

American Disparity:

Assessing the USA's Contrasting Involvement in the Serbo-Croatian and Russo-Ukrainian Wars

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Master's Thesis

Word Count: 19.724



Table of Contents

Abstract	3
1. Introduction	4
1.1. Introduction to the Topic	4
1.2. Research Question and Subquestions	5
1.3. Main Theoretical and Conceptual Framework	7
1.4. Methodology	10
1.5. Sources and Source Criticism	12
2. Historiography	14
2.1. Historical Context	14
2.1.1. Historical Context: Russo-Ukrainian War	14
2.1.2. Historical Context: Serbo-Croatian War.....	15
2.2. US Interventionism	16
2.3. To what extent were the Russo-Ukrainian and Serbo-Croatian Wars similar?	17
2.3.1. The struggle for independence amid the collapse of multi-ethnic Slavic federations	17
2.3.2. Ukraine's and Croatia's fascist past as a justification to invade	20
2.3.3. Intertwined populations and the 'protection' of minorities	22
2.4. Conclusion of the Historiography.....	23
3. Analysis	25
3.1. To what extent did the Wars pose a humanitarian crisis?	25
3.2. How did the USA perceive the Wars?	26
3.2.1. How did the USA perceive the Russo-Ukrainian War?	27
3.2.2. How did the USA perceive the Serbo-Croatian War?	28
3.2.3. Conclusion: How did the USA perceive the Wars?	30
3.3. How did the USA react to the Wars?	31
3.3.1. How did the USA react to the Russo-Ukrainian War?	31
3.3.2. How did the USA react to the Serbo-Croatian War?	33
3.3.3. Conclusion: How did the USA react to the Wars?	36
3.4. Application of Mearsheimer's Offensive Realism Theory.....	36
3.4.1. Application of Toft's five pre-assumptions of Offensive Realism	37
3.4.2. What explains the USA's reaction to the Russo-Ukrainian War?	39
3.4.3. What explains the USA's reaction to the Serbo-Croatian War?	41
3.5. Irrelevance of 'humanity' and 'democracy' in the US interventionism	44
4. Conclusion	47
Bibliography	50

Abstract

As the leading military and economic power, the USA often uses its strength to intervene in foreign conflicts. To the public, their interventions are usually communicated as well-intentioned. Nonetheless, after examining how the USA has reacted to the Russo-Ukrainian War of 2022-ongoing and the Serbo-Croatian War of 1991-1995, it becomes clear that the USA's foreign policy is determined by more factors than just 'humanitarian concerns' or the 'spread of democracy'. That is because the two wars were strikingly similar in both their reasoning and course, which makes the USA's contrasting involvement in them stand out. While the USA is Ukraine's biggest donor of military and financial support, Croatia was pretty much left on its own. Yet, even though US interventionism and its inconsistencies are heavily debated topics, no comparison of it has been drawn between this thesis's specific case studies, even though they depict the inconsistency of US interventionism well. This raises the question as to why the US involvement in the two wars was so different, even though the wars were so similar. An answer to this central question can be found in Mearsheimer's Theory of Offensive Realism. The theory argues that states, no matter the cause or severity of a conflict, will not 'turn offensive' and intervene abroad unless that intervention is beneficial to them. Meaning that even if the USA was faced with two similar conflicts, and only one of them would significantly benefit the USA and its stance in the world, the USA would only intervene in that one. After looking at the two cases from the USA's point of view, the war in Ukraine and its outcome had a more significant importance to the USA and its allies in Europe, which Russia could threaten with a victory in Ukraine. On the other hand, Croatia, even though it showed the desire to integrate into the democratic West, was not of interest to the USA, which was preoccupied with other conflicts at that time, and considered the Yugoslav War as a regional conflict happening outside of its sphere of influence. Therefore, instead of humanitarian or ideological reasons, the US decision-making on where to intervene and where not is more influenced by self-interested reasons, which were pointed out by this thesis.

Key Words: USA, Interventionism, War, Ukraine, Russia, Serbia, Croatia, Offensive Realism, Democracy, Biden, Clinton

1. Introduction

1.1. Introduction to the Topic

The USA often portrays itself as the police officer of the world. It has involved itself in multiple conflicts worldwide, in which it often picks a side to support financially, providing military equipment, or even deploying a military force. The way US high-ranking politicians communicate their interventions to the public, it could seem like the US foreign policy strictly intervenes for good and justifiable reasons, such as ‘the spreading of democracy’, ‘protection of human rights’, or general ‘prosperity’. Nonetheless, if that is the case, the USA should be expected to react consistently in similar contexts. For example, if two wars were similar in both reasoning, course, and severity, the USA should react at least similarly to them, if ‘democracy’ and ‘human rights’ are their main concern. Yet, with this self-assigned role, the USA still fails to do so, which would indicate that there is a different explanation behind the US decision-making on where to intervene and where not.

To prove and explain this, this thesis will compare the USA’s involvement in two similar wars, the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War since the full-scale invasion in 2022, and the Serbo-Croatian War of 1991 to 1995. To point out an inconsistency, this thesis’s historiography will compare the two wars from various points of similarity in both reasoning and course. Later, this thesis will also compare them in the extent to which they posed a humanitarian crisis based on casualties, instances of civilian massacres, and ethnic cleansing. By showcasing the similarity of those two case studies, this thesis will highlight the inconsistency in the USA’s involvement in two similar scenarios. To explain why the USA’s involvement in both wars has been so contrasting, this thesis will use Mearsheimer’s theory of Offensive Realism. For the application to be accurate, this thesis will also follow Toft’s model of applying the theory. While applying the theory to the two cases, a more reasonable conclusion will be drawn as to why Ukraine is pretty much dependent on foreign aid, as it received a significant amount of it, while Croatia was left on its own. Comparing these two involvements can therefore explain how the USA operates internationally and what determines its level of involvement. Furthermore, US interventionism is to this day a relevant topic since the US Army and economy are still the biggest in the world, and their involvement in smaller war-torn countries can determine the war’s whole outcome. Therefore, knowing what motivates the USA to get itself involved in a foreign conflict is crucial to understanding the USA’s foreign policy.

1.2. Research Question and Sub-questions

Though a connection between the Russo-Ukrainian and Serbo-Croatian Wars in the context of offensive realism or US-American interventionism has not yet been made, a comparison of the two wars on their own has. For example, Sasse and Lackner draw a connection between those two wars when discussing identity-building in Ukraine and Croatia during their process of gaining independence. Both wars were very much identity-centered and crucial for maintaining the culture, identity, and sovereignty of the respective defending country.¹ When it comes to the application of the chosen theoretical framework to this thesis, Mearsheimer himself has already applied his theory to the Russo-Ukrainian Case. He claims that Russia acts in an offensive realist fashion, and so does the USA, intervening in Ukraine. However, an application of that same theory seems to be lacking in the case of the Serbo-Croatian War, which this thesis will conduct.

As hinted at, this thesis will look at three key areas: the Russo-Ukrainian War, the Serbo-Croatian War, and US interventionism, with the main point of analysis being the inconsistencies of US interventionism. By comparing how the USA has reacted to both wars, this thesis will aim to add to the debate about the inconsistencies of US interventionism. The USA, being the only country with a big enough military and economy to project its power globally in multiple conflicts, as argued by Choi, makes US interventionism a highly debated and studied topic. This reflects on the amount of literature covering US interventionism.² For instance, Choi analyzed multiple cases of US interventionism and its irregularities while trying to categorize them in the context of ‘human rights protection’, ‘anti-terrorism’, or ‘spread of democracy’.³ Furthermore, Dobson is another academic who has aimed to point out inconsistencies in US interventionism before. He analyzes the topic in the context of the case studies of Somalia and Vietnam, arguing for the naivety and bias of the USA when it comes to implementing its own democratic systems abroad through military or financial means.⁴ Nonetheless, though Dobson follows the same pattern as this thesis in exposing inconsistencies in US American interventionism by using different case studies, no other paper uses the specific context of the Russo-Ukrainian and Serbo-Croatian wars, even though their similarities and yet different reactions from the USA display the USA’s inconsistency very well. Lastly, MacMillan

¹ Gwendolyn Sasse and Alice Lackner, “War and state-making in Ukraine: Foreign a civic identity from below?” *Ideology and Politics* 1, no. 12 (2019): 94.

² Seung-Whan Choi and Patrick James, “Why does the United States intervene abroad? Democracy, human rights violations, and terrorism,” *Journal of Conflicts Resolution* 60, no.5 (2019): 900.

³ Choi and James, “Why does the United States intervene abroad? Democracy, human rights violations, and terrorism,” 901.

⁴ Alan P. Dobson, “The dangers of US interventionism,” *Review of International Studies* 28, no. 3 (2002): 578.

emphasizes the importance of analyzing multiple cases of US interventionism as the reasoning and development over time are crucial to the understanding of interventionism. In his paper, MacMillan looks at the USA intervening in Latin America and Vietnam, thus revealing the different types of strategic approaches and reasoning behind each of them, and thus showcasing the inconsistencies in the US interventionism.⁵

As far as the literature gap goes, a point that seems to be missing in the academic debate about US interventionism is the direct comparison of US interventionism in two similar scenarios. As shown above, various academics have made a comparison of US interventions using vastly different case studies such as Vietnam, Rwanda, Somalia, or Ukraine, arguing how the US foreign policy is hypocritical for not reacting the same in Rwanda as it did in Ukraine, for example. A comparison of how the US foreign policy reacted differently in different scenarios and contexts is therefore not very feasible, as it does not point out an inconsistency or a failure to react similarly in similar scenarios. Most case studies mentioned above are inherently different and play out in completely different contexts, to the point where some of the many contextual differences can explain the inconsistency of US interventionism, instead of using theories to try and explain it. This thesis will therefore take a different approach by pointing out that the USA even reacted differently to two strikingly similar scenarios, thus proving a bias or an inconsistency and filling this literature gap.

In an effort to showcase this inconsistency, this thesis will be centered around the following research question: “What explains the USA’s contrasting involvement in the similar Russo-Ukrainian War of 2022-2025 and the Serbo-Croatian War of 1991-1995?” To answer this question, this thesis will apply Mearsheimer’s theory of ‘Offensive Realism’ to explain the contrasting involvements of the USA in the two case studies. Besides answering the research question, this thesis will also discuss the following sub-questions. First of all, “To what extent were the Russo-Ukrainian and Serbo-Croatian Wars similar?”. Answering this sub-question with the help of secondary literature should prove that the Russo-Ukrainian and Serbo-Croatian Wars were similar enough to the point where the USA would be expected to involve itself similarly in both wars to be consistent. Second, this thesis will discuss the question, “How did the USA perceive the wars?”. Answering this is just as important as proving the actual similarity of the wars, since the US perception is what can be used against the USA and their decision to intervene or not. For instance, if the USA were not aware of the humanitarian crisis in Croatia, it could not be held accountable for not intervening. Therefore, proving that the USA was very

⁵ John MacMillan, “After Interventionism: A Typology of United States Strategies,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 30, no. 3 (2019): 578.

much aware of the humanitarian crisis in both case studies is crucial to this thesis argument. For this sub-question, primary sources such as speeches and remarks regarding the wars by high-ranking US politicians will be used. The third sub-question this thesis will aim to answer is “How did the USA react to the Russo-Ukrainian and Serbo-Croatian Wars?” With the help of databases, institutes, or governmental archives depicting concrete material support, the lack of it, or other measures imposed on these wars, answering this will help the thesis reveal the differences and inconsistencies.

Lastly, after describing what Mearsheimer’s Theory of Offensive Realism is, this thesis will answer the research question in light of the theory. The goal is to counter Choi and James’ arguments that US interventionism is strictly concerned about either ‘anti-terrorism’, ‘spread of democracy’, or ‘humanitarian concerns’.⁶ Instead, it will follow the argument of Dobson, who argues for the contrary, that even though the US foreign policy arguments an intervention in a certain positive way, the underlying cause is oftentimes not so well-intentioned or straightforward.⁷

1.3. Main Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The theory, with the help of which this thesis aims to explain the USA’s inconsistent involvement in the two case studies, is John Mearsheimer’s Theory of Offensive Realism. Offensive Realism is a branch of one of the main IR theories, realism. According to Karpowicz, Realism stresses the competitive factor in international relations instead of the cooperative factor. He argues that states are independent actors who are mainly concerned with their own security, the pursuit of their own interests, and the struggle for power.⁸ Grieco adds that in order for those states to act independently, and accordingly to the realist traits mentioned above, political anarchy is needed, ensuring that states can act for their own benefit. This means that there is no law above the personal interest of a state, creating independent decision-making for all.⁹ Lastly, Karpowicz states that such preconditions are likely to make the states act rationally out of skepticism or paranoia, as international politics are seen as a realm without law enforcers

⁶ Choi and James, “Why does the United States intervene abroad? Democracy, human rights violations, and terrorism,” 901.

⁷ Dobson, “The dangers of US interventionism,” 578.

⁸ Julian Karpowicz, “Political Realism in International Relations,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2010): 1.

⁹ Joseph M. Grieco, “Anarchy and the limits of cooperation: A realist critique of the newest liberal institutionalism,” *International organization* 42, no. 3 (1988): 487.

and justice. This way, conflicts or ‘preventive’ wars can occur more easily as states seek to survive.¹⁰

The theory at the center of this thesis, however, will be a branch of realism created by the American political scientist John Mearsheimer, Offensive Realism. Offensive Realism is a theory that aims to explain why modern states engage or involve themselves in conflicts abroad. In contrast to traditional realism, this theory argues that there are certain conditions that make states act more offensively to achieve their goals and maximize their power. Those conditions are summarized into five points by Peter Toft, which will be mentioned later in this chapter. Peter Toft is a supporter of Mearsheimer’s offensive realism and a firm believer that every state strives to become a ‘great power’ or a dominant hegemon. He argued that this nature makes competition and clashes of interest inevitable. Mearsheimer adds to this claim by arguing that the primary reason states strive to be as independent and powerful as possible is to establish a political hegemon, thereby ensuring their survival. However, he further argues that continuous growth towards this goal by multiple states is not possible, making this race to becoming a hegemon highly competitive.¹¹ According to both Mearsheimer and Toft, that is the reason why states go on offensive wars or engage in offensive maneuvers, such as intervening in a conflict on a different continent.

Another reason why states turn offensive is the uncertainty that comes with living in a political anarchy with no rule-enforcers. Mearsheimer, for instance, argues that a reckless state can become aggressive or intervene abroad as a preventive measure to weaken their rival, which could have attacked them back. This creates wars or interventions out of paranoia, which aim to limit the capability of other states to harm your state.¹² Mearsheimer, therefore, argues that political actors turn offensive in an effort to gain power, hence increasing their likelihood of survival. He states:

Rational states will sometimes go on the offensive anyway because they believe that they can gain power at the expense of their reckless foes and thus increase their likelihood of survival.

Survival, in particular, according to Mearsheimer’s theory, is the only goal a state has and to which all of the actions of a state can be traced back. Hence, Mearsheimer emphasizes that a state will not get itself involved in a conflict that would pose a threat back or that would weaken

¹⁰ Karpowicz, “Political Realism in International Relations,” 4.

¹¹ Peter Toft, “John J. Mearsheimer: an offensive realist between geopolitics and power,” *Journal of International Relations and Development*, no. 8 (2005): 383.

its political role in the world. Meaning that even offensive states prioritize their own security and role in the world over the well-being of other countries.¹³ The point of every state striving to become a political hegemon is something that another offensive realist, Eric Labs, connects to the balance of power and the consequences it bears. He argues that the balance of power is an unnatural state since states will always seek more than that. Labs emphasizes that for this exact reason, wars break out as they seek the upper hand in fields such as the military, soft power, or political superiority in a region or worldwide.

However, global powers are in favor of the balance of power, since it ensures that no new hegemons can arise in different regions or the world, which could threaten their position or role. Labs thus confirms the offensive realist claim that a state of anarchy is what motivates an aggressive diplomatic approach instead of a cooperative one, since states seek domination, not a balance of power, at least in their own region, which each state seeks to dominate.¹⁴ Though Labs does not apply this directly to either of the case studies of this thesis, he also argues that great powers will involve themselves in conflicts with the potential to prevent a regional hegemon from arising.¹⁵

In order to put all those aspects of offensive realism into an applicable theory, Toft summarizes the theory by splitting it into five preconditions and categories that are crucial for the application of offensive realism to a case study. Those preconditions are also what is said to make states act more offensively or aggressively in the pursuit of their goals, which is what separates the offensive realist theory from the traditional realist one. The first, already mentioned, assumption is that modern states live in an anarchical world with no rule enforcers. Second, the actions of the states are unpredictable, and nobody can be sure of them, which can cause actions by states out of paranoia. Third, survival is the main factor influencing states' behaviors. Fourth, states act in their national interest of increasing their survival possibilities. Lastly, each state puts heavy emphasis on the military as it is said to be crucial to one's survival capacities. The application of Toft's five assumptions to the case studies will be made in the analysis chapter.

Lastly, it is important to mention that it is true that different US presidents and governments can influence US foreign policy, the theory argues that what is central to the diplomatic behavior of a state is its self-interested and rational nature. While different US

¹³ John Mearsheimer, "Reckless States and Realism," *International Relations* 23 no. 2 (2009): 253.

¹⁴ Eric Labs, "Beyond victory: Offensive realism and the expansion of war aims," *Security Studies* 6, no. 4 (1997): 2.

¹⁵ Labs, "Beyond victory: Offensive realism and the expansion of war aims," 3.

presidents might have different approaches to solving a crisis abroad, they would still do so in a way that would generally benefit their own country.¹⁶ For example, even though Bush's and Clinton's stances on the Yugoslav War differed significantly, one seeking the maintenance of Yugoslavia, while the other supporting Croatian independence, neither decided to get actively involved in it by providing weapons or military personnel. This is because a direct involvement in Croatia was seen as potentially harmful to the USA's military efforts in either the Gulf War or a potential collapse of the USSR.¹⁷ In other words, even though presidents can have different opinions or stances on certain conflicts, they would never do something that could potentially harm their own country.

1.4. Methodology

As mentioned above, this thesis will use a comparative case study. It will compare the USA's involvement in the Serbo-Croatian War and the Russo-Ukrainian War, with US interventionism being the main area of analysis. According to Goodrick, a comparative case study is effective at examining two or more datasets and recognizing similarities, differences, or patterns. He further emphasizes a comparative case study's in-depth nature, which makes it especially effective to analyze multiple policies, events, programs, or intervention sites.¹⁸ Furthermore, Bartlett & Vavrus emphasize that the cases used for comparison do not have to be from completely different backgrounds, which is often the assumption to make the research findings more universally applicable. Instead, they argue that, on the contrary, similar cases from the same or similar countries or contexts can contribute just as much to a debate by pointing out an inconsistency in a similar case.¹⁹ They call it the 'tracing across' logic, which examines connections between two cases and showcases the similarities of their contexts. In addition, this method allows for an exploration of how the point of analysis plays out in different scenarios over time, in this case, how US interventionism has developed between the Serbo-Croatian and Russo-Ukrainian Wars.²⁰ Since the US reaction is the biggest difference between the two wars, the logic of Bartlett and Vavrus is therefore suitable, as it will be able to review how US interventionism has differed in two similar contexts.²¹ Besides that, Goodrick points out that in

¹⁶ Mearsheimer, "Reckless States and Realism," 242.

¹⁷ Davor Pauković and Marko Roško, "Western Newspapers and the War in Croatia," *Department of Mass Communication* (2023): 171.

¹⁸ Delwyn Goodrick, "Comparative Case Studies," *Methodological Briefs Impact Evaluation*, no. 9 (2020): 1,

¹⁹ Lesley Bartlett and Frances Vavrus, "Comparative case studies: An innovative approach," *Nordic journal of comparative and international education* 1, no. 1 (2017): 6.

²⁰ Bartlett and Vavrus, "Comparative case studies: An innovative approach," 7.

²¹ Bartlett and Vavrus, "Comparative case studies: An innovative approach," 11.

order for a comparative case study to be complete, both cases should be described at the beginning of a thesis, which is why this thesis will include a section explaining the historical contexts of both the Russo-Ukrainian and Serbo-Croatian Wars. This way, the reader can be familiar with the case studies of this thesis before its analysis.²²

After following Goodrick's requirements for doing a comparative case study and familiarizing the reader with both wars, this thesis will compare them. It will start by comparing their similarities in both reasoning and severity. The first point of comparison will be Croatia's and Ukraine's fascist past during the Second World War, which served as a justification for the invasion of Croatia and Ukraine more than half a century later. Second, the role of Ukraine's and Croatia's memberships in the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, and how the Westward distancing from those multi-ethnic Slavic federations caused unrest. Third, how the ethnic Serb and Russian populations in Croatia's and Ukraine's bordering regions and their 'protection' served as a justification for the invasion. Lastly, the fact that both wars saw a similar number of casualties in proportion to the populations, as well as instances of civilian massacres or war crimes, portray the similar severity of the wars. In order to draw a successful comparison, this thesis will utilize mainly secondary sources of academics and historians for an in-depth description of the events. By proving a similarity between the two wars, the two contrasting involvements of the USA will be comparable on a similar basis. Besides pointing out the similarities, this thesis will also look at US interventionism as a whole. It will look at the history of US interventionism, where it occurred, and for what reason.

As for the analysis part, it will answer the sub-questions mentioned above, while using both secondary literature, primary sources such as speeches of high-ranking politicians, or other governmental archives or databases. Since the Russo-Ukrainian War is still ongoing, this thesis will not be able to consider any sources past April 2025, and it also will not be making any predictions or assumptions about the future, as it is uncertain. Those sources will be examined using the method of historical analysis. According to the definition of the Sage Dictionary of Qualitative Management Research, a historical analysis is a method that examines evidence from the past to understand the present. It can be applied to all historical artifacts, as well as speeches, which are especially effective at reviewing the historical context of a past event. This way, explaining the development of a trend or the root cause of an event becomes easier. A historical analysis further focuses on the political and historical setting of a speech. It is effective at assessing the source's role in a historical event. More importantly, it is effective at

²² Goodrick, "Comparative Case Studies," 1.

comparing a historical source with a present-day one, which is fitting for the cases of this thesis. Lastly, it does not put much emphasis on sentimental analysis or analysis of discourse, which this thesis will not need in its analysis, as it is analyzing the historical context of the speeches instead.²³ Moreover, this thesis will aim to explain the contrasting involvement of the USA using Mearsheimer's Offensive Realism Theory. With the help of this theory, this thesis will aim to explain why the USA reacted to these two wars so differently, even though the wars were very similar. In order to do so, this thesis will apply Toft's, another offensive realist's, five pre-assumptions of offensive realism to both case studies, thus proving their viability for the realist analysis.

When it comes to the limitations of a comparative case study, Goodrick highlights two main ones. First, a comparative case study using only two case studies can appear misleading and generalizing.²⁴ Since this thesis will only be using two case studies due to its limited size, its findings of it cannot be universally applicable to every US intervention. This problem especially occurs when using two drastically different cases, as they tend to be more context-dependent. To eliminate this limitation, however, this thesis follows Bartlett's and Vavrus's approach by using similar cases. The second limitation Goodrick warns of is that a comparative case study is subject to a selection bias when it comes to choosing cases to analyze. Nonetheless, he argues that this limitation is inevitable and even necessary in order to draw a conclusion from the comparison of the case studies.²⁵

1.5. Sources and Source Criticism

Since the point of this thesis is to point out a bias in the USA's foreign involvement, the primary sources covered will be mostly from US American presidents and politicians themselves in the form of speeches and statements. Those are accessible through the White House database in the case of Joe Biden and his remarks on the war in Ukraine. Bill Clinton's statements are not published in the White House database, meaning this thesis will use different archives, such as the AP Archive or YouTube videos. Furthermore, this thesis will also use primary sources for the comparison of the wars. If this thesis's aim is to expose a bias in the USA's involvement, it first needs to prove that the two wars were similar on multiple levels. For instance, the first primary source, which focuses on the Croatian case and the brutality of the war, casualties, and

²³ Richard Thorpe and Robin Holt, "Historical Analysis," *The SAGE Dictionary of Qualitative Management Research* (2008): 109.

²⁴ Goodrick, "Comparative Case Studies," 8.

²⁵ Goodrick, "Comparative Case Studies," 11.

war crimes, is a book by a detective who was working on arresting Yugoslav war criminals, which could be effective for this thesis to use in comparison to the Ukrainian case. For further comparison of the wars, this thesis will also use both Vladimir Putin's and Slobodan Milošević's reasoning for their respective wars, which they gave in multiple remarks or speeches. In the Serbo-Croatian case, this thesis will also use speeches and interviews of the two involved presidents, which will allow me to draw a connection between the two wars.

Though speeches are generally a good source to analyze since they allow you to draw your own analysis from them, and they are created by people directly involved in your case studies, they also have their weaknesses. For instance, a president's speech is often targeted at a specific crowd. For example, all public performances of presidents are for the general public to consume. Therefore, nobody can guarantee whether something a politician says is always truthful or whether it is actually what he means or what his actions represent. Nonetheless, in this thesis, it is the USA's perception of the wars that matters; speeches can be a good indicator of how the USA's authorities viewed or portrayed the wars. Lastly, since I am not a speaker of either Russian or Ukrainian, I will be relying on translations of the statements. However, this can cause a problem of words getting lost in translation. Nonetheless, Putin's and Zelensky's interviews and speeches are such popular texts with a large crowd of both Russian/Ukrainian and non-Russian/Ukrainian speakers to the extent that I believe that a poor translation would have already caused controversy, which it has not so far. In the Serbo-Croatian texts and speeches, this thesis will look at both the originals and translations, as I do speak the language.

2. Historiography

2.1. Historical context

Ever since fighting its last World War, Europe has remained relatively peaceful. The continent has started cooperating instead of fighting each other, thus facilitating a prosperous relationship. This, however, does not apply to former Yugoslavia, Russia, and Ukraine. Following Goodrick's argument that every complete comparative case study needs to introduce its cases in a historical context, the following section will do so shortly.²⁶

2.1.1. Historical context: Russo-Ukrainian War

When it comes to the Russo-Ukrainian War, we often hear that the war has already started in 2014. That is the year when Ukraine-Russia relations plummeted, as explained by Shevsky. He argues that following the pro-Western Maidan revolution in Ukraine, the Ukrainian people replaced a pro-Russian government under Yanukovich with a more Western-oriented one under Poroshenko following the elections in 2014.²⁷ Paul adds that this westward shift in ideology drastically changed the relationship between Russia and Ukraine. She argues that Russia felt a threat of losing part of its sphere of influence to the West as well as its Black Sea Fleet located in Crimea. Following a pro-Russian protest in Crimea caused by the Russian population of Crimea, which makes up 60% of the peninsula, the Russian army annexed Crimea without resistance, as per Paul.²⁸ Shortly after the annexation of Crimea, war broke out in eastern Ukraine in the Donbass region, which is populated by a significant number of ethnic Russians. Sasse & Lackner argue that what sparked those ethnic-tensions and pro-Russian separatism in eastern Ukraine is the clash of identities, which intensified with the Euromaidan protest and annexation of Crimea.²⁹ They argue that such events are likely to spark identity-based conflicts to the point where people who used to live in peace in a multi-ethnic region suddenly feel a sense of superiority over the others and revolt.³⁰ The war in the Donbass was ongoing up until February 2022, when Putin declared the Luhansk and Donetsk Oblasts as independent and thus starting the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. As is noticeable in this paragraph, and as argued by Roberts, Putin's main fear was the idea of losing Ukraine to the

²⁶ Goodrick, "Comparative Case Studies," 1.

²⁷ Dmitry Shevsky, "Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine," *Handbook of Revolutions in the 21st Century* (2022): 858.

²⁸ Amanda Paul, "Crimea one year after Russian annexation," *European Policy Centre*, no. 24 (2015): 1.

²⁹ Sasse and Lackner, "War and identity: The case of the Donbas in Ukraine," 139.

³⁰ Sasse and Lackner, "War and identity: The case of the Donbas in Ukraine," 141.

West. Roberts explains this by pointing out that before starting the War, Putin mentioned multiple times that it would be a preventive one against the West's eastward expansion.³¹ The Russo-Ukrainian War is therefore very much identity-driven, as argued by Sasse and Lackner. Paul, Shevsky, and Roberts further add that this identity clash has further turned into a war of ideologies in which Russia refuses the Western ideology to expand eastwards, thus making the war in Ukraine a 'preventive' one, as argued by Putin.

2.1.2. Historical context: Serbo-Croatian War

The Union of Southern Slavs, or Yugoslavia, was established after WW1 in the form of a kingdom. Calic explained that already back in 1919, the victors of WW1, who were responsible for the formation of new states following the collapse of Austria-Hungary, shared some concerns about such a multi-ethnic state like Yugoslavia. Nonetheless, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was established anyway in June 1919. However, the first dissolution of it came already in WW2. As described by Mirković, following pressure from the Axis powers, Croatia split from the federation as they were promised an independent nation with a large portion of Bosnian and Serbian territory.³² The newly created Croatian state was led by the ultra-nationalist Ustaše regime, which, according to Mirković, committed genocide on minorities such as Serbs, Bosniaks, and Jews in an effort to create an 'ethnically pure' Croatia.³³ After WW2, the country reunited under communist leadership by Josip Tito. Tito was well aware that Yugoslavia was very multiethnic and that it had just come out of an ethnic conflict in WW2. In an effort to make the people forget their differences, Tito implemented various policies intending to create a bigger sense of unity in his country. Batović particularly points out language policies such as the denial of the Croatian language, instead calling it Serbo-Croatian, or promoting a shared 'Yugoslav culture' which did not exist and was aimed at people to forget their own cultures.³⁴ Following the death of Tito, Calic argues that Yugoslavia turned into a collective presidency with representatives from each of the federation's republics. Due to the complexity of the system, Yugoslavia essentially split into two voting blocs, blocking each other's proposals.³⁵ As pointed out by Calic, the federation quickly entered an economic crisis,

³¹ Geoffrey Roberts, "Now or Never: The immediate Origins of Putin's preventive War on Ukraine," *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 22, no. 2 (2022): 22.

³² Damir Mirković, "The historical link between the Ustasha genocide and the Croato-Serb Civil War: 1991-1995," *Journal of Genocide Research* 3, no. 3 (2000): 365.

³³ Mirković, "The historical link between the Ustasha genocide and the Croato-Serb Civil War: 1991-1995," 370.

³⁴ Ante Batović, "The Balkans in Turmoil – Croatian Spring and the Yugoslav position between the Cold War Blocs 1965-1971," *LSE Cold War Studies Programme* (2009): 7.

³⁵ Marie-Janin Calic, *History of Yugoslavia*. Purdue University Press (2018), 22.

which led to the reappearance of nationalism, in which different ethnicities were blaming each other for the economic crisis. Between the years 1989 and 1990, both Serbia and Croatia elected their presidents, Milošević and Tudjman, whom Calic both classifies as nationalists. With the Croatian side trying to leave the federation for economic, cultural, and ideological reasons, and the Serbian side trying to keep the federation intact out of the supposed fear of a second Serb genocide, war broke out.³⁶

2.2. US Interventionism

As already mentioned, the USA is the only country with a big enough economy and military to project its military power globally, as argued by Choi & James. This connects with the fact that the USA spends roughly as much money on its military as the rest of the world combined, which allows the USA to intervene abroad on multiple occasions at once. The USA has done so with the help of direct military presence, military aid, government support, overthrowing of unwanted governments, invasions, or financial support. Choi & James argue that US interventionism, in particular, has been an effective foreign policy tool that the USA has used since the Second World War.³⁷ In their paper, Choi & James research the motivation behind US interventionism abroad. They came to the conclusion that after ‘promoting democracy’ and ‘combatting terrorism’, ‘human rights concerns’ are the third biggest reason for US interventionism.³⁸ Dobson, however, is critical of this approach. Though he emphasizes that in the minds of US policymakers, their interventions were mostly helpful, he remains cautious. Dobson argues that what’s perceived as good in the USA might not be good or even applicable in different cultures and settings abroad. This means that US interventionism was not always voluntary or helpful and can be, on the contrary, harmful to the political sovereignty of a foreign nation. According to Dobson, therefore, the US interventionism is used as a tool to spread the US ideology abroad and thus expand its influence and soft power worldwide.³⁹ Papageorgiou adds that this foreign policy has been maintained from the Cold War Era during the US containment policy, which was supposed to limit the spread of communism.⁴⁰ Choi & James specify that between 1981 and 2005, the USA has intervened in 46 countries, whether through

³⁶ Marie-Janin Calic, *History of Yugoslavia*. Purdue University Press (2018), 71.

³⁷ Choi and James, “Why does the United States intervene abroad? Democracy, human rights violations, and terrorism,” 900.

³⁸ Choi and James, “Why does the United States intervene abroad? Democracy, human rights violations, and terrorism,” 913.

³⁹ Dobson, “The dangers of US interventionism,” 595.

⁴⁰ Agis Papageorgiou, “Justifying the Unjustifiable: Cold War American Always had a Strong Ethical Dimension,” *St Anthony’s International Review* 19, no. 1 (2024): 151.

military support or military presence.⁴¹ Though these interventions mostly occurred in Latin America in support of anti-communist movements, the USA has also intervened in numerous Middle-Eastern countries (Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Israel) and African countries (Somalia, Libya). Though the academics might disagree on its reasoning or helpfulness, they would agree that US interventionism has been an effective tool of the US foreign policy, which should be analyzed and is relevant to this day, as it is important to know under which circumstances the USA intervenes abroad and when it chooses not to.

2.3. To what extent were the Russo-Ukrainian and Serbo-Croatian Wars similar?

Before analyzing the ways in which and why the USA's involvement has been so contrasting in these two wars, it is important to establish a connection between these two case studies with the use of secondary literature. This thesis will only be able to point out a bias or inconsistency in the US interventionism if it proves that the two wars are similar enough for the USA to ideally react the same to both of them. Besides those two wars being, so far, the only two wars fought on the European continent since WW2, they share multiple similarities, three of which will be discussed in this section. Those commonalities are: The struggle for independence amid the collapse of multi-ethnic Slavic federations, Ukraine's and Croatia's fascist past as a justification to invade, and Intertwined populations and the 'protection' of minorities. In the analysis chapter, one more similarity about the severity of the war will be discussed.

However, before the comparisons, it is important to mention that this thesis certainly does not aim to compare the extent of suffering of all four involved countries, nor to evaluate which experienced greater or lesser hardship. Instead, as explained above, comparing the two wars is an essential step to pointing out a bias in the USA's involvement.

2.3.1. The struggle for independence amid the collapse of multi-ethnic Slavic federations

Both Ukraine and Croatia were once part of multi-ethnic Slavic federations, with their opponent in the wars being the political hegemon in them. Ukraine was part of Russia's Soviet Union, while Croatia was part of Serbia's Yugoslavia. Both of those federations were founded after the First World War, Yugoslavia in 1918, and the Soviet Union in 1922, and dissolved in the early 1990s. As argued by the Ukrainian and Croatian separatists, those multi-ethnic federations posed a significant threat to their identities as well as other minority ethnic groups.⁴² Whether

⁴¹ Choi and James, "Why does the United States intervene abroad? Democracy, human rights violations, and terrorism," 900.

⁴² Sasse and Lackner, "War and state-making in Ukraine: Foreign a civic identity from below?" 94.

it was by means of language policies, suppression of nationality-specific art, or breakdowns of pro-independence protests, both Ukraine's and Croatia's identities were at stake, thus creating a strong will for independence. The wars that this thesis will be analyzing were also fought during instances when Ukraine and Croatia opted for more political independence and made significant steps towards European integration and democracy, away from, respectively, Russia or Serbia.

Yugoslavia was founded after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Kosnica describes it as a Kingdom of the Southern Slavs, which were the Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Bosnians, Montenegrins, and Macedonians.⁴³ After Yugoslavia's first dissolution in World War Two, Yugoslavia was reunited into a Federation run by communist Josip Tito, who led the country until his death in 1980. Such a multiethnic federation required strict monitoring. As it is described by Prpić, Tito suppressed any form of nationalism that would put the Federation at risk of collapsing.⁴⁴ Prpić more specifically argues that laws such as denouncing the Croatian language to 'Serbo-Croatian', political repressions of nationalist activists and religious actors, or rewriting of Croatian history, particularly helped Tito make Southern Slavs forget their differences.⁴⁵ Instead, Bokić argues that a 'Yugoslav' ethnicity was created, which was supposed to serve as an alternative to the particular national identities. Bokić further argues that this lack of self-determination and identity was the main reason for the outburst of the Yugoslav Civil War, during which states were fed up with their identity being suppressed.⁴⁶ Guzina, on the contrary, argues that the war was primarily escalated by the Serbian desire to maintain their federation and create a 'Greater Serbia'. He also states that the creation of a 'Yugoslav identity' was no less than an attempt by Serbian authorities to make people forget their true identity and be loyal to a central Serbian identity.⁴⁷ Guzina, therefore, argues that the case of the Yugoslav Civil War represents the struggle for newly established countries to maintain independence from their former political hegemon. Attila further adds that for that exact reason, Croatian President Franjo Tudjman was elected. He was a candidate strongly advocating for the independence of Croatia. Attila describes him as a populist and nationalist, which is what he argues the Croatian people looked for during the times when Yugoslavia was collapsing. That

⁴³ Ivan Kosnica, "State Authority and Competing Arrangements in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes/Yugoslavia (1918–1941)," *Administrative* 5, no. 1 (2021): 161.

⁴⁴ George Prpić, "Communism and Nationalism in Yugoslavia," *Balkan Studies* 10, no. 1 (1969): 23.

⁴⁵ Prpić, "Communism and Nationalism in Yugoslavia," 45.

⁴⁶ Miloš Bokić, "The main reason that led to the Dissolution of Yugoslavia and Short Explanation of Failed Project of the Yugoslav Nation," *University of Vienna*, 2013: 8-10.

⁴⁷ Dejan Guzina, "Socialist Serbia's Narratives: From Yugoslavia to a Greater Serbia," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 17, no. 1 (2003): 93.

is why Tudjman was elected to power in spring 1990.⁴⁸ With the strong desire of the Croats to leave Yugoslavia and a President committed to this idea, the dissolution of Yugoslavia seemed inevitable. In this phase, the Croatian people and politicians showed clear intentions to separate themselves from a Yugoslav federation, which they perceived as one-sided or institutionally Serb-dominated. While Yugoslavia was crumbling, the Serbian authorities under Milošević made a last effort to maintain their sphere of influence, and thus started an invasion of the separatist republics, as described by Jerčić.⁴⁹

The case of Ukraine was not much different. Kappeler argues that, similarly to Croatia, Ukraine also held a strategic location and importance in the context of sea access, which he argues explains Russia's strong engagement in the Russification processes Ukraine faced during the times of the USSR.⁵⁰ Kappeler further believes that Russia did so strategically, since like-minded societies are more likely to stay loyal to each other.⁵¹ Similar to Yugoslavia, the USSR also had policies limiting nationalism and the national identities of minorities. Weeks adds on to Kappeler's argument of Russia's russification of Ukraine strategically and states that Russia's strategy to gain loyalty from the minority nations was to use language as a tool since, after all, Russian is a similar language to both Ukrainian and perhaps Belarusian.⁵² Russian was mandatory in schools and considered necessary to build a successful career. Weeks considers this Russian assimilation process to be a success since the Russian language was growing to the point where two-thirds of Ukrainians spoke it on a daily basis, which, in the Russian eyes, justified Russia's claim over that land.⁵³ With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, however, Russia lost all of the 'progress' it had made in Ukraine in an effort to keep it Russian, arguably for strategic reasons. Kanet emphasizes that Putin has made it clear that the fall of the Soviet Union was Russia's most catastrophic event in history. Kanet adds that Putin's motivation behind his decision to invade Ukraine is re-establishing what Russia has once lost, yet again, representing a war that is fought as a result of the dissolution of a federation.⁵⁴ Besides that, Shevsky agrees with Kanet by adding that the event which triggered the Russian aggression was the Maidan protests and the following change in Ukraine's government in the

⁴⁸ Attila Marko Hoare, "The War of Yugoslav Succession," *Central and Southeast European politics since 1989* (2003): 113.

⁴⁹ Natko Martinić Jerčić, "Political Circumstances and Security Situation in Western Slavonia on the Eve of the Greater-Serbian Aggression in 1991," *Review of Croatian History* 18, no. 1 (2022): 379.

⁵⁰ Andreas Kappler, "Ukraine and Russia: Legacies of the imperial past and competing memories," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 5, no. 2 (2014): 110.

⁵¹ Kappler "Ukraine and Russia: Legacies of the imperial past and competing memories," 108.

⁵² Kappler "Ukraine and Russia: Legacies of the imperial past and competing memories," 107.

⁵³ Theodore Weeks, "Russification/Sovietization," *European History Online* (2010): 33.

⁵⁴ Roger Kanet, "Rebuilding 'Greater Russia' and the Invasion of Ukraine," *TPQ* 22, no. 1 (2023): 28.

direction of the West.⁵⁵ Sasse and Lackner further argued that the relations between Ukraine and Russia significantly worsened as Ukraine was pushing for more political independence from Russia, which Russia was not going to allow mainly due to the strategic importance of it.⁵⁶

2.3.2. Ukraine's and Croatia's fascist past as a justification to invade

During the Second World War, both Ukraine and Croatia had significant fascist or ultra-nationalist movements arising from the context of the federations just mentioned. By teaming up with the Axis powers, they hoped to gain independence from their federations through brutal means, including ethnic cleansing or forced assimilation. On the contrary, Russia and Serbia, who were satisfied with their political dominance within their federations, took a resisting stance towards the German, Ukrainian, and Croatian fascists, who posed a threat to their empires and people. About half of century later, spent together in their respective federations, this problem of the past seemed to have appeared again when it comes to the use of propaganda by Russia and Serbia. Both Putin and Milošević accused their counterparts as fascists based on this chapter in the histories of their nations, while convincing their populations that Ukraine and Croatia had fascist intentions with their ideological shifts towards the West.

In the case of Croatia, Hitler and Mussolini played a huge role in creating a fascist Independent State of Croatia under the rule of the ultra-nationalistic and, by ideology, fascist movement Ustaše. This movement led to the destabilization and the first split of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, as its values were not compatible with life in a multi-ethnic federation, according to Mirković. Mirković adds that during its existence between 1941 and 1945, it was responsible for genocidal acts toward minorities such as Jews, Gypsies, Communists, and perhaps most notably, Orthodox Serbs. Mirković further claims that the Fascist Croatian State did so in order to ethnically cleanse its territories of Serbs and Bosnians and, therefore, create a claim over that land. Pavlaković adds to Mirković's argument by stating that those acts significantly damaged the relationship between Croatian authorities and Serbs living in Croatia and even created a sense of trauma between the two ethnic groups. Fast forward to 1991, when Croatia decided to separate from Yugoslavia a second time, Mirković claims that the Ustaše's acts of the past contributed to the escalation of the Serbo-Croatian War. He emphasizes that the Serb population living in Croatia, which possibly feared a second genocide, contributed to the escalation of the war by rebelling out of fear, which was a result of the trauma inflicted on the Serbs by Croatian

⁵⁵ Shevsky, "Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine," 858.

⁵⁶ Sasse and Lackner, "War and identity: The case of the Donbas in Ukraine," 139.

Ustaše in World War Two.⁵⁷ Mirković further adds that the Serbian authorities were aware of this traumatic memory and played on it by manipulating the Serbs into revolt using politics of memory from a 50-year-old event. This meant that Serb president Milošević made numerous public announcements accusing Croats of being fascist.⁵⁸ While Pavlaković agrees with Mirković's argument, he rejects the Serbian propaganda's claim that the creation of the modern Croatian state was founded on fascist values, as argued by the Serbian president Milošević and his propaganda.⁵⁹

When it comes to Ukraine, Rossoliński explains the emergence of Ukrainian fascism as a result of the Ukrainian people living under the foreign rule of either Russia or Poland, which was often repressive. He argues that the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) was established under those circumstances where it sought independence for the Ukrainian people. However, similar to the Croatian Ustaše movement, the OUN also sought a homogenous independent nation, according to Rossoliński. Rossoliński uses this narrative as an explanation for the OUN's genocidal acts towards ethnic minorities such as Poles and Russians.⁶⁰ Verbeeck then uses this part of Ukraine's history to make a connection to the contemporary war against Russia. He argues that, similar to the one of Croatia, Ukraine's fascist past has also shaped its opponent's justification for invading and use of propaganda. Verbeeck mentioned in his journal that Russian propaganda outlets use the USSR's fight against fascism in World War Two as a tool to justify today's war against Ukraine. Ferraro further argues how successful this narrative is by pointing to the 20% of Russians who believe that 'denazification' is the primary reason for the 'special military operation', which was the third most mentioned justification. He states that, similarly to Serbia, Putin was able to reach such numbers by using the politics of memory of Ukraine's genocidal actions in WW2.⁶¹ Besides using 'denazification' as a justification for the war, Verbeeck in general emphasizes Russia's engagement in propaganda, such as using specific terminology of this war in an effort to paint a certain picture of the Ukrainian pro-Western shift, a strategy which again was used frequently in Serbia's case.⁶²

⁵⁷ Damir Mirković, "The historical link between the Ustasha genocide and the Croato-Serb Civil War: 1991-1995," *Journal of Genocide Research* 3, no. 3 (2020): 363.

⁵⁸ Mirković, "The historical link between the Ustasha genocide and the Croato-Serb Civil War: 1991-1995," 364.

⁵⁹ Vjeran Pavlaković, "Flirting with Fascism: The Ustaša legacy and Croatian politics in the 1990s," *The shared History and the Second World War and National Question in ex-Yugoslavia* (2008): 2.

⁶⁰ Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe, "The Fascist Kernel of Ukrainian genocidal Nationalism," *The Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies*, no. 2402 (2015): 42.

⁶¹ Vincente Ferraro, "The Contradictions in Vladimir Putin's 'Just War' against Ukraine: The Myths of NATO's Containment, Minority Protection and Denazification," *Center for Asian Studies*, 1 (2023): 25.

⁶² Georgi Verbeeck, "The Return of History as Travesty: The Struggle against Fascism in the Russian-Ukrainian War," *Journal of Applied History*, 4 (2022): 78.

2.3.3. Intertwined populations and the ‘protection’ of minorities

As mentioned in the last point of similarity above, Russia and Serbia’s justification for their attack on Ukraine and Croatia was centered around the fascist and genocidal acts of the OUN and Ustaše in World War Two. Therefore, what was also playing into their claim was that many Russians live in Ukraine, and many Serbs live in Croatia. This meant that the border regions were often quite intertwined because of the similar history the countries share. This provided yet another foundation for the Russian and Serbian reasoning and justification for an attack in the name of the protection of their countrymen abroad.

In the case of Croatia, the region in question is the Republika Srpska Krajina. This region is Serb-dominated and covers a significant portion of eastern and central Croatia. During the outbreak of the war, Serbs living in those regions rose up against being part of a new independent Croatian state, with the use of blockades or attacks on Croatian police forces, even though the Croatian decision to secede was democratically decided, according to Pavlaković.⁶³ Guzina further agrees that the Serbian authorities intentionally escalated the situation by supplying the Serb rebels with weapons with which they could fight the Croatian police and, later on, the army from the inside. However, contrary to Pavlaković, Guzina argues that the Serb authorities’ plan was never to protect the Serbs in Croatia. Instead, they wanted to re-establish a Greater Serbia, a nationalist idea from the 19th century which attributed Serbia large parts of Croatia and other Balkan nations, even those which were not Serb-dominated.⁶⁴ Thornton supports this point by pointing out that Serbs later in the war also attacked villages inhabited mostly by Croatians, which arguably makes the narrative of protecting Serbian citizens doubtful.⁶⁵ Nonetheless, the Serbian authorities’ narrative that made the Serbs living in Croatia revolt seemed to have worked, as it mobilized numerous Serbs in Croatia for the war. Vujačić demonstrates this effectiveness by arguing that, during the Croatian counter-offensive operation ‘Storm’, approximately 180.000 Serbs left the Republika Srpska Krajina for Serbia.⁶⁶ This perhaps represents the fear of the Serbs and the extent to which they believed the Serbian narrative about Croatia’s supposed desire to continue a genocidal mission from World War Two.

⁶³ Vjeran Pavlaković, “Symbols and the Culture of Memory in Republika Srpska Krajina,” *Nationalities Papers* 41, no. 6 (2013): 893.

⁶⁴ Dejan Guzina, “Socialist Serbia’s Narratives: From Yugoslavia to a Greater Serbia,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 17, no. 1 (2003): 109.

⁶⁵ Christopher Thornton, “Walking in the Wake of War Letter from Dubrovnik,” *The Sewanee Review* 121, no. 1 (2013): 158.

⁶⁶ Ivan Vujačić, “The United States in the Western Balkans: Reluctant, Late and Distant Involvement vs. Quick Radical Fix,” *Integrating the Western Balkans into the EU*, 7 (2023): 149.

When it comes to Russia and Ukraine, the Ukrainian regions with a sizeable Russian population are Crimea and the Donbas. How big the population actually is can be hard to prove since the nation you identify with can be heavily influenced by societal standards, as Slyvka explains. He argues that both Donbas and Crimea were subject to Russification during the Soviet Union, which influenced the identity of the inhabitants, which then oriented more towards Russia. As a result, Slyvka argues that Donbas and Crimea were mostly Russian-speaking, without making any conclusions about their identity.⁶⁷ Later on, during the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2021, as well as during Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russian President Putin stated the protection of the Russian-speaking population as the reason for the invasion/annexation. Verbeeck argues that Putin's accusation of Ukrainian authorities as being fascist and genocidal helped him justify his acts to his own population, ensuring that public support stayed high throughout the war in Ukraine. Verbeeck further argues that this narrative makes Russia's invasion seem more like a defensive war, which fuels the morale of Russian soldiers and conscripts.⁶⁸ This way, Putin has used Ukraine's fascist past in World War Two as a base for his discourse, which is being told to millions of Russians.

2.4. Conclusion of the Historiography

In conclusion, after providing historical context of both wars, some similarities in reasoning can already be noticed. The thesis categorizes them into three. The first category, 'The struggle for independence amid the collapse of multi-ethnic Slavic federations,' explains how Croatia and Ukraine distancing themselves from the spheres of influence of Serbia and Russia sparked the conflict. The second category, 'Ukraine's and Croatia's fascist past as a justification to invade,' describes the connection of Croatia's and Ukraine's pasts to the modern-day wars. Lastly, the category of 'Intertwined populations and the 'protection' of minorities' is a further reason both Serbia and Russia used prior to attacking their neighbor, which was ideologically drifting away from them. By making further comparisons between the wars, it becomes apparent that the wars were similar by nature, during which Ukraine and Croatia made significant westward, pro-democratic steps away from their ex-occupiers, Russia and Serbia, which sparked the tensions between the two sides. This comparison also helps to summarize the overall stakes of the wars the USA had to evaluate and make a decision on intervening or

⁶⁷ Roman Slyvka, "The preconditions for conflicts in Donbas and Crimea: similarities and differences," *Borderlands of nations, nations of borderlands*, no. 13 (2017): 202.

⁶⁸ Verbeeck, "The Return of History as Travesty: The Struggle against Fascism in the Russian-Ukrainian War," 78.

not. In different words, the similar reasoning, cause, and justification of the wars presented a similar scenario for the USA to deal with: one side, Russia and Serbia, accused the other side, Ukraine and Croatia, of being fascist separatists who pose a threat to the ethnic minorities in their territory. Yet, the US reaction to both wars was rather contrasting.

3. Analysis

3.1. To what extent did the wars pose a humanitarian crisis?

The severity of a war is often measured by the number of both civilian and military casualties. In the cases of the Russo-Ukrainian and Serbo-Croatian Wars, the intensity and the extent to which those wars have caused a humanitarian crisis can be explained by comparing the number of casualties from both conflicts. This thesis certainly does not aim to compare the suffering of the thousands of people during those wars, it just aims to put the intensity of the wars into perspective for the sake of the argument.

In the case of the Russo-Ukrainian War, it is harder to find exact numbers of casualties as the war is still ongoing, and the casualties are expected to increase, and both sides are reluctant to publish the exact number of casualties. Nonetheless, as of April 2025, the estimates vary. The Quincy Institute claims that 250.000 Ukrainians have lost their lives as of February 2025, while the Ukrainian authorities claim the number to be lower, 125.000, to be precise (79.500 civilians, 46.000 soldiers).⁶⁹⁷⁰ Trump, on the contrary, placed the estimate at around a million Ukrainian lives, though this claim seems to lack sufficient evidence, as argued by Justin Spike from AP News.⁷¹ For the sake of neutrality, this thesis will use the claim of The Quincy Institute for its argument, meaning 250.000 casualties. This number seems to be claimed the most by various independent journals such as the Wall Street Journal or Business Insider. To put the intensity of the Russo-Ukrainian war on a scale, this thesis will divide the population of the country by the number of casualties. In Ukraine's case, 250.000 divided by 41.000.000, which equals 0,61%. Meaning that 0,61% of the Ukrainian pre-war population had passed away. Among those casualties are also victims of Russian war crimes. Though more are expected to be discovered as the war heads to an end, one civilian massacre in Ukraine that comes up occurred in Bucha. Ukrainian authorities have claimed that 458 civilians were shot

⁶⁹ "The Ukraine War after three years: Roads not taken," Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, last modified February 19, 2025,

<https://quincyinst.org/research/the-ukraine-war-after-three-years-roads-not-taken/#overview>

⁷⁰ "A very bloody war – What is the death toll of Russia's war in Ukraine?" Kyiv Independent, last modified February 13, 2025,

<https://kyivindependent.com/a-very-bloody-war-what-is-the-death-toll-of-russias-war-in-ukraine/>

⁷¹ "Trump says Ukraine started the war that's killing its citizens. What's the facts?" AP News, last modified February 21, 2025,

<https://apnews.com/article/ukraine-russia-trump-war-zelenskyy-putin-7fe8c0c80b4e93e3bc079c621a44e8bb>

in the streets of this Kyiv suburb during the retreat of the Russian army. Zelensky and numerous other world leaders have already classified this event as a ‘genocide’ or ‘war crime’.⁷²

When it comes to the Serbo-Croatian War, the numbers are more precise thanks to the war being more than 30 years old, and more research being dedicated to it. Nonetheless, the number also varies in Croatia’s case. Both BBC and NCR argue for 20.000 casualties.⁷³⁷⁴ On the other hand, the head of the Croatian Commission for Missing Persons, Colonel Ivan Grujić, estimates the number to be around 12.000 (6.788 soldiers, 4.508 civilians), while Croatian historian Marko Attila estimates the number to be 15.970 casualties.⁷⁵⁷⁶ These numbers include civilian deaths in Vukovar and Ovčara, where executions of wounded Croatian soldiers and Croatian citizens took place, as per the criminal investigator in Croatia, Vladimír Dzuro. Thanks to his investigation, he was able to find human graves of approximately 300 people. He himself considered this atrocity a war crime and was tasked with finding the responsible.⁷⁷ In order to draw a comparison, this thesis will again compare the death toll to the pre-war population of Croatia. Once again, for the sake of neutrality, this thesis will pick the estimate of the independent news outlets, meaning BBC and NCR, which estimated 20.000 casualties in this case. This adds up to 0,42% of the total pre-war population of Croatia.

While both wars caused significant humanitarian crises, it is noticeable that the death toll compared to the respective pre-war populations remains in both cases around 0,5%: 0,61% in Ukraine and 0,42% in Croatia. Furthermore, both Ukraine and Croatia have suffered instances of war crimes targeted specifically at civilians and their identities. Those actions only intensify the extent to which the wars were ‘bloody’ and therefore call for international reaction.

3.2. How did the USA perceive the Wars?

Having proved the similarity of the two wars, both in reasoning and in the extent to which they created a humanitarian crisis, it is important to point out how the USA perceived them. The USA and its interventionism being the central area of analysis of this thesis, their perception of

⁷² Bartosz Hamarowski and Maria Lompe, “Digital Witnesses to the Crime: Visual Representation of the Bucha Massacre across Social Media Platforms,” *Media, War & Conflict* 17, no. 4 (2024): 578.

⁷³ “Croatia accuses Serbia of 1990s genocide,” BBC News, last modified March 3, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26415503>

⁷⁴ “30 years after war in Croatia, sisters still healing wounds,” NCR Online, last modified December 28, 2023, <https://www.ncronline.org/30-years-after-war-croatia-sisters-still-healing-wounds>

⁷⁵ “Martić Witness details Croatian War Casualties,” Institute for War and Peace Reporting, last modified April 13, 2006, <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/martic-witness-details-croatian-war-casualties>

⁷⁶ Marko Attila Hoare, “Genocide and Bosnia and the Failure of International Justice,” *Working Paper Series*, no. 8 (2008): 8.

⁷⁷ Vladimír Dzuro, *Vyšetřovatel: Démoni balkanské války a světská spravedlnost*. (Grada Publishing, 2017), 39.

the two wars is just as, if not more important than, the actual similarities of the wars. For example, two wars and their humanitarian consequences could be identical, however, if the USA only acknowledges or knows about one humanitarian crisis, then that would explain why it reacted so differently to the two wars. In that case, this thesis would not need any theories or other reasoning to explain the inconsistency to react similarly in similar scenarios. Therefore, pointing out how the USA perceived the two wars is crucial to whether the US foreign policy can be considered 'biased' or not for being inconsistent with its interventionism.

3.2.1. How did the USA perceive the Russo-Ukrainian War?

Since the start of the full-scale invasion, the USA has made its stance on the conflict very clear. The USA has been very open about being on the side of Ukraine since the first day. On the same day as the start of the full-scale invasion, US President Joe Biden made his support for Ukraine clear as he denounced Putin's invasion. Biden stated,

Putin is the aggressor, Putin chose this war, and now he and his country will bear the consequences. [...] I spoke late last night to President Zelenskyy of Ukraine, and I assured him that the United States, together with our Allies and partners in Europe, will support the Ukrainian people as they defend their country. We'll provide humanitarian relief to ease their suffering.⁷⁸

The US perception was therefore very clear: the aggressor was Putin's Russia, and the country attacked was Ukraine. As also touched upon by Biden, he recognized the immediate need for humanitarian aid for Ukraine, which required to be taken seriously. In fact, when Biden was questioned on the severity of the war, whether he considers the War in Ukraine a genocide, he responded with a "Yes". In April 2022, he doubled down on this claim by stating,

Yes, I called it genocide because it has become clearer and clearer that Putin is trying to wipe out the idea of even being able to be Ukrainian. And the evidence is mounting. A bit different than it was last week, more evidence is coming out of literally the horrible things that the Russians have done in Ukraine. And we're going to only learn more about the devastation.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ "Remarks by President Biden on Russia's unprovoked and unjustified attack on Ukraine," U.S. Embassy in Malaysia, last modified February 24, 2022,

<https://my.usembassy.gov/remarks-by-president-biden-on-russias-unprovoked-and-unjustified-attack-on-ukraine/>

⁷⁹ Joe Biden, "Biden calls Russian actions in Ukraine genocide," New York Times, April 13, 2022, 0 min., 34 sec.,

<https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/politics/100000008301441/biden-ukraine-russia-genocide-comments-video.html>

In this sense, Biden's perception of the war reflected the US reaction. As emphasized by Dudko & Faraponov, the USA is Ukraine's biggest donor of military, economic, and humanitarian aid, and on top of that, it leads a coalition of allies in support of Ukraine.⁸⁰ However, Dudko & Faraponov argue for a further US perception of the War in Ukraine. They argue that the USA draws a clear distinction between Ukraine, a democratic country, and Russia, with an authoritarian regime. In this dynamic, Dudko & Faraponov argue that the USA sees the war as a defense of its own values, meaning that it is, in a sense, personally involved in it, even though it's on a different continent.⁸¹

Under the Trump administration, the US perception of the extent to which the War in Ukraine is a humanitarian crisis has not changed. Just like Biden, Trump also recognizes the war as a threat to thousands of human lives. In an interview with Fox News in 2022, he stated, "This is a genocide taking place" while talking about the War in Ukraine.⁸² During his term, Trump further expressed his concern for the human lives in both Ukraine and Russia. He has argued that "millions" of Ukrainians have passed away, though these numbers are said to be overestimated, according to Justin Spike.⁸³ Though as of April 2025, both presidents might have differed in their approaches to this conflict and disagreed on the reasoning behind it, both would, however, agree on the intensity of the conflict and that it has to stop.

3.2.2. How did the USA perceive the Serbo-Croatian War?

In the case of the Serbo-Croatian War, the USA's reaction was far more reluctant and unclear. As argued by Pauković and Roško, the USA and the West feared an outbreak of a bigger war in Yugoslavia. Pauković and Roško explain this reluctance by stating that the US American focus at that time was fully on the USSR and the Gulf War. In a sense, they argue that the USA treated the Yugoslav War silently, hoping the ethnic tensions would resolve themselves. In different words, Pauković and Roško argue that maintaining the status quo in the Balkans was in the USA's interest, thus creating geopolitical stability in a time period where the USA was

⁸⁰ Iryna Dudko and Vladyslav Faraponov, "President Biden's foreign policy doctrine and advancing US assistance to Ukraine," *American History and Politics* (2023): 16.

⁸¹ Dudko and Faraponov, "President Biden's foreign policy doctrine and advancing US assistance to Ukraine," 17.

⁸² "Trump joins Biden in calling Russia's war on Ukraine genocide," The Hill, last modified April 13, 2022, https://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/3267118-trump-joins-biden-in-calling-russias-war-on-ukraine-genocide/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁸³ "Trump says Ukraine started the war that's killing its citizens. What's the facts?" AP News, last modified February 21, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/ukraine-russia-trump-war-zelenskyy-putin-7fe8c0c80b4e93e3bc079c621a44e8bb>

preoccupied with different conflicts. In fact, they state that the support for maintaining Yugoslavia was dominant both in the USA and Western Europe, besides Germany.⁸⁴ Éthier even argues that ever since the Second World War, Germany and the USA have not disagreed on a topic so much as on the topic of the Yugoslav War. Similarly to Pauković and Roško, she argues that while Germany believed the desire for Croatian independence was caused by imperialist policies of the Serbian president Slobodan Milošević, the USA authorities and the majority of Western European authorities believed it was mainly caused by the chauvinism of Croatian elites. Furthermore, Éthier also argues that the USA took this reluctant position in an effort not to escalate the conflict into a broader war in the Balkans.⁸⁵

This argument reflects the stance of US President Bill Clinton as well. Clinton, even in 1995, four years after the Bosnian War started, still warned of a wider war, which explains his reluctance. After being asked whether he is concerned about the Serbo-Croatian War spreading into an all-out war in the Balkans, he responded with:

Yes, well, I'm concerned that it could spread, the war in Bosnia and the Croatian-Serbian area. Let me just back up that the Croatian offensive originally was launched in response to the Serb attack on Bihać, one of the protected areas, and it has largely apparently relieved a lot of pressure on Bihać, but because it is so comprehensive it runs the risk of a wider war, and that is what we have cautioned against in our contract with the Croats.⁸⁶

The Croatian offensive in question is an offensive organized by the Croatian and Bosnian forces to liberate the besieged city of Bihać by the Serbian Army of the Republika Srpska in Bosnia. This quote by Clinton summarizes the US American initial perception of the war, which underestimated the conflict and, as argued by Pauković and Roško, was unsuccessful.

Nonetheless, it is noticeable that Clinton shared his support for the Croatian side of the conflict in the cited speech from 1995. That is because a change occurred in the USA's perception of the war, as Éthier argues. She states that the USA's support for Croatia's independence shifted in favor of Croatia after Milošević repeatedly refused to work on a ceasefire or negotiation deal between the countries involved.⁸⁷ Even Pauković and Roško argue for a drastic change in how the USA perceived the war. However, they explain it by the sudden

⁸⁴ Pauković and Roško, "Western Newspapers and the War in Croatia," 171.

⁸⁵ Diane Éthier, "La politique étrangère de la Croatie: De son indépendance à nos jours, 1991-2006," *Slavic Review* 67, no.1 (2008): 223.

⁸⁶ Bill Clinton, "USA – Clinton defends Croats but warns of Wider War," remark, August 4, 1995, posted July 21, 2015, by AP Archive. YouTube, 0:19, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zhJ6eIBP42U>

⁸⁷ Éthier, "La politique étrangère de la Croatie: De son indépendance à nos jours, 1991-2006," 224.

escalation in Yugoslavia, which showed that maintaining the country would not be possible. As the war continued and eventually spilled over into Bosnia, the USA started acknowledging its severity. Both George Bush and Bill Clinton recognized the war in Croatia as ‘ethnic-cleansing’. In 1992, while answering questions from reporters in Colorado, Bush stated that

The aggressors and extremists pursue a policy, a vile policy, of ethnic cleansing, deliberately murdering innocent civilians, driving others from their homes. Already, the war has created over 2.2 million refugees, roughly the population of greater Pittsburgh and Baltimore. This is, without a doubt, a true humanitarian nightmare.⁸⁸

Bill Clinton, too, has taken a strong pro-Croatian stance on this topic and accused Milošević of ethnic cleansing. In an interview on CBS with Dan Rather, he stated, “*So the United States and NATO believe that there should be no ethnic cleansing and no people killed or uprooted because of their ethnic background.*”⁸⁹ This goes to show that both the Bush and Clinton administration shared their stances and perceptions on the war. They agreed on the aggressor: Serbia’s Milošević, as well as on classifying the war as ethnic cleansing.

3.2.3. Conclusion: How did the USA perceive the wars?

In the conclusion of the USA’s perceptions on both wars, it becomes evident that its stances on both wars did not differ too much. The biggest difference, and the point of analysis of this thesis, is that the USA was far more reluctant in the conflict in Yugoslavia. The USA was hoping for a de-escalation of the conflict by not supporting any independence movements, a stance that changed later in the war as Clinton leaned more towards supporting Croatia, though only verbally. On the other hand, the USA made it very clear from the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which side it’s on and that it is capable of helping out their ally. When it comes to recognizing the wars as a humanitarian crisis, all four US Presidents serving during the times of the wars (Bush, Clinton, Biden, Trump) shared their concern about the civilian losses and called the respective wars a ‘genocide’ or ‘ethnic cleansing’. This goes to show that the US American authorities were well aware of the severity of the wars, which they perceived similarly. Given the public acknowledgment of the atrocities committed in both wars, it would

⁸⁸ George Bush, “Remarks in the Situation in Bosnia and an Exchange with Reporters in Colorado Springs,” The American Presidency Project, August 6, 1992, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-situation-bosnia-and-exchange-with-reporters-colorado-springs>

⁸⁹ Bill Clinton, “Interview on CBS with Dan Rathler,” interview by Dan Rathler, US Department of State, March 31, 1999, https://1997-2001.state.gov/policy_remarks/1999/990331_clinton_ksvo_cbs.html

be reasonable to expect the USA to respond to both humanitarian crises in at least a similar way, especially if they claim to uphold the principle of equal value for all human life.

3.3. How did the USA react to the wars?

Having proved that the two wars are similar enough in the contexts of both reasoning, severity, and the way the USA perceived them, this thesis will now break down how the USA particularly reacted to both wars and in which specific areas the US intervention differed.

3.3.1. How did the USA react to the Russo-Ukrainian war?

As previously mentioned, the USA expressed its support for Ukraine right at the start of the Russian full-scale invasion. Biden also did not hesitate to denounce Putin. He stated that,

The world should see these acts for what they are, no one has threatened Russia. Russia sought this conflict. One man sought this brutal, senseless war.⁹⁰

Though Biden and the majority of Western leaders made their verbal support for Ukraine very clear, it is the material support that matters in the scenario of a war. As stated by Dudko & Faraponov, Biden was very eager to support Ukraine, especially when it comes to providing them with the necessary military equipment. Furthermore, the USA was leading a coalition of allies in which the USA orchestrated the military aid from other European states.⁹¹ Meaning that the USA does not just provide support itself, it also encourages other countries to join the effort. While hosting Ukrainian President Zelensky at the White House in December 2023, Biden admitted that the USA's support for Ukraine is limited and that the ability to keep supporting is coming to an end. Nonetheless, Biden promised Zelensky that

We will continue to supply Ukraine with critical weapons and equipment as long as we can. Including 200 million dollars I just approved today for critically needed equipment for additional air defense interceptors, artillery, and ammunitions.⁹²

This goes to show how important Ukraine and its sovereignty are to the USA and how committed Biden was to its defense.

⁹⁰ Joe Biden, "Biden denounces Russia's 'shameless violation' of UN Charter, urges world to stand with Ukraine," United Nations, September 21, 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/09/1127321>

⁹¹ Dudko and Faraponov, "President Biden's foreign policy doctrine and advancing US assistance to Ukraine," 16.

⁹² Joe Biden, "Biden promises Ukraine support 'for as long as we can' but subtle language change will make Zelenskyy shudder," Sky News, December 14, 2023, <https://news.sky.com/story/biden-promises-ukraine-support-for-as-long-as-we-can-but-subtle-language-change-will-make-zelenskyy-shudder-13029224>

When it comes to the material support of Ukraine, the USA is just as supportive. The amount allocated by the USA varies depending on various sources, and so does the differentiation between grants and loans. The Kiel Institute for the World Economy states that as of April 2025, the USA has allocated 114 billion Euros worth of military, financial, and humanitarian aid. This estimation places the USA in the first spot in the total allocated amount of support among all countries, with Germany being second with 17 billion Euros. The 114 billion Euros allocated by the USA make up 0,53% of the US GDP, ranking it 13th in the world in this category. Most of the money was categorized as military aid, 64,62 billion to be precise.⁹³ According to the US Department of Defense, this amount includes ammunition, rocket launchers, javelins, tanks, armored vehicles, and artillery as of December 2024.⁹⁴ Another estimate is by the Council on Foreign Relations, which as of March 2025 estimates the number to be 175 billion, out of which 128 billion was sent directly to the Ukrainian government, the rest stayed in the US and funded the replacement of military equipment sent to Ukraine. The total sum is a result of five major bills passed by the US Congress under the Biden administration. Out of the total amount, 70,6 billion is said to be the money dedicated to military aid. Additionally, the Council on Foreign Relations argues that most of this support came in the form of cheques and that only 20 billion was sent to Ukraine in the form of a loan.⁹⁵ Nonetheless, the vast majority of institutes estimate the number to be above 100 billion, which symbolizes a strong US support of Ukraine in both the military and humanitarian fields.

Besides verbal and material support for Ukraine, the USA also took significant steps to harm Russia's war efforts with the use of sanctions. Those sanctions have been targeted at the financial and banking sector, individuals, or export controls. According to Naz, the sanctions on Russia after the full-scale invasion of 2022 mark the third wave of sanctions by the West. Naz emphasizes the categories of export controls and restricting Russia's currency exposure as the most significant for this phase.⁹⁶ The export controls were meant to limit Russia's raw materials exports, which are one of its biggest income sources. Specifically, the USA and the EU implemented an embargo on Russian oil or gas or set price caps for Russian crude oil.⁹⁷

⁹³ "Ukraine Support Tracker," Kiel Institute for the World Economy, last modified April 15, 2025,

<https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/>

⁹⁴ "Ukraine Security Assistance," U.S. Department of Defense, last modified December 19, 2024,

<https://media.defense.gov/2025/Jan/08/2003626039/-1/-1/0/UKRAINE-INFOGRAPHIC-19DEC2024.PDF>

⁹⁵ "Here's how much aid the United States has sent Ukraine," Council on Foreign Relations, last modified March 11, 2025,

<https://www.cfr.org/article/how-much-us-aid-going-ukraine>

⁹⁶ Erum Naz, "Economic Sanctions against Russia: Impact, challenges, and Global Repercussions," *Journal of Business Strategies* 18, no. 1 (2024): 7.

⁹⁷ Naz, "Economic Sanctions against Russia: Impact, challenges, and Global Repercussions," 8.

Itskhoki & Ribakova, however, argue that the sanctions could have been more effective had they been imposed simultaneously instead of gradually. This way, Russia was able to slowly adapt to them by finding different trading partners. They argue that even though Russia's exports initially dropped in 2022, they recovered and rose again in 2024.⁹⁸ Itskhoki & Ribakova explain this reluctance in imposing by the West, not wanting to harm itself while harming the Russian export of commodities. This is because the bigger the degree to which the target economy is integrated into your market, the greater the harm to the country imposing the sanctions.⁹⁹ The Russian economy, in particular, was very integrated into the West's economies, mainly through commodity exporting.¹⁰⁰ Nonetheless, no matter their effectiveness, the USA did make an effort to harm the Russian economy through sanctions or trade blocks, however, only to an extent in which the sanctions would not harm the USA back.

3.3.2. How did the USA react to the Serbo-Croatian war?

In the case of the Serbo-Croatian War, the USA reacted to it in quite a contrasting manner. George H.W. Bush, who was the US President at that time, did not seem to be interested in intervening in Yugoslavia. Different academics bring up different reasons for this reluctance, which can be explained in multiple ways. Doder explains this reluctance by pointing out that Bush was facing a re-election campaign and feared that an intervention abroad could negatively influence it.¹⁰¹ Bush, in particular, ran a strong anti-interventionism campaign once the elections were nearing. In his diary, he wrote,

I've told our top people, we don't want to put a dog in this fight, [...] It's not one that we have to mastermind [...] This concept that we have to work out every problem, everywhere in the world, is crazy.¹⁰²

Even in presidential debates with Bill Clinton, Bush expressed his disagreement with the highly unpopular Vietnam War and other Wars in the Middle East, which required US soldiers to directly intervene in them. Nonetheless, Bush still sent his soldiers to Iraq and Somalia. Clinton,

⁹⁸ Oleg Itskhoki and Elina Ribakova, "The Economics of Sanctions," *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity* (2024): 37.

⁹⁹ Itskhoki and Ribakova, "The Economics of Sanctions," 3.

¹⁰⁰ Itskhoki and Ribakova, "The Economics of Sanctions," 28.

¹⁰¹ Dusko Doder, "Yugoslavia: New War, Old Hatreds," *Foreign Policy*, no. 91 (1993): 4.

¹⁰² "Bush's Ambivalent Yugoslavia Policy Shaped Transatlantic Relations for Decade," *Atlantic Sentinel*, last modified December 17, 2018, <https://atlanticsentinel.com/2018/12/bushs-ambivalent-yugoslavia-policy-shaped-transatlantic-relations-for-decade/>

on the other hand, embraced this position of the USA as a global police officer and argued for a more humanitarian and ideological view of interventionism.¹⁰³

During the early 1990s, the USA was furthermore preoccupied with the collapse of the Soviet Union. In this phase of post-Cold War uncertainty, the USA was hesitant to intervene in a smaller conflict when it had troops already in Iraq and was preparing itself for potential conflicts arising in the USSR. Hence, Pauković explains, the USA was rather interested in maintaining the status quo and did not support Croatia's independence. Furthermore, Bush feared that the Yugoslav War might inspire ethnic minorities and separatists to rise up in the USSR, which could result in them getting their hands on nuclear weapons.¹⁰⁴ As per Vujačić, the US reaction in the Balkans was more reaction-based than a thorough process, which would attempt to predict and prevent further humanitarian risks. Hence, he agrees that the US stance only changed after most of the war crimes were already committed, thus calling the US reaction reluctant and late.¹⁰⁵

With the Bush administration making its stance very clear on the Yugoslav case, much of the problem-solving was left to the EU and the UN. For the UN, Cyrus Vance did most of the negotiating with both the Croatian and Serbian sides on behalf of the UN. Nonetheless, the USA did have a part in the decision-making process, as the European Community did not seem to be unified enough on the matter in order to respond effectively.¹⁰⁶ This created a setting in which, though Bush had made it clear the USA is not interested in intervening in Yugoslavia, he was still expected to act at least as a negotiating medium between the two sides. This stance reflects the overall reaction of the West to the war, though a significant number of European countries were supportive of Croatia's independence, especially Germany, the UN still initially followed the US American desire for the war to die down and for Yugoslavia to remain intact.¹⁰⁷ For instance, U.S. State Department spokesman Richard Boucher stated in January 1992, a year after the war started, that the USA would not consider Croatia an independent state unless its independence was settled through peaceful negotiations with the Serbs and other Yugoslav republics. For that reason, the UN's initial reaction was to calm the tensions down and make a significant effort to settle the war through diplomatic means such as ceasefires and embargoes. Upon his appointment as the UN's mediator in the Yugoslav crisis in October 1991, Cyrus

¹⁰³ Dobson, "The Dangers of US Interventionism," 586.

¹⁰⁴ Pauković, "Western Newspapers and the War in Croatia," 171.

¹⁰⁵ Vujačić, "The United States in the Western Balkans: Reluctant, Late and Distant Involvement vs. Quick Radical Fix," 146.

¹⁰⁶ Doder, "Yugoslavia: New War, Old Hatreds," 4.

¹⁰⁷ Julie Malá, "International Intervention in Croatia during the Yugoslav Wars," *E-International Relations* 16 (2021): 3.

Vance immediately started working on a ceasefire since he argued that the deployment of UN peacekeeping units was very complicated and unlikely in the first year of the war.

After numerous failed or interrupted ceasefires organized by the UN, a final ceasefire between Serbia and Croatia was signed after international pressure, mainly in the form of diplomatic pressure and the threat of not recognizing Croatia by the USA. With the fighting being paused, the UN finally dared to deploy peacekeeping units in Croatia, which were not only tasked with maintaining peace but also humanitarian aid. Besides a few clashes, the ceasefire remained.¹⁰⁸ This period was largely used by the Croatian side to rearm and train a professional army, which it did not have up until this point. That is because Croatia was planning not to rely on the international community to return its territories in a diplomatic way. Instead, in the last year of the war, the Croatian army regained its territories using military force.¹⁰⁹

The arming and building of a professional Croatian Army, however, did not come easily as it was largely disapproved by the West, especially the USA and the UN. The international community feared this step to be a further escalation of the conflict, which at this stage was only getting more intense with the War in Bosnia breaking out. In order to complicate the rearmament process for Croatia, the UN Security Council imposed an arms embargo on all of Yugoslavia, including both Serbia and Croatia. Additionally, this step was supported by the USA, which was ready to help the UN impose this embargo by providing the necessary personnel and know-how to crack down on weapon smuggling into Yugoslavia. However, though imposed on both sides of the conflict, the embargo had far more severe consequences in Croatia. The Serb-controlled and dominated army of Yugoslavia was far more self-sufficient, better organized, more modernly equipped, and overall, stronger. On the other hand, the Croatian Army was highly inexperienced and was largely composed of police forces, volunteers, or other militia units. It lacked crucial equipment such as tanks, other heavy weapons, alongside a professional command structure. In this scenario, the Croatian Army was mainly relying on weapons smuggled over the embargo into the country.¹¹⁰ This did not only significantly hinder the Croatian war effort and defense capabilities, but it also created ground for war profiteering and the creation of a black market for weapons, which generally inflated

¹⁰⁸ "Chronology for Serbs in Croatia," UNHCR, last modified May 21, 2023,

<https://web.archive.archive.unhcr.org/20230521125701/https://www.refworld.org/docid/469f387dc.html>

¹⁰⁹ "The Conflicts," International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, last modified December 31, 2017,

<https://www.icty.org/en/about/what-former-yugoslavia/conflicts>

¹¹⁰ Peter Andreas, "Criminalizing consequences of sanctions: Embargo busting and its legacy," *International Studies Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (2005): 351.

the prices for those weapons.¹¹¹ In such a situation, there were even multiple instances of Yugoslav soldiers willingly surrendering their equipment to the Croatian forces, or even weapons being smuggled all the way from the USA.¹¹² Due to these circumstances, Croatia lacked the tools to protect itself from the Serb/Yugoslav Army, and thus, a significant portion of its territory was controlled and damaged by the Serbian army before the first ceasefire came into effect.

3.3.3. Conclusion: How did the USA react to the wars?

In this part of the thesis, the inconsistency of the US involvement was made clear. Even though the contexts and situations were strikingly similar, the US involvement was more than contrasting. In the case of Ukraine, the USA took the situation very seriously and provided Ukraine with the necessary military equipment, humanitarian aid, and financial help. This effort is reflected in the rankings of how much each country allocated in support of Ukraine, where the USA clearly ranks first. Besides that, the USA also imposed sanctions on Russia, which they clearly perceived as the aggressor. The sanctions mainly targeted Russia's commodity export industry, but only to the extent that the sanctions would not harm the USA back. In Croatia's case, the USA took a far less reluctant stance on the war. It was interested in maintaining Yugoslavia intact as it was preoccupied with different conflicts and potentially future ones. For that reason, even though it left much of the negotiating to the UN, the USA still supported any ceasefire or embargo proposals, which would make Croatia less capable of successfully gaining independence from a Yugoslavia that was not supposed to break apart. This goes to show that while on the one side, the USA supported Ukraine significantly, on the other side, it deliberately made Croatia's efforts for independence harder.

3.4. Application of Mearsheimer's Offensive Realism Theory

So far, this thesis has pointed out that the wars were similar in both reasoning and severity. Furthermore, the USA acknowledged the wars posing a humanitarian crisis and a risk of cultural genocide and ethnic cleansing and hence expressed their support for the defending countries of Ukraine and Croatia. However, as mentioned above, the USA yet only heavily intervened in one of the conflicts, in Ukraine. This thesis believes that the answer lies in Mearsheimer's theory of Offensive Realism.

¹¹¹ Andreas, "Criminalizing Consequences of Sanctions: Embargo Busting and Its Legacy," 352.

¹¹² "Chronology for Serbs in Croatia," UNHCR, last modified May 21, 2023, <https://webarchive.archive.unhcr.org/20230521125701/https://www.refworld.org/docid/469f387dc.html>

3.4.1. Application of Toft's five pre-assumptions of Offensive Realism

Before starting with the application of the theory, this thesis will first further showcase that both case studies fit into Toft's five pre-assumptions of Offensive Realism. In this section, it will be proven that Offensive Realism is applicable both in the case of the Russo-Ukrainian and Serbo-Croatian Wars and explain why they fit into them.

The first pre-assumption argues that states live in political anarchy. Yugoslavia in the 1990s was part of the so-called 'post-Cold War uncertainty'. This meant that after the fall of the USSR and the USA becoming the only hegemon in this new unipolar world, most of Eastern Europe did not have a regional hegemon that would dominate in the economic, political, and military field. This made the Balkan region independent from foreign influence.¹¹³ When it comes to Ukraine, even though since 2014 it has generally been considered an ally of the USA and the West, it has also made significant steps away from Russia.¹¹⁴ Nonetheless, neither the USA, NATO, or the EU could guarantee Ukraine's security with direct military involvement. This means that no self-proclaimed 'rule enforcers' were present in Croatia or Ukraine, which could guarantee their survival. This made the wars play out in an anarchical setting.

The second pre-assumption states that states can never be sure of each other's actions or plans. As mentioned in the historiography, the Serbo-Croatian War was started based on a lack of communication, in which the Serbian side feared a second Serbian genocide if Croatia left the federation with the sizeable Serb minority living on Croatian territory.¹¹⁵ This made Serbia's invasion a so-called 'preventive' war, which Mearsheimer argues is typical in a setting in which countries cannot be sure of each other's actions and act rationally out of paranoia. The Russo-Ukrainian War can be similar in a similar manner. After the Maidan Revolution and a pro-Western change of government in Ukraine, the communication between the two countries worsened significantly, making their relationship increasingly complicated. Russia then out of fear of losing its regional influence, invaded Ukraine in a reckless manner.¹¹⁶

The third pre-assumption states that survival is the main motivation behind the actions of all states. As once again mentioned in the historiography, Croatia and Ukraine are both strategically very important to respectively Serbia and Russia. Croatia had most of Yugoslavia's sea access as well as a sizeable Serb population.¹¹⁷ Keeping Croatia would therefore increase

¹¹³ Pauković, "Western Newspapers and the War in Croatia," 171.

¹¹⁴ Shevsky, "Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine," 858.

¹¹⁵ Mirković, "The historical link between the Ustasha genocide and the Croato-Serb Civil War: 1991-1995," 363.

¹¹⁶ Shevsky, "Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine," 858.

¹¹⁷ van Vujačić, "The United States in the Western Balkans: Reluctant, Late and Distant Involvement vs. Quick Radical Fix," *Integrating the Western Balkans into the EU*, 7 (2023): 149.

Serbia's likelihood of survival. Ukraine is also very strategically important to Russia due to its location in which it acts as a buffer state between Russia and the West. Having Ukraine under their sphere of influence would therefore increase Russia's likelihood of survival against the West.¹¹⁸

The fourth pre-assumption states that states act out of their own interest. In the Croatian case, both Serbia and Croatia acted out of their own interest; Croatia by deciding to leave Yugoslavia, in which it lacked political power, and Serbia by trying to maintain its sphere of influence by trying to prevent Croatia from leaving it.¹¹⁹ The Russo-Ukrainian case is rather similar. Ukraine distanced itself from Russia with the Maidan revolution, while Russia acted out of its own interest to maintain Ukraine under its control and keep it as a pro-Russian buffer state between them and the West.

The fifth and last pre-assumption states that the military is the only thing that can protect a country and its survival, unlike other foreign factors. That is why the theory states that states take their military very seriously. This is also noticeable in all four countries involved in the case studies. While Serbia's and Croatia's military spending ranged from 5% to 12% in the early 1990s,¹²⁰¹²¹ Russia's and Ukraine's reached 4,7% and 25,9% according to MacroTrends.¹²²¹²³ This shows an above-average military spending for European countries, clearly demonstrating how important the military was in a hostile environment where the military was the only thing that could guarantee security and increase the chance of survival.¹²⁴

The two case studies clearly fit into Toft's five pre-assumptions of Offensive Realism. Explaining why the USA reacted to them the way it did using the Offensive Realism Theory is therefore feasible and applicable. This thesis will therefore now proceed with an analysis of US interventionism in Ukraine and Croatia.

¹¹⁸ Amanda Paul, "Crimea one year after Russian annexation," *European Policy Centre*, no. 24 (2015): 1.

¹¹⁹ Jerčić, "Political Circumstances and Security Situation in Western Slavonia on the Eve of the Greater-Serbian Aggression in 1991," 379.

¹²⁰ "Serbia Military Spending/Defense Budget (1992-2023)," MacroTrends, last modified 2025, <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/srb/serbia/military-spending-defense-budget>

¹²¹ "Croatia Military Spending/Defense Budget (1992-2023)," MacroTrends, last modified 2025, <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/hrv/croatia/military-spending-defense-budget>

¹²² "Russia Military Spending/Defense Budget (1987-2023)," MacroTrends, last modified 2025, <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/rus/russia/military-spending-defense-budget>

¹²³ "Ukraine Military Spending/Defense Budget (1992-2023)," MacroTrends, last modified 2025, <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/ukr/ukraine/military-spending-defense-budget>

¹²⁴ Toft, "John J. Mearsheimer: an offensive realist between geopolitics and power," 383.

3.4.2. What explains the USA's reaction to the Russo-Ukrainian War?

One of the arguments of Mearsheimer's Theory of Offensive Realism is that states are willing to turn offensive when they see an opportunity to gain power, weaken their rival, or overall improve their position in the world. They do so in order to prevent a nation from becoming a regional hegemon. Furthermore, states are said to strive to become a regional hegemon in order to guarantee their survival.¹²⁵ This situation accurately depicts the USA's stance on Russia and Ukraine. In the sphere of Eastern Europe, Russia is the only country with nuclear weapons, a population of over 50 million, the strongest army, and the largest economy. However, after the collapse of the USSR, much of that Russian potential remained within Russia's borders, especially after 2014, when Ukraine made significant steps towards European integration and Russia therefore directly bordered the 'Western' sphere of influence, as described by Shevsky.¹²⁶ As mentioned in the historiography, the Russo-Ukrainian War can be explained as an effort of Russia to regain the influence it once had over Eastern Europe. This effort directly clashed with the interests of the USA, which, according to the theory, would benefit from a balance of power in the region. That is because a state that secures its neighbors and has them under its dominance is then more likely to project its power globally, as it would not have to worry about threats coming from neighbors. Russia would therefore have access to new economic opportunities, markets, and would not have to focus on the potential threats coming from the West, as it would have a pro-Russian Ukraine as a buffer. In general, it would have access to Western Europe as well as a larger presence in the Black Sea, where the USA already has its sphere of influence.¹²⁷ Hence, maintaining Ukraine as a buffer state between the West and the East is very important to the unity of the USA's sphere of influence in Western Europe. Therefore, with Russia trying to become the regional hegemon by invading the strategically important Ukraine, and the USA trying to prevent Russia from becoming a hegemon in Eastern Europe, the USA protected its interests by providing Ukraine with the necessary supplies. This point about containing Russia was also made by Putin himself, in February 2022, while talking at a press conference with Viktor Orban, when he stated that

The United States is not that concerned about Ukraine's security. Its main goal is to contain Russia's development. This is the whole point. In this sense, Ukraine is simply a tool to reach this goal.¹²⁸

¹²⁵ Mearsheimer, "Reckless States and Realism," 250.

¹²⁶ Shevsky, "Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine," 860.

¹²⁷ Kappler, "Ukraine and Russia: Legacies of the imperial past and competing memories," 111.

¹²⁸ Roberts, "Now or Never: The Immediate Origins of Putin's Preventative War on Ukraine," 16.

This once again goes to show how important it was to the USA for Ukraine to stay independent. Putin is aware of the importance of Ukraine to the USA, hence he is trying to maintain it under his dominance.

Another key argument of Mearsheimer's theory is that states prioritize their survival, which is said to be the most important goal of a state. In this sense, Ukraine was very important to the USA and its presence in Europe. The USA greatly benefits from its European allies as they embody a rival to the Russian hegemony in Europe. They furthermore collaborate in both economic, security military terms, and in general, help maintain their shared ideology, which does not align with that of Russia as per Shapiro and Witney.¹²⁹ Hence, the prosperity and thus resilience of European countries matter profoundly to the USA's presence in Europe and thus the USA's survival. That is because a stronger Russia means a stronger enemy for the USA and a potential threat to its allies. Furthermore, since being stronger than your rival guarantees your survival according to the theory, the USA had every reason to intervene in Ukraine and keep Russia's military and economic power within its borders.¹³⁰ This setting is also represented by ex-Secretary of Defense of the USA, Lloyd Austin, who in December 2023 agreed that

Ukraine matters profoundly to America's security, and to the trajectory of global security in the 21st century [...] That's why the United States has committed more than \$44 billion in security assistance to Ukraine's brave defenders.¹³¹

Additionally, even though Ukraine was highly important to the USA's and its European allies' security, the cost of involvement was relatively low, which creates a perfect setting for involvement in the offensive realist mind. The USA and Europe were able to provide sufficient material for Ukraine to defend itself from complete defeat, without ever sending their own military personnel into Ukraine. Furthermore, even though the 114 billion Euros that the USA allocated in support for Ukraine, as per the Kiel Institute, were significantly helpful, it still only translates to 0,53% of the USA's GDP, which is a relatively low cost considering the importance of the Ukrainian War. In fact, no country allocated more than 2,4% of its GDP.¹³² Mearsheimer's theory additionally states that a state will not get itself involved in a conflict,

¹²⁹ Jeremy Shapiro and Nick Witney, "Towards a Post-American Europe: A Power Audit of EU-US Relations," European Council on Foreign Relations (2009): 55-56.

¹³⁰ Mearsheimer. "Reckless States and Realism," 242.

¹³¹ "Biden pledges U.S. Will not walk away from Ukraine," U.S. Department of Defense, last modified December 12, 2023,

<https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3615637/biden-pledges-us-will-not-walk-away-from-ukraine/>

¹³² "Ukraine Support Tracker," Kiel Institute for the World Economy, last modified April 15, 2025, <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/>

which would pose a threat back to the state that involves itself in it.¹³³ In this case, even though the USA is strongly involved in the Ukrainian War and generally is a big actor in it, whose decisions could decide the outcome, Russia does not have many possibilities to counter this. The USA's geographical location places it at a safe distance from Russia, and the threat of even bigger US involvement in Ukraine deters Russia from threatening or harming the USA.¹³⁴ Furthermore, the USA was not fighting any significant wars involving its military personnel at the time of the Russo-Ukrainian War. Not at least one, which would require significant attention and funding to the point where the USA could not involve itself in two wars, including that in Ukraine. This meant that the strong US support for Ukraine would not harm any war efforts elsewhere, which could threaten US soldiers and their mission. Therefore, in such a setting, the USA's full focus was on Ukraine.¹³⁵ However, this point, which Mearsheimer describes, in which a state will not involve itself strongly in a conflict if it means to be harmed back, can be seen when it comes to the USA's and EU's approach to sanctioning Russia. As mentioned in Itskhoki's and Ribakova's article, the USA and EU only imposed those sanctions, which would not put a toll on their economies.¹³⁶ That is because Russia's exporting economy, especially in the energy industry, was heavily integrated into the EU and US economies. Meaning that sanctioning it fully could result in a wider economic crisis in Europe and the USA.¹³⁷ Itskhoki and Ribakova, therefore, argue that the West's unwillingness to fully sanction Russia's export industry likely aided Russia in its war effort.¹³⁸

This setting, therefore, meant a high-potential, yet low-risk war. Meaning that the USA greatly benefits from Ukraine's success, while it does not have to put up with many risks or side effects of the war. However, no matter the importance of Ukraine's sovereignty, the West was still reluctant to complicate Russia's war effort if it negatively affected their economies.

3.4.3. What explains the USA's reaction to the Serbo-Croatian War?

First of all, Mearsheimer's Theory argues that one of the explanations as to why states sometimes do not react appropriately to a conflict or humanitarian crisis is that states sometimes miscalculate the effect or severity of the war. Those judgments are said to be made based on

¹³³ Mearsheimer. "Reckless States and Realism," 243.

¹³⁴ Matthew R. Costlow, "Geography and the future missions of U.S. homeland missile defense." *Comparative Strategy* 40, no. 2 (2021): 159.

¹³⁵ N.V. Stepanova, "Military Assistance to Ukraine from the Perspective of US National Interests," *Herald of the Russian Academy of Sciences* 92, no. 15 (2022): 1482.

¹³⁶ Itskhoki and Ribakova, "The Economics of Sanctions," 27.

¹³⁷ Itskhoki and Ribakova, "The Economics of Sanctions," 15.

¹³⁸ Itskhoki and Ribakova, "The Economics of Sanctions," 3.

wrong information that a state has about a conflict.¹³⁹ This point of the Offensive Realism Theory can be connected to the USA's initial belief that Yugoslavia could remain intact. The USA's and the UN's reluctant reaction was mostly to blame on their desire to make the war die down using ceasefires or blocking Croatia's access to necessary weapons.¹⁴⁰ However, the information that the war in the Balkans would be avoidable was inaccurate. The political situation in Yugoslavia, with nationalism on the rise and Croatia electing a pro-independence president, was very tense as the Federation collapsed.¹⁴¹ With the lack of dialogue and growing ethnic tensions, the war first started in Slovenia, from where the independence movements spread across the nation, and the prevention of Yugoslavia's breakup was close to impossible.¹⁴² However, as the Yugoslav conflict erupted into a full-scale war in Croatia, the USA and the UN still did not take significant action to put a stop to the humanitarian crisis in Croatia; on the contrary, the UN arms embargo was still kept.¹⁴³ As mentioned in the sub-chapter about how the USA perceived the wars, Clinton was very much aware of the humanitarian crisis in Croatia and even called it 'ethnic cleansing'. This means that Mearsheimer's argument about states misjudging a conflict is no longer applicable, as Clinton was very much aware of the severity of the war. Still, neither the USA nor the UN did not change their stance toward the war in Croatia, which can be explained using another point of Mearsheimer's theory. A state's uncertainty can even apply to its own actions. It can never be sure how its soldiers would perform somewhere, what their impact would be, or if it is too dangerous for direct involvement.¹⁴⁴ This reluctance resulted in a late reaction to the conflict, which could have been quicker can be explained in the USA's desire to maintain Yugoslavia, which the European community disagreed with, and the fact that the USA could have not been certain, if the deployment of US troops would have been safe for them.¹⁴⁵ Since, after all, the USA would not send their soldiers somewhere to potentially take heavy casualties for 'little' reward.

Speaking of 'little' reward, to further explain why the USA was so reluctant to get involved in Yugoslavia, another point of Mearsheimer's theory can be used. According to Kirschner, another offensive realist, states might even intervene in conflicts that are not important to their survival. Since great powers have the luxury to have their survival secured,

¹³⁹ Mearsheimer, "Reckless States and Realism," 244.

¹⁴⁰ Pauković and Roško, "Western Newspapers and the War in Croatia," 171.

¹⁴¹ Jerčić, "Political Circumstances and Security Situation in Western Slavonia on the Eve of the Greater-Serbian Aggression in 1991," 379.

¹⁴² Vujačić, "The United States in the Western Balkans: Reluctant, Late and Distant Involvement vs. Quick Radical Fix," 145.

¹⁴³ Andreas, "Criminalizing consequences of sanctions: Embargo busting and its legacy," 351.

¹⁴⁴ Mearsheimer, "Reckless States and Realism," 244.

¹⁴⁵ Malá, "International Intervention in Croatia during the Yugoslav Wars," 1.

such as the USA, which is geographically far away from any threat, they tend to seek more, such as status, deference, or the ability to influence happening worldwide. However, in order for a state to get itself involved in a conflict abroad, which is irrelevant to its survival or power position in the world, the conflict cannot pose a threat back to the state, the USA, in this case, or should at least have a symbolic importance.¹⁴⁶ When connecting this point to the case of Croatia, the USA should have had a different reason not to intervene in it, which would make the Serbo-Croatian War a risky one to intervene in. Pauković and Roško, America's military presence in Iraq during the Gulf War played a significant role in the years when the ethnic tensions between Yugoslavian nations were growing between 1990 and 1991. The USA and the world were preoccupied with the Gulf War instead, which many Western countries committed to with the deployment of their own personnel. A commitment to the Serbo-Croatian War would therefore likely require a split of military efforts, which could directly harm the soldiers stationed in Iraq. Another factor that likely prevented the USA from intervening in Croatia is the fact that the Serbo-Croatian War played out in the context of a post-Cold War uncertainty. Much of the Western community feared that a violent breakup of Yugoslavia could serve as an example to the USSR, which could result in nuclear weapons ending up in the wrong hands. This reflects the fact that the US wished for Yugoslavia to remain united, and hence, the US politicians saw Serb president Milošević as someone who could keep the federation united.¹⁴⁷

Besides miscalculating the situation at the start of the war, and not intervening because the attention was elsewhere, the Serbo-Croatian War also lacked relevance in general for the USA, which made the war a high-risk and low-reward intervention. The reason for the irrelevance of the Serbo-Croatian War to the USA can be explained in multiple ways. First of all, the strategic importance of Yugoslavia was declining as the end of the Cold War was approaching. The federation's neutrality and strategic position between the West and the East made it particularly important to both sides, which resulted in frequent competition for the control over Yugoslavia. The USA's attitude towards Yugoslavia changed during the times when the result of the Cold War was increasingly looking in favor of the West. The US ambassador to Yugoslavia, Warren Zimmermann, made this very clear when delivering a message in 1989, stating that "Yugoslavia no longer enjoyed the geopolitical importance that the US had given it during the Cold War." In this sense, the importance of Yugoslavia sank

¹⁴⁶ Jonathan Kirschner, "Offensive Realism, Thucydides Traps, and the Tragedy of Unforced Errors: Classical Realism and US-China Relations," *China International Strategy Review* 1 (2019): 60.

¹⁴⁷ Pauković and Roško, "Western Newspapers and the War in Croatia," 171.

with the threat of the Soviet Union. This attitude also contributed to the breakup of Yugoslavia as the country's relations with both the West and the East plummeted.¹⁴⁸ A second point that explains the irrelevance of the conflict to the USA is the geopolitical strength of Serbia, which was significantly lower than that of Russia in the context of the 2020s. As already mentioned in the previous chapter, a state will get itself involved in a conflict if that war poses an opportunity to weaken its rival, which would thus lead to an improvement of the state's position in geopolitics. Therefore, it is in favor of a world-dominant state, such as the USA in this case, to prevent regional hegemony from arising, which Russia was actively trying to pursue.¹⁴⁹

On the other hand, even though it is included in the concept of Greater Serbia, 1990s Serbia did not have the capacity to become the sole hegemon in the Balkan region, since, besides the breakaway Republic of Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary were still significant forces that could compete with the potential spread of Serbia's influence.¹⁵⁰ Even if it did, the USA did not have a strong presence in the Balkans or Eastern Europe in the setting of the early 1990s to begin with, meaning that Serbia would not be able to threaten the USA directly or indirectly. To conclude, this goes to show how Russia was a much bigger threat to the USA and its European allies than Serbia. Unlike Russia, Serbia did not need to be contained as it was not perceived as dangerous to the USA. The US involvement in Serbia during the last year of the war was only conducted as a symbolic measure, which realist states or politicians occasionally conduct to gain popularity both domestically and abroad.¹⁵¹

3.5. Irrelevance of 'humanitarian concerns' and 'democracy' in the US interventionism

As was mentioned in the introduction, Choi and James categorize US interventionism into categories of democracy and humanitarian reasoning.¹⁵² The two wars shared two similarities, which Choi and James argue make the USA more likely to intervene in a conflict. Both Ukraine and Croatia made westward steps favoring democracy and sovereignty, while suffering a similar number of casualties per capita. This and the fact that the USA has reacted so differently to both wars prove that there must have been an underlying reason that influences the US decision-making on where to intervene and where not.

¹⁴⁸ Vujačić, "The United States in the Western Balkans: Reluctant, Late and Distant Involvement vs. Quick Radical Fix," 145.

¹⁴⁹ Mearsheimer, "Reckless States and Realism," 243.

¹⁵⁰ Guzina, "Socialist Serbia's Narratives: From Yugoslavia to a Greater Serbia," 109.

¹⁵¹ Mearsheimer, "Reckless States and Realism," 245.

¹⁵² Choi and James, "Why does the United States intervene abroad? Democracy, human rights violations, and terrorism," 901.

Even though the theory of offensive realism argues that states will not intervene in a conflict abroad if it is not strategically important to them, Kirschner does state that a state might intervene in a conflict for a more symbolic reason in order to gain approval or popularity both from their own country's citizens and the international community. However, that is only the case if the war is not dangerous to intervene in and will not harm the USA, in this case.¹⁵³ This goes to show that even to realist states and leaders, the way an intervention is justified is important as to how its citizens view the intervention. This results in realist states oftentimes glorifying their interventions abroad by justifying them with arguments such as 'spreading democracy' or 'solving a humanitarian crisis'.

For instance, since the start of the Russo-Ukrainian War, Biden has been very outspoken about his reasoning for the amount of support allocated by the USA. In 2024, he mentioned points suggesting that the USA supports Ukraine for the reason that they are a democratic country defending itself against an authoritarian one.

For nearly three years, the United States has rallied the world to stand with the people of Ukraine as they defend their freedom from Russian aggression, and it has been a top priority of my Administration to provide Ukraine with the support it needs to prevail.¹⁵⁴ Besides justifying his support for Ukraine with the fact that Ukraine is democratic and therefore represents Western values more than Russia, Biden also argued that he intervened in Ukraine for humanitarian reasons. Following the civilian massacre in Bucha, Biden stated that "We have to continue to provide Ukraine with the weapons they need to continue the fight".¹⁵⁵ Biden has therefore communicated the US involvement in Ukraine using exactly the points Choi and James categorized US involvements into: 'spread of democracy', 'humanitarian concerns', and 'anti-terrorism'. However, since the USA actively tried to prevent Croatia from taking that same path towards European integration and democracy, while it was suffering a similar humanitarian crisis, it becomes apparent that there is an underlying reason which motivates US interventionism, one which was explained using the offensive realism theory.

Lastly, even though throughout the course of those two wars, four presidents have exchanged office, each with different opinions and stances on the wars they were concerned

¹⁵³ Kirschner, "Offensive Realism, Thucydides Traps, and the Tragedy of Unforced Errors: Classical Realism and US-China Relations," 60.

¹⁵⁴ Joe Biden, "Statement from President Joe Biden on U.S. Support for Ukraine," White House Archives, December 14, 2023, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/09/26/statement-from-president-joe-biden-on-u-s-support-for-ukraine/>

¹⁵⁵ Joe Biden, "Biden on Bucha massacre: 'It is a war crime'," Politico, April 4, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/04/04/biden-bucha-massacre-war-crime-00022690>

with, as of April 2025, no major shifts in their relations to the countries at war have occurred. As mentioned in the introduction, that is because it is the self-interested nature of states that is central to their foreign policy, not the personal stances of politicians.¹⁵⁶ For instance, even though Clinton advocated for a stronger US presence worldwide and more ‘humanitarian’ and ‘democratic’ interventionism, Biden was still far more open to supporting Ukraine than Clinton was to supporting Croatia.¹⁵⁷ Therefore, the way US policy operates cannot be explained by politicians’ different political beliefs or stances on interventionism. Instead, it can be explained by the self-interested nature of states, which will only help out another country at war if there is strategic value to it.

¹⁵⁶ Mearsheimer, “Reckless States and Realism,” 242.

¹⁵⁷ Dobson, “The Dangers of US Interventionism,” 586.

Conclusion

Even though US interventionism is both a relevant and a highly studied topic, a comparative case study that aims to point out an inconsistency in it using similar cases is missing. Most scholars tend to focus their research on cases where the US foreign policy has reacted differently, which results in the comparison of vastly different cases, which are not effective at exposing an inconsistency. Therefore, since nobody has attempted to draw a connection between the cases used for their argument, this thesis fills that gap by comparing US interventionism in two very similar scenarios, the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War and the Serbo-Croatian War of 1991-1995.

The two wars shared similarities on multiple levels. Besides both being the result of smaller countries, like Ukraine and Croatia, seeking political independence from their respective old occupier in the USSR or Yugoslavia by making westward steps favoring democracy and European integration, the wars also shared the same reasoning.¹⁵⁸¹⁵⁹ Both Russia and Serbia based their reasoning for invasion around the fact that Ukraine and Croatia had a past of collaborating with Hitler during the Second World War, during which fascist movements sought an ethnically pure and independent Ukraine and Croatia, respectively, which resulted in the genocide of minorities such as Russians and Serbians.¹⁶⁰¹⁶¹ A further reasoning used was the combination of the fascist past and the fact that both Ukraine and Croatia had a sizeable Russian/Serbian minority, which were declared to need ‘protection’ from a supposed second genocide.¹⁶²¹⁶³ Lastly and perhaps most importantly, in both wars, the defending countries had a similar number of casualties in proportion to their populations and faced numerous instances of civilian massacres or other war crimes. This meant that both Ukraine and Croatia suffered a similar humanitarian crisis.

Furthermore, even though the US politicians were aware of the situation, their involvement in both was rather contrasting. In the case of Ukraine, the USA was the country that allocated the most money worth of military and humanitarian support, while also leading the way in sanctioning Russia’s export industry, thus hindering its war efforts.¹⁶⁴ In Croatia’s

¹⁵⁸ Sasse and Lackner, “War and identity: The case of the Donbas in Ukraine,” 139.

¹⁵⁹ Jerčić, “Political Circumstances and Security Situation in Western Slavonia on the Eve of the Greater-Serbian Aggression in 1991,” 379.

¹⁶⁰ Ferraro, “The Contradictions in Vladimir Putin’s ‘Just War’ against Ukraine: The Myths of NATO’s Containment, Minority Protection and Denazification,” 25.

¹⁶¹ Pavlaković, “Flirting with Fascism: The Ustaša legacy and Croatian politics in the 1990s,” 2.

¹⁶² Verbeeck, “The Return of History as Travesty: The Struggle against Fascism in the Russian-Ukrainian War,” 79.

¹⁶³ Guzina, “Socialist Serbia’s Narratives: From Yugoslavia to a Greater Serbia,” 109.

¹⁶⁴ Kiel Institute for the World Economy, “Ukraine Support Tracker.”

case, the USA actively tried to prevent Croatia from becoming independent, as they were more interested in maintaining Yugoslavia and thus supported a UN arms embargo on Yugoslavia, which certainly harmed Croatia's under-armed and unprofessional army.¹⁶⁵¹⁶⁶ This thesis aimed to answer the central question as to why the US involvement in both wars differed so drastically, even though the wars were so similar. The research findings came up with the following explanation: that the effort to become a democratic country and the extent to which a war is a humanitarian crisis are irrelevant to the decision-making of the US foreign policy on where to intervene and where not. If it were relevant, the USA would have supported both Ukraine and Croatia, which were suffering a humanitarian crisis during the war for more political independence and integration into the Western democratic world, not only verbally but also with the necessary materials.

In order to make sense of those research findings, this thesis explained this inconsistency using John Mearsheimer's Theory of Offensive Realism. The theory, which argues that states are willing to act offensively in the pursuit of their goals, explains the inconsistency in US interventionism by evaluating the wars based on their significance to the USA and its position in the world.¹⁶⁷ While the Russo-Ukrainian War did fulfil these criteria of importance, the Serbo-Croatian War did not. Ukraine served as a crucial buffer between Russia and Western Europe. According to the theory, it is in the interest of global hegemons, such as the United States, to prevent any regional hegemons from emerging, which could potentially threaten the role of the dominant country.¹⁶⁸ This made the Ukrainian War far more important than the Serbo-Croatian War, which was irrelevant to the US hegemony or position in the world. It was seen more as a regional conflict, in which Serbia did not pose a threat to becoming a regional hegemon in a region where the USA did not have much of a presence anyway.¹⁶⁹

Lastly, even though both wars shared multiple similarities in both reasoning and severity, the USA reacted to them contrastingly. This proves that 'humanitarian concerns' and 'democracy' are not central to the US decision-making on where to intervene and where not. Instead, after applying the theory of offensive realism to this case, it becomes apparent that states such as the USA will only intervene abroad if it directly benefits from it. Accordingly, the USA only provided Ukraine with the necessary materials to defend itself, while Croatia,

¹⁶⁵ Pauković and Roško, "Western Newspapers and the War in Croatia," 171.

¹⁶⁶ Andreas, "Criminalizing consequences of sanctions: Embargo busting and its legacy," 351.

¹⁶⁷ Toft, "John J. Mearsheimer: an offensive realist between geopolitics and power," 383.

¹⁶⁸ Labs, "Beyond victory: Offensive realism and the expansion of war aims," 3.

¹⁶⁹ Guzina, "Socialist Serbia's Narratives: From Yugoslavia to a Greater Serbia," 109. Guzina, "Socialist Serbia's Narratives: From Yugoslavia to a Greater Serbia," 109.

which was in a similar situation, was left on its own. Even though high-ranking US politicians can use justifications such as spreading democracy or helping out people in humanitarian crises, it does not necessarily have to be central to the intervention. The USA has a long history of interventionism, which oftentimes seems inconsistent, and even though US presidents change, the inconsistency of US interventionism is expected to persist as long as states continue to act by their self-interest.

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