

The Foreign Fighters On The Front Lines Of The Russia-Ukraine War



John P. Ruehl

On February 2, 2023, former U.S. Marine Peter Reed [was killed](#) in Ukraine while evacuating civilians in the front-line city of Bakhmut. [Two days later](#) on February 4, the bodies of two British volunteers, Christopher Perry and Andrew Bagshaw, were returned as part of a prisoner swap deal with Russian forces. Their deaths mark some of the latest Western casualties in Ukraine one year after Russian forces invaded the country in February 2022.

Foreign fighters have flocked to Ukraine [since the initial round of Russian military intervention](#) in 2014. But following the Russian invasion in February 2022, the number of fighters making their way to Ukraine has skyrocketed. After Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy [asked](#) foreigners to join the International Defense Legion of Ukraine at the beginning of the war on February 27, around [20,000 volunteers from more than 50 countries](#) arrived in Kyiv over the next two weeks.

Many traveled to the country [for ideological reasons](#). In contrast to the disillusionment many Western veterans felt after combat tours in [Afghanistan](#) and [Iraq](#), the belief that they would be helping to “[ease Ukrainian suffering](#)” and would be [defending democracy](#) have been powerful motivators in bringing thousands of volunteers to Kyiv.

However, the vast majority of foreign arrivals [returned home before the summer of 2022](#) for several reasons. Some [lacked credible experience](#) and were accused of being “[war tourists](#)” instead of being dedicated to Ukraine’s liberation. Western soldiers who volunteered also found themselves [operating](#) without strong air support and other key technological advantages enjoyed over militant groups in the Middle East.

Language barriers have often inhibited foreign fighters from not being able to [communicate](#) clearly with their Ukrainian counterparts. Allegations of criminality,

[both in their home countries as well as in Ukraine](#), have also been levied on some foreign volunteers.

Most estimates place [between 1,000 and 3,000 foreign fighters](#) currently supporting Ukrainian forces, largely serving in three battalions of the International Legion. Hundreds of more professional foreign volunteers are believed to be serving in smaller units separate from the International Legion.

These include groups dominated by citizens from across the former Soviet Union, such as the [Georgian Legion](#), [Chechen battalions](#), and [Kalinoŭski Regiment](#), a group of Belarusian fighters. Western-dominated military units include groups like [Alpha](#), [Phalanx](#), and [the Norman Brigade](#). However, even these units have faced controversy. The leadership of the Norman Brigade, a Canadian-led unit, for example, [has been repeatedly criticized by former members](#).

Western private military and security companies (PMSCs) are also active in Ukraine. The [Mozart Group](#), a U.S. PMSC, styled to counter the Russian PMSC Wagner Group (similarly named after a German composer), was active in the Ukrainian conflict in the early days. But as funding dried up and remarks by some of its members drew negative attention on social media, [the Mozart Group fell apart](#). Its remaining leadership is currently attempting to reorganize itself and get back to the front line.

The involvement of U.S. volunteers in Ukraine has also raised questions over potential [violations of the Neutrality Act](#), enacted in 1794 to prevent American citizens from getting involved in foreign wars. Yet while the U.S. State Department has [recommended against](#) U.S. citizens from traveling to Ukraine, Washington has done little to prevent [thousands of its citizens](#) from traveling there.

The U.S. is not alone in its mixed messaging over foreign fighters. The British government has [stated it is illegal](#) for British troops and ex-service personnel to travel to Ukraine to fight, but just days into the Russian invasion in February 2022, then-Foreign Secretary Liz Truss [announced her support](#) for British individuals traveling to Ukraine to do so. Other Western governments have, meanwhile, declared they would discourage individual citizens from traveling to Ukraine but [would not prosecute those who did so](#).

This has not prevented some legal action from being taken against those who are

caught. [In June 2022](#), a court in the Russian-controlled separatist region of Donetsk sentenced two British citizens and a Moroccan to death for fighting in the Ukrainian military. “Such treatment of prisoners of war constitutes a war crime, but the Russians claimed that they were mercenaries and, thus, the rules of war did not apply to them,” [stated](#) the Harvard International Review.

Wary of instigating a wider war between NATO and Russia, Western officials have refrained from putting official boots on the ground. Nonetheless, U.S. special operations forces [have been active in Ukraine](#) since before the war and continue to operate in the country, along with CIA personnel. Additionally, special forces from Britain, France, Canada, Lithuania, and other Western allies [are also active](#) in Ukraine.

Alongside the lack of clarity over the intelligence and special forces operations, it is difficult to confirm the exact number of Westerners in Ukraine, what type of roles they are serving, where exactly they are, and how many have died. Seemingly erroneous claims are also often made regarding their casualties. On January 25, 2023, a Turkish website, allegedly citing what is assumed to be data from Israel’s intelligence agency Mossad, [stated that thousands of soldiers from NATO countries](#) had been killed, including hundreds from the U.S. and the UK. This claim was quickly [denied by NATO](#).

The Kremlin has, meanwhile, highlighted how Russia is [not just fighting Ukraine, but NATO itself](#), and [captured](#) Western fighters are key to portraying this message to both the Russian public and international audiences. Moscow has [sought to frame the conflict](#) as a wider struggle against the West, which it believes will resonate with other populations around the world.

[In March 2022](#), Russian President Vladimir Putin called for foreign fighters to help liberate the Donbas, while according to Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, 16,000 foreigners had indicated they were willing to fight alongside Russian forces in Ukraine, according to Newsweek.

Yevgeny Prigozhin, the financier of Wagner Group, [declared on his company’s Telegram channel](#) in February 2023 that more than 10 million U.S. citizens had signed up with the group to fight for Russia. While Wagner has found most of its new recruits [from Russian prisons](#), the Kremlin has had some luck in recruiting foreign fighters to Ukraine. Many Russian PMSCs have typically [recruited from](#)

[former Soviet states](#), and Central Asian fighters are [suspected to be fighting on both sides](#) of the conflict.

Many Serbians also resent the [West's historical role in their country's affairs](#) and small groups of Serbian nationals have been fighting alongside Russian forces in Ukraine [since 2014](#). Serbian officials noted in January 2023 that they were [monitoring reports](#) of additional Serbians serving Russia in Ukraine. Montenegrin officials are also attempting to prevent their citizens, many of whom share pro-Serbian and pro-Russian sentiment, [from going to Ukraine](#), with some having already done so since 2014 as well.

Iranian soldiers and personnel are [in Ukraine helping Russians](#) operate Iranian-made drones, and according to a Ukrainian official, [10 Iranians were killed](#) during an attack on Russian positions in October 2022. Hundreds of Syrian fighters are [also suspected to be in Ukraine](#), mirroring the dynamics of the Syrian civil war where Iranian, Syrian, and Russian troops have fought together since 2015.

The possibility of additional volunteers from other countries joining the war on both sides remains high. [In August 2022](#), Russian state media began suggesting that up to 100,000 North Korean volunteers could end up supporting the Kremlin's campaign in Ukraine. While that number is clearly optimistic, North Korean volunteers may come to exceed the handful of [South Korean citizens](#) known to have traveled to Ukraine to fight for Kyiv.

Additionally, [small numbers of U.S. citizens](#) have also gone to fight for Russia, alongside U.S.-trained Afghan commandos [also now fighting for Russia in Ukraine](#). Though the Kremlin [denies the reports](#), it is believed Afghan soldiers have been [actively recruited](#) by the Kremlin for months.

The Russia-Ukraine war is clearly more than a war between two countries. In addition to the material aid, both [Russia](#) and [particularly Ukraine](#) have received from their allies, thousands of foreign fighters from around the world have arrived to fight alongside them. As more volunteers continue to arrive, there is a greater risk of other countries becoming entangled in the conflict. Establishing safeguards to deal with foreign volunteer casualties and prisoners of war is crucial to preventing the conflict from escalating further.

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Source: Globetrotter