

Book Review

Foreign Fighters in Ukraine: The Brown-Red Cocktail

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Book Title

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The issue of foreign fighters participating in wars abroad and then returning to their homelands has been a highly topical and politicised one due to many links found to terrorism upon their return (OHCHR, 2024). While much research has been dedicated to foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, less has covered similar issues in the case of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

Kacper Rękawek starts his monograph with a question: is the Russian-Ukrainian war a potential space for attracting and radicalising right-wing fighters from the West that might pose a danger of extremist violence back in their homelands upon their return? The short answer is no. The more interesting discussion is – why not? While the author does not dwell directly on the reasons for this latter question, his detailed and captivating story of foreign fighters participating in the Russian-Ukrainian war gives us some clues.

Rękawek puts forward an argument that ideologically, foreign fighters constitute a “brown-red cocktail” where right- and left-wing ideologies mix and even coexist. Dissecting the propositions of Russian (propagandist) media as well as Western mainstream media, the author finds that the definitions of far-right and far-left ideologies constructed in the 20th century are not easily applied to the realities of both sides in the war. He finds out that individuals who profess far-right ideologies that are racist, anti-LGBTQ, and anti-globalist were fighting alongside those who claim to be far-left without any discomfort. What united them was their anti-American positions. The author carefully deconstructs the motivations, ideologies and experiences of foreign fighters arriving from the Western countries to participate in the Russian-Ukrainian war, mostly focusing on the 2014-2016 period but dedicating the last chapter to potential mobilisations of the foreign fighters during the first year of the re-escalation of the war into a full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Since the numbers of the fighters are so low, the author opts for individual stories of fighters coming from different Western countries and situates them within the institutional and state level circumstances of both Ukraine and the countries of origin.

When it comes to practical organising, Rękawek discusses networks within the right-wing circles in countries of origins as well as Ukraine and Russia, and notes that those individuals who had established contacts were more likely to also mobilise during 2022. Surprisingly, he finds little evidence that Ukrainian or Russian diasporas served as recruitment channels for the fighters in Ukraine, unlike what has been seen in other wars. While the purpose of the book is perhaps descriptive, a more

theoretical, abstract level of motivations to join this war could be of large value. For example, one could delineate some of the following narratives that are implicitly present throughout the book but never actually discussed:

As related to (collective) memory: One of the more fascinating findings shows that some fighters, notably those on the Russian side, would relate the reasons for joining to other wars/conflicts. The author discusses an example of foreign fighters from Spain who saw the initial periods of the Russian-Ukrainian war as similar to the Spanish Civil War. They would join the pro-Russian “separatists” and see themselves as fighting what they saw as the “Franco”-esque army of Ukraine. Fighters from Serbia, who also predominantly joined the pro-Russian side, would refer to the debt they owe to Russia for joining them in their “anti-NATO fight” during the Balkan wars. Another narrative pertaining to memory is a hint the author gives on intergenerational transmittance of trauma (a phenomenon discussed by Baser and Toivanen, 2024; Féron, 2024). Here was an example of an American fighter who joined the Ukrainian side of the war without ideological reasons but admitted that his Latvian grandma shared memories of being persecuted by “Russian/Soviet” rule. This, he claimed, together with the news of Russian invasion pushed him to join the war effort on the Ukrainian side.

Masculinity and saviour narratives: It seems most Western foreign fighters (predominantly men) on both sides experienced disillusionment and disappointment as nothing was organised as they envisioned it: they were often treated as “tourists” and not heroes, and they were not always even permitted to participate in the actual battles. Central and Eastern European as well as Russian foreign fighters tended to have an easier time integrating into existing structures and suffered less of a language barrier. This seems to point to another ideological dimension of how the Western foreign fighters thought of Ukraine and its people – no matter the military experience, they saw themselves as masculine saviours who were not appreciated by the locals.

In the final chapter of the book, the author analyses the first half a year of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and critically approaches the issue of potential re-mobilisation of the foreign fighters. He concludes that during this period motivations of the foreign fighters in joining the war were less ideological. They acted more in a capacity of “concerned citizens”. While only time will show whether new patterns of participation have emerged, the author continues to claim that the expected, in the West, mass mobilisation of the far-right individuals to join the Russian-Ukrainian war has largely failed. It would be of great value to continue this research and draw conclusions on the theoretical level which would also aid in our analysis of the Russian-Ukrainian war overall and its specific narratives circulating globally.

References

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