

CHARLES UNIVERSITY IN PRAGUE
Faculty of Social Sciences
Institute of International Studies

M. A. DISSERTATION MARK SHEET (Opponent's Review)

Student: Patrick Hoffmann

Program: Balkan, Eurasian and Central European Studies

Title: *German Foreign Fighters in the Yugoslav Wars*. 101 p.

Reviewed by:

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As the main aim of his thesis Patrick Hoffmann has chosen an interesting but very complicated issue. In general, he decided to analyse foreign warriors from Germany who were fighting in the Yugoslav wars. More specifically he tries to identify those German citizens, who were combating in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1991–1995, determine their background, actions on the ground and post-war trajectories, as well as suggest their probable motivations for joining the combat in the way they did. The thesis raises the question, how these German war volunteers can be best described and if they are somehow specific within their subgroup of predominantly Western anti-Yugoslav foreign fighters. Hoffmann also argues that a common but simplifying interpretation of motivations of volunteers underestimates underlying ideological dimensions for the foreigners to join combat, as well as existing networks that were based on diaspora and transnational political activism. Last but not least he is arguing that there is not much reason why this group should be considered any different to other historical and contemporary foreign fighter groups, including contemporary jihadists.

At the beginning, it might be stressed that Hoffmann's thesis is remarkable, innovative, and ground breaking work. It represents a demonstrative example how a thesis should be prepared and realized. Hoffmann's dissertation has a thorough structure, he has accumulated almost all available sources and literature and outlined in-depth a theoretical framework of presented research. The author defines, explains and sets out terminology used in his thesis. He explains in a comprehensible way the differences between terms such as foreign fighter, mercenary and volunteer. Methodologically he used theories on modern warfare, exemplified by the well-known theory of "new wars", as well as within the phenomenon of foreign war volunteering. And most importantly, Hoffmann identifies around 50 real German foreign fighters and is able to give reliable, source based information of approximately half of them. And especially this part of his work, a thorough analysis of their social background, ideological underpinning, role on the ground and life after the combat is the most impressive part of his dissertation. Also, Hoffmann confronts his findings with existing research (Nir Arrieli's work) and moves contemporary knowledge about foreign fighters in Yugoslav wars further.

The main limits of this kind of research are undoubtedly a lack of diversity in data, absence of relevant primary sources, insufficient number of secondary literature and other materials regarding this topic. In fact, regarding the existing literature and sources we can observe that relatively little is known about the foreign fighter's numbers, motivations and backgrounds. It seemed that the only possible way how to relevantly research this issue in-depth and from a broad perspective, is to conduct field research and interview these ex-soldiers. Due to the fact that Hoffmann did not decide to proceed as follows, there was a

threat that his work could be superficial. After reading his thesis, however, I had to refute this precondition. Although Hoffmann has decided to analyse German foreign fighters “only” from available primary sources (media, internet links – youtube, facebook etc.) and literature concerning foreign war volunteering in general, his thesis is a very well written analytical study consisting a thorough discussion of the literature and other primary sources. With used materials he works very carefully trying to verify all information by using of cross-checking system. Only for next research it would be really interesting to try to get into contact with some of these fighters and compare the findings of this thesis with their stances.

The style of Hoffmann’s dissertation is clear in general. His list of bibliography extents on more than 12 pages, which is – for this type of work – impressive. He is referring to almost all important work regarding this topic. Within characterization of the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, he might take into consideration works of other famous scholars as Valère Philip Gagnon, John Lampe or Robert Hayden. I would only criticize the way he is working with his bibliographic references. Hoffmann uses strange quotation usage in which – if he is referring to some author’s work more times – he cites only a name of the author, sometimes with a shortcut of the title. Footnotes are in general relatively chaotically organized.

Also, although I consider his account for choosing Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina as logical, there is no thorough explanation of distinction between a level of involvement of these German fighters in conflicts in these two states. In his abstract, Hoffmann is referring only to Croatia, although further he considers the two conflicts jointly, according to the strong nexus between the Croatian and the Bosnian case. In spite of the fact that these conflicts have similar dynamics I conclude that between them there were very distinct differences. And because of that, it would be interesting to explore more in-depth the distinction of impacts of these (German) fighters. Hoffmann mentions that the main focus will remain on everything related to Croatia, whose armed forces were the main destination for German foreign fighters in the conflict. I missed a detailed explanation of this decision and it seems to me little bit misleading to describe situation on the ground in Croatia and not in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Maybe he should have highlighted why he focused on German fighters involved in Croatian forces in general. And could he be more specific and explain the difference between situation in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina during the beginning of the 90s? Also, the author’s name for the state “Bosnia” is not correct and should be mentioned properly under the complete heading, e.g. Bosnia and Herzegovina. There are other important questions. Are there any estimations how many German fighters fought on side of Croatian forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Bosnian army? Where these guys have gone, if anywhere, since these experiences? How they might view their role in terms of the rightward populist turn in Europe at present?

As it might be seen from my review, Hoffmann’s text does present original analysis, which could be considered a respectable introduction into a still unexplored and unknown topic of influence of foreign fighters in Yugoslav wars, especially in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The perspective of this thesis, although at some places Hoffmann’s text is more descriptive than analytical, is very important in considering an original insight into foreign fighting on the example of the Yugoslav wars. For this reason, this dissertation serves as an important base for future research and a welcomed contribution to the field. I recommend to the author to consider the publishing of this work. Patrick Hoffmann’s MA Dissertation “German Foreign Fighters in the Yugoslav Wars” to oral defense with a proposed assessment of excellent (výborně, 1).

Date: Prague, June 11, 2016

Signature: