

# Diasporas and Armed Conflicts: Beyond Being “Third Party”<sup>1</sup>

Ivan D. Loshkariov

MGIMO University

**Abstract.** This article discusses an essential dimension of modern diaspora research related to the functional status of diasporas in contemporary armed conflicts. The conventional point of view is that diasporas can only act as a “third party” of a conflict either by contributing to the deepening of the contradictions between the opposing parties, or by acting as an intermediary between them. In theoretical terms, the author relies on the concept of “new” or network wars (netwars) and tries to demonstrate that there are the prerequisites for the more active involvement of diasporas in armed conflicts at the structural level of modern world political processes. To identify the structural requirements for such participation, the author turns to the analysis of two cases. The first case is the emergence and functioning of the Polish I Corps in 1917–1918 in Russia, which was formed when the Polish population of Russia was separated from their territory of origin as a result of the First World War. An analysis of the documents shows that the leadership of the corps quite clearly evaded political subordination to the Russian authorities and retained only military subordination, implying that the task of this unit was to participate in the restoration of Polish statehood. The second case is the genesis and evolution of the “Secret Army” of General Vang Pao in Laos in 1960–1974. This unit played an essential role in the Civil War in Laos, as it managed to restrain the onslaught of the superior forces of the Patet Lao Front and troops from North Vietnam. Such long-term participation in hostilities was made possible thanks to the logistical and technical support of the US special services. The two case studies allow us to conclude that there were armed units in previous historical periods with a clear diaspora component: they made a significant contribution to the overall dynamics of the confrontation between major parties to the conflict. This experience helps analyse contemporary conflicts with a diaspora component, especially in the context of the gradual erosion of power resources in world politics. The participation of diasporas in armed conflicts outside the “third party” framework is associated with the achievement of several conditions, both internal and external.

**Keywords:** diasporas, armed conflicts, Wang Pao, Dovbor-Musnitsky, Secret Army, Polish Corps.

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In recent decades, a strong belief has appeared in international political science that diasporas, unlike other actors in world politics, cannot have military-political resources of influence. Given the fact that the traditions of “methodological nationalism,” that is, the idea of the leading role of states in global affairs, are still strong in international political science (Tsygankov, 2012: 31–33), there is nothing surprising about this theory. At least, this position was typical for diaspora studies, which contend that the use of force by states limits or even prevents diasporas from doing the same.

The advent of the literature on so-called “new” or “network” wars in the mid-1990s brought with it the new thesis that diasporas can act as mediators or “third parties” in armed conflicts, whether it be the struggle against political regimes inside states (Arquilla, 2001) or the standoff between modern and archaic methods of conducting war in an entire region, or in the conditions of states in collapse (van Creveld, 2015: 91–92). From this point of view, the role of diasporas in conflicts is still secondary, but it is nevertheless vital. As Mary Kaldor notes, “Alienated diaspora groups in advanced industrial or oil-rich countries provide ideas, funds and techniques, thereby imposing their own frustration and fantasies on what is often a very different situation” (Kaldor, 2015: 41–42).

The theory that diasporas were instigators of conflicts in the 1990s was particularly relevant against the backdrop of the situations that were taking place with the obvious involvement of diasporas – the bloody wars in the former Yugoslavia, the border clashes in the South Caucasus, and the acute conflict between the Tamil and Sinhala populations in Sri Lanka. In all these cases, one of the conflicting parties was receiving external support from their respective diasporas. The negative role of diasporas was explained, first of all, by the fact that these migrant communities were not afforded the opportunity to act through formal mechanisms for resolving disputes (because they did not have the financial resources or legal grounds to do so, and had problematic relations – or no relations whatsoever – with their countries of origin). At the same time, an emphasis was placed on the changing role of the means of communication and the emergence of opportunities for direct and, most importantly, long-term communication with direct participants in conflicts in the territories of the migrant communities’ countries of origin, which blurred the boundaries between internal and international conflicts (Adamson, 2005; Demmers, 2002; Koinova, 2011). Interestingly, confrontations of this kind typically give rise to new conflicts, since they lead to the emergence of refugees and refugee diasporas, who are less willing to compromise in the fight against those who caused these refugees to take flight from their countries (Lyons, 2007).

The theory that diasporas were instigators of conflicts also led to the emergence of an alarmist hypothesis that the very presence of a diaspora abroad could present a significant risk for states that have recently gone through conflicts at home and abroad or are at the pre-conflict stage of their political development (Gleditsch, 2007). In a report for the World Bank, the preeminent economist Paul Collier even calculated that the presence of a large diaspora of a given nationality in the United States increases the likelihood of a conflict bubbling up in that country by over a third, while the presence

of a small diaspora increases that chance by just 6% (Collier, 2000). Collier went on to compile a larger database and came up with an ill-defined theory: the presence of diasporas of any size in developed countries “substantially” increases the likelihood of conflict (Collier, 2004).

However, since the mid-2000s, the opposite theory about diasporas – that they serve as “instigators of peace” – has been gaining popularity. Jacob Bercovitch stressed that the configuration of engagement of diasporas in armed conflicts directly depends both on the characteristics of the diasporas and on the attributes (stages) of the conflict itself (Bercovitch, 2007: 23–34). And there are many possible forms of engagement, including constructive forms (assistance in the negotiation process, support for post-conflict settlement, etc.). There are numerous examples of the constructive participation of diasporas in armed conflicts in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – as mediators between warring clans and investors in infrastructure development in the ongoing Somali Civil War (Horst, 2013), a negotiating platform for the formation of a transitional government in Afghanistan, and mediators in the de-radicalization of Christian fundamentalists in Uganda (Baser, Swain, 2008).

It is likely that diasporas can, as a “third party” to a conflict, act both as “peace brokers” and “warmongers.” As a discipline, diaspora studies is gradually coming to the realization that the content and forms of the involvement of diasporas in conflicts are determined, among other things, by geographical distance and concerns about the security of the territory they came from (Van Hear, 2017), temporal characteristics of identity, and mechanisms of political mobilization within diasporas (Blinkerhoff, 2008). Equally important is the fact that the diasporas themselves are different: for example, so-called “stateless diasporas” are far more likely to be involved in conflicts as “warmongers” (Baser, 2015). Thus, for diasporas, participation in conflicts is a result of complex internal processes and changes in the political processes in their territory of origin (Roth, 2015).

In this regard, it would be appropriate to ask whether or not the participation of diasporas in armed conflicts really is limited to the “third party” format. First, this is a direct continuation of the logic of modern research, which links the activities of diasporas and the external state of affairs: situations can very well arise when the activities of diasporas go beyond the “third party” format. Second, the reality of “new wars” does not imply that the state has lost its monopoly on legitimate violence, rather, it implies that access to the instruments of violence has become easier, and that more and more attempts are being made to go beyond legitimate violence and force people to accept whatever political order they are told to accept, including on the international stage (Arquilla, 2001). In other words, the theory that diasporas can be the main participants in conflicts (under the right external conditions) does not, strictly speaking, challenge or contradict “methodological nationalism,” at least not directly. Finally, moving just a little way beyond the boundaries of the existing scientific orthodoxy (or “normal science”) cannot be considered a problem, but rather as a point from which the search for new answers to serious theoretical questions can begin (Kun, 2003).

It is precisely these considerations that determined the purpose and structure of the present article. Its main goal is to prove, empirically, that the participation of diasporas in conflicts can very well exceed that of “third parties.” To do this, we perform a detailed analysis and comparison of two cases – the existence of the national Polish corps in Russia in 1917–1918 (with a focus on the Polish I Corps), and the participation of the “Secret Army” of General Vang Pao during the Laotian Civil War in 1960–1970. These cases were selected for their theoretical significance, since our aim is to demonstrate that diasporas successfully went beyond the functionality of a “third party” to an armed conflict even before the era of “new” or network wars. This will allow us to uncover “initial” structural prerequisites for diasporas to become involved in conflicts as something more than a “third party.”

### **The Polish I Corps: An “Armed” Diaspora in Russia?**

During the First World War, so-called “national units” formed along ethnic lines (Ukrainian, Czech, Latvian, etc.) emerged in Russia. These units developed rapidly following the February Revolution, when “ordinary” units were seen by the country’s leadership and its military leaders (but not by everyone, of course) as being less reliable than units made up of Russians (Oleynikov, 2016; Solntseva, 2004).

As we know, in March 1917, the Provisional Government agreed in principle to Polish independence, although it postponed the official process until All-Russian Constituent Assembly had met. It was in these conditions that the first groups started to be formed, with the support of the authorities (primarily the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet). These were groupings of Polish nationals (Rachkowski, 2019). In late May – early June 1917, a congress of Polish military personnel was held in Petrograd, at which 52 local unions of military forces were represented. Two bodies were elected at the Congress – the Polish Military and the Central Executive Committee – which together formed the Nachpol (the Main Polish Military Executive Committee). The functions of the Nachpol included, among other things, coordinating the actions of the Polish military units.<sup>2</sup>

In later June 1917, the leadership of the Russian army, with the approval of the Nachpol, formed the Polish I Corps. While the Corps remained a division of the Russian Army, was operationally subordinate to the Headquarters of the Supreme High Command and received the necessary supplies, its purpose was obvious – to prepare for hostilities on Polish territory and the subsequent declaration of Poland’s independence. Lieutenant General Józef Dowbor-Muśnicki was unequivocal in Order No. 2 dated July 25, 1917, sent out to the Corps (although the document was only published in Polish): “Our dearest wish is close to becoming a reality. The Russian Revolution has

<sup>2</sup> State Archive of the Russian Federation. F. R-5111, ser. 1, file 9, sheet 9.

thrown off the yoke of autocracy and liberated the Polish people from a heavy oppression they did not deserve. Proclaimed among the goals of this war are the restoration of Poland, and as the first step towards this, the formation of a large and independent combat unit, the Polish I Corps has begun.”<sup>3</sup>

Thus, by the autumn of 1917, a combat unit that, from a political point of view, was not subordinate to the Russian authorities had appeared on Russian territory (primarily in Mogilev Region). Steps would later be taken for the formation of two more Polish corps on the territory of modern Ukraine, but the process was interrupted by the October Revolution. Of course, the army units were not overly concerned about following the Nachpol's every command, and the differences in how public organizations and military personnel perceived reality started to show. For example, Lieutenant General Dowbor-Muśnicki only appointed two of the nine candidates put forward by the Nachpol regimental or brigade commanders.<sup>4</sup> Even so, Nachpol did manage to coordinate the activities of the Polish units rather successfully, ensuring their replenishment, and defending their interests before the Russian authorities.

By October–November 1917, Dowbor-Muśnicki's corps boasted as many as 30,000 soldiers and officers. Since its formation, the corps had adopted a neutral stance in relation to the turbulent events that were unfolding in Russia, particularly Kornilov's Speech and the October Revolution. Moreover, Dowbor-Muśnicki took it upon himself to send Colonel Mościcki to the German-occupied territory to negotiate with the so-called “Regency Council” – the nominal governing body of Poland (Zielinsky, 2009: 43–44; Wrzosek, 1967).

The situation changed dramatically in December 1917 – January 1918, when the Soviet authorities took up the issue of the Polish armed formations and Polish party-political bodies. The new Headquarters of the Supreme High Command and the Command of the Western Front demanded the redeployment of parts of the Polish I Corps, attempted to introduce the appropriate revolutionary institutions in it (revolutionary committees, lectures on the new political movement), and dissolve some units. In addition, six members of the Nachpol were arrested in Minsk on January 17, 1918.<sup>5</sup> It was against this background that the remnants of this committee (at least its Kiev chapter) ceded their powers to another body, one which had close ties with a Polish socialist party (*pildsudchiki*), that is, with political forces on the other side of the front (Miodowski, 2008; Wrzosek, 1967).

In these difficult conditions, the command of the Corps decided to make a clean break from the Soviet authorities, and General Dowbor-Muśnicki sent an ultimatum to the Headquarters of the Supreme High Command demanding that all orders to

<sup>3</sup> State Archive of the Russian Federation. F. R-5111, ser. 1, file 122, sheet 2.

<sup>4</sup> State Archive of the Russian Federation. F. R-5111, ser. 1, file 18, sheet 41. State Archive of the Russian Federation. F. R-5111, ser. 1, file 122, sheet 35.

<sup>5</sup> New style dates are used throughout the text.

disarm Polish units and delay the movement of units to the place of deployment of the Corps be cancelled. There was, of course, no way that the Headquarters of the Supreme High Command and the Command of the Western Front would give in to Dowbor-Muśnicki's demands within the timeframe he had set – 1200 hours on January 25, 1918. Quite the opposite: an order was issued to disarm the corps and outlaw its commander. In response, the Corps captured the city of Babruysk and made it a stronghold, entering into clashes with individual detachments on the Western Front. The fighting continued with varying degrees of success, but the Corps did manage to take Minsk, where the front headquarters had previously been located (February 20) (Wrzosek, 1967).

All these events took place against the backdrop of the refusal of the Soviet Union to agree to peace with Germany and the other Central Powers (February 10). The German offensive began on February 17, 1918. Under these conditions, the Corps took the rather unusual step to conclude an agreement with representatives of the German command on February 26, 1918. According to the document, the Polish Corps was recognized as a neutral armed unit, which temporarily retained administrative control over the deployment area of Babruysk and its surrounding regions (Miodowski, 2008: 164–165). The Corps command would subsequently declare its loyalty to the Regency Council – that is, it had refused to be subordinated to the German command in both the military and the political sense (Zieliński, 2009: 45–46).

The history of the Polish I Corps is instructive both from the point of view of the forms and types of identity that were in demand during the revolutionary period over a century ago, and from the point of view of diasporas. Despite the fact that a significant area of Poland was part of the Russian Empire before the First World War, the Polish diaspora in Russia at that time included a considerable number of Polish people in the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Courland, as well as those living, voluntarily or otherwise, on the far reaches of the Empire (in Central Asia, Siberia, etc.) (Zarinov, 2010: 23–24). In this case, the undoubted feeling of collective trauma that arose as a result of the three partitions of Poland and the effective dissolution of Polish statehood for over a century is perhaps what drew people of Polish descent to active participation in the Polish diaspora. This mood was captured, for example, in a letter by Staff Captain G.P. Dembovetsky (April 1917) about his transfer to the national military unit: “As a Polish immigrant, I, like my ancestors, was forced to serve the Russian Tsar as the King of Poland. Now that my Fatherland will exist independently, I consider it my duty to devote my efforts and my life to it.”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Russia lost control over its Polish territories following a series of offensive operations by German and Austro-Hungarian troops in 1915. That is, the Poles in Russia who maintained social, economic, cultural and political ties with each other became a diaspora in the formal sense of the word.

<sup>6</sup> State Archive of the Russian Federation. F. R-5111, ser. 1, file 50, sheet 13.



In the framework of diaspora studies, the history of the Polish I Corps is important because it highlights the conditions under which an armed unit of the Polish diaspora appeared. This unit was not limited to operations at the rear, as it also took an active part in the hostilities, albeit not for long and against a clearly weaker enemy (combined detachments of revolutionary-minded soldiers of the Russian army). What is more, the Polish I Corps was always subordinated to two entities (or at least declared as much) – in the military sense to the Russian Headquarters of the Supreme High Command, and then to the Command of the German Eastern Front, and in the political sense to the Headquarters and then to the Regency Council. Finally, the fact that the Polish I Corps, as a political diasporic unit, was involved in military efforts and refused to submit to direct military leadership in January 1918, and then successfully concluded an agreement with representative of the enemy command, is worthy of attention.<sup>7</sup>

If we consider these facts from a descriptive, rather than a normative point of view, then we can state that the Dowbor-Muśnicki Corps, as a diasporic unit, enjoyed a certain degree of independence, or, more precisely, that it was a political actor in global events (Lebedeva, 2013). This theory is confirmed not only by formal communication with other universally recognized actors (in this case, Germany), but also by its significant autonomy from other actors (primarily the Russian authorities). What is more, the consequences of the activities of the Dowbor-Muśnicki Corps went beyond the political and legal boundaries of a single state – that is, they were, at the very least, transnational (cross-border) in nature. Today, diasporic armed units may very well repeat the experience of this corps, although it will clearly be far more difficult to achieve recognition from official actors (mainly states). In other words, it will probably be more difficult for diasporic political units to be concentrated in a geographically limited space, as happened with the Dowbor-Muśnicki Corps in Mogilev Region in 1917–1918.

### **Vang Pao's "Secret Army": An "Armed" diaspora in Laos?**

The territory of modern Laos had traditionally always fallen under China's influence from the north. Time and again, various non-Han ethnic groups had been resettled from China's southern regions to Indochina and faced with attempts at assimilation. In the 12<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> centuries, the oppression of the Mongol Yuan Dynasty forced two large ethnic groups, the Tai and the Lao, out of the Yungui Plateau (History of the East, 2002: 580).<sup>8</sup> The first major state of Lao was the Kingdom of Lan Xang ("The Kingdom of a Million Elephants and White Parasols") (1353–1707), which eventually broke up

<sup>7</sup> To be fair, it should be noted that the German command unilaterally set about revising the agreement in March 1918, and that the Corps was disbanded in May.

<sup>8</sup> The ethnically related Shan people moved from China to the territory of modern Myanmar during the same period.

into several principalities. From the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the northern and central regions of Indochina, where the Lao people had settled, gradually assumed control over the Thai state of Siam, and later the French colonialists. This control was mostly nominal, especially on the left bank of the Mekong River. This led to a complex social structure developing over the course of several centuries on the territory of modern Laos, a social structure that exists to this day: at the top of the social hierarchy are farmers of Lao and Tai descent in the river valleys and lowlands (the Lao Lum people), farmers and gatherers of the Mon-Khmer ethnic group (the Lao Teng) who live in the hilly areas, and small mountain ethnic groups (the Lao Suong) (History of the East, 2004; Weightman, 2011).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Hmong (Miao) people entered this complex political and social context. Initially, this ethnic group lived in the area between the Yellow and Yangtze rivers, but, over the course of several millennia, the Chinese (Han) drove them south of the Yangtze (the modern provinces of Sichuan, Guizhou and Yunnan). During the Ming Dynasty (14<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> centuries), the Chinese authorities mainly focused on subordinating the Hmong, which was achieved by appointing Han Chinese as local administrators. After this, during the Manchu Qing Dynasty (1644–1912), the Chinese state focused on the settlement of the Hmong and the forced resettlement of the Han to the south: in order to reduce the likelihood of an uprising, the authorities were not averse to ethnic cleansing or sophisticated forms of punishment, such as handing out lifetime bans on leaving their own villages. This led to a series of major uprisings in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and the eventual culling of the Hmong population by three or four times (Vang, 2008). The first wave of migration began during the Miao Rebellion of 1795–1806, as a result of which numerous Hmong villages were moved to the north of modern Laos at the initiative of the village elders. As these were mountainous areas, the Hmong automatically found themselves “Lao Suong,” that is, at the very bottom of the social hierarchy. Gradually, the Hmong settled in the central regions of Laos, but their status did not change (Vang, 2008). Thus, a classical diaspora appeared on the territory of modern Laos, one that had been forced to migrate from China and was now looking for a place in the economic and social life of the “host” society.<sup>9</sup>

Hmong armed units appeared as a result of the following factors. First was political instability within the host country. Laos became an independent state in 1949 (it achieved full independence in 1954), although this did nothing to calm the tensions inside the country: pro-communist forces (the Lao People’s Liberation Army, or Pathet Lao) took control of the north of the country; in the central regions, the French, and then the Americans, tried to strengthen the “neutral” monarchist regime; and the conservative monarchists (“royalists”), opposing neutralism and communism, took hold

<sup>9</sup> The following figures illustrate the lowly social status that the Hmong people occupy in Laotian society: by 1975, only one representative of the Hmong people had earned an advanced degree; three Hmong had won seats in parliament; one Hmong was a cabinet minister; and one sat on the Supreme Court (Yang, 2003: 276).



of the south. What made the situation particularly tenuous was that the three main opposing forces were all headed by representatives of the royal house,<sup>10</sup> whom King Sisavang Vatthana, with almost no success whatsoever, attempted with Buddhist-like patience to unite into a single governing body (Hamilton-Merritt, 1993; Weightman, 2011: 439).

Second, Indochina had become a theatre of peripheral confrontation between the two superpowers. While the main hotspot of the confrontation in the region between the Soviet Union and the United States was in Vietnam, the Ho Chi Minh Trail – logistics network that provided supplies to the pro-communist Viet Cong from North Vietnam – passed through eastern Laos. That is, the situation in Laos was seen by the superpowers as part of a broader issue: by the mid-1960s, it was a perfectly normal occurrence for the North Vietnamese units to provide a helping hand to the Pathet Lao's offensive operations, and the Royal Army tried to repel these attacks with the support of American aviation (Webb, 2016).

It was in these conditions that Major Vang Pao of the Royal Army proposed in 1959 to use local self-defence units from the Hmong population to fight the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese units.<sup>11</sup> The reason was that the so-called Plain of Jars (in the provinces of Xiangkhoang and Houaphanh), had acquired great strategic importance for both the royal troops and their opponents, as it spread to the capital of Vientiane in the northeast and a section of the Ho Chi Minh Trail.<sup>12</sup> A large number of Lao Suong, including Hmong, lived in this territory. The American embassy in Laos eventually rejected Vang Pao's plan (Webb, 2016).

The situation changed in late 1960, when the Pentagon and the CIA decided to encourage guerrilla warfare against the Pathet Lao and North Korean detachments. In December, a meeting between representatives of the US military and the Hmong clans took place, with the parties agreeing on the need to form Hmong units. A key role in these negotiations was played by Lieutenant colonel Vang Pao, the highest-ranking official in the Laotian army, who was tasked with leading the new units (Hamilton-Merritt, 1993).

By the summer of 1961, US experts in guerrilla operations had provided weapons and basic military training to Hmong fighters (7000–9000 soldiers). They were already comparable in size to the number of Pathet Lao fighters (19,000 soldiers). Despite the conclusion of the Geneva Accords in 1962 guaranteeing the neutrality of Laos, the CIA continued to help Vang Pao's units and, unlike the Pentagon, did not even pull its specialists out of the country. In fact, the CIA would become the main partner of the

<sup>10</sup> Prince Souvanna Houma represented the neutralists; Prince Boun Oum the royalists; and Prince Prince Souphanouvong the communists.

<sup>11</sup> Vang Pao was one of the few Hmong officers in the Laotian army. He owed his officer rank to the recommendations of the French colonial administration.

<sup>12</sup> Laos also had a "royal capital" during this time – the city of Luang Prabang, located north of the Plain of Jars.

Hmong detachments.<sup>13</sup> (Webb, 2016). The North Vietnamese side did the same thing, defiantly withdrawing 40 of its men from Laos (of a total of 7000). As a result, clashes between Pathet Lao, Hmong, neutralist and royalist troops continued in the north of the country, and full-scale hostilities resumed in 1964 (Hamilton-Merritt, 1993).

From this point onwards (until 1974) that Vang Pao's "Secret Army" became the main unit that fought against the Pathet Lao and Vietnamese troops in the northeast of the country – in the Plain of Jars. The Hmong units had the upper hand in that they were able to fight during the rainy season, which begins in July. Having been promoted to the rank of general, Vang Pao leaned on the clan elders for support, and also actively used Hmong refugees from the northern provinces to replenish his units (approximately 200,000 Hmong left the areas occupied by the communists). By 1967, Vang Pao's troops numbered some 20,000 (Hamilton-Merritt, 1993: 177).

To summarize the results of the Laotian Civil War, we should note that the size advantage of the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese detachments proved too great for the "Secret Army," which was pushed out of the main part of the Plain of Jars, as well as for the most combat-ready units of the Royal army. In the case of the Vang Pao units, disagreements between the Pentagon, the Department of State and the CIA also had a detrimental effect, as did the strategic missteps in the operations to return the "sacred" Mount Phu Chi Fa in 1967–1969.

As part of the policy to defuse international tensions, the Soviet Union and the United States agreed to curtail conflicts in Southeast Asia. In 1973, a ceasefire agreement was concluded in Laos between the main parties to the conflict, and work to set up a coalition government was launched. In 1974, against the backdrop of the impeachment of President Richard Nixon, the United States wound down all its military operations in Laos, and the Pathet Lao eventually took full control of the country the following year (Webb, 2016). After that, a large proportion of the Vang Pao army's fighters, as well as almost half of the Hmong population in Laos (as many as 150,000 people in total), left the country, moving first to Thailand, and then farther afield to Europe and North America (Yang, 2003: 277).

From the point of view of diaspora studies, General Vang Pao's "Secret Army" is interesting because of how quickly external forces managed to translate social and historical differences into political ones: the mountain communities of Laos (the Lao Suong) were faced with a choice – either support the geographical distant monarchy, or surrender to the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese troops, who were operating in close proximity. Diaspora communities are not known for harbouring revolutionary designs, as they typically seek to integrate into the host society and benefit from the existing, stable social infrastructure, rather than fight for transformations with unknown consequences. Unsurprisingly, the Hmong communities of gatherers and farmers in the north of Laos opted for the status quo – that is, the clan leaders supported the efforts of Vang Pao and his mobilization campaigns.

<sup>13</sup> The CIA operated in Laos under the guise of civil aviation company Air America.

Vang Pao's "Secret Army" could thus claim the role of an actor in world politics. First, it clearly had contacts, albeit formal, with foreign political players. However, these contacts cannot really be described as a kind of patron–client relations, since the "client" in this case – General Vang Pao and his entourage – often ignored the recommendations of the CIA, especially when it came to planning operations, the actual conducting of warfare, and communicating with the official Laotian authorities. Second, the results of these activities were important not only for Laos, but also for Vietnam and Thailand (and perhaps for the whole of Southeast Asia), that is, they had international ramifications.

At the same time, the unique features of this case need to be emphasized. The Hmong initially occupied a low position in the social hierarchy of Laos and could not reasonably expect any radical changes in this situation from the local authorities. Thus, they were already predisposed to interacting with external forces. But even this was not enough, as external forces, in turn, had to have an interest in interacting with the country and the events taking place there. There are very few examples of such a coincidence of external interest and internal predisposition today (a relatively recent example is Saudi Arabia's support for the Kurds in Iran), which means that a similar situation is unlikely to arise in modern conditions.

### Intermediate Results

Our analysis of the history of the Polish I Corps and the "Secret Army" of General Vang Pao allows us to tentatively conclude that the participation of diasporas in the respective conflicts was as main actors, rather than as "third parties," which "stoke the flames" of confrontation or "instigate" peace. What is more, this is possible for various types of conflict – from world wars (in the case of the Polish I Corps) to a partisan struggle in the jungle as part of a so-called proxy conflict between superpowers.

Of course, the cases we have looked at have their own specific features (see Table 1), including the differing degrees of involvement of external actors, the socioeconomic conditions for the functioning of diasporas, and the features of the political regimes and administrations of territories (a semi-feudal parliamentary monarchy and a transitional republic with zones of direct military control). These parameters suggest that diasporas may become involved as a main player in conflicts when the institutions of state power have weakened significantly: in the cases we have looked at (Laos in 1960–1975 and Russia in 1917–1918), the countries were either in the embryonic stages of civil war, or in the midst of a prolonged confrontation.

**Table 1. The Comparison of Cases.**

	Polish I Corps	"Secret Army"
Conducted military operations	Yes, for a limited time	Yes, for over 10 years
Military subordination to the leadership of the armed forces the host country	Yes, official	Yes, official
Existence of a political governing body of the diaspora	Yes	No
Involvement in the formation of a subdivision of political forces (parties, movements)	Yes	No
Involvement of the special services in the formation of armed units	No	No
Type of conflict in which the armed units took part	Inter-state conflict (world war)	Indirect (proxy) inter-state conflict
Goal of the armed units	Self-protection and the restoration of statehood in the territory of origin	Improving the status of the Hmong in the host country
Existence of a civil war in the host country	Yes	Yes

The cases we have looked at do not give us a definitive answer to the question of how long "armed" diasporas or diasporic military units typically take part in conflicts. Obviously, this depends directly on the supply of weapons and the ability to replenish forces, which means that diasporas need to search for external allies (public associations, superpowers, special services, etc.). However, the cases we have analysed differ here: politically speaking, Vang Pao's "Secret Army" relied on the traditional clan structure of the Hmong and did not have a clearly defined ideological colouring, while the Polish I Corps enjoyed the support of Polish political forces (both inside Russia with the *pildsudchiki*, and beyond its borders with the Regency Council). In addition, the Polish I Corps managed to avoid political subordination to the superpowers (Russia and Germany), while the "Secret Army" relied on the help of the CIA and clearly focused on the United States, even ignoring a number of intra-Lao political alignments.

\* \* \*

In modern conditions of network and "new" wars, where access to violence (and not necessarily legitimate violence) has expanded dramatically, diasporas may well become a class of actors in global political processes that will play a more active role in armed conflicts, domestic, international and inter-state. Modern political science has thus far been unable to offer an answer to the question of how likely such a scenario actually is. Thus, the ongoing discussion of whether diasporas are instigators of conflict or instigators of peace needs additional understanding from the point of view of how modern armed conflicts generally work and what place diasporas and similar cultural and racial units occupy in them.

The cases we have looked at provide a foundation for further research into conflicts involving diasporas. At the same time, a comparative analysis clearly indicates the direction that such research should take – a study of the relationship between diasporas and civil wars, that is, the collapse of the state as a Westphalian sovereign. Another promising area is the analysis of the relationship between military institutions and institutions representing the interests of diaspora (with a focus on paramilitary and other similar units).

Of course, these cases are also marked by the relatively weak links of the diaspora units with their territories of origin. The Polish I Corps, for example, could not physically offer anything more than the occasional exchange of information with individual political circles behind the front lines. Meanwhile, the “Secret Army” lost its links with the territory of origin as a result of the harsh assimilation policy of imperial China. There are thus no grounds to argue that weak links with the territories of origin lead to an increase in the aggressiveness of diasporas. That said, it is obvious that the isolation factor eliminates one of the restraining mechanisms in the political behaviour of diasporas, including within the framework of an armed conflict. Thus, any analysis of conflicts that in one way or another involve diasporas requires a balanced assessment of the internal and external conditions for their involvement that takes the features that led to the formation of the diasporas themselves and the specifics of the countries participating in the conflicts into account.

#### **About the Author:**

**Ivan D. Loshkariov** – Cand. Sci. (Political Science), senior lecturer in the Department of Political Theory, a researcher at the Center for the Study of Political Elites, Institute of International Studies MGIMO, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, 76 Prospect Vernadskogo Moscow, Russia 119454. ORCID: 0000-0002-7507-1669. Email: ivan1loshkariov@gmail.com

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The author declares the absence of any conflicts of interest.

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