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The forgotten faith of locally recruited conflict zone interpreters. a case study of interpreters in the wars in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia in the 1990s.

Abstract

Although present on the battlefield since Roman times, interpreters and translators working in conflict zones have rarely been considered by scholars and practitioners, at least until the death toll among interpreters in Iraq and Afghanistan staggered in the years 2000s. This situation prompted a reflection on this “less glamorous” form of interpreting along with their roles, practice and dangerous position. Scholars, professional organisations and veterans’ associations have since been fighting for interpreters’ protection, social security and relocation in the short-term, but little attention has been paid to interpreters’ position in the long term, to understand how and whether their perception and status change when cannonballs have long stopped firing. To answer this question, this paper considers the experience of locally recruited interpreters who worked for peacekeeping and military missions to Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia in the 1990s. After presenting the context of their deployment, we will discuss the status former conflict zone interpreters have in nowadays Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the possible reasons behind it, to point out useful lessons that can predict interpreters’ positioning in post-war countries as well as improve their long-term management in the future.

Keywords: *Interpreters, Translators, Conflict zones*

Introduction

Traditionally conceived as the failure of dialogue and diplomacy, wars have emerged, in the last twenty years, as contact zones (RUZICH, 2021: 75), where language exchanges are essential. Despite their importance, the role of civilian and military language agents, be they translators, interpreters, multilingual officers, or language assistants, has only started to be considered in translation and war studies in the 2000s (KELLY ET AL., 2019; SUMMERFIELD, 2014;) when local interpreters in Afghanistan and Iraq in the 2000s became “the largest group of civilian victims of the conflict” (KAHANE, 2007; KELLET, 1999). The last twenty years have seen a surge in academic output on the topic approached from different angles including the humanitarian (BARTOLINI, 2010; DELGADO LUCHNER-KHERBICHE, 2018; FITCHETT, 2014), military (CAPPELLI, 2011; FOOTITT-KELLY, 2013; SNELLMAN, 2014), theoretical (M. BAKER, 2005, 2006, 2010; FOOTITT-KELLY, 2014), or pedagogical one (ALBAAKA, 2020; TODOROVA- RUIZ ROSENDO, 2022) and efforts have been parallelly made to trace back the role and presence of interpreters in wars over the centuries (BAIGORRI-JALÓN, 2011, 2019; GÓMEZ AMICH, 2018; MORENO BELLO, 2014; PERSAUD, 2016; RUIZ ROSENDO-PERSAUD, 2016; TAKEDA 2016; TODOROVA, 2016; WOLF 2019). While professional organisations, institutions (COUNCIL OF EUROPE, 2010; EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, 2018) and veterans’ associations have campaigned for interpreters’ rights – namely protection, social security and relocation – little attention has been paid to the status enjoyed by former war zone interpreters in post-war societies on the long term.

This paper analyses the current position of interpreters recruited during the war in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina in the 1990s, whose contribution seems to have been “erased” from post-war discourse and representation. We will try here to analyse the reason(s) behind this situation by

considering four possible variables, namely, interpreters' "involvement" in peacekeeping/military missions, interpreters' position in wartime society, traditional representations of interpreters, and nationality and language, although more factors could be at play here. The findings are part of a wider PhD project, carried out between 2019 and 2021, investigating the role, position, and practice of interpreters during the war in the former-Yugoslavia.

Methods

The research project from which data used for this papers stem used archive material (official archival documents, newspapers articles, trials reports, videos and audio files) and semi-structured interviews with former military personnel (15 respondents) and interpreters (12 respondents). Interviews were held online due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and despite the cons of online qualitative interviewing - like troubles in establishing a relationship, lack of disclosure and paralinguistic clues (C. BAKER, 2012C) - the online tool gave us the chance to access interviewees from far-away countries and did not seem to affect disclosure, even of highly emotional issues. While being aware of the methodological limitations of interviews, especially if carried out several years after the events investigated took place (C. BAKER, 2019: 160), we believe that, although affected by the passing of time and by the interviewees' conscious and/or subconscious narratives, interviews provided a valuable tool to gain information about individual, collective and cultural experiences and that time distance allowed interviewees to talk freely about it without the limitations and influences of the narratives that were dominant at the time (C. BAKER, 2019). Moreover, since military matters are usually covered by confidentiality and war archives are often classified for 30 or 50 years after a war has ended or until its protagonists are alive (FOOTITT, 2019), interviews are sometimes the only way for scholars in this field to gather relevant data and access information.

Background

When the conflict broke out in the Former-Yugoslavia, the international community adopted an inconsistent and patchy approach to recognition and resolution of the conflict, although trying to provide humanitarian and cease-fire support (Gow, 1997). Two missions were deployed to the area: the European Community Monitor Mission (ECMM), established in Slovenia in September 1991 to be later extended to Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR)¹, active in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina until 1995, when it was replaced, after the Dayton Agreement, by NATO-led IFOR (1995-1996) and SFOR (1996-2004), and later by EU EUFOR (2004), which is still active today. In a matter of months, a huge number of troops, NGOs, humanitarian and international organisations, and foreign journalists flooded Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia, soon realising that they would not be able to function without the help of language intermediaries (DRAGOVIC-DROUET, 2007). The former-Yugoslavian interpreting market was already up to international standards (BERNARDI, 2023) but limited in size and heteronomous recruitment proved immediately difficult (CRONIN, 2002: 393): thousands of interpreters had therefore to be recruited among teachers, doctors, engineers and students (BAKER, C. 2010A: 165), sometimes only equipped with a grasp of English and no prior interpreting experience (DRAGOVIC-DROUET, 2007). Recruitment practices varied greatly and no training was provided at employment until a centralised language unit was introduced by SFOR in 2000 (ASKEW, 2011). ECMM interpreters were all volunteers and started to be paid only when Germany took over the EC presidency in 1994, while the UN hired and paid interpreters as "language assistants", although working conditions varied, despite the existence of a somewhat centralised recruitment system (BERNARDI, 2023).

¹ The UN also continued to be present after 1995 with UNMIBH, UNTAES, UNIPTF, UNPSG and investigators of the ICTY.

Nevertheless, locally recruited interpreters did not have social security, healthcare or pension schemes, and the provision of protection equipment generally depended on their commander's common sense (IVI: 316). Interpreters operated on the front line, with the increased risk, as local citizens, of being arrested by the warring parties (SPAHIĆ-ŠAGOLJ, NO DATE), killed or injured (C. BAKER, 2010A; FOOTITT - KELLY, 2013: 185). They performed a variety of tasks and had no clear job description: they mediated among local and international commanders and assisted UN agencies in their encounters with the local population, gathered victims' accounts, organised safe passage at checkpoints, assisted observers in accidents evaluation and medical evacuation, they were present at body count and passenger exchange, coordinated aid and sometimes performed community interpreting tasks (THOMAS, 1995, 1997).

1. Status of interpreters in post-Yugoslavian societies: "public erasure"

Despite the widespread use of locally recruited interpreters in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia, in almost 30 years, research on their role and position has only been carried out – to the author's knowledge – by foreign scholars, or local scholars living abroad, such as British scholar Catherine Baker (2010A, 2010B, 2011, 2014), former EC interpreter Zrinka Stahuljak (1999, 2007, 2009) and Serbian professor Mila Dragović-Drouet (2007).

What emerges, especially from Baker's research, also confirmed by the data this paper is based on, is that former interpreters are generally absent today from popular and traditional representation of the conflict and have been denied any type of recognition of their work both from their country and their former employers (C. BAKER, 2014: 99).

From an institutional point of view, although the discussion on veterans' management and role have taken centre stage in the two countries in the last twenty years, both in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina interpreters have never been considered for veteran status (*branitelj/branilac*) – which goes with public recognition and financial support – despite the risks undertaken and their permanence on the front line (BAKER C., 2010B; BERNARDI, 2023; FOOTITT - KELLY, 2013), nor will ever have any chance to it, judging from a general reading of the Croatian and Bosnian laws on veteran status and subsequent amendments (REPUBLIKA BOSNE I HERCEGOVINE, 2004; REPUBLIKA HRVATSKA, 2017).

From a more cultural and sociological point of view, interpreters were never given any public recognition of any sort, except for some 30 Croatian interpreters who received the Croatian Homeland War Memorial medal in 2002 (PREDSJEDNIK REPUBLIKE HRVATSKE, 2002). Even here, it should be noted that their names appear on the list of recipients without specific mention of their role – unlike all the other categories of medal recipients – and one can figure out they were interpreters only by knowing them personally, with no mention of the awarding ceremony or the medals found by the author in any newspaper of the time.

This lack of recognition was raised by several of the Croatian ECMM interpreters interviewed: "Many of my colleagues have like a wound that we are forgotten" (INTERPRETER 02, 2020), a feeling reinforced by the fact that, according to Interpreter 2, they were all unpaid volunteers until 1994; "these people I worked with really worked for the noblest motives, they did their best, they went into dangerous situations, they were students who could party and instead of going to clubs they went on the field, working day and night, really people did their best emotionally, physically and intellectually and they didn't expect a reward then, none of us expected a reward then, but we do have a sort of bitter feeling in the mouth like that was nothing" (IBID.).

Finally, interpreters, unlike veterans and refugees, are equally absent from popular representations of the conflict and from post-Yugoslavian fiction, cinema or political debate (BAKER, C., 2014: 93) except for the recent movie *Quo Vadis Aida* by Jasmila Žbanić (2021), where the main character is a local female UN interpreter very freely inspired by the experience of Hasan Nuhanović, a UN interpreter in Srebrenica.

Conflict zone interpreters in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia have not just fallen into oblivion though, but they seem to have acquired, in post-Yugoslavian societies, a negative reputation. The few times they are mentioned, they are usually negatively connotated, voire reviled and criticised. For example, during the war, the Croatian Education Minister of the time publicly defined the patriotism of Croatian interpreters as "questionable" (STAHULJAK, 2009: 409) and interpreting scholar Dragović-Drouet (DRAGOVIC-DROUET, 2007) heavily criticised the professionalism of ECMM interpreters, putting forward an example of mistranslation broadcast by RTL-TV1 in the autumn of 1993, although this is historically and scientifically unverifiable as the author failed to provide a specific timeframe for verification, and the source of the example is a complot theory book (COLLON, 1998). Another example of mistranslation was provided in 2018 by a Croatian magazine (DNEVNO.HR, 2018), which published undisclosed footage claiming to prove that local UN interpreters had "*fige u džepu*" (Croatian for "ulterior motives"), that guided their translation behaviour².

In Bosnia-Herzegovina, interpreters seem to enjoy a similarly bad reputation, as emerges from the reading of internet comments under an article by RTV of Bosnia-Herzegovina (RTV BN, 2016), on the attempt of some 700 former BiH NATO and EUFOR employees to have their employer contributions paid (MULIĆ-SOFTIĆ, 2017). Comments are quite explicit (e.g. "They worked for years for enormous sums of money") or even angry (e.g. "Most of them worked in the interest of NATO and SFOR like spies, I wouldn't pay them a penny") (IBID.).

Such a bad perception can also be found throughout the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) trial procedures, where interpreters often took the brunt of criticism and their witnessing, especially of interpreters from the Republic of Serbian Krajina, was routinely discredited by defence lawyers claiming that "all interpreters working for the United Nations were in fact providing the Serbian side with intelligence" (ELIAS-BURSAĆ, 2015: 235).

2. Reasons for interpreters' erasure and bad reputation

The interviews held with interpreters and military officers, as well as the documents analysed confirm what the available literature has posited, i.e., interpreters and their contribution to their countries' independence have been erased from post-war societies. To understand why, the specific historical, political and sociological context in which interpreters operated was analysed, along with dominant perceptions about interpreters and translators in the general public and the armed forces. Four possible variables for interpreters' current status were put forward, namely interpreters' "involvement" in peacekeeping/military missions, interpreters' position in wartime society, traditional representations of interpreters, and nationality and language.

2.1 Interpreters' involvement in peacekeeping/military missions

One of the main variables behind interpreters' erasure and bad reputation may be their "involvement" with international military/peacekeeping missions as these were harshly criticised for having failed to stop the war and the suffering of the local population, coming to represent the failure of the international community to provide a consistent and effective response to the conflict (Gow, 1997). UNPROFOR's non-reaction, or slow reaction time (MATJAZ, N.D.) was considered by Croats and Bosnian Muslims as a *de facto* approval of Serb aggression (PIRJEVEC, 2014: 160) to the point that it was called SERBOFOR in Sarajevo (IBID.). On the other hand, Bosnian Serbs described attacks on their positions in 1994 and 1995 as a "persecution", an approach further reinforced in

² The said footage and other excerpts of interpreter-mediated interactions were analysed using Conversation Analysis (CA) and, although several interpreting and translation mistakes were reported, unneutral renditions seem to be due more to a lack of language control and interpreting skills rather than to political considerations.

public sentiment after the NATO bombing of Belgrade in 1999 (IBID.). ECMM was also accused of treason by Croats, for serving the interests of the European Union that was suspected of favouring the Serbs (KAHANE, 2007) and turning pink zones into Serb-held territory (KRSTICEVIC, 1998). Locals ironically nicknamed ECMM observers *sladoredari* (Croatian for "ice-cream men") (MIŠKULIN, 2010; MALARIĆ, 2016), who "only go out when it's sunny and there is no fighting" (MIŠKULIN, 2010).

Interpreters working for these missions were probably seen as an extension of their failures, without distinguishing between the individual's work for an association and the association itself. A proof of that is that all interpreters interviewed stated that they enjoyed initial support from their fellow nationals, who had hoped international presence could stop the war, but that they slowly became the target of local contempt as the situation deteriorated and the missions proved useless, voire detrimental. Given interpreters' visible presence within the mission, whispering in the commanders' ears, local citizens might have also expected them to influence the course of events, to advocate for their suffering, so that when the situation failed to change, the blame fell harder on the interpreters. Although no extreme violence episodes like those in Afghanistan and Iraq were recorded, interpreters recount having been outcasted by their own community and treated suspiciously: "[people were] like you're not really one of us anymore, you are working for them so we can't really tell you everything, you know, we have to be careful with you when we hang out with you" (INTERPRETER 05, 2020).

2.2 Interpreters' position in wartime society

Another variable that could explain the contempt and anger at interpreters, even today, might be the fact that interpreters had, despite the risks and lack of protection, at least in the eyes of their fellow citizens, a power position envied by many. The salary paid by international organisations was two or three times higher than that of any professional in wartime or post-war Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina: interpreters working for UNPROFOR were paid between 500 and 900 euros at the highest pay grades (C. BAKER, 2011: 27; BERNARDI, 2023), with salaries increasing with the arrival of SFOR in the late 1990s (C. BAKER, 2011). In a country where unemployment plummeted, to use the words of a former SFOR interpreter in Bosnia-Herzegovina, "interpreters earned the salary of three surgeons, two majors and four heads of the local district" (GATALO, 2004: 35). This is probably why interpreters were accused of not caring about the war situation or the suffering of their countrymen and women, as long as they made money (INTERPRETER 02, 2020).

When reminded that some interpreters did not earn a salary for months and that EC interpreters, for example, were unpaid volunteers until 1994, critics underline that interpreters were nevertheless in an advantaged economic position: they could be paid in hard currency, like food or cigarettes, had access to food products and essential goods that were impossible to find or too expensive on the black market thanks to their daily connection with foreign officers (NUHANović ET AL., 2019; SULJAGIĆ ET AL., 2010) and they were entitled to a meal a day in the military canteen. Such a position and connections allowed some interpreters to engage in black-market activities, commonly referred to as *ratno profiterstvo* (Croatian for "war profiteering"). Although none of the interviewed interpreters put themselves on record as profiteering from the war in that sense (C. BAKER, 2012A: 865), and no accounts were found by the author, the chance to potentially engage in parallel activities, probably equalled interpreters, in the eyes of their fellow citizens, to war profiteers and black-market criminals.

A further argument behind interpreters' bad reputation could be that local authorities sometimes tried to interfere with the missions' employment policies, especially between 1992 and 1995, as "foreign military bases represented competing sources of income for local residents that could harm [their] ability to exert patronage and influence" (IV: 859). Interference could range from pushing "their own relatives" (IBID.) into interpreting positions to having interpreters split their

salaries with them under threat of conscription or imprisonment (IBID.), thus contributing to portraying interpreters as recipients of age-old nepotism practices of privileged war and political elites.

A further factor to consider in this respect is one that has gender-related implications: interpreters' wages were uncommon enough in a war-raged country, let alone if earned by women, who represented most of the interpreting workforce. Although in Yugoslavia women had enjoyed some rights not yet granted in the West (like divorce or abortion), the country was still a male-dominant and sometimes rural society: when women interpreters became the bread-winners of their families and sometimes extended families gender and age relations within the family were reversed (C. BAKER, 2010B: 162), as their economic position gave women unprecedented decision-making power over their fathers, fathers-in-law, brothers and husbands and possibly undermined their traditional dominant role. Considering age-old prejudices towards working women, it can be easily inferred how these young women working with military men – who sometimes they ended up marrying or having affairs with – were easily placed on the negative side of the "saint-whore" complex, as testified by four out of the seven female interpreters interviewed. Interestingly, such a perception could also be extended to men, for different but somehow similar reasons: in the toxic masculinity approach promoted by nationalist parties on all sides before and during the war, male interpreters often attracted general scorn on gender grounds because they did not actively contribute to the war effort by taking up arms and fighting on the front lines, and for hiding as "cowards" in UN offices (BAKER, 2012A: 859; BERNARDI, 2023).

2.3 Traditional representations of interpreters

Another reason for interpreters' bad reputation is more connected to traditional representations of language intermediaries and can be found in the Italian motto, *traduttore traditore*, which epitomises ancient-old mistrust towards interpreters and "the idea that a translator can never remain entirely faithful to a source text or speech" (C. BAKER, 2010B: 166). Interpreters' representation has always alternated between faithfulness and unreliableness, sympathy and hatred, but this duality takes, in conflict zones, more dangerous connotations with interpreters accused of being either "native spies" by foreign employers or "treacherous collaborators" by their local community. Their difficult role is perfectly described by an interpreter who worked for SFOR in Bosnia-Herzegovina: "Some people would try to put us down telling us that "who do you work for? Are you working for us or you're working for them?" (INTERPRETER 05, 2020).

In war and post-war Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, interpreters seem to have, therefore, fallen on the negative side of this "victim-villain dimension" (M. BAKER, 2012), characterised by unreliableness and duplicitousness which can also be found in other conflicts in history, the most recent examples being Afghanistan and Iraq (M. BAKER, 2010; BOULET, 2003; GLIONNA - KHALIL, 2005; INGHILLERI, 2010; PALMER - FONTAN, 2007; TAKEDA, 2009: 59). This distorted perception is linked to the theoretical assumption that interpreters should be neutral and invisible conduits of information – also promoted, at least until the 1990s, by conference interpreting scholars and professionals (LAMBERT, 2018: 269) – where interpreters' agency, that is action or intervention within the interpreting act, can be perceived by end-users as treachery or the result of shady allegiances (M. BAKER, 2010).

Research in interpreting has nevertheless shown, in the last twenty years, that communication is a co-constructed activity, and that the interpreter contributes to the interaction as a full-fledged participant, especially in community interpreting (WADENSJÖ, 1998), while neutrality has become a much more nuanced and complex concept, to be considered not like a fixed, immutable assumption (BALLARDINI, 2019), but "en situation", that is according to the specific context where it takes place (HALE, 2007; 2008; INGHILLERI, 2012; KALINA, 2015; RUDVIN, 2002). This is all the more true in

conflict zones, where the neutrality often evoked by the military and the general public is even more problematic, as no human being acts in a purely neutral way in a war, not even local interpreters who participate with ontological and personal narratives of their own (KAHANE, 2007) in the narratives that create the intellectual and moral environment of the conflict (M. BAKER, 2012). The inability of interpreters "to find neutral or linguistically neutral spaces" (KAHANE, 2007: 4) is then further complicated by a lack of specific international status for interpreters in conflict zones: they are not part of the foreign military troops, but they work for one of the parties in the conflict and come dangerously close to the "continuous combat function" as defined by art. 51.3 of the First Additional Protocol and art.13.3 of the Second Additional Protocol to the Geneva Convention of 1949 for combatants (UNITED NATIONS, 1949). Being neither one nor the other, interpreters find themselves in a legal no man's land (BARTOLINI, 2010), with unclear rights and protection, but especially no specific neutral status as the one granted to doctors and journalists. As a consequence, these conflicting expectations in both the military and the general public between interpreters' neutrality and their local embeddedness contribute to creating a climate of mistrust and the automatic expectation of betrayal and duplicity of interpreters, which has defined the general attitude towards interpreters in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia in the 1990s.

2.4 Nationality and language

A final aspect that complicated interpreters' position and probably contributed to their bad reputation is the interplay between their national or ethnic belonging and their professional role, especially in a conflict where ethnicity was central or made to appear as such. People were forced to pick sides, to choose their *narod* (Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian for "nation") – a concept similar to the German *volk* –, binding together those sharing a common history, tradition and culture. Such a univocal conception of nationality, given by a set of factors the individual cannot influence, probably affected interpreters not just as citizens embedded in the conflict, but also in their role as language mediators. Military officers interviewed in the framework of this research project reported that international forces paid attention to interpreters' ethnicity because deploying interpreters from the "wrong" nationality would result in their imprisonment or in refusal to engage in negotiations by the warring parties (BERNARDI, 2023): in Sarajevo, Serb interpreters usually worked on one side of the confrontation line, while Bosnian-Muslim and Croat interpreters worked on the other (THOMAS, 1995). Only a few worked on both sides of the line and when they did, they remember having been forced to lie about their names and surnames not to betray their national origin (C. BAKER, 2012B; TODOROVA, 2016: 233). As a consequence, the interpreters' ethnicity was often associated with their perception as professionals and used to justify cases of mistranslation, as we have seen in the examples provided in section 1.

It should also not be forgotten that any inter-language operation was also complicated by the role languages acquired to express national identity: if Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian previously functioned as regional variants of the same language, the struggle for linguistic uniqueness and recognition in the 1990s was as fierce as the one on the battlefield. Besmir Fihadić, in his work on linguistic justice at the ICTY, provides the example of a man killed in a Serb detention camp for having used the Bosnian word for "enjoy your meal", "*bujrum*", instead of the allegedly Serbian one (FIDAHIĆ, 2018: 78-79). When the war broke out, nationalist language policies and prescriptions were implemented to encourage citizens to express their national belonging through language. As a consequence, even in the briefest translation, interpreters were forced to routinely take, not just inter-language, but also intra-language decisions (BERNARDI, 2023), as we can see in the excerpt below, taken from a mediated encounter between a US official and an interpreter speaking to Serbian refugees in the Croatian Krajine (UNTV ARCHIVES, 1995):

Kao što je Gospodin Roberts rekao sada je ovo pitanje, sada je čitava ova stvar krenula na mnogo više nivoa, političke nivoa a mi ćemo i dalje kao i prije ovaj **osigur... obezbeđivati** vam zaštitu i podršku [As Mr. Roberts said, now this issue, now this whole thing has gone to much higher levels, political levels and we will continue as before to **guarantee... to guarantee** to you protection and support - my translation]

Here, the interpreter, speaking to Croatian Serbs, self-corrects in mid-sentence the Croatian word *osigurati* and replaces it with the Serbian one *obezbeđivati*, although both would have been understandable. This kind of forced intra-language translation could probably have exposed them to increased "ethnic" criticism for any language choice they willingly or unwillingly made.

It should also be added that interpreters, for the simple fact of mastering one or more foreign languages, are usually the result of different language and nationality backgrounds, experiences abroad, or the simple desire to learn about other people's cultures and customs. As such, they emerge in the interviews as people who generally found it even harder to pick sides in a clearcut way and appear to be aware that the situation was more complex than the "us vs. them" narrative that dominated the conflict. After all, it is the interpreter's job itself to *prevoditi* (Croatian for "to carry through") that is to carry the message across, from one language and one culture to another, to walk the thin line between the here and there and interpreters must be both here and there to do it. It is easy to understand how this "other otherness" is even more problematic in a polarised society and how the juxtaposition of several "loyalties" or "belongings" put interpreters in an even more uncomfortable position.

Conclusions

This brief contribution in no way aims at defending interpreters *a priori*, but at underlying how, in post-war situations, interpreters continue to face problems because of their work for many years after the war has ended. Conflict zone interpreters in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina in the 1990s have been reviled or at least erased from public discourse and recognition for several reasons, ranging from the reputation of their employer to their ethnicity and language issues. It should be said, though, that with few exceptions (SPAHIĆ-ŠAGOLJ, NO DATE; NUHANOVIĆ ET AL., 2019; SULJAGIĆ ET AL., 2010), interpreters themselves failed to reflect on their experience as a professional category, probably because interpreting was a "temporary evil", a painful experience to leave behind, and not a professional choice. Even those who pursued careers as conference interpreters never came up with a special definition for that social/working group and identified with market dynamics while professional associations have mostly been "concerned with defending professional quality and rates against amateur competition, which may also include former employees of international organizations" (C. BAKER, 2014: 8).

We believe that this case study, investigating the position and status of conflict zone interpreters in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina after the war, might provide a reference for the fate that awaits other interpreters in more recent conflicts as it alerts both interpreters and their employers upon the risk of stigmatisation for interpreters as a category when the war is over, even if this does not turn into outright violence and retribution like in Afghanistan right now. Moreover, we wanted to bring to the attention of the general public the difficult position interpreters find themselves in, caught among the different expectations of the warring parties, their employers, and their own community.

As several scholars have already underlined, international forces making use of locally recruited interpreters in war zones should include post-war interpreters' management in their plans, primarily for what concerns their safety, with relocation offered to those risking their lives, but they should also consider the less-violent forms of exclusion and discrimination befalling interpreters

remaining in their own countries that sometimes continue over many years. Finally, if the need to train locally recruited conflict zone interpreters has been identified as fundamental (PERSAUD, 2016; TODOROVA- RUIZ ROSENDO, 2022), this should include strategies and measures to support interpreters in the aftermath of the war, as well as guidance, professional methodology and decision-making training, to help interpreters mitigate errors and improve their general perception.

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