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The Utility of Foreign Volunteers in Ukraine

The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine supposedly marks the return of the paradigmatic conventional high-intensity warfare, thus calling into question the past two decades of irregular conflict. Upon closer inspection, however, the war in Ukraine also exhibits several continuities, including the fact that non-citizens are fighting on behalf of both conflict parties. This paper examines the role of such volunteers in the Ukrainian war effort. Based on a review of the existing literature, our study argues that there is a need for a distinction between regular and irregular foreign volunteers. The paper then proposes a novel typology of such volunteers, based on their host's legal status as well as their organizational capacity. Through a number of case studies including the International Legion, Chechen volunteer battalions as well as the Russian Volunteer Corps, and by comparing them to previous conflicts, the paper examines the utility of foreign volunteers for Ukraine. Its findings indicate that the Ukrainian experience largely confirms historical trends: Foreign volunteers are primarily useful for strategic messaging and garnering international attention. Meanwhile, their impact at the operational and tactical level is limited, with irregular volunteers having a higher probability than regular ones to affect battlefield outcomes. On the other hand, the Ukrainian case also shows some nuances with regard to the International Legion neither fitting the irregular nor regular volunteer category neatly as well as the attainment of deniability by using Russian volunteer groups carrying out cross-border raids.

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History and Political Science

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