



The Composition and Challenges of Foreign Fighters in Ukraine

COLLECTION:
UKRAINE – A
NEW HORIZON OF
WARFARE?

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February, 2022, the Ukrainian government invited foreign citizens to join its military forces. While this invitation is not without precedent, Kiev's approach to foreign fighters differs from that seen in recent conflicts. This paper examines the characteristics defining Ukraine's approach to foreign fighters and highlights challenges these fighters have faced. It argues that the foreign fighters in Ukraine mainly come from Western countries and primarily serve an outward-facing role, internationalizing the conflict and in order to sway Western public opinion while offering relatively limited operational benefits. Logistical issues and a lack of experience, especially experience relevant to the context of a conventional war, have together resulted in low morale, further plaguing the attempt to use foreign volunteers.

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Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February, 2022, the Ukrainian government announced that it was welcoming foreign citizens to join its military as part of the Ukrainian International Legion (UIL) in its fight against the Russian Federation. In recent years, we have seen non-citizens volunteer for combat in civil wars fought, for example, in the Middle East. Yet Ukraine's recruitment efforts are notable in that a decision was quickly taken to call for foreign fighters in an inter-state conflict. While it is too soon to make a definitive analysis of the development, it nonetheless deserves a closer look, as this could very well repeat itself in future conventional wars between asymmetrically positioned countries.

At the core of the current phenomenon are two questions. Why does Ukraine want foreign fighters? And how has this decision manifested? This paper examines the demographic constitution, structure, outward facing role, and the limited operational value of the foreign fighting force in Ukraine. It argues that Ukraine's call for foreign volunteers was primarily driven by a desire to harness their potential propaganda value abroad, principally in the West. Over the course of the first several weeks, their relative importance has declined due to the structural challenges they have faced, their limited necessity in Ukrainian propaganda efforts after the few first weeks, and the diminished significance of foreign fighters in combat itself. Additionally, unlike in many other conflicts, the foreign fighters in Ukraine are notable in that many are of non-diasporic origins and have travelled on their own initiative to fight for a foreign state, rather than having seen deployment as members of pre-existing foreign units. Finally, the use of such fighters in Ukraine has faced fundamental challenges, which further limits their efficacy.

METHODOLOGY AND LITERATURE

Examining the topic of foreign fighters is inherently challenging, especially when their use is ongoing. Due to the legal implications, whether in their home countries or following their capture, much of their activity is covert. Although the Ukrainian government has made occasional claims on the total number of foreign volunteers, officials have consistently refused to give more precise figures for those currently deployed in a frontline capacity, or numbers relating to nationality. Consequently, this paper relies heavily on media reports; these are the most up to date, wide-ranging, and accessible. This is itself, however, fraught with numerous issues. Estimates vary wildly, cases covered are often anecdotal, and (Western) media coverage tends to skew in favour of positive profile pieces sympathetic to the volunteers and the Ukrainian cause more generally. Additionally, available data can quickly become outdated, especially for a dynamic conflict such as this one.

A consequence of the conflict being relatively new and the fact that it is ongoing has been the dearth of literature on foreign fighters in Ukraine post-24 February. Nevertheless, existing literature on foreign fighters, including (but not limited to) those already in the Donbass prior to 24 February, 2022, offers some insights. Works such as Arielli (2020) and MacKenzie and Kaurert (2021) are particularly useful. Foreign fighters have primarily come to be viewed through the lens of the Global War on Terror, and research over the past twenty years has primarily focused on jihadis, including articles on the presence of Europeans fighting for the Islamic State (see, for example, Rostami et al., 2020). Even earlier cases such as the Yugoslav Wars have been re-examined through a post-9/11 conception (see, for example, Mitchell, 2008). At this stage of the conflict, findings are as tentative as source material is scarce – notwithstanding the topic's clear relevance.

In order to overcome some of these hurdles, this paper examines the demographic novelty of the predominantly non-diasporic make-up of the foreign forces, the potential and ongoing challenges faced by the fighters, their respective home countries, and Ukraine. It also offers an early assessment of relevant capabilities. Since reliable quantitative data is hard to obtain, a qualitative approach is preferred.

NON-DIASPORIC FIGHTERS IN UKRAINE

Wars have the tendency to attract diasporic populations. During the early 1990s, for example, ethnic Croats from as far away as Argentina returned to the Balkans as their new country declared and fought for its independence (Milekic, 2018). Other times, diaspora communities

can play a significant role in supporting militants or armed forces, such as Irish-American support for the republicans in Ireland (Dumbrell, 1995). Additionally, the spectre of diasporic combatants and disloyalty has spurred severe crackdowns on ethnic minorities, resulting in actions like the mass internment of Japanese-Americans during the Second World War (Aitken and Aitken, 2011). Recent conflicts have borne witness to other types of shared non-native identities such as religion used in a bid to recruit fighters. In the case of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, while a significant portion of the foreign jihadi fighters were Arab Muslims with ancestral ties to the region, many were merely co-religionists who came from faraway places as diverse as Belgium (Bakker and de Bont, 2016), China (Duchâtel, 2019), and Indonesia (Broches, 2020).

The conflict in Ukraine is notable in that it has consistently set aside such an approach. Recruitment for the UIL is not explicitly aimed at any specific region or set of countries but is, rather, grounded in the hope of attracting individuals with prior military experience. Despite this seemingly nationality-blind approach, it primarily draws from NATO countries. One could argue that a vision of shared (ostensibly European) identity has been propagated by Ukrainian authorities with implicit reference to the European Union's profession of "European values" within a broader Western umbrella that includes countries such as the United States. This has been true for both the military, which the government has repeatedly called a "European army," and for the potential volunteers (Boffey, 2022). Even in his appeal for foreign volunteers, Zelenskyy described the conflict as being "the beginning of a war against Europe, against European structures" (Zelenskyy, 2022).

Despite its appellation, the International Legion is mainly made up of fighters from the wider North Atlantic region. By early March, volunteers reportedly came from 52 countries, according to the Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba (Abend, 2022). This contrasts with the French Foreign Legion, which has volunteers from approximately 150 (Roy, 2017). This is a result of the UIL's main function being, notwithstanding any lack of experienced soldiers, to serve a role in international media and propaganda rather than as compensation for any deficiency in manpower. As the researchers on foreign fighters Dr Nir Arielli and Kristo Karvinen have pointed out:

From the host's perspective, foreign volunteers can be an excellent propaganda tool for both domestic and international need [since they] attract media attention, especially in the countries they come from. Volunteers view themselves as somehow representing their own country, and often hope to see their government follow their example by intervening in the conflict. (Arielli and Karvinen, 2022)

By having Westerners fight and die in Ukraine, the conflict implicitly becomes a Western-Russian conflict instead of a merely Ukrainian-Russian one. Mark Cancian of the Center for Strategic and International Studies highlights the fact that "one purpose of any foreign volunteer operation is political, showing worldwide support for the cause and appearing to distribute the burdens" (Cancian, 2022). This alignment of Ukraine with NATO and EU countries is reflected in both the people the Ukrainians are reaching out to and the broader global disposition towards the conflict. Zelenskyy has successfully tailored his message to various North Atlantic countries, as evidenced by his addresses to the U.S. Congress, the British Parliament, the German Bundestag, and many others (McNish and Sugden, 2022).

Countries imposing sanctions represent a mere 14% of the world's population and, geographically speaking, are principally limited to the North Atlantic (Sachs, 2022). Consequently, pro-Russian sympathies combined with economic motivations have led to some living outside of the West wanting to join Russian forces. Media reports suggest that 14 recruitment centres have been opened in Syria alone. According to the Syrian analyst Danny Makki, "If need be, Russia could quickly recruit members of these groups to fight in Ukraine" (Karam, 2022). Following social media rumours of a pay of \$2,000 in a country experiencing 30% inflation, possibly sparked by the news that Russia was exploring recruiting volunteers in the Middle East, hundreds of Ethiopians (including veterans) showed up at the Russian embassy in Addis Ababa in April 2022. According to one of these: "The reason I want to go to Russia is not to fight Ukraine but it is because I am not benefiting from my country" (Endeshaw, 2022). While very few countries actively support Moscow, large parts of the world remain either ambivalent or indifferent to

the fighting. With radically divergent approaches by Western and non-Western countries in response to the conflict (C. Lynch, 2022), it is unsurprisingly that volunteers fighting (and not fighting) for Ukraine reflect this global distribution of opinions and geopolitical reality.

This is not to say that the foreign volunteers that are interested or reportedly fighting in Ukraine are entirely from Western countries. Despite logistical challenges, some Asians have allegedly joined Ukrainian forces. Within a week of the deployment of Russian forces into Ukraine, seventy Japanese had already volunteered, with an estimated 50 of them having been former members of Japan's Self Defence Force, although it remains unclear if any of them have actually participated in combat (Yusuke and Shu, 2022). Additionally, while most expatriates have left the country, a handful have stayed behind as part of the war effort. A Malaysian couple claimed they signed up with the Ukrainian Territorial Defence Forces (Aziz and Chern, 2022), while a 21-year-old Indian student studying there, who had previously been rejected by the Indian army due to his height, has likewise volunteered (Das, 2022). Nevertheless, this still pales in comparison to Western volunteers.

INDIVIDUALLY MOTIVATED YET STATE-LED

In times of war, it is common for governments that are losing (or at the very least, not winning) to request the support of foreign fighters. Unlike the Ukrainian example, however, these have generally been through pre-existing units or in the form of externally organized efforts. In the case of the Spanish Civil War, many of the Italians fighting on the side of the Nationalists were not individuals that made their way to Spain on their own but, rather, Blackshirts – the Fascist Party's volunteer paramilitary branch which predated the conflict in the Iberian peninsula by well over a decade (Rodrigo, 2019). Similarly, during the Syrian Civil War, the government led by President Bashar al-Assad has received considerable support from foreign Shia militias, most notably Lebanon's Hezbollah (Ali, 2019). Other groups, such as some Iraqi militias, were deployed on a more ad hoc basis. While the latter is technically an example of the utilization of foreign fighters, it is far more nuanced – the wars in Iraq and Syria during the 2010s can be conceptualized as a single, broader conflict with distinct dynamics on each side of the Sykes-Picot border (Alfoneh, 2018). In any case, although smaller examples of recruitment for the explicit purpose of fighting in Syria do exist (Afghan fighters, for example), the bulk of the foreign fighters were part of pre-existing military or paramilitary units with their own intact command structure.

So far, there does not appear to be any major foreign state-organized effort in this regard. To this point, the bulk of Western support for Ukraine has been in the form of weaponry and economic sanctions levied against Russia. Coming on the heels of the challenges that emerged around the issue of foreign fighters that travelled to the Middle East, it is remarkable that there was initially a degree of cautious, if not overt, support from some governments for their citizens to go to Ukraine and fight. Britain's Foreign Secretary Liz Truss and Denmark's Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, for example, openly signalled that they did not oppose their citizens travelling to the frontlines (Randerson, 2022, Hunter, 2022). Initial enthusiasm or indifference has been considerably scaled back, however (Allegretti, 2022). It is worth noting that this has been largely pre-emptive; the opposition that emerged on the part of Western officials was not sparked by any specific incident but, rather, by potential questions surrounding the participation of foreign volunteers that were not initially taken into account by some political figures.

The Ukrainian effort is notable in that it is a real-time response rather than a structural element of its armed forces scaled up in time of war. Permanent foreign elements can be seen in countries with active military deployments or small native populations, or both. An example can be found in the United Arab Emirates, where citizens constitute a mere 11% of a total population of roughly 10 million, despite being active in several armed conflicts, most notably in Yemen. In their case, the dependence on foreign recruits is unavoidable if the country wishes to maintain its highly militarized state, even if not fighting abroad (Barrett, 2022). While it remains to be seen whether this will be the case in Ukraine, it is very well possible that any future peace deal could require a demobilization and disarmament of these foreign fighters. Precedents for this include the former Yugoslavia and, indeed, the Minsk II accords in the case of Ukraine itself (Chatham House, 2020). One way this could be circumvented is through the naturalization of foreign fighters, which occurred in the case of some Bosnian mujahideen. The legalization of

dual citizenship in December 2021 would likely contribute to this possibility, especially since most of the new volunteers do not have particularly close ties to Ukraine and the fact that they already possess more “valuable” passports, especially those with EU citizenship.

CHALLENGES OF USING FOREIGN FIGHTERS

Ukraine’s fundamental challenge is not one of manpower. The relative dearth of fighting-age men among Ukrainian refugees outside the country suggests that the government’s exit ban on this cohort is effectively implemented and could be a large reservoir if fully utilized. The challenges the Ukrainian military face are a matter of scale in terms of armament and capacity, not the number of soldiers. Active recruitment of foreign nationals primarily serves as a signal to the wider world as Kiev seeks to internationalize the conflict. By including Western soldiers, the conflict can be interpreted by some as a conflict involving the West itself.

So far, Ukrainian authorities prefer to have these foreign troops under their own command. The longer fighting goes on, however, the harder this becomes. There are already signs that independent units have emerged: the Sheikh Mansour Battalion consists, for example, of anti-Russian Chechen volunteers (Ghaedi, 2022). Increased selectiveness by the UIL, due both to a decline in the propaganda value of foreign fighters and a less acute military situation, has left many potential volunteers outside the Legion. By early May, it was reported that a majority of foreign fighters were now “fighting with groups other than the International Legion” (Arraf, 2022). The potential emergence of independent military units risks reversing years of command centralization in an effort to rein in such groups. Most notably, the infamous Azov Battalion became a Special Purpose Regiment as part of the National Guard of Ukraine (Umland, 2019).

The challenges with commanding foreign fighter units could be seen prior to 24 February, as in the case of the Georgian Legion, which consists of Georgians and other nationalities. Having initially been integrated into the Ukrainian Armed Forces, the Georgian Legion later left the 54th Brigade, according to its own Facebook page (Georgian Legion, 2018). While the Ukrainian government has consistently sought to maintain overall command of foreign fighters, this has already shown to be inadequate. The predominantly Canadian-led Norman Brigade has experienced considerable turmoil due to internal disagreements as a result of disputes between the unit’s commanders and some of its members while allegedly accepting inexperienced volunteers (Blackwell, 2022).

The hazards faced by Ukrainian command are further heightened by the fact that criminals and others with unsavoury backgrounds could be overrepresented among foreign fighters in conflicts around the world. This was also true during the Donbass War of 2014–2022; early signs suggest that this is once again becoming a potential issue. Among the Finns travelling to Ukraine are a number of individuals with prior convictions or gang affiliations (Gustafsson, 2022). For those without any prior criminal history, mere participation in the fighting could result in future convictions. Serbia, for example, has already criminalized fighting in foreign wars (Kuloglija and Husaric, 2022). Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, the Neutrality Act forbids American citizens from joining or organizing for a foreign fighting force while subject to United States law (Rudesill, 2022). Although it is not clear whether such laws will be enforced in the case of Ukraine, it is unlikely to be implemented effectively due to the secrecy in which many volunteers operate. Nevertheless, the use of social media could play a critical role due to the conflict’s visibility internationally, as has been the case with Western ISIS fighters (Klausen, 2015). With mobile phones now functioning as both cameras and computers, coupled with a desire for internet fame or affirmation, it is certainly possible that identifying individuals will be considerably easier than it was in the early 2000s. In a bid to protect their identities, Ukrainian officials have so far declined to identify the countries of origin due to the fact that they know some have already criminalized this type of behaviour (AP, 2022).

Western volunteers with prior military experience may have several shortcomings. Troop deployments by Western countries are relatively short. During the Afghanistan War, British soldiers deployed for an average of six to eight months (UK Government, 2013). In addition, prior experience is not fully transferable, with retired U.S. Marine Corps colonel Andrew Milburn noting that “trading shots with the Taliban or al Qaeda is quite different from crouching in a freezing foxhole being pummeled by artillery fire” (Milburn, 2022). Hieu Le, an American veteran who served nine months in Afghanistan, quickly realized that his experience had not

adequately prepared him for fighting in Ukraine: “Even those with military experience, you’ve got to realise that there isn’t a war that has been fought like this in a long time” (McCready 2022). Additionally, Western troops have operated from a position of material wellbeing far superior to that the Ukrainian military can hope to offer. For example, Swedish troops deployed to Mali initially received UN rations (BBC, 2015). However, following complaints, these were replaced with larger meals, served in air-conditioned tents, which other African troops did not receive. While by no means an easy deployment, the starting position for Western veterans is still not comparable to countries fighting conflicts on their own soil. As Le observed: “What’s different with the U.S. military and all the other NATO militaries – they’re spoiled. When it comes to fighting a war, they have air support, medivac, logistics, all kinds of different levels of intelligence, and support. Here in Ukraine, we had none of that” (McCready, 2022).

The utilization of foreign volunteers comes with additional complications which have not been addressed by the Ukrainian government, and only partially addressed by the volunteers’ home countries – warnings against travelling. Chief among these are questions relating to potential prisoners of war. Should Russian forces capture them, are they considered POWs as defined by the Geneva Convention? What responsibility do governments have for obtaining the release of their citizens? Will they be included in prisoner exchanges? Will Kiev value those captured as much as they do value Ukrainian citizens? Will pressure be exerted on Kiev to accelerate the release of Western volunteers at the expense of Ukrainian POWs? Will there be a hierarchy of prisoners among the various nationalities? These are no longer hypotheticals. On 9 June, 2022, the Supreme Court of the Donetsk People’s Republic sentenced to death two Britons and a Moroccan, classified as mercenaries by pro-Russian forces, for their involvement in the conflict (TASS, 2022). While British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has urged his ministers to do “everything in their power” to secure the release of the men (Ambrose, 2022), as Canada’s Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has acknowledged, the capacity to help citizens captured abroad is “very limited” (Global News, 2022). The same day that the three men were sentenced, two American veterans went missing and were captured in eastern Ukraine and detained by pro-Russian forces (Freeman, 2022).

So far, no coherent set of policies has been outlined. History can, however, offer us some insights. Despite claims to the contrary, governments regularly negotiate for the release of their citizens, even with terrorists (Napoleoni, 2016). Some countries may opt to engage in bilateral negotiations with the Russian Federation; others may rely on third parties. Others might opt to abandon their citizens altogether. A legal justification based on the earlier issuance of travel advisories can also be used as an excuse to do nothing, as has already been used in the case of ISIS fighters; the British government has indeed stripped some of their citizenship (Sabbagh, 2019). While some Western officials have hinted that sanction relief may accompany Russian troop withdrawal (Benson, 2022), it is extremely likely that certain sanctions will remain (Romaniuk, 2022). In such a case, non-Ukrainian prisoners could play a role in subsequent rounds of post-war negotiations. This may depend, however, both on the number of foreign prisoners and the demographic makeup of the body of prisoners, in terms of nationalities. Additionally, it is very well possible that the holding of any pro-Ukrainian prisoners would be an impediment to sanction relief even if Kiev and Moscow were to reach a consensus on a permanent peace agreement.

Ukraine’s efforts to recruit have been hampered by governments not wanting to have their own citizens fight abroad. South Korea, which has male conscription and banned its citizens from travelling to Ukraine since mid-February, has arrested an active-duty marine who attempted to join the fighting (Song and Kang, 2022). Numerous African countries have similarly cracked down on recruitment in their countries. Both Algeria and Nigeria have ordered the Ukrainian embassies to turn away volunteers, while the Senegalese government ordered the Ukrainian ambassador to take down a social media post, condemning it as “illegal and punishable by law” (S. Ali, 2022). According to the Ukrainian ambassador to South Africa, Mozambique, and Botswana, Ukraine has been unable to take up offers of help due to the governments of these countries (S. Ali, 2022). The UJL’s official website does not list any African missions for recruitment and, according to a Ukrainian official who works on registering volunteers who spoke to the BBC, not a single African had arrived in Ukraine by mid-March despite tens of thousands of volunteers from across the world reportedly signing up (S. Ali, 2022). This has likely further reinforced the Western-heavy make-up of the fighters. Since these volunteers

primarily serve a propaganda purpose aimed towards Western countries, these limitations are unlikely to meaningfully impact Kiev's ultimate goal in respect to foreign fighters, and help to insulate the potential sender countries from any potential blowback.

ASSESSMENT

It may be too early to say whether or not these foreign fighters will contribute significantly to the ongoing conflict between Moscow and Kiev. With the exception of highly trained and organized career soldiers, foreign fighters tend to be less effective. As Professor Daniel Byman (2022) of Georgetown University points out, "most end up as cannon fodder." Foreign fighters tend to be most effective in insurgency. An obvious factor is motivation. By definition, non-resident foreigners with no ties to the country they are fighting for are considerably less motivated than citizens. While it can be debated whether or not foreign fighters are mercenaries, discussion concerning their usefulness extends at least as far back as the 16th century: Nicolo Machiavelli (1532/1998) bluntly stated that "mercenaries and auxiliaries are useless and dangerous," advising that "since such attachment and devotion cannot be looked for from any save your own subjects, you must, if you would preserve your dominions, or maintain your commonwealth or kingdom, arm the natives of your country" (Machiavelli, 1531/1883). The possibility of returning home always exists in a way that is not true for locals. In a sense, the mere possession of a foreign passport serves as an unintentional "golden bridge" for retreat. As Sun Tzu (5th century B.C.E./1910) pointed out, the ability to retreat can considerably disarm an enemy; a totally surrounded enemy is far likelier to fight more intensely. While this precept was originally intended to apply to how one deals with a foe, this ancient insight can be applied to the way Ukraine is handling its own side. Not only are foreign fighters able to leave, and thus more likely to do so as danger approaches, Ukrainian males between the ages of 18 and 60 cannot (Tondo, 2022), effectively finding themselves surrounded.

The predisposition to leave has already manifested itself among some foreign volunteers. 51-year-old Irishman Ivan Farina, who had previously fought as a volunteer in Bosnia, left Ukraine a mere two weeks after leaving Ireland following a missile attack on his base. According to Farina, those who left, including himself, did so "mainly [for] family reasons" (Lally, 2022). And according to the Swedish volunteer Jesper Söder, although they had arrived individually, many left Ukraine together following a Russian airstrike on foreign volunteers in Lviv (Almryd, 2022).

Even if foreign fighters are willing and able to fight for Ukraine, it does not mean that Ukraine is able to integrate them effectively. This has already manifested itself in the form of materiel challenges. Some volunteers left shortly after arriving due to a lack of weapons (Blann and Ganley, 2022). Foreign fighters also pose unique challenges, which Ukrainian authorities have been forced to reckon with. Something as fundamental as language has burdened government forces. According to Kacper Rekawek, who has researched foreign fighters in Ukraine at the Center for Research on Extremism at the University of Oslo, "You don't know the language, the local reality, you have to be attached to someone who speaks your language, or English at least" (Hume, 2022). This complication exists whether Kiev decides to integrate these volunteers into existing units or to deploy them as a distinct unit where multiple languages would be spoken at the same time (Byman, 2022). While the French Foreign Legion also accepts non-francophones, it at least has the benefit of training their recruits for several months before sending them to a battlefield, which cannot be said of the UIL.

While there is no definitive figure for the number of fighters who have remained, according to a report by the Belgian newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws*, a majority had left within a month of the start of the conflict (De Leebeeck, 2022). Such a high turnover is indicative of low morale and unrealistic expectations. One of the causes has been the initial delay in deployments to the frontline. While some volunteers have been sent, others have been held back for further training. According to a spokesman for the UIL, a greater number of applicants were being rejected by the end of April, which has likely caused a sense of disillusion for some (Arraf, 2022). Among those accepted in the initial cohort, many were dismissed unceremoniously following a lacklustre performance (Milburn, 2022). Furthermore, no decisive military action has so far been determined by foreign fighters, with foreign weapons playing a far larger role.

From a propaganda value perspective, the significance of foreign volunteers in Ukraine has been extremely short-lived. The search for the term “foreign volunteers in Ukraine” on Google peaked during the period of 27 February to 5 March, the same week the formation of the UIL was announced (Google Trends). By the week of 3–9 April, however, searches had plunged by a full 92%; searches for “foreign fighters in Ukraine” had fallen by 90% (Google Trends). In terms of media reporting, much of it has been restricted to profiles of individuals from the same country as the media outlet doing the reporting – Britons being covered in British newspapers, for example (Ferris-Rotman, 2022). To an extent, this has helped Ukrainian efforts to align its fate with that of the West in the minds of some. But this type of reporting is hardly reflective of their operational utility, especially since much of it is conducted prior to departure. For example, an American local newspaper, *The Columbus Dispatch*, interviewed one Henry Hoeft prior to his leaving for Ukraine only for him to return to the United States within two weeks (Doyle, 2022).

Combat effectiveness is a relative term and ought to be contextualized in relation to the wider Ukrainian military. Following moderate success, stalling Russian offensives and preventing the immediate fall of Kiev, Ukrainian officials have become far more selective in who they accept. While early public statements called for those with military experience (a conspicuously broad description), officials have since begun only selecting those with combat experience (Arraf, 2022). This suggests that as Western public and governmental opinion has solidified behind the Ukrainian government, in the context of a more stable military position on the frontline, foreign fighters offer Kiev less value from a propaganda perspective. Instead, President Zelenskyy has focused mostly on pushing for increased Western sanctions and further weapons deliveries (S. Lynch, 2022).

While the propaganda role and value have been relatively limited, it has nonetheless played an outsized role, as indicated by the initial intensity in media coverage and the high level of interest among Westerners. This is not, however, unusual. Even in the case of the earlier Donbass conflict, foreign fighters received disproportionate media coverage (Arielli, 2020). What is perhaps unique in the current conflict is the quick signup rate, if one is to believe Ukrainian officials. One can only speculate at this time as to the accuracy of these claims; Rekawek (2022) estimates that of the roughly 20,000 that expressed interest in fighting for the Ukrainian government, “merely several hundreds to a few thousands” actually travelled to Ukraine. Of 6,000 Americans that registered with the UIL, half were rejected before being interviewed with only roughly a hundred being accepted (Seldin, 2022).

CONCLUSION

Foreign fighters are by no means a new phenomenon. The difficulties and advantages that have existed for earlier generations remain. But the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian conflict does signal a potential remodelling of this tradition, in which non-diasporic elements are attracted to inter-state conflicts. This type of warfare questions the notion of “having military experience” and what it means when one is fighting a significant military power as opposed to conducting insurgence. As the Ukrainian case demonstrates, merely welcoming foreign fighters is not enough for them to be effective combatants.

Following 9/11, the notion of being a “foreign fighter” has been intimately associated with jihadi terrorists and other such groups. The moralistic language used in the context of the conflict in Eastern Europe, and the associated media coverage, suggest that this conception is malleable – but it remains to be seen for how long non-citizen volunteers will be perceived as idealistic and helpful participants in the Ukrainian cause. The longer the fighting lasts and the more intense it gets, the more likely it becomes that more foreign fighters will depart and those that do remain will become involved in atrocities themselves. Western governments may one day have to reckon with the implications of their citizens fighting abroad, whether it is about what happens on the battlefield, or post-traumatic stress disorder upon their return, among other possible issues.

While foreign fighters can play a disproportionate role in a conflict’s narrative, this propaganda role and value can be short-lived, as the experience of Ukraine has, so far, shown us. Nevertheless, the demographics of the fighters can tell us two things: who the host country is seeking to influence and how the rest of the world views the conflict. In the current conflict, it is clear that Ukrainian public opinion efforts are mainly aimed westward and that it is primarily

the West that is sympathetic to Ukraine. While geographic proximity can partially explain this, due to ease of access and travel to the frontline, restrictions posed by some African countries on their citizens fighting for Ukraine highlights the global ambivalence towards the conflict.

The composition and fate of the foreign fighters may very well change the longer the conflict goes on. As violence increases and attention wanes, it is possible that foreign fighters will play an even smaller role than the one they do today. In the case of a negotiated diplomatic settlement, it is likely that the role and fate of foreign fighters will be crucial. In the case of the Donbass War, the withdrawing of “all foreign armed formations, military equipment and also mercenaries” from Ukraine and the disarming of “all illegal groups” were key components of the Minsk II agreement (Chatham House, 2020). It remains to be seen if this will be the case once more.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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