of violent individuals present in other units: “there were some inhumane individuals... bloodthirsty men... this [violent behaviour] was in their blood” (Mile, BSA).

Most interviewees condemned torture and attributed such behaviour to undisciplined and unprofessional individuals, and “sick people”. However, some were more cynical and disgusted with the human race: “I could see how the mind of people changes in the moment when you give them weapons... it is horrifying how much the weapons change one’s mind... when you give a bit of power to a man, especially to a semiliterate man, he destroys others, he tortures, he kills’ (Jovo BSA).

The soldiers were particularly disturbed by the sexual abuse of POWs. Thus one interviewee described a gruesome scene that he witnessed as a prisoner: “There was an imprisoned Serb... who was taken by the military police, who were drunk of course, and they took a sharp bottle opener and asked the prisoner: “What is this?” ... and then the policeman said “No” and took his tooth out... he then said to the other prisoner “Take your trousers and underwear” and then they forced the guy without the tooth to perform oral sex on the other guy... while he was bleeding... horrible...” (Boris, CA). This extreme form of sexualised torture and abuse was often attributed to “sick people”. However, as these events took place in front of other prisoners, soldiers and military police it seems more likely that these were cases of performative violence

deliberately displayed in order to mark the boundaries between the two groups: to differentiate the inferior “feminine”/homosexual Serbs versus the “hyper masculine”/heterosexual Croats and vice versa. These extremely violent performances were deployed to enhance the group bonds among the members of military. As Lee Ann Fujii [2017: 661] argues, these violent displays have a strong social dimension; they are intended “to be seen and make people take notice”. The sexualised torture was not used here to extract strategic information or to trigger ingrained emotions among those who witnessed these violent acts. Instead, the violent act was performed deliberately in order to create new and shared emotional dynamics.

In other cases, soldiers showed empathy towards the POWs who were recognised as being in a very similar situation to their own: “when you capture them you think I would do anything to him... but once you see him, hungry, thirsty, scared, terrified and that he is here just as you are because somebody forced him to go, and he does not know where he is and what he is... and what will be of him... not a single hair from his head was missing... we captured a prisoner and took him to our quarters... I was not going to torture him and vent my spleen [for a killed comrade] ... we are not like that” (Zoran, BSA).

What the interviews show is that, despite the CA and BSA having similar, mostly lax, formal policies towards the treatment of POWs, there was no uniform behaviour regarding the use of torture and abuse. In most instances, torture was not deployed by ordinary soldiers. When POWs were abused, these acts were context-dependent and shaped by the specific emotional dynamics of different combat zones. This variability indicates that the use of violence is never a matter of simple biological response or of universal ethical principles. Instead, the intensity and frequency of torture is often framed by differences in the emotional group dynamics.

Narcotics and violence

There is a wealth of research showing that killing and torture in war are often accompanied by the excessive use of narcotics [Kamieński 2017; Malešević 2017, 2010; Collins 2008]. Theatres of war are extremely stressful environments, and the use of alcohol and drugs has often helped combatants to deal with everyday realities including the death of close friends and the need to shoot and kill other human beings. Nevertheless, the use of narcotics has also generated violent excesses, as drunken and

drugged combatants have been involved in the torture, rape and abuse of civilians and POWs.

The use of narcotics on the battlefield usually occurs in two principal and different ways. First, the organised and controlled distribution of narcotic substances by the military organisations, in order to stimulate combatants to fight or make it easier to operate in an exceptionally stressful and violent environment. Second, the sporadic and spontaneous use of narcotics by combatants themselves in an environment with a pronounced lack of discipline and poor organisational structure. The research indicates that, while the professional militaries are more likely to deploy narcotic use for the latter reason, the paramilitaries and poorly organised groups dominate in the former type of substance abuse. The interviews with combatants from Croatia and Bosnia show that the use of alcohol and drugs was rampant during the war. In some, mostly rare, instances this was coordinated by the military organisation. However, in most other cases, substance use was disorganised and initiated by the combatants themselves. As Iva Vukušić [2019, 2018] demonstrates, many acts of extreme cruelty towards civilians and POWs during the Yugoslav wars of succession were undertaken by individuals who were excessively drunk or were high on drugs. This particularly was the case with poorly organised paramilitary units such as the Yellow Wasps, the Avengers/White Eagles, or *Leva Supoderica*. A similar pattern of behaviour was also to be found among the regular military formations where the heavy use of narcotic substances was associated with the excessive deployment of violence and torture.

Much of the research on the use of intoxicating substances among combatants overemphasises their chemical properties while downplaying or ignoring their social impact [Kamieński 2017]. In this reading, alcohol and drugs are deployed to numb the ingrained emotions and moral scruples that prevent many humans from engaging in killing or torture. The neo-Darwinians tend to explain the intoxication more in terms of loosening any moral qualms and thus allowing the biological proclivities to take over. In contrast, many sociologists interpret the reliance on drugs and alcohol as a way of overcoming the emotionally inbuilt inability to kill. Despite these pronounced differences, both perspectives largely neglect to address the ways in which drugs and alcohol contribute towards the emotional dynamics of killing. For one thing, the use of these substances does not produce uniform outcomes. When drugs are distributed by the military to increase fighting efficiency, they tend to have very mixed results: some soldiers fight better while others experience hallucinations, paranoia, fear and, as such, become

ineffective fighters [Kamieński 2017; Bergen-Cico 2012]. The same applies to the unsanctioned use of narcotics, with some soldiers relying on the substances to fight more or better while others become too drunk or too high to fight at all.

For another thing, soldiers opt to use substances for different reasons. Rather than just focusing on suppressing their inbuilt emotional responses or moral values that prevent killing, many combatants use narcotics for social purposes—to enhance micro-group solidarity, to forget that they are away from loved ones, to stop thinking about the past or future, to build a group-mediated resistance to fear, and for many other reasons not related to fighting. The relationship between killing and the use of narcotics is therefore far from being straightforward. Instead of having a purely chemical function, the consumption of substances contributes to the development of complex emotional dynamics.

Judging from the responses of the interviewees, it seems that only a small number of military units systematically received narcotics for combat-related purposes. A member of the Croatian Defence Forces (HOS)³ who later joined the Croatian Army indicated that his unit was supplied with narcotics for use in case of injury or capture, and that these tablets would allow soldiers to fight without pain: “at the beginning of war they gave us some tablets that you need to take if you get wounded... there were four tablets and if your wound was light you take one, and if it is a larger wound you take two... and if you take all four you lose all feeling in a part of your leg, it becomes numb but you can still run... I did not believe in this but we all took them” (Vjeko, CA).

In most other cases narcotics were used spontaneously and without official permission. However, the large scale of narcotics use could also indicate that the military authorities either tolerated this practice or simply did not have the organisational capacity to stop their soldiers from using narcotic substances. Many soldiers were therefore intoxicated during or after battles. Some combatants admitted to relying on these substances on the battlefield: “I was on the pills for nerves and was also regularly drinking *loza*, double dose of *loza* [a grape brandy]... you lose all sense of reality... and it took me two years to get off this” (Zoran, CA). In this context, alcohol and drugs were used to navigate the sudden transition from a mundane and peaceful civilian life to a world of killing and dying.

³ The Croatian Defence Forces (HOS) was a paramilitary wing of the far-right Croatian Party of Rights from 1991–1992. It was later incorporated into the Croatian Army.

The use of these substances generated a variety of emotional responses. For example, heavy drinking contributed to conflicts between different groups of individuals, with ordinary recruits often resenting volunteers and vice versa, and with non-drinking soldiers disliking their intoxicated colleagues: “there was a lot of infighting between soldiers because there was a lot of alcohol” (Nenad, CA). Or “he would do it even if he was sober... that was simply in him... only when you are drunk that comes out of you easily... that negative energy... [drinking] only erases the breaks” (Boris, CA).

In other instances, alcohol was used to build up social networks among volunteers who relied on substances to join the military, to stay on the battlefield despite pronounced and shared feelings of fear, and to develop cohesive bonds with other volunteers. Such units of volunteers were recognised by other soldiers due to their extreme nationalist rhetoric which was not, however, reflected in their military skills. On the contrary, a number of interviewees emphasised that many of the all-volunteer units were not very effective in military terms because they were ill-disciplined and constantly intoxicated: “they were not warriors, there was not much use of them... they were slow, they drunk a lot... from fear... I did not drink that much... [they were] mostly volunteers” (Boris, CA). Or “I’ve joined the all-volunteer unit where ... 90 to 95% people were under the influence of alcohol” (Dragan BSA). The excessive reliance on alcohol in this case had little to do with biology and chemistry and much more with the enhancement of social ties. The substances were not used to suppress or trigger emotions but to generate a distinct shared emotional dynamic where all volunteer units would feel a strong sense of group attachment. The use of alcohol did not stop the feelings of fear or military inadequacy; it actually increased those feelings. What alcohol did is to help foster a stronger sense of bonding among individuals who had never met each other before.

The emotional dynamics of fighting and killing

The most influential analytical accounts are deeply polarised in their understanding of soldiers’ behaviour on the battlefield. For some scholars, human beings are “wired for violence” and, as such, are likely to kill other human beings if necessary to maintain their own survival or reproduction [Martin 2018; Pinker 2011]. Others explain the use of violence through the prism of self-interested behaviour, with strategic

killings deployed to enhance an individual's economic gains. In contrast, the neo-Durkheimian and interactionist perspectives argue that, for most ordinary soldiers, killing is very difficult. Collins [2008] points out that a "violent few" were responsible for most of the killings attributed to all the military units that fought during WWII, and that the same pattern is discernible in many other wars. He argues that killing undermines the formation and maintenance of normal interaction ritual chains. As such, it creates tension, fear and discomfort. Other scholars emphasise that killing goes against the moral principles on which most recruits were raised. As such, taking part in extreme acts of violence is likely to generate "moral injuries" [Shey, 2014].

The experiences of Croatian and Bosnian Serb soldiers indicate that the attitudes and practices associated with fighting and killing are highly variable. Some soldiers express disdain for violence, and find the process of killing difficult and disturbing, while others treat it as a part of ordinary military routine. While for some recruits the act of killing was a horrifying experience "an image that haunts me all my life", others could kill with ease—"I was as cool as a cucumber". Furthermore, the responses to these acts are not fixed in time and place but are context-dependent and changeable—the same individuals who find killing and the sight of dead people very difficult in one situation, are calm, cold and detached in others. The situational context also shapes collective responses to killing and fighting, with groups responding differently to the same violent events and also expressing different emotional reactions before, during and after the battle. These ever-changing social and individual behaviours and attitudes are to be found in individuals' experiences of killing. They are also found when observing death and incapacitating injuries, when witnessing torture and abuse, and when using narcotics in the context of violent action.

These findings suggest that emotions play a crucial role in the individual and collective perceptions and actions related to fighting and killing. They are in line with the recent sociological and psychological scholarship on emotions [Barrett 2017; Turner 2007; Barbalet 2002]. The act of killing is regularly associated with a variety of emotional responses including fear, shame, guilt, anger, pride, anxiety, and so on. However, many conventional approaches tend to see emotions as stable and fixed entities that are triggered by violence. In this context, fighting and killing are often assumed to be sparks of universal emotional reactions. Although the two leading perspectives discussed here offer profoundly different interpretations of the killing processes, they both subscribe to the essentialist view of emotions. In this view, emotions are

entities with fixed states that require external stimulus to trigger them into action. What the interviews with the Bosnian Serb and Croatian soldiers show is that killing does not trigger emotional reactions but that emotional responses are shaped and transformed through the violent experience. Simply put, human beings do not kill other human beings because of fear, anger, shame, or pride but that these changing emotional responses are generated in the very acts of violence [Malešević 2019]. The killings do not tap into a fixed emotional reservoir; instead they create new social realities when individuals and groups mould and are moulded by new emotional dynamics. Emotions are not triggered in the combat zone; they are made through the shared experience of violence.

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Résumé

Les champs de bataille sont des lieux de mort et de destruction. Dans la zone de combat, les soldats se battent et tuent tout en assistant à la mort de leurs camarades. Ces expériences de vie sans précédent sont régulièrement marquées par de fortes réactions émotionnelles. Dans cet article, j'analyse la dynamique émotionnelle complexe des combats et des tueries dans la zone de combat. En particulier, j'explore les expériences de soldats ordinaires qui ont combattu dans les guerres de Croatie et de Bosnie-Herzégovine de 1991 à 1995. L'article est basé sur les entretiens réalisés avec les membres de l'armée croate et de l'armée serbo-bosniaque qui ont eu une expérience directe du champ de bataille. L'accent est mis sur la relation entre les émotions et la violence sur les théâtres de guerre, avec un intérêt particulier pour les expériences personnelles de combat et de meurtre. L'article remet en question les interprétations existantes de ce phénomène et soutient que l'action de tuer en temps de guerre n'est ni uniformément facile ni uniformément difficile mais dépend du contexte, est variable et très contingent. En outre, les actes de combat et de meurtre ne déclenchent pas automatiquement des émotions préexistantes et stables, mais les processus violents eux-mêmes génèrent des dynamiques émotionnelles distinctes. Plutôt que de simplement suivre les actions violentes, les émotions sont en fait souvent suscitées par les actes mêmes de combat et de meurtre.

Mots-clés Sociologie de la guerre; Guerres de Yougoslavie; Combat; Tuerie; Violence organisée.

Zusammenfassung

Schlachtfelder sind Orte des Todes und der Zerstörung. Im Kampfgebiet kämpfen und töten Soldaten, während sie gleichzeitig dem Tod ihrer Kameraden beiwohnen. Diese beispiellosen Lebenserfahrungen sind regelmäßig von starken emotionalen Reaktionen geprägt. In diesem Aufsatz untersuche ich die komplexe emotionale Dynamik, die auf dem Schlachtfeld durch Kämpfen und Töten freigesetzt wird. Besonderes Augenmerk gilt den Kriegserfahrungen einfacher Soldaten, die zwischen 1991 und 1995 an Kriegshandlungen in Kroatien und Bosnien-Herzegowina teilgenommen haben. Grundlage sind Interviews mit Angehörigen kroatischer und bosnisch-serbischer Armeen, die in Kriegshandlungen involviert waren. Schwerpunktmäßig geht es um die Beziehung zwischen Emotionen und Gewalt im Kriegsgebiet, insbesondere die persönlichen Erfahrungen von Kämpfen und Töten. Der Aufsatz hinterfragt die gängigen Interpretationsansätze dieses Phänomens und stellt die Behauptung auf, dass Kriegshandlungen wie Töten weder einheitlich leicht noch unveränderlich schwierig, sondern kontextabhängig, variabel und in hohem Maße unvorhersehbar sind. Darüber hinaus lösen Kampfhandlungen und Tötungsprozesse nicht automatisch bereits vorhandene und stabile Emotionen aus, sondern führen im Gegenteil zu einer eigenständigen emotionalen Dynamik. Die Emotionen entstehen direkt während der Gewalttaten, und nicht als Folgeerscheinung.

Schlüsselwörter Kriegssoziologie; Jugoslawienkrieg; Kampf; Töten; Gefühle; organisierte Gewalt.