

Anti-Government Non-State Armed Actors in the Conflict in Eastern Ukraine

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ABSTRACT	This article presents the main ANSA involved in the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. It focusses on an analysis of the specific phenomenon of the <i>opolchentsy</i> – <i>Narodnoe opolchenie Donbassa</i> . The aim of this paper is to introduce and describe these actors and to ground them in certain theoretical conceptions. The paper also tracks the changing motivations of the various ANSA brought under the umbrella of the quasi-state actor <i>NOD</i> throughout the conflict, and the changing array of formations that made up the <i>opolchenie</i> during a particular period of time. Evidently, the <i>opolchenie</i> do not fit into the usual classifications of ANSA.
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The armed conflict in eastern Ukraine began to attract scholarly attention immediately after the start of the hostilities. The tension in this region was inseparably linked with the events that preceded the fighting: the overthrow of President Yanukovich during the so-called Euromaidan and Russia's annexation of Crimea that directly followed. A number of papers have analysed Russia's role in the conflict, the relations between Moscow and Kiev, and the response by the international community (HAUKKALA 2015; MALYARENKO – WOLFF 2018). Others have focussed on the military operations or the political, social and humanitarian situation in the region (KATCHANOVSKI 2016; ROBINSON 2016; KUDELIA 2016). Few, however, have analysed the armed actors, and those that have done so tended to focus on the state actors: the Ukrainian army and the Russian armed forces in the region (KUDELIA 2014; PIECHAL 2015). There is a huge amount of typological research available about armed non-state actors (ANSA), but since the beginning of the conflict in the Donbas, no one has tried to view *Narodnoe opolchenie Donbassa* (or *opolchentsy*) through the prism of existing conceptual studies. The fighting in Eastern Ukraine is still ongoing, and this, of course, makes it difficult to obtain information from this region.

This paper seeks to fill this lacuna by analysing ANSA who either have been engaged on the side of the pro-Russian separatists or irredentists or have been created by these separatists. This means that the study does not address ANSA fighting on Ukraine's side. The aim of this paper is to introduce and describe these actors and to ground them in the theoretical conceptions introduced below. The paper also tracks the changing motivations of the various ANSA brought under the umbrella quasi-state actor *Narodnoe opolchenie Donbassa* throughout the conflict, and the changing array of formations that made up the *opolchenie* during a particular period of time.

In the following text, the conceptualisation of armed non-state actors (ANSA) will be followed by the specification of the methods of research. Then the authors will explore the phenomenon of the *Narodnoe opolchenie Donbassa*, and then the transformations and metamorphoses of the NOD during the conflict will be analysed. Afterwards there will be an interpretation of the results of the study.

CONCEPTUALISING ARMED NON-STATE ACTORS

The issue of *armed non-state actors* (ANSA) or *violent non-state actors* (VNSA) has been broadly treated in the literature (SALEHYAN 2009; WILLIAMS 2008; THOMAS – KISER – CASEBEER 2005; MULAJ 2010). For the purposes of this paper, we largely rely on Mair (2003), Schneckener (2006) and Williams (2008). Mair (2003) defined four ideal types of armed non-state actors: criminal organisations; terrorist organisations; warlords; and insurgents or rebels. He provides four essential criteria for classification into the four types: motivations; target groups; geographical scope; and objectives. Within each of these criteria, Mair (2003) distinguishes a dichotomy. He specifies two motivations – political and economic, as well as two target groups – either official security forces and competing groups, or the civilian population. The geographical scope, then, can be limited and clearly defined, or global. And, finally, the objective is either to overthrow and replace the existing government or to coexist with it.

Williams (2008) used the four types of ANSA as defined by Mair (2003), but added militias and paramilitary units to them. In addition to the motivations and objectives, he also distinguished other aspects, including in his model size and strength, organisational structure, the role of violence, the relationship to the state, the financing method and provision of resources, and the relationship with members and supporters. Schneckener (2006) provides more types of ANSA than the previous two authors, even though the gist remains the same. He distinguishes rebels/guerrillas, militias, clan chiefs/big men, warlords, terrorists, criminals, mercenaries, private military and security companies and marauders.

Schneckener's (2006) premises for defining ANSA imply that they are able and willing to use violence to achieve their objectives, and are as follows:

- A. They are not integrated into the mechanism of the state: they are not the president's personal guard, a special unit or the police;
- B. They have a measure of autonomy with regard to their policy, conduct of military operations, resources and infrastructure, even though they may be officially or informally used by state actors or can be directly linked with the structures of the state;

- C. They exhibit a certain continuity of existence and operations conducted, precluding occasional or sporadic eruptions of violence from ANSA activities.

Very similarly to Mair (2003), Schneckener (2006) observes the ANSA's objectives (change or preservation of the status quo), geographic scope (control of territory versus indifference towards territoriality or globalism), relationship to violence (physical or psychological violence, corresponding partly to Mair's category of the target group) and motivation (political or ideological versus economic or profit-driven).

Relying on Mair's four criteria cited above and combining them with Schneckener's types, we obtain the following table, which will serve us in studying the conflict in Eastern Ukraine and the *opolchentsy*-type units and their allies:

TABLE 1: THE AUTHORS' INTERPRETATION OF MAIR'S CRITERIA COMBINED WITH ANSA TYPES ACCORDING TO SCHNECKENER

Type of actor	Motivation	Geographic scope	Objectives	Objects of violence
Rebels and guerrillas	Political/ ideological	Limited	Regime change	State/regime
Militias	Political	Limited	Mostly status quo	Both/dependent on situation
Clan chiefs	Political/economic	Limited	Mostly status quo	State/regime
Warlords	Economic	Limited	Status quo	Civilians
Terrorists	Political/ ideological	Global	Regime change	Mostly civilians
Organised crime	Economic	Global	Status quo	Both/dependent on situation
Mercenaries and private military and security companies	Economic	Limited/dependent on assignment	Dependent on customer	Mostly civilians/ dependent on customer
Marauders	Economic	Limited	Both/dependent on the specific case	Civilians

THE METHODS OF OUR RESEARCH

This paper is based on a qualitative design and presents an interpretive case study of ANSA fighting the Ukrainian government and their motivations. The basis for this article is an ethnographic field research combined with elements of document and content analysis. For the research

itself it is essential not only to triangulate the collected data, but also to implement the triangulation of methods. All official data and statistics were therefore verified by alternative sources. The majority of (Western) research on the east Ukrainian crisis up until now is based on analysis of news articles published predominantly in the English language, as well as official documents and reports of the Ukrainian government and international organisations.

Field research related to the conflict which would also include primary data from the Donbass region is still not available, and because of that, the interpretation and exploration of the current findings are of a low quality. The texts on this topic published by Russian authors are unfortunately influenced by various propagandist methods (e.g. publishing articles on servers such as Sputnik or Pogrom, etc.). This article therefore can be considered unique thanks to the primary qualitative data collected from quite often hardly reachable sources and localities. The ethnographic methods employed in the study also allow for the collection of firsthand information and help one to discover original information. The authors are, however, aware of the pitfalls associated with the use of ethnography, especially the questions regarding the correct categorisation of data, proper evaluation of the collected information, and complications with the generalisation of information. For this reason, all the data collected with ethnographic methods are also triangulated by the aforementioned analysis of documents.

The field research itself is based on six elements, which must include: participant observation, collecting biographies, interviews, field notes, interpretation of findings, and the final report (DRULÁK 2008: 156). The research could be most accurately described as non-standardised, the reason being that standardisation is not feasible in the context of field work within an armed conflict. Participant observation is generally used as the primary or secondary method while researching the areas of conflict. The element of trust and the relationship between the researcher and the population or respondents is important. Relationships between the researcher and the population which are too close can, however, influence the transparency of the research (PALA 2016; CF. NORMAN 2009: 82). Quite often, the significant issue of discord between the trust of the population and the credibility of the research is present.

One of the co-authors of this text has focussed on the topic of Ukraine for a long time and she also had a permanent residency in Donetsk until 2016, which automatically puts her into the position of an observer-participant. The co-author also witnessed the protests and the declaration of a referendum in spring 2014. The role of the researcher in the observer-participant category brings multiple advantages and unique elements, but it also has its limits. Personal ties to and orientation in the research topic can have a negative effect as well, especially when the boundary between the personal experience (which is quite traumatic in the case of a conflict) and critical evaluation is distorted. The other co-author, however, didn't have any personal ties with Ukraine. The duo of authors did venture out for several short-term visits to Ukraine, each between two and three weeks long, in the years 2015, 2016, and 2018. All the visits included shorter research trips to the Donbass with the purpose of collecting data, especially to locations heavily affected by the conflict – Maryanka, Avdeyevka, Krasnogorovka, Starognatovka, Novtroickoye, Volnovach, and Mariupol. Gatekeepers authorised for stays in the Donetsk People's Republic were sent to the territories which are not under the control of Ukraine.

The sources and data were collected in several ways and were both primary and secondary in character. The key primary data were obtained through non-standardised, semi-structured interviews with politicians and activists living in the territory controlled by the Donetsk People's Republic (*Donetskaya narodnaya respublika*, DNR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (*Luganskaya narodnaya respublika*, LNR). These were supplemented with interviews of the same type with ordinary people of these regions. From 2014 to 2019, 80–90 non-structured, non-standardised interviews were conducted with politicians, activists, militants, humanitarian workers and ordinary people. These interviews had a role that was supplementary and contextual in character. This data collection is part of a long-term ethnographic project, which largely consists of field work; the present paper is only one partial output of the broader research design.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 27 respondents. Five of these held senior positions in the political and security apparatus of the DNR and the LNR. Another four had been high-ranking

officials prior to the creation of the separatist republics, and during the transformation of the local administration they either resigned or were removed from their posts. A further seven respondents were directly involved in military operations: four were participants in the erstwhile anti-terrorist operation (ATO) on the Ukrainian side and the other three took part in the armed conflict on the side of the *opolchentsy*. The remaining respondents were ordinary citizens who nevertheless were socially engaged in the conflict in some way, whether as workers in healthcare, civic activists or humanitarian workers. The variety of their positions, ideological and political visions, ages and occupations created an ideal sample for obtaining the most varied and complex information for the subsequent triangulation of data. Twelve respondents were between the ages of twenty-two and twenty-nine at the time of their interview. The next twelve were between the ages of thirty and fifty. Two respondents were in the fifty-one to sixty age category, and one respondent was in the senior age category (sixty-one to seventy-five years). Bearing in mind the safety of the respondents (since the armed conflict is ongoing and there is political tension in the region), the authors guarantee their anonymity and will not divulge anything connected with their personal data. This position agrees with both the ethics of research and the applicable legislation.

The selection of respondents was largely by the snowball method, or more specifically, four independent snowballs. Individuals identified through personal contacts of one of the paper's authors and deemed by her to be important due to their involvement in the object of research and the author's existing expertise and long-term fieldwork, served as gatekeepers. All the interviews were conducted in Russian.

Other primary data include legal documents (e.g. the constitutions of the separatist republics), direct statements by political and military leaders (e.g. through YouTube channels), programmatic proclamations, propaganda leaflets, websites and social media profiles.

The secondary data largely consisted of newspaper articles (mostly sourced from the internet) and other types of journalism, agency reports and scholarly articles and monographs, especially those concerned with ANSA and *de facto* states.

ANALYSING *OPOLCHENTSY*

Historically, *opolchentsy* were various armed tribal formations such as popular guards or armed reserve groups of the militia type. Tsar Peter I introduced the so-called ‘recruit obligation’, which was a method of replenishing the armed forces by recruiting common people with no military training. Later, the term came to mean conscription. Under the Russian Empire, *opolchentsy* were represented by groups of warriors (*ratniki*) drafted during the Crimean War, the Russo-Japanese War and World War I. The Soviet era brought a profound qualitative change, as part of which a system of citizens’ military training and subsequently also a programme of general military education were created. During World War II, in a transformed way, the phenomenon of *opolchentsy* reappeared. Volunteer formations appeared from the first days of the war, including communist battalions, militia groups and destruction battalions. As early as September 1941, the *Diviziya narodnogo opolcheniya* (DNO) was transformed into a rifle division that was incorporated into the Soviet army (BOLSHAYA SOVETSKAYA ENTSIKLOPEDIA 1974: 269–270).

More recently, the meaning of this historical term has shifted again. Unlike in the past, *opolchentsy* are no longer civilians serving their military (defence) duty during a war, but ‘voluntarily mobilised’ civilians (IVANOV 2011: 134–140; SKOROBOGATYY 2015).

In the conflict in the Donbass, the armed forces of the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics present themselves as *opolchentsy*. These ‘republics’ emerged after the wave of demonstrations in Eastern Ukraine protesting the deposition of President Yanukovich and the subsequent regime change; a referendum was then held in Crimea (unrecognised by the international community) and the two republics were proclaimed. Later, on 24 May 2014, a confederation of these republics was created, and it was called by the neologism *Novorossiia* (TASS 2014). A year later, on 18 May 2015, the confederation ceased to exist, although some of its representatives called it ‘temporarily frozen’ (REGNUM.RU 2015).

It needs noting that in the Donbass conflict, the *opolchentsy* cannot be conceived of as a monolithic armed actor, even though they are presented by the local actors as the ‘DNR or LNR army’,

officially called Narodnoe opolchenie Donbasa (NOD). In reality, this is an umbrella term for a conglomerate of various groups, which are often of very different ANSA types.

In the first step of the analysis, based on the data collected and inquiries among respondents, the contemporary opolchentsy can be divided into three broad categories: local inhabitants; Russian volunteers; and foreign volunteers. All of the opolchentsy groups form parts of the NOD. Now we will introduce these armed formations that are formally under the command of the NOD, and give more detail about the most important and best-known battalions (SKOROBOGATYY

2015; DONETSKAYA NARODNAYA RESPUBLIKA SOVET MINISTROV PREZIDIUM 2015).

Local Inhabitants of The Donbass

Many people living in the Donbass were certain that their region would be able to survive independently. However, industry, which until recently contributed to the prosperity of this and other regions of Ukraine, ground to a halt. Hundreds of thousands lost their jobs and half a million people moved away (KORRESPONDENT.NET 2016; SEGODNYA 2016). Furthermore, the Ukrainian side adopted a stringent policy towards people who decided to remain in the two separatist regions. Until 30 April 2018, Kiev called the two regions the anti-terrorist operation zone (in Russian, *antiteroristicheskaya operatsiya*; in Ukrainian, *antyterorystychna operatsiya* – ATO), and now calls them temporarily occupied territories (in Russian, *vremenno okkupirovanaya territoriya*; in Ukrainian, *tymchasovo okupovana terytoriya*). The military operation, then, is called the operation of the united forces (in Russian, *operatsiya obedinonnykh sil*; in Ukrainian, *operatsiya obyednanykh syl*). As of 1 December 2014, Ukraine stopped payments of pensions and welfare to the inhabitants of the regions not controlled by the Ukrainian government (RBK-UKRAINA 2017). Jobs being unavailable; unpaid salaries and pensions; Ukrainians' obstruction of humanitarian convoys travelling from their territory to the *de facto* states, which largely sustained the poorest people in the regions, thus causing further poverty; Ukraine's ban on supplies of food and goods; the so-called 'Poroshenko blockade' of 2017 – all of these factors in effect forced some men – and women, though less so – who were fighting and fit, to join the *opolchentsy*. Thus, these people joined the *opolchentsy* armed groups not for ideological reasons – ones connected with their ideals, identity or other abstract-sounding arguments. Their motivation was largely

material and economic – to secure an income. This income consisted of both the regular soldier's pay and opportunities to enrich themselves materially in the theatre of the conflict, whether by looting, robbery or acceptance of bribes at checkpoints (*blokposty*) or other marauder activities.

OPLLOT

The Oplot brigade was originally founded in Kharkiv in January 2014 as a civic association opposing Euromaidan (SHEREMET 2014). As early as April of that year, the group was involved in blocking the Donetsk *oblast'* administration and later helped to organise the referendum on the status of the Donbass (TASS 2014; MALOROSSIYA 2014).

The head of the DNR, Aleksandr Zakharchenko, became the commander of the brigade, which allegedly included the battalions *Smert'* (Death), which, in the early phases of the conflict, was largely made up of Chechens supporting their leader, Ramzan Kadyrov (the *kadyrovtsy*); Svarozhych; and the Russian Orthodox Army (*Russkaya pravoslavnaya armiia*) (ISSHENKO 2014). In this configuration, Oplot became known as a brigade, but it is sometimes referred to as a battalion. In early 2016, a senior official of the DNR Ministry of Defence, Eduard Basurin, addressed the matter of the Oplot brigade in the media, arguing that it was a fabrication of the armed forces of Ukraine and that there was no such unit in the NOD (REPORTER 2016).

BERKUT

This proudly named unit (its name means 'golden eagle') should be part of the DNR Ministry of Defence but all available sources point to the paramilitary nature of the formation and the fact that it seems to operate under the DNR police; it is excluded from the published structure of the DNR Ministry of the Interior, however (LENTA.RU 2017; VKONTAKTE 2017). In any case, our respondents agreed that the data indicating that Berkut belongs under the Ministry of Defence or Interior were obsolete. Although members of the former Berkut continue to serve in the armed forces, and some in the police, the unit as such no longer exists. The name is linked with a unit that was involved in the violent suppression of a demonstration at Maidan Nezalezhnosti, or Independence Square, in Kiev in November 2013; some of its personnel later joined the *opolchentsy* (GARMATA 2015).

VOSTOK

The Vostok brigade was founded in early May 2014. It was headed by a former commander of the Alfa unit of the Security Service of Ukraine (*Sluzhba Bezpeky Ukrainy*, SBU) in Donetsk *oblast'*, Aleksandr Khodakovskii. Originally a battalion, it emerged from the organisation Patriotic Forces of the Donbass (*Patrioticheskie sily Donbassa*). At the moment of its inception, it was largely made up of personnel formerly serving in Ukraine's special units Alfa and Berkut¹ as well as volunteers with Russian citizenship, mostly from the Caucasus, especially the *kadyrovtsy*. Originally a battalion, it was later transformed into a brigade following the First Minsk Agreement

(PATRIOTICHESKIE SILY DONBASSA 2020).

There were disputes between the battalion's commander Khodakovskii and Zakharchenko. At present (June 2018), the brigade is disarmed and most of its members have had to leave the Donbass, fearing purges by DNR and Russian special troops (DERGACHEV 2015).

KALMIUS

At a time when the presence of foreign contingents among DNR troops could no longer be concealed, it was the Kalmius battalion that promoted itself as a unit made up solely of the inhabitants of the Donbass (VESELYY RODZHER 2014; ARCHIV NOVOROSSIYA TV 2014). According to a report by Novorossiia sources, it is a combat unit consisting of miners. Interestingly, the deputy commander of the Kalmius special unit is also the DNR deputy minister for the coal industry, Konstantin Kuzmin. He said that the miners were taking holiday or sick leave in order to be able to fight on the DNR side (ORLOVA 2014; VMAKEEVKE.COM 2014). Most of the miners lost their jobs, or were forced by the coal industry management to join the units of the *opolchentsy*. Special units of Russian intelligence agencies and professional soldiers providing training are part of the battalion (OTTER 2014).

SOMALI

Somali, a special task force of the DNR Ministry of Defence, is interesting particularly for its media fame. Its commander, Mikhail Tolstykh (nicknamed Givi), became a symbol of the struggle against the Ukrainian armed forces. Beyond its very active propaganda on social networks, it is difficult to describe Somali as a true combat battalion (STOPTERROR 2015). It has been popular largely thanks to the position enjoyed by its leader. Givi was well-liked by the Donbass population, earned respect from his soldiers,

and gained some political weight. On 8 February 2017, he was murdered in his office by someone using a *Shmel'* flamethrower registered as military equipment of the Russian army. One of the possible explanations of his death is linked with the case of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, which was shot down over Ukraine. Givi allegedly knew who was behind the shooting down of the Boeing and who provided the weapons system. According to one version of the story, Givi was murdered by his subordinates; according to another, by the leadership of the people's republics on the order of the Kremlin, as Givi could not be controlled and increasingly won popular support, which was undesirable for the Russians. According to experts, a third version according to which he was murdered by the Ukrainian side, is unlikely (ANTIPOV 2017; KORRESPONDENT.NET 2017).

REPUBLICAN GUARD

This group was founded on 12 January 2015 on Aleksandr Zakharchenko's orders. Formally it is not part of the DNR Ministry of Defence but reports directly to Zakharchenko. The guard is largely made up of members of Oplot, the Russian Orthodox Army, the groups Pyatnashka, Bulat and Patriot and one company of the Varyag battalion. It is led by Ivan Kondratov, nicknamed Vanya Russkii (STOPTERROR 2015). Kondratov was also a deputy of the DNR People's Council (parliament) and unnerved the DNR leadership with his unpredictable media appearances which, as the Ukrainian side in particular pointed out, were unpredictable due to his drug addiction (TSN.UA 2016).

Although all of the battalions, brigades and units presented here came under the DNR armed forces and ought to be subordinate to the DNR Ministry of Defence, the reality is different. The battalions are actually quite autonomous. The relationships inside them as well as the links between the commanders and the DNR leadership are complicated. Zakharchenko commands the greatest authority; yet there have been repeated conflicts between him and the other commanders, and among the commanders themselves. Also involved in these relationships are the Donbass political elite and the Russian sponsors.

PRIZRAK

The Prizrak brigade is known under various names. Initially it was *Narodnoe opolchenie LNR*, and then it was designated a brigade and later a battalion. It won its greatest popularity and renown when it was a brigade, and that is why it is most often referred to as such in the public discourse. The group

was founded during the protests calling for LNR independence in April 2014. It was led by Aleksei Mozgovi, though Aleksandr Kostin has been the most active field commander throughout its existence (VKONTAKTE 2018A). What is more, since the beginning there were strong links with Strelkov, and many opinions agree that in some strategic decisions it was Strelkov who had the last word (PRIZRAK.INFO 2015). When Strelkov left, Mozgovi sided with those who criticised the Minsk Agreements and described the DNR and LNR leaderships as traitors (OBOZREVATEL 2014; SBORSCHIKOV 2014). Two assassination attempts were made against Mozgovi, the second one successful. The official line put out by the LNR says that Ukrainian agents of the group *Teni* assumed responsibility for the assassination, but people close to Mozgovi argued that it was the leadership of the people's republics and the Kremlin who were behind Mozgovi's elimination, precisely because of his criticism of the Minsk Agreements and his lack of humility towards the senior leadership (GORDEEV 2015; GOROSHKO 2017).

There is a relatively widespread opinion that, like Strelkov, Mozgovi was one of the few commanders of the people's republics' armed groups whose primary motive was not to achieve a position of power, or a pecuniary motive, as he primarily acted out of ideological conviction. This created a number of conflicts between him and the rest of the LNR elite, including the head, Plotnitskii, and it was the main reason for his elimination. However, this was preceded by attempts to moderate the conflict when the *Prizrak* brigade joined the LNR Popular Militia (*Narodnaya militsiya LNR*), the LNR armed forces (YARMOLYUK 2015). And yet, Mozgovi continued to be unwilling to obey the orders of the LNR leadership; for instance, he organised his own military parade and his group was called the 'alchevskaya opposition' because it was one of the few to oppose Plotnitskii (BELOKOBYSKIY 2015).

Russian Volunteers

Most often discussed in connection with Russian volunteers are the soldiers of the Russian army who pose as volunteers, but in reality form part of secret, deniable operations undertaken by the Russian armed forces. People living in the territories of the DNR and the LNR have long suspected that the same 'little green men'² who had previously appeared in Crimea were now fighting in the Donbass. (Their participation in the Crimea operation and membership in the Russian army were ultimately admitted to by Putin in the film *Crimea. The Way Home*.)

This was confirmed immediately after the first fatalities, when papers and military IDs of Russian citizens were found among their personal items (NOVOE VREMYA 2014; THE GUARDIAN 2015; BBC 2015). Further evidence appeared when some Russian soldiers were captured and admitted that they had come to wage war on the separatist republics' side. Soon their families in Russia were heard from too, with mothers and wives of the soldiers compiling lists of killed or missing men and organising small-scale public protests (GRANI.RU 2014; ZAITSEV – RYUMOKHIN 2014; GRUZ200.NET 2017). With the secret Russian contingent in Eastern Ukraine unmasked, there was no point in denying the fact, and the leadership of the Novorossiia armies admitted that there were three to four thousand Russian volunteers. The fact that they were servicemen in the Russian army or intelligence agencies was, nonetheless, still denied: they were presented as ordinary Russian men who came to fight the spread of Ukrainian fascism.

Russian media portrayed the Russian 'volunteers' as heroes, but their membership in the Russian armed forces continued to be unadmitted, even though amusing situations often arose with soldiers sharing photographs and statuses on their social networks that proved their presence in the area where the war was unfolding in Eastern Ukraine. In most cases, the servicemen were *de jure* on leave from the armed forces, so that their participation could not be interpreted as an official intervention by Russian troops. In doing so, the Russian armed forces formally relinquished responsibility for these soldiers, and, in a purely formalistic way, could deny that the 'little green men' were fighting in Ukraine because the Russian supreme command ordered them to do so.

Another group of Russian citizens who became involved in the armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine were members of the so-called right-wing units of the Russian Spring. Here we mean mainly extreme-right activists, supporters of the 'White Movement' dating from the Russian Civil War, and groups which strongly accentuated the religious theme – from (neo)paganism to Orthodox Christianity. A closer examination of the links between these organisations and the separatist battalions might suggest that all these groups have an extreme-right ideological background, and some of them are deemed extremist even in Russia itself (ROVS.NAROD 2018; VKONTAKTE 2018B).

In reality, the situation is somewhat different. For example, the ROVS volunteer battalion is nothing but a history club of admirers of the White

Movement in Russia. Indeed, its name references an organisation linked with General Wrangel. The group does not have a single member in Eastern Ukraine, but its leader, Ivanov, was involved in the Donbass, alongside Igor Strelkov, the former military leader of Novorossiia (KAZANTSEV 2014). However, he was more of an ideological adviser. When Strelkov was removed, Ivanov decided to fight the Putin regime alongside Strelkov (DERGACHEV 2015).

In March 2015, another unit, Rusich, became part of a well-known unit in LNR territorial defence, the Prizrak brigade, led by Aleksei Mozgovoi. The commander of Rusich, Aleksei Milchakov, became its face. Milchakov has military experience; he served (and, according to some sources, continues to do so – i.e. he is formally on leave) in the Pskov Airborne Division. Due to the political disputes within the LNR, Rusich was transferred under the command of the DNR armed forces, specifically, the Viking battalion. In July 2015, when the Novorossiia project was frozen, the Rusich group was sent back to Russia and Milchakov declared a ‘war against all’ (NIKITIN 2015; GONTA 2015). The nationalist, even neo-Nazi ideological basis of the group is masked by pagan and Old Slavic symbolism, but the members of Rusich around Milchakov are activists of various Russian extreme-right groups.

The organisation Varyag is one of the few not to hide their extreme-right orientation, as it endorses its neo-Nazi ideology quite openly, as is apparent from its name, which references an SS volunteer regiment of the same name. Varyag is closely linked with another organisation called the Varjag Crew, and the two can only be distinguished by a detailed analysis. From the time of the Orange Revolution, some of their members appeared at various rallies as paid provocateurs. Thus, they originally supported Ukrainian nationalism and, in the context of the Orange Revolution, Yushchenko’s camp. However, over the years they have changed their political doctrine, even if they broadly continued to endorse neo-Nazism. In the context of the East Slav realities, however, they moved into the pro-Russian camp, and during the Euromaidan they supported Yanukovich; many of them became known as *titushky* (RASTA 2014). Although on the general level and in their symbolism both *Varyag* and the Varjag Crew exhibited neo-Nazi traits, having abandoned Ukrainian nationalism they also absorbed the National Bolshevik doctrine, which they were able to combine with Russian Orthodox Christian nationalism. Most of them show no intellectual leanings – they are Russian skinheads or football hooligans – and have a rather meagre understanding of the ideological

aspects of their activities, valuing their apparently schizophrenic mixture of neo-Nazism, National Bolshevism and religious Russian nationalism largely for its emotional, romantic symbolism.

The Imperial Legion (*Imperskii legion*) is a military-patriotic club from St Petersburg which provides tactical and firearms training. It falls under the Russian Imperial Movement (*Russkoe imperskoe dvizhenie*), a monarchist and patriotic organisation having as its aim to return Russia to the tsarist form of government and renew the empire in its greatest territorial scope (PROGRAMMA RID 2018: JUNE 9). In terms of personnel, it largely recruits Russian skinheads, demanding of its members the Russian ethnicity and Orthodox Christian religion (VKONTAKTE 2018C). The Imperial Legion organised camps called Partizan, where military-tactical training was provided, and also recruited volunteers to serve among the *opolchentsy* in the Donbass. Ultimately the club was represented in the Donbass by only about twenty people, who served there as instructors training other combat groups. In early 2016, they issued a proclamation on the VKontakte social network to the effect that members of the Imperial Legion were no longer active in the Donbass. The group's contribution to the combat operations was altogether minimal; but it was much more effective as a fundraiser, helping the *opolchentsy* acquire weapons and other kit.

The Russian National Unity (*Russkoe natsionalnoe edinstvo*, RNE) can also be considered an extreme-right organisation, and it is active in Russia and relies on Russian nationalism and the Orthodox religion. It has as its aim to unite the Russian nation, consisting of the Great Russians, the Little Russians and the Belarusians. The organisation was founded shortly before the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1990 by former activists of the National-Patriotic Front *Pamyat'*. *Pamyat'* was an extreme-right anti-Semitic organisation with conspicuous monarchist traits (PRIBYLOVSKY 1999). When the anti-Semitic and the radical Nazi wings seceded from the RNE, those who remained endorsed the values of Russian nationalism and religious orthodoxy (RUSNATION.ORG 2018).

Despite the rift, the legend of this faction of Russian nationalism, Aleksandr Barkashov, was involved in the recruitment of volunteers for the RNE battalion in the Donbass. Well-known figures of this organisation include the first DNR governor, Pavel Gubarev.

However, it is uncertain whether the RNE really has combat groups in Eastern Ukraine. We believe that the RNE seeks to exploit the media spotlight turned on the conflict in the Donbass and thus to attract some of this attention to itself.

Foreign Volunteers

There has been much speculation about the presence of foreign fighters in the Donbass conflict. Apart from the participation of members of the Russian armed forces noted above, there is little firm evidence of this. Often there are efforts to win the attention of the world's media for various ephemeral groups, which are sometimes redolent of operetta. In terms of their affiliation with a state, there is a similar problem with the participation of the *kadyrovtsy* in the fighting in the Donbass as there is with that of the soldiers of the Russian army. The latter deny their membership in the armed forces of their state, but often do so very artlessly and blatantly. The *kadyrovtsy* have not denied their involvement at all, but, on the other hand, they come under the troops of the Russian Federation's Ministry of Internal Affairs (*Ministerstvo vnutrennikh del*). In fact, they are a quasi-state armed force directly subordinate to the Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, who is formally subject to the authority of the Kremlin, but actually acts quite independently and if he is accountable to anyone it is to Vladimir Putin himself.

Among the foreign fighters, the Serbian volunteers of the battalions Jovan Šević and Novi Srpski Husarski Puk have attracted significant media attention. Via their names both groups evoke historical notions of Slavo-Serbia and the New Serbia of 1753–1764 – at that time Serbian frontier guards moved to the Russian Empire to defend the border with Austria and form a Serbian hussar regiment. In terms of the motives for the contemporary fighters to become involved in the Ukrainian crisis we note that they declare their struggle against fascism and NATO and in support of their Russian brothers and Orthodox Christianity. In the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, they are included in the so-called interbrigades – groups of foreign fighters. Beyond the battalions Jovan Šević and Novi Srpski Husarski Puk noted above, the Serbian-French section of the Prizrak brigade and the North Wind battalion (*Severnyi veter*) also have Serbian members. Most of the Serbian volunteers are veterans of the wars in Yugoslavia, where they obtained combat experience. Others are football ultras and members of

nationalist associations called the *bratushky*;³ others still are members of the Serbian right-wing movement Serbian Action (*Srpska Akcija*), veterans of the Serbian anti-terrorism unit Kobra or former soldiers of the regular Serbian army. Aleksandar Vučić – then the prime minister of Serbia – said in 2014 that 99 per cent of the Serbian fighters in Ukraine were mercenaries (MALYSHEVSKY 2014).

Other foreign contingents are less numerous than the *kadyrovtsy* and the Serbian fighters. Many foreign fighters see their participation in the conflict as a kind of ‘military safari’ on which they can come, and during which they can shoot guns with impunity and also obtain some combat experience. Some of the individuals might be freelance instructors of foreign private military and security companies – such speculation circulates among the local population but cannot be verified from trustworthy sources. At present there is no substantial group of foreign fighters remaining in the separatist republics. In terms of their motivations, with some very small exceptions, one cannot see the presence of foreign soldiers as informed by ideology, religion or politics. All of them receive remuneration, and hence they are mercenaries.

Other foreign fighters in Eastern Ukraine included former Yugoslav soldiers (not just Serbs), Frenchmen, Italians, Germans, Czechs, Slovaks, Poles, Britons and citizens of the Baltic states and other ex-Soviet countries. The contribution made by foreign battalions to actual combat operations has been minimal, but they were important for attracting attention and for the propaganda efforts of the separatist republics (MEDIUM 2016).

TRANSFORMATIONS AND METAMORPHOSES OF THE NOD DURING THE CONFLICT

Over the course of the conflict in the Donbass since spring 2014, the NOD has undergone substantial change. It emerged in March 2014, when protests against the new Ukrainian government started in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. The core of the NOD was made up of supporters of the Donbass’ secession from Ukraine, especially active members of the so-called anti-Maidan, who later started to form their own armed groups, describing them as volunteer battalions: Berkut, Oplot, the Patriotic Forces of the Donbas, Varyag and Vostok. When the people’s republics were created and the public administration and its premises seized, it was necessary to involve local contingents in the *opolchenie*, not in order to strengthen the

capacity of the army but to create the correct political-ideological conception of Novorossiia. Igor Strelkov (Girkin), the former commander of the NOD, said that this Novorossiia army was originally made up of Donbass inhabitants who opposed the illegitimately imposed government of the so-called 'Kiev junta'. Anyone could become a volunteer – it was enough to fill in a questionnaire on the army's official website and take an oath (VIDEO NOVOSTI ODESSY 2014; ZHUCHKOVSKY 2016; VKONTAKTE 2015). The issue of the locals being volunteers is crucial in terms of the historical meaning associated with the term *opolchenie*, which has voluntariness at its core.

The informal interviews with the inhabitants of the Donbass have nevertheless shown that most of the *opolchentsy* at that time were Russian citizens. The respondents particularly pointed out that the gunmen did not speak the local dialect, as well as the fact that they always stood in queues in front of exchange offices, where they exchanged their Russian roubles for Ukrainian hryvnas. The initial suspicions of the locals were confirmed with the first fatalities, in which the bodies of the alleged volunteers were identified as those of citizens of Russia.⁴ As early as May 2014, it was apparent that most of the *opolchentsy* were not just Russian citizens, but actual soldiers of the Russian army. It transpired that the locals played only a little role in the NOD, that the NOD was much mythologised, and that the volunteer and militia conception of the *opolchenie* was not realised in the early days of the conflict.

In late May 2014, foreign fighters started to arrive in the Donbass, of which the most conspicuous were the Chechen *kadyrovtsy* (SEYLOOR 2015). The inclusion of foreign nationals helped to make the Novorossiia army more popular in the media and also to spread the notion of a 'Russian world' (*Russkii mir*). The logistical cooperation between Russian private military companies and the local leadership started at the same time, with more instructors being sent to provide training. These militants were not primarily motivated by politics or ideology and were not serving voluntarily, and this contradicted the concept of *opolchenie*.

At the same time, there was intense fighting for Donetsk airport and over the summer there was a military conflict between the Ukrainian army and the *opolchentsy*, known as *Ilovaiskii kotel* (Ilovaisk kettle) (SIBIRTSEV 2017). On 5 September 2014, the Minsk Agreement was signed to regulate the conflict, but it was not adhered to and the conflict escalated further, with

a recruitment drive among the locals in autumn. Many joined the *opolchenie* voluntarily, spurred by the following factors: the offensive operation of the Ukrainian army; the loss of life among the locals; blockades of supplies of food and water; the introduction of checks of people on the line of contact; the cancellation of payments of pensions and welfare by Ukraine; and increasing poverty and unemployment. The intense armed operations continued in January 2015, especially in Debaltseve. In response to this, the Second Minsk Agreement was signed. It did not end the fighting, but it did limit the combat operations to the area described as the ‘Donetsk rainbow’ (*Donetskaya duga*) – Mariinka-Avdiivka-Piesky, where the clashes continue to this day. In spring 2015, most of the foreign fighters left the Donbass. The rest of the *kadyrovtsy* did, too, and went on to participate in the Russian operation in Syria (SITNIKOV 2017). From summer 2015, the armed conflict between the Ukrainian army and the *opolchentsy* became more intense. The latter have been substantially strengthened by ideologically motivated volunteers and locals, but soldiers of the Russian army posing as members of the popular *opolchenie* continue to serve an important role. Another important milestone was the removal of field commanders in the autumn and winter of 2016/2017. Evidently, there were continuous internal conflicts and struggles for power within the *opolchenie*, and the broadly popular *opolchentsy* leaders who truly believed in the concept of Novorossiia and the related ideology were exposed to the greatest risk.

The NOD, then, is a unique example where the concept of *opolchenie* was put into practice only several months after the fictional founding, and not primarily thanks to the DNR and LNR propaganda, but due to missteps taken by the parent state (Ukraine), which gave up on providing elementary services to a certain segment of its population, admittedly under a situation where its role was made difficult by armed opposition activities that were much assisted by the neighbouring Russia. If in the early days of the conflict the claim that the *opolchentsy* were volunteers and ideologically motivated was a lie, then during the first year of the military operations, not least due to the unfavourable relationship of the Ukrainian government with its citizens living in the area affected by combat operations, the *opolchenie* transformed into a hybrid of volunteer and mercenary formations, which is unique chiefly thanks to the heterogeneity of the units within the NOD.

INTERPRETING THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Table 2, based on Table 1 from the theoretical section above, will help us to interpret and summarise the data obtained according to the theoretical concept chosen.

TABLE 2: INTERPRETATION OF THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Type of actor	Motivation	Geographic scope	Objectives	Objects of violence
Local armed formations	Economic and political/ideological	Limited	Regime change in the Donbass	Ukrainian soldiers
Russian volunteers	Economic and political/ideological	Limited	Regime change in the Donbass / fighting against the Kiev regime	Ukrainian soldiers/civilians
Foreign volunteers	Political/ideological	Limited	Fighting against the Kiev regime	Ukrainian soldiers/civilians

The local armed formations are largely made of people that are truly locals, especially since 2015, as indeed the official version says. Most of them are economically motivated, although we do find ideologically oriented Russian nationalists among them. The political-ideological motivation becomes more prominent as we go up in the DNR and LNR armed forces hierarchy, and among the commanders it occasionally prevails over the economic motivation. We note that the motivation among the masses tends to be economic and material, and that among the elite political and ideological, which might seem paradoxical when compared with the situations obtaining in a number of other conflicts. In the Vostok and Oplot battalions, the majority of combatants are politically and ideologically motivated, placing their belief in the notion of a ‘Russian world’ (*Russkii mir*). They were politically active even before the beginning of the armed conflict, during both the Orange Revolution and the Euromaidan. The Vostok battalion is made up of former members of armed units of the Ukrainian Ministry of the Interior, namely Alfa and Berkut, that were the main forces dispersing the demonstrators in Kiev during the Euromaidan.

For the armed formations of the DNR and the LNR, the primary aim is to preserve the DNR and the LNR’s sovereignty, which means that in the context of the conflict as a whole, in terms of their attitude towards the regime in Kiev, they seek to achieve a regime change but only in the Donbass. However, in the long term their objectives may change – this

being dependent, among other things, on transformations of Russian foreign policy. Many members of the DNR and LNR armed forces desire – or certainly desired at the beginning of the conflict – not only a regime change in the Donbass, but also a change in their nationality and the inclusion of the Donbass into the Russian Federation, i.e. they are textbook case irredentists. In the overwhelming majority of cases, their armed action targets Ukrainian soldiers or pro-Ukrainian ANSA. Violent actions against civilians are limited and mostly unintended incidents in this case. If we attempt to classify the DNR and LNR armed formations according to Mair's ANSA types, we note that most of them are insurgents, but as the conflict progresses some of the formations exhibit traits of militias or even warlords.

As far as the soldiers of the Russian army and Russian volunteers are concerned, there is a serious conceptual issue in that the soldiers are members of a state's armed forces. However, they are involved in the Donbass conflict incognito – Moscow's official position is that there is no deployment of Russian soldiers in the Donbass. In this respect, their activities fall under the categories of deniable, black and covert operations. The motivation of the soldiers of the Russian army – it does not matter much whether they went to the Donbass voluntarily or were commanded to do so as part of a deniable operation – is mostly a mixture of political and ideological stimuli, but there are also economic stimuli. To some extent, they had no choice, as they had taken an oath and by their deployment in the Donbass they were obeying the orders of the supreme command. However, an examination of their profiles on social networks and personal interviews reveals that the vast majority of the soldiers agree with their country's policy towards Ukraine and in ideological terms they are mostly Russian nationalists supporting the idea of a Russian world. However, the economic aspect of their motivation cannot be ignored, as their engagement in the Donbass conflict is considered a foreign mission (albeit one denied officially), which brings various benefits such as higher wages and better welfare and housing for their families. Furthermore, there is the tacit assumption that by staying in the zone of conflict they will profit at the expense of the locals. As far as the true volunteers are concerned, their motivation is largely ideological, though combined with an economic one. These are the sympathisers of nationalist groups noted above and members of the skinhead movement. Some of them see their participation in the conflict simply as an opportunity to make some money. And, as has

been ascertained, the overwhelming majority of the ideologically motivated individuals and groups are not actually present in the zone of conflict and their activities are only virtual. Those members of the Russian nationalist groups that are actually involved in the conflict receive a financial reward for their services (they mostly serve as instructors). The objective of the soldiers of the Russian army is to implement the Kremlin's policy, which is pushing for a regime change in Ukraine. Their violent operations largely target the Ukrainian armed forces, less so the local population. When *opolchentsy* perpetrate violence against the local population, it is largely via members of the Russian army and using Russian military equipment. The strategy for intimidation of the local population is implemented by friendly fire and shelling of towns and cities under a separatist administration. After such episodes the *opolchentsy* accuse the Ukrainian armed forces of violating the terms of the ceasefire and the Minsk Agreements and use these episodes (which they themselves perpetrated) to justify their shelling of Ukrainian cities outside the zone of conflict. If soldiers of the Russian army active in the Donbass can be seen as ANSA at all, then they have to be considered mercenaries.

Foreign fighters are represented by several distinct groups of gunmen. Foremost among them are the *kadyrovtsy*, who come under the armed forces of the Chechen Republic Ministry of the Interior and answer directly to Kadyrov. For most of them, the political-ideological aspect of the conflict is of primary importance, yet participation in the armed clashes is often understood as a kind of 'military safari' – a training sortie in a zone of conflict – which is a more individual, psychological motivation. However, even such 'war tourists' frame their participation in the conflict with sympathies for the ideas of Russian nationalism. Their numbers are rather small, especially as of late (2016–2017), and they are mainly used for propaganda in the media. The most numerous contingents among the ideologically motivated foreign fighters are groups from former Yugoslavia who enthuse about an Orthodox Christian civilisation, their support for their 'Russian brothers' and the fight against NATO. Some of the foreigners act as instructors, and are motivated primarily by economic interests; their numbers are very small indeed and they act individually. The foreign fighters oppose the 'fascist junta of Kiev' and promote regime change in Ukraine; as such both members of the Ukrainian army and civilians are their targets. As far as Schneckener's typology of ANSA is concerned, the foreign fighters in Ukraine can be subsumed under several types. Many

of them can be considered mercenaries and they exhibit the characteristics of marauders even more frequently – the more so because unlike the *opolchentsy* from the ranks of the locals, they have no personal connection with the region. The foreign fighters are a heterogeneous group that corresponds to multiple ANSA types, depending chiefly on their motivations and the transformations of their organisations during the conflict.

CONCLUSION

This article has presented the main ANSA involved in the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. It has focussed on an analysis of the specific phenomenon of *opolchenie* – a purely local formation that we can conceive of as an umbrella entity – with an organisational structure to some extent – under which armed units, whose *modus operandi* is often very independent, are rallied. Indeed, we can see an *opolchenie* as a very specific kind of non-state armed actor, combining elements of an insurgency, a militia, a volunteer unit and a pro-government paramilitary group which, however, acts in the interests of a neighbouring country, and not those of its homeland.

The existing knowledge about the ANSA phenomenon is insufficient for analysing this Eastern Ukrainian case, though arguably there has been a number of recent case studies that documented exceptional instances of non-state armed violence. For instance, they are informed by tensions arising from the characteristics of the local combatants and by the option, which is increasingly available to them, of becoming involved in global processes. The nature of the relations between ANSA and the state is also undergoing a change. There is nothing new about a state supporting an ANSA, or about direct (and clandestine, or denied) military support. Nevertheless, the direct Russian military support to the *opolchenie* has been particularly extensive, especially in the early stage of the conflict, and this is in contrast with Russia's policy of denying the involvement of its soldiers, and the claims that the Russian troops in Eastern Ukraine are volunteers. Another specificity in this case has been the use of Russia's own problematic armed actors – the Chechen Kadyrovtsy. Though formally part of the Russian security forces, in reality they act as a kind of semi-state ethnic militia.

Evidently, the *opolchenie* in this case does not fit into the usual classifications of ANSA. It is a hybrid formation that not only has a different motivation from that of a typical ANSA; it also has a specific structure. Its

goals have been subject to change throughout the conflict and are likely to change further.

As a result, the *opolchenie* does not fall under any of the categories of known empirical and theoretical concepts of ANSA (see Mair, Schneckener or Williams). This type of armed formation incorporates multiple categories – warlordism, foreign fighters, a militia, and an insurgency. An *opolchentsy* can be viewed as a living organism which has multiple layers; it transforms and shifts throughout time, changes its goals and motivations, and reacts to changes and challenges of the given armed conflict. The *opolchenie*'s structure and approach to warfare have changed over time as well. The conflict in Eastern Ukraine has become a sort of aggregated and modified product of already known tools of Russian foreign policy. This corresponds with the concept of hybrid war known from texts by Frank Hoffman or Richard Johnson.

This case provides a clear example of how a modern conflict can transform the classical understanding of ANSA; it demonstrates that modern Western theories in this area suffer from lacunae that can be identified by studies of modern conflicts and security threats. In many ways, any such studies are imperfect due to the secrecy and limitations of resources and information about this issue.

Previous studies have not dealt with the *opolchentsy* in Ukraine or have not focussed on the specific form of ANSA involved in the conflict. The existing research has focussed on the undoubtedly determinative role of the Russian forces in the area and the circumstances of their deployment, or on pro-Kiev actors. Thus, the phenomenon of *opolchentsy* poses a research challenge. It is a challenge for the ANSA concept because most of the levels on which these actors are studied (their motivations, ideologies, organisational structures, and violent methods) will need to be refined over time. But the challenge is also broader, as it is concerned with the historical and ideological grounding of the phenomenon. So far, such an academic reflection of the phenomenon is lacking.

Besides the fact that this article fills the gap caused by the absence of theoretical grounding – in which *opolchentsy* are considered as an example of a non-state armed actor which in the short term can change its structure, motivation, and tactics of warfare – the article to a certain extent has also a practical use. The description of the ANSA in Eastern

Ukraine and the introduction of the concept of modern *opolchenie* tell us that the differences in composition of the specific formations, as well as the transformations of the given ANSA, will need a different and multi-layered approach to the solution of the conflict in the Donbass. Because solution suggestions are an important element of conflict research, this article can become a source of guidance on how to approach the particular actor for the purposes of the ensuing de-escalation and peace process.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Here, Berkut refers to a special unit of the Ukrainian police. There is, however, continuity with the *opolchentsy* battalion of the same name, as the latter included members of the Ukrainian Berkut police unit, which opposed the pro-Western orientation of the Ukrainian government that was brought to power by the Maidan. Many of them were dismissed, as they were understood to have committed violence against the demonstrators in Maidan. Ultimately, the Ukrainian police abolished the whole Berkut unit on 25 February 2014.
- 2 'Polite people' (in Russian, *vezhlivye lyudi*) and 'little green men' (*zelenye cheloveчки*) are designations for the masked soldiers in green unmarked uniforms carrying modern Russian weapons and equipment who appeared in Ukraine in 2014 during the Crimea crisis.
- 3 A Russian term, often used ironically, for southern Slavs, referencing a sense of belonging between Russians and Serbians during the Russo-Turkish war of 1877–1878.
- 4 „Ubitye, plenennyye, propavshie, zamechennyye v Ukraine“.

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