

FROM IDEOLOGY TO IDENTITY: THE COMPLEX REALITIES OF INTERNATIONAL MILITARY VOLUNTEERS IN UKRAINE

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Abstract: *The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has drawn international military volunteers motivated by ideals far removed from financial gain. Unlike mercenaries, who fight primarily for monetary reward, these volunteers are driven by ideological convictions, humanitarian empathy, and a quest for identity and purpose, often risking their lives to support Ukraine's sovereignty. This study investigates the complex motivations, psychological impacts, and battlefield challenges faced by these volunteers. Through available literature review, this article synthesizes findings from diverse studies to present an analysis of the motivations and mental health impacts that define this group. The analysis reveals three primary motivational themes: a commitment to defending democratic values, a strong sense of humanitarian duty, and a desire for personal transformation. Volunteers report significant psychological challenges, with the stress of modern technological warfare, exacerbated by surveillance and cyber operations, intensifying the need for resilience and tactical adaptability. The findings underscore the high psychological cost of volunteerism and highlight the critical difference between ideologically driven volunteers and mercenaries. This study contributes to conflict and military psychology by offering nuanced insights into modern military volunteerism. The findings underscore the need for legal protections, comprehensive mental health support, and post-conflict reintegration programs, aiming to support these volunteers who fight not for profit but for principle and solidarity.*

Keywords: *international military volunteering, ideological motivation, Ukraine conflict, volunteer psychology, modern warfare adaptation, combat motivation*

1. INTRODUCTION

The onset of Russia's military engagement in Ukraine in 2022 catalyzed a significant international response, manifesting in the mobilization of volunteers worldwide. This surge in volunteerism is not an isolated event but reflects a recurring theme in the annals of history, where ideological convictions have drawn individuals to participate in conflicts far from their homelands. Notably, mobilization echoes the spirit of international solidarity seen during the Afghan-Soviet conflict, where ideological motivations spurred thousands to join the fray. In the contemporary context, the Ukrainian crisis has galvanized a diverse cohort encompassing military veterans, humanitarian workers, and ordinary citizens, all united in their support for Ukraine's sovereignty. The plurality of motivations underpinning this engagement ranges from commitment to ideological principles to deeply personal convictions, with a significant number identifying the defense of democratic ideals against authoritarian encroachment as a pivotal concern. The precedence of such mobilizations is evident in historical instances such as the Afghan – Soviet war, where ideological and religious motivations were paramount among volunteers from predominantly Muslim countries supporting the mujahedeen against

Soviet forces. Similarly, the Bosnian conflict (1992-1995) attracted international volunteers motivated by solidarity and a desire to counter ethnic atrocities, paralleling the current influx of volunteers in Ukraine who moved by reports of aggression and human rights violations. The fight against ISIS in Syria further exemplifies this pattern, where international volunteers allied with Kurdish forces oppose extremist ideologies, driven by a commitment to defend fundamental rights and democratic values, akin to the motivations observed in Ukraine. This study seeks to delve into the multifaceted motivations of foreign volunteers in the Ukrainian conflict, exploring the unique challenges posed by a highly mediatized and technologically advanced warfare landscape. By examining both traditional and innovative combat tactics, including the use of cutting edge technology, this research aims to shed light on the adaptability and resilience required by volunteers to navigate the complexities of modern battlefields. This exploration contributes to the corpus of literature on international military volunteering, offering nuanced insights into the interplay between ideological fervor, psychological resilience, and tactical adaptability within the context of contemporary global conflicts.

2. BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

International military volunteering is a recurrent phenomenon in global conflicts, involving ideological stakes and universal values. According to international norms and the law of conflict, military volunteering refers to a person's free commitment to provide military support to a combatant party in an armed conflict, without external coercion. In international humanitarian law, military volunteers differ from mercenaries in their motivation - based on ideological or humanitarian convictions, not financial gain [19].

This legal framework is essential for the clear delineation between volunteers and mercenaries, legitimizing volunteer participation as an expression of solidarity and ideological commitment, especially in the context of major political and humanitarian crises. Military volunteering is legally acceptable as long as participants abide by international rules and do not carry out aggressive or illegal actions [5].

Against the backdrop of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Ukrainian government established the International Legion of Territorial Defense of Ukraine, which has become a center of attraction for international volunteers committed to supporting Ukrainian sovereignty. This unit, also known as the International Legion of Ukraine, has attracted thousands of fighters from various countries, including the US, Canada, France, Germany, the UK, as well as Latin America and Asia [20].

The International Legion of Ukraine was created as a component of national defense, thus allowing the participation of foreign fighters under the direct authority of the Ukrainian armed forces. Members of this legion are paid a stipend to cover basic needs and support the continuity of combat, similar to Ukrainian soldiers. Thus, these volunteers are not considered mercenaries according to Article 47 of Protocol I of the Geneva Conventions, which defines mercenarism as an activity motivated primarily by substantial financial gain.

The majority of Legion members have previous military experience, either as veterans of their home countries' militaries or as former soldiers with theater of war experience [2]. This experience contributes to their professionalism and adaptability on the battlefield, although there are variations in training and skill level among unit members.

Although the international community does not perceive these volunteers as mercenaries, Russian propaganda often mischaracterizes them as "paid soldiers", however, the volunteers are motivated by a desire to defend Ukrainian democracy and sovereignty, viewing their involvement as an act of moral duty.

International volunteers in the Ukrainian Legion are motivated by a mixture of ideological and humanitarian factors. An analysis of ideological motivations, shows that many volunteers perceive the conflict in Ukraine as a defense against global authoritarianism, thus contributing to the strengthening of democratic values internationally [14].

A report [11] by the International Center for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) indicates that about 60% of foreign volunteers in Ukraine are motivated by a desire to defend freedom and democracy, seeing Russia as a direct threat to these values, another study reveals that many of these volunteers identify with an international resistance group against oppression, seeing themselves as a barrier against the spread of authoritarianism [22]. A study [7] suggests that some volunteers are deeply influenced by reports of war crimes and attacks on civilians, perceiving their participation as a moral duty to protect the Ukrainian population from violence and abuse. This humanitarian motivation is similar to that found in other conflicts, such as the Bosnian war, where international volunteers have been driven by concerns for human rights and the protection of civilians. Another study [10] adds that the majority of the volunteers interviewed see the aggression against Ukraine as a threat not only to a nation, but also to the fundamental principles of international humanitarian. Some volunteers join conflict out of a desire for identity transformation and the regaining of personal purpose, perceiving their involvement in conflict as an opportunity to give new meaning to life and find camaraderie in a global context of solidarity [2], this study found that 45% of the volunteers surveyed see the experience as a way to overcome feelings of isolation or disillusionment in civilian life.

The literature provides numerous historical examples of military volunteering, many of which have significant parallels with the International Legion in Ukraine. For example, in the Afghan-Soviet war (1979-1989), thousands of volunteers from predominantly Muslim countries joined the mujahedeen to resist the Soviet invasion, motivated by religious beliefs and opposition to communism. Similarly, the Bosnian war (1992-1995) attracted international volunteers who, out of religious solidarity, supported the Bosnian Muslim community, seeing their involvement as a defense of humanitarian values and a response to ethnic atrocities. Similarly, in the conflict in Syria (2014-2019), many international volunteers joined Kurdish forces to fight against ISIS extremism, motivated by solidarity with Kurdish values and a desire to defend fundamental rights and democracy.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a documentary analysis methodology based on reviewing and synthesizing interviews conducted by other researchers in the field of international military volunteering. This approach allows for an in-depth assessment of the experiences and motivations of international volunteers involved in the conflict in Ukraine through secondary analysis of qualitative data. In this study, the documentation was conducted by analyzing recent studies and interviews published in academic and reputable media sources in order to provide a comprehensive perspective on the phenomenon of international military volunteering in Ukraine, exploring the ideological and psychological aspects underlying volunteer participation. This approach allows triangulating information from a variety of sources, thus improving the reliability and accuracy of the findings.

For the analysis, interviews and qualitative studies published by researchers were selected using strict criteria of validity and relevance. The selection process focused on materials from recognized academic sources, reputable publications and international

media reports published after 2022, thus ensuring the timeliness of the data and their correspondence with the context of the conflict in Ukraine. Studies were selected based on the following criteria:

- Thematic relevance, the chosen materials contain details about the motivations, experiences and psychological challenges of international volunteers.
- Methodological rigor, only studies that used recognized methodologies and provided detailed descriptions of the methodological framework were included.
- Compliance with ethical standards, only interviews that were conducted in accordance with ethical regulations and which ensured anonymity of the participants were included in the analysis.

To comply with ethical standards of secondary research, the analysis was conducted with caution to avoid interpretations that could compromise the confidentiality of the original participants. As this study is based on previously validated and published data, the results obtained are strengthened by triangulating information from multiple sources.

4. FINDINGS

This section summarizes the results of the literature review on the motivations, battlefield experiences and psychological impact on international volunteers in Ukraine. Recent studies provide detailed insights into the profile of volunteers, their motivations and the unique challenges they face in the context of a highly publicized and technologically advanced war.

The motivations to get involved in the conflict in Ukraine are complex and fall into three main categories: ideological commitment, humanitarian solidarity and the desire for personal development.

A central motivation for volunteers is the perception of the conflict as an essential struggle to protect democratic values against authoritarianism. In an analysis of 50 interviews with volunteers, Käihkö notes that the majority of participants perceive their mission in Ukraine as part of a global effort to counter authoritarian expansion [13]. The report by the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism shows that about 60% of foreign volunteers in Ukraine are motivated by a desire to defend freedom and democracy, perceiving Russia as a direct threat to these values [11]. Studies also analyzes motivations through the lens of psychological factors, emphasizing that volunteers identify with an international resistance group against oppression and perceive themselves as a barrier against authoritarianism.

Many volunteers are deeply influenced by reports of war crimes and attacks on civilians [7], from the 40 interviews analyzed, the researchers found that 70% of volunteers perceive their participation as a moral duty to protect the Ukrainian population from violence and abuse. This humanitarian motivation is similar to that observed in other conflicts, such as the Bosnian war, where international volunteers were mobilized by human rights and civilian protection concerns. The majority of volunteers interviewed perceive the aggression against Ukraine as a threat not only to a nation, but also to fundamental principles of international humanitarian law [10].

Some volunteers are motivated by a deep desire for identity transformation and personal development [2], they perceive participation in conflict as an opportunity to give new meaning to their lives and find camaraderie in a context of global solidarity. In a sample of 30 volunteers surveyed, 45% mentioned that involvement in the conflict in

Ukraine gave them the chance to experience a strong existential meaning, in contrast to the alienation and disillusionment they had experienced previously.

International volunteers in Ukraine face a unique set of tactical challenges, imposed by combining modern technologies with traditional combat strategies.

Adapting to drone warfare and advanced technology: volunteers in Ukraine need to adapt quickly to a battlefield where drones and advanced surveillance systems are widely used, nearly 70% of the international combatants surveyed feel considerable psychological pressure due to the constant risk of detection, which requires rapid adaptation to defensive strategies against aerial attacks and digital surveillance, they also note the psychological impact of surveillance technologies and the constant pressure to adapt to new combat conditions [6].

Trench warfare and defensive strategies: an analysis [23] based on the experiences of foreign combatants highlights the challenges of trench warfare, which requires significant physical and psychological endurance. Volunteers are exposed to intense artillery barrage and are forced to use modern defensive structures and adapted methods to protect themselves from continuous attacks. The study shows that 80% of the volunteers experience a significant psychological impact due to prolonged exposure to the harsh trench conditions and the constant need to remain vigilant in the face of attack.

The conflict in Ukraine generates profound psychological effects on volunteers, who are subjected to constant exposure to trauma and high stress [9], volunteers experience a variety of psychological effects, including anxiety and emotional exhaustion. In a sample of 25 volunteers, 68% reported symptoms of chronic stress and insomnia, noting that ideological motivations help them cope better with stress. Studies [21] confirm high rates of PTSD and depression among volunteers with prolonged exposure to violence, both among international combatants and civilians. The study provides insight into the emotional strain and need for structured post-conflict psychological support.

The important role of social support and camaraderie in the International Legion in the psychological adjustment of volunteers who benefit from close bonds with peers exhibit greater psychological resilience despite the physical and emotional difficulties of conflict [24]. Solidarity among volunteers helps to maintain morale and a sense of belonging, thus compensating for isolation and psychological exhaustion, social relationships may function as a psychological shield against long-term PTSD.

5. FINAL ANALYSIS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL MILITARY VOLUNTEERING

The conflict in Ukraine marks a significant moment in the evolution of international military volunteering, bringing together fighters from different cultures and backgrounds, motivated by a combination of democratic ideals, humanitarian solidarity and a desire for personal development. This trans-national mobilization, facilitated by modern technology and media communication networks, demonstrates how ideological conflicts in the digital age continue to attract global voluntary participation, even in a context characterized by high risks and complexity.

The International Legion of Ukraine is a unique example of the integration of international volunteers into the formal military structure of a sovereign state. It has created a diversified defense force that reflects an international commitment against authoritarian aggression. The volunteers contribute not only to the territorial defense of Ukraine, but also to building international support for a cause that transcends national borders, and are perceived as representatives of a global movement in defense of democracy.

The diverse profiles of volunteers in the International Legion - including experienced veterans and civilians with no prior experience - have produced an adaptable unit capable of meeting the tactical challenges of modern warfare[2]. This structure enables rapid adaptation to changing battlefield conditions and ensures a high degree of resilience and tactical innovation in the face of threats from Russian forces. In addition, the integration of international structures into national defense, is a potential model for other states facing existential threats, contributing to an increased sense of global solidarity and social cohesion [24].

Although ideological and humanitarian motivations give international volunteers a strong sense of purpose, the psychological impact of participating in a protracted conflict cannot be underestimated. According to a research [16], constant exposure to violence, risks to life, and casualties among comrades generate high levels of stress and emotional exhaustion, while combat trauma remains a significant factor in the volunteer experience. Without adequate psychological support, many are at risk of developing long-term psychological conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and severe anxiety, thus highlighting the acute need for post-conflict support and structured psychological interventions.

Another study [7] emphasizes the critical role of social and digital support networks in maintaining morale and resilience of volunteers, the camaraderie and interpersonal bonds developed during conflict prove to be crucial for stress management, providing a base of mutual support in the absence of other resources. These social and solidarity networks help to mitigate the negative effects of trauma, but also suggest the need for structured support, both in the short term and post-conflict.

Technology plays a central role in the war in Ukraine, presenting international volunteers with both unique challenges and opportunities. The use of drones, surveillance systems and digital communications is redefining the experience of volunteers on the battlefield, adding unprecedented tactical complexity. The studies [15] document the psychological pressure generated by the constant requirement to adapt to a digitized battlefield, noting that volunteers are forced to combine traditional combat skills with advanced technological knowledge to survive and accomplish complex missions.

Beyond the direct impact on combat tactics, the digital exposure of volunteers on social media has introduced an additional psychological dimension. Volunteers face pressure to manage both their work on the battlefield and their public image, which amplifies psychological stress and creates a dual role, both physical and symbolic, this media exposure increases the commitment to the mission, but it also intensifies the emotional coping demands in a conflict where both the public and the battlefield are deeply interconnected [8].

The conflict in Ukraine demonstrates an emerging trend in international military volunteerism, showing how transnational mobilization can become a crucial component of a state's defense effort. This global engagement in support of a democratic and humanitarian cause offers valuable lessons for future ideological conflicts, suggesting that such collaboration can strengthen both the military capability and the social cohesion of a nation under pressure.

The implications of this phenomenon highlight the need for a robust psychological support system for international military volunteers, especially in post-conflict transition phases. Research suggests that psychological resources and social support networks need to be systematically integrated to sustain the motivation and mental health of volunteers in the long term. At the same time, as technology continues to advance, conflict coping strategies will require specific training in order for volunteers to operate effectively and safely in intensely mediatized and digitized combat environments [16].

5. CONCLUSION

This study unravels the intricate tapestry of international military volunteering amidst the conflict in Ukraine, offering a nuanced understanding of the motivations fueling this global mobilization. These findings underscore the potent mix of ideological commitment, humanitarian solidarity, and the quest for personal development that propels individuals from diverse backgrounds to join forces in this pivotal struggle. This study contributes to the discourse on contemporary conflict studies by shedding light on the complexities of volunteer participation in a technologically advanced and highly mediatized war environment. The analysis reveals that the motivations of international volunteers are multifaceted and deeply interconnected. Ideologically, volunteers are driven by a profound commitment to defend democratic principles against the tide of authoritarianism, seeing their involvement as a crucial front in the global fight for freedom and democracy. This ideological drive is complemented by a strong sense of humanitarian solidarity, with many volunteers drawn to the conflict through reports of human rights abuses and a moral imperative to protect the vulnerable. Additionally, conflict offers a unique context for personal development, allowing volunteers to find a sense of purpose and community in the midst of chaos. Tactically, the study highlights volunteers' adaptation to a new warfare paradigm, characterized by the integration of advanced technologies such as drones and digital surveillance. This adaptation is not merely technical, but also psychological, as volunteers navigate the dual pressures of combat effectiveness and media visibility. The resilience and innovation demonstrated by these volunteers redefine the operational landscape of military volunteering, suggesting a blueprint for future engagement in similar conflicts. Psychologically, this research emphasizes the critical role of social bonds and camaraderie in sustaining volunteer morale and mental health. These internal support networks are vital for mitigating the traumatic impact of prolonged conflict exposure, underscoring the necessity of comprehensive psychological support systems for volunteers during and after their service. Conclusively, this study not only enriches our understanding of the dynamics of international military volunteering in the modern age, but also charts a path for future research in this critical area. This calls for a deeper exploration of the psychological ramifications of volunteering, the impact of technological advancements on combat tactics and volunteer experiences, and the development of support mechanisms to aid volunteers' reintegration post-conflict. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of international solidarity and the collective defense of democratic values, urging a re-evaluation of global responses to authoritarian threats. In sum, the contributions of international military volunteers in the Ukraine conflict illuminate the evolving nature of contemporary warfare and the indomitable spirit of the global citizenry united by shared ideals. As we look to the future, this study serves as a foundational reference for policymakers, military strategists, and humanitarian organizations, guiding the formulation of strategies that harness the power of volunteerism in the service of peace, democracy, and human dignity.

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