

American Foreign Fighters in Ukraine: Motivations, Profiles, and Risk-assessment

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Since the outbreak of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, a significant number of American citizens have voluntarily traveled to fight alongside Ukrainian forces. These individuals, motivated by a mix of personal convictions and opportunistic motivations, have joined the conflict despite the United States not being formally involved in the war.

Utilizing an original open-source dataset, this report firstly profiles American foreign fighters in Ukraine post-2022, examining their motivations, supporting organizations, and wartime roles. Subsequently, it analyzes the challenges and vulnerabilities confronting returning American fighters, with a focus on mental health needs, available reintegration programs in the United States (U.S.), and the broader social and political landscape, including potential implications of a second Trump presidency. It concludes that while not ideologically attracted to extremist ideologies or indoctrinated in Ukraine, these fighters still pose a non-negligible security risk due to a lack of recognition for their efforts, limited psychological support, and the changing political climate in the country.

Data

Recording and obtaining statistics on American fighters in Ukraine is difficult due to the limited data tracked and released by government agencies. The U.S. Department of State is not tracking departing individuals; the Customs and Border Protection and the Department of Homeland Security are releasing very partial information; and the Ukrainian International Legion is withholding detailed enrollment data mostly to protect volunteers from Russian reprisal. To mitigate this lack of information, we compiled a

new dataset of American combatants killed in Ukraine since 2022, encompassing variables such as personal details, travel/combat information, professional background, and ideological leanings. We identified basic personal information for 75 deceased individuals and 28 currently active or returned fighters. We also collected a comparative dataset looking at Canadian combatants killed in Ukraine.

Data were sourced and cross-referenced using open-source intelligence, including government documents, news articles, and media reports, supplemented by monitoring social media channels (primarily X and Telegram) used by foreign fighters and their units. Although social media represents a valuable source of information on foreign fighters, many issues of fraud and [misrepresentation](#) were reported. For that reason, we have triangulated all information obtained on social media with additional sources including newspaper articles and government announcements.

American Foreign Fighters in Ukraine: A Profile

Most American foreign fighters in Ukraine possess prior military experience. These individuals are overwhelmingly [male](#), typically in their 20's and 30's with an average age of 32, and some are navigating recovery from challenges such as addiction, cancer, depression, or PTSD related to previous conflicts. According to open-source intelligence, fewer than 10% of this cohort appear to have criminal convictions, including offenses like aggravated battery and unlawful firearm possession; separately, some potential volunteers were reportedly denied entry into Ukraine due to criminal records. In 2024, one foreign fighter was [extradited to the US to face criminal charges](#) committed prior to his departure to Ukraine, including a charge of double homicide.

Over 60% of the fighters identified had previous military experience, mostly in the U.S. Army, including Green Berets, Army Rangers, and Navy SEALs. This proportion is in line with [other studies](#) conducted on foreign fighters in Ukraine. The data also shows a high number of decorated military veterans, many holding stable jobs such as corporate lawyers. This pattern underlines a different profile of foreign fighters and returnees compared to what was observed in Syria and Iraq, in Kurdistan, and Ukraine in 2014 and 2015. For that particular case, studies have underlined [the role of clusters, ideology, and religiosity](#), but also particular [socio-economic factors and criminal networks](#).

Estimating the precise size of foreign fighter contingents remains challenging. However, based on killed-in-action (KIA) data, Americans constitute one of the top three groups by nationality, along with Colombia and Georgia. Colombians are largely reported to be financially motivated mercenaries. Meanwhile, Georgians (notably the Georgian Legion) and Belarusians (fighting with the Kastus Kalinoŭski battalion) represent some of the most consistently active foreign fighter groups in the war. The Georgian Legion has been estimated to number roughly [800 militants](#), mostly Georgians. By comparing the number of American fighters killed in action, a conservative estimate places the total number of American foreign fighters in Ukraine between 600 and 700 individuals. This number does not include U.S. military personnel active in Ukraine. For example, according to [leaked NATO documents](#) in 2023, 14 American special forces and over 40 CIA officers were present in Ukraine at the time.

The geographical distribution of American fighter deaths aligns with key war zones, predominantly Bakhmut, Pervomaisk, and Avdiivka. It was in these locations that most foreign combatants perished during intense engagements with Russian Armed Forces and Wagner Group mercenaries. Although a limited number of fighters were killed on Russian soil in Kursk and Bryansk oblasts, possibly operating

under Ukrainian military intelligence, the prevailing evidence suggests their involvement in urban defensive operations on Ukrainian territory as members of dedicated foreign fighter units.

American-led Military Units in Ukraine

Fighters have predominantly joined units like the Ukrainian International Legion and the Chosen Company (composed mostly of Americans and other Westerners), though some have also joined far-right organizations, like Karpatska Sich, or nationalist organizations, such as the Georgian Legion. This profile is consistent with what is observed in a similar dataset on Canadian foreign fighters in Ukraine.

[The Chosen Company](#) was created at the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, mostly independent from the Ukrainian International Legion. It is composed of roughly 60 fighters from over 31 countries and welcomes many English-speaking fighters including Americans, Canadians, Irish, and Australians, as well as other Western fighters, such as Swedes and Greeks. Fighters are considered members of the Ukrainian Armed Forces and compensated and protected as such. At the same time, [some fighters](#) reported being sent into suicide missions and being put at more risk compared to Ukrainian fighters. The unit fought through the Ukrainian battlefield, but their participation in the [2023 counteroffensive](#) in Southern Ukraine circulated widely on social media, including the [now-viral](#) “Operation Shovel”. The Company also appeared in propaganda videos released by Yevgeny Prigozhin and the infamous Wagner group during the battle of Bakhmut. More recently, in October 2024, the Company was integrated in the [49th Special Purpose Detachment](#) of the Security Service of Ukraine. In May 2025, Commander [O’Leary announced that Company would shut down its activities](#), raising the question if some of its fighters could be fully integrated in the Ukrainian army and not come back to their respective Western countries.

O’Leary – a decorated veteran of the Iowa National Guard who has fought in Iraq (2007-08) and Afghanistan (2010-11) – is the commander of the Chosen Company. When Russia launched its full-scale invasion in February 2022, he felt compelled to help defend Ukrainian freedom and his focus shifted decisively to the war. A month later, he traveled to Ukraine and signed a contract to serve in the armed forces, vowing to stay until the war’s end, despite having no personal connection to the country. Before his involvement in Ukraine, O’Leary also volunteered to train the Kurdish army and fight against the Islamic State in northern Iraq. The Russian government announced a criminal case against O’Leary *in absentia*, accusing him of engaging in mercenary activities, as well as terrorism and supplying weapons to Ukrainian forces. As of now, O’Leary remains in active service in Ukraine as the Chosen Company’s commander while also liaising through social media to highlight both victories and challenges of the conflict.

In July 2024, the company became the subject of [war crime allegations](#) reported in *The New York Times*, citing the execution of Russian Prisoners of War (POWs) and other wounded soldiers attempting to surrender. As in many instances in the war, these allegations were never fully investigated. Some members of the Company were allegedly also executed by Russian forces. O’Leary has strongly denied the accusations and provided his account along with video footage, but they have begun dividing the unit. Such fragmentation is a recurring phenomenon among foreign fighter units. For example, the Norman Brigade, composed mostly of French-speaking Canadians, experienced tensions between foreign fighters which were regularly exposed in [newspapers and social media](#).

Overall, the level of professionalism within foreigner-based units and fighters varies greatly. Although structured as a professional military unit by O’Leary, the Chosen Company became a hub for all kinds of different fighters including deserters, [battle chasers](#), and individuals with criminal backgrounds, as well as several [decorated American military veterans](#). If some units have been integrated into Ukrainian military intelligence and used for high-risk missions, others have approached the fight as [dangerous vacations](#). Such was the case for Jeremy Michael Miller, callsign “Tennessee,” a Floridian tattoo artist and U.S. National Wildland Firefighter who was motivated to travel to Ukraine because he “[wanted to fight in a war](#)”. Miller had no previous military experience prior to joining the Chosen Company but was one of over 1,500 individuals arrested for their participation in the January 6 insurrection on the Capitol. He was charged with multiple felony and misdemeanor offenses in October 2024, only to be pardoned three months later on President Trump’s first day of his second term. Miller’s case illustrates the presence of varying individual motivations and combat experience within foreigner-based units that characterize their variable levels of professionalism. Beyond such personal trajectories, broader structural issues have surfaced. Some commanders are accused of abusing their subordinates and their power; poor leadership and mismanagement, as well as many reports of [poor discipline](#) and war crimes, have also emerged throughout the years.

Motivations

As underlined by the general literature on foreign fighters and specific case studies on Ukraine, motivations for joining foreign conflict zones remain heterogeneous and context-dependent. The case of O’Leary exemplifies [motivations](#) and recurrent narratives offered by volunteers focusing on altruism and [moral imperative](#) – a sense of duty – to defend civilians, their freedom, and the future of democracy. However, that [optimism has increasingly turned into fatalism about the war](#) and the prospect of winning it, as well as its heavy costs on the fighters themselves, particularly their mental health. Such changes and evolution of motivations of many fighters underlines the daunting effect of the brutality of the battlefield.

Western foreign fighters often mention altruism and empathy as primary motivations, but fighters from the Soviet Union underlined the importance of [decolonization and anti-Russian views](#). Roughly 4% of our database comes from Ukraine or other post-Soviet republics. Ukrainian-descent fighters appear to be properly more represented in Canada compared to the US due to the large diaspora in the country and mobilization activities organized by the different Ukrainian communities. Recent political events in the United States have also reignited a [mobilization push](#) inside the country. Other less prominent motivations include thrill and adventure, and in some cases, hiding from American law-enforcement agencies.

Ideological motivations remain limited compared to previous conflicts including Ukraine in 2014 and 2015. In our database, individuals with right-wing ideology are [scarce](#) and are quickly [disbanded](#), a [trend](#) confirmed in most of the contingents of foreign fighters in Ukraine in 2022. If previously Ukraine acted as a hub for European and North American far-right militants, the trend changed with the more stringent vetting process developed by the Ukrainian government in February 2022.

Prior to 2022, individuals with extremist ideologies could more easily infiltrate the ranks of Ukraine’s volunteer legion, with Dalton Kennedy being a prime example. Kennedy was a soldier in the Chosen Company who was KIA near Kharkiv in May 2022. He was a former member of the U.S. Army’s Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps and briefly enlisted in the U.S. Army in August 2015, leaving the following

month without completing Basic Training. Instead, he traveled to Ukraine in 2016 and joined Right Sector, a far-right nationalist paramilitary group in Ukraine. His [neo-Nazi ideology](#) was prominently displayed on social media and he regularly participated in far-right, neo-fascist discourse in online channels for Patriot Front members and at extremist rallies. Before his death, Kennedy was one among seven Americans under FBI investigation for war crimes committed in Ukraine. He was also linked to Alex Zwiefelhofer and Craig Lang, two former U.S. Army soldiers [turned right-wing criminals](#) who met in Ukraine, underscoring the security implications of transnational extremist ties and the potential for radicalized individuals to return to a domestic environment already permeated by far-right discourse.

Funding and Social Media Activities

Social media is an important vector of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation from both sides of the conflict. For foreign fighters, it has had many uses, from showing the reality and brutality of the war, to getting internet fame, and to help raise awareness, support, and funds for soldiers and volunteers. American foreign fighters are funded through a few different channels, as they must finance their own way to the Ukrainian legion or to the units they are joining. There are dedicated fundraising and sponsorship websites that assist with arranging flights, providing equipment, and helping with living expenses. There have been instances of [wealthy individuals](#) who contributed personal funds out of altruistic motivations, and some American volunteers have gotten help from their employers to raise enough money to be able to travel. In many cases, fighters are asked to monetarily contribute to their unit.

A lot of planning takes place in the dozens of Reddit and online channels to gather support and funds for volunteers. For example, the Chosen Company or people allegedly affiliated with them have launched crowdfunding campaigns to procure electronic warfare equipment and drones. Some foreign fighters used social media to increase their fame and act as [influencers](#), often creating friction between fighters and leading to accusations of [misrepresentation](#). Internet fame also comes with the growing risks of [doxxing](#) by Russia's supporters or nefarious agents, increasing the personal risks to fighters to be harassed, blackmailed, and sometimes ultimately targeted in and outside Ukraine.

Funding and Social Media Activities

If combat operations, motivations, and pathways are relatively well documented, the disengagement of non-ideological foreign fighters remains understudied in the literature on foreign fighters, particularly in the context of military veterans who jumped from conflict to conflict.

The challenges American veterans face in accessing adequate mental health care and reintegration support underscores the grim outlook for the return of American volunteers fighting in Ukraine. Despite having served in official U.S. military operations, [only about half](#) of American veterans who need psychological support actually receive it, due to a combination of limited provider availability, organizational and administrative barriers to access, and stigmatizing attitudes. This care gap is reflected in the alarming statistic that veterans die by suicide at a rate [72% higher](#) than their civilian counterparts. Access to the Veteran Affairs (VA) health care is not automatically provided after discharge, even after combat service, and the strict eligibility criteria leads to many veterans being excluded from benefits.

American foreign fighters returning from Ukraine are likely to face complex and compounded psychological challenges stemming from the intense and unfamiliar nature of the conflict. Unlike past U.S. military engagements characterized by counterinsurgency, guerilla tactics, and widespread availability of multilateral support, the war in Ukraine has introduced many American soldiers to a style of warfare focused on heavy artillery and trench warfare. The persistent presence of unmanned aerial systems (UAS) contributes to the development or worsening of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and [anticipatory anxiety](#) similar to WWI-era shell shock and WWII-like battle fatigue. For veterans already coping with trauma from prior deployments, or for those with no prior combat experience, this environment can trigger serious mental health issues.

A PTSD crisis has emerged as a looming concern. Classic symptoms stemming from war include flashbacks, nightmares, hyper-vigilance, emotional numbness, and survivor's guilt. However, with the novelty of this war, different symptoms are likely to manifest, and the risk of complex PTSD (CPTSD) rises. Soldiers on all sides of the conflict have shown signs of trauma – Ukraine's own combatants are reporting [alarmingly high levels](#) of PTSD, anxiety, and depression from the frontlines – and foreign volunteers are no exception. Furthermore, Western volunteers, especially Americans and Canadians, face the psychological difficulty of fighting an enemy who, unlike past adversaries in the Global War on Terror, looks and acts more like themselves, making it harder to mentally separate from the violence. This increases the risk of [moral injury](#), a condition not diagnosed by VA, meaning those suffering from it may not receive the necessary support.

Combat stress and psychological injury often manifest in harmful coping behaviours, notably alcohol and drug abuse. Many veterans turn to substances to self-medicate their anxiety, insomnia, or emotional pain. American volunteers returning from Ukraine are at risk of this pattern, especially given the high-intensity stress they endured and the lack of formal support they receive upon their return. Many volunteers identified in our dataset have a history of substance abuse, and on the frontlines in Ukraine, alcohol and drug use has been [widespread and is rising](#). The use of cannabis and synthetic drugs has skyrocketed among fighters, due to pre-existing addiction, boredom, a way to cope with stress, or to stay alert. Foreign fighters might continue to misuse drugs and alcohol as a form of self-therapy once they have returned home, especially if their care needs go untreated.

Moreover, returnees and their families confront escalating threats of persecution and retaliation from Russia and associated [internet trolls](#). Russia, for instance, widely publicized the deaths of individuals it designates as 'foreign mercenaries', exemplified by the cases of Canadian fighter [Jean-François Ratelle](#) and American fighter [Corey Nawrocki](#). Kill lists detailing foreign fighters' personal information have circulated on Telegram channels. While Western fighters seem less likely to be targeted by Russian intelligence services than fighters from former Soviet Union nations (such as Chechens), the ongoing danger still significantly contributes to the mental burden on these individuals and their families upon return. Additionally, Russia has used the legal system to bring charges against foreign fighters, accusing them of mercenary activities, terrorism, and illegally crossing the border between Ukraine and Russia. In the case of a peace settlement in Ukraine, Russia will use the Interpol Red Notice system to target foreign fighters by requesting their deportation.

The Lack of Formal Reintegration Processes

For American veterans currently fighting in Ukraine – which represent over 60% of the contingent based on our assessment – the situation is even more precarious. If negotiations between Ukraine and Russia lead to a ceasefire in the coming year, as many as 500 American veterans could return home – most without access to adequate mental health care or financial support. Upon returning from Ukraine, they will most likely be ineligible for veteran support for psychological or physical conditions stemming from their service abroad, as these experiences fall outside the scope of official U.S. military duty. The implications of this are serious: without adequate care, these individuals – most of whom already carry unresolved trauma – face heightened risks of psychological deterioration, suicide, and isolation. It has been found that [36.9%](#) of U.S. veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan had been diagnosed with at least one mental health disorder stemming from their service, and returning to a combat zone will aggravate these morbidities.

Returning home will prove to be difficult for those who may struggle with a loss of purpose once removed from the adrenaline-fueled sense of duty at the front, or those carrying grief for fallen soldiers, which can spiral into clinical depression if the trauma goes untreated. Trauma, stress, and burnout have been identified as key drivers to the high suicide rate among veterans: four times as many U.S. post-9/11 veterans have died from suicide than were [killed in combat](#). While no such statistics exist yet for American foreign fighters in Ukraine, this precedent raises concern that without support, some can turn to suicidal ideation – as was the unfortunate case of Stuart Heath Anderson, a U.S. Army veteran from Raleigh, North Carolina (NC), who served in the Ukraine war. Having served with the NC National Guard for 10 years, he deployed to Syria in 2019. In October 2022, at 33 years old, Anderson joined the fight in Ukraine’s International Legion, motivated by a strong sense of duty.

Anderson, callsign “Rico”, took part in many intense battles, including in the Bakhmut region, which saw relentless Russian assaults and long months of heavy urban fighting. He served roughly six months in combat with the Legion, having lost many friends and surviving several near-death encounters in the trenches. Anderson returned home in late 2023, physically intact. However, the psychological wounds of war followed him. His friends and family mentioned he struggled with PTSD and depression, with symptoms of insomnia, flashbacks, and survivor’s guilt. Of his 35-man unit, he was one of only seven survivors. Unfortunately, on January 28, 2025, Anderson took his own life, and [sources](#) imply that the mental scars of war contributed to this tragedy. While he had begun seeing a counselor for combat stress, this move may have been too late. His story highlights the lingering mental health battle that can follow volunteers back from the front, and the need for informed reintegration programs to be put in place for returnees.

Proper support and care can attenuate and prevent the impact of PTSD, depression, and burnout upon return. The experience of Alexander Drueke, a 40-year-old U.S. Army veteran from Tuscaloosa, Alabama, exemplifies this. His 12 years of service included two tours to Iraq. He felt compelled to join the war in Ukraine and did so in spring 2022, joining the International Legion. Drueke, along with fellow American volunteer Andy Huynh, was captured by Russian forces in June 2022 during a firefight near Kharkiv. They endured 105 days of captivity as POWs, including time in a Russian black site where they were tortured, starved, and threatened with execution.

Both volunteers were freed among others in a prisoner exchange in September 2022 and returned home with physical scars and psychological trauma. Drueke had already been 100% combat-disabled with PTSD from his prior service even before Ukraine. However, his prior experience with PTSD [ironically helped him](#)

[cope](#) with the new traumas of the imprisonment. Driven by altruism, instead of returning to combat, he chose to go back to Ukraine in 2023 in a humanitarian capacity. Despite the psychological trauma, Drueke has used therapeutic techniques learned from VA and remains an advocate for Ukraine and for the treatment and reintegration of volunteers, finding purpose in helping others.

Reintegration Strategies for U.S. Foreign Fighters

The U.S. currently lacks a comprehensive policy framework for addressing the return of American foreign fighters from Ukraine. There is no federal reintegration program in place to support these returning volunteers, creating a policy gap with potentially far-reaching consequences. For volunteers who are not veterans, support is even more limited, often relying on general civilian services, nonprofits, or private mental health care.

Only a limited number of reintegration programs currently operate in the U.S., and some have been affected by recent federal budget cuts. In recent years, multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) such as the one at [Boston Children's Hospital](#) and the [Massachusetts Bay Threat Assessment Team](#) have emerged as a promising model. MDTs consist of professional frontline workers and social actors with specialized expertise — such as psychologists, therapists, social workers, law enforcement, youth workers, and school-based resources — as well as individuals directly connected to a case, including religious mentors or former extremists. This collaborative approach is believed to provide a synergistic response to complex issues, ensuring that various needs are addressed simultaneously rather than in isolation, which helps prevent barriers to effective intervention.

At the same time, this problem should not be approached as specifically an American one, but rather a broader Western security issue. Most of the American returnees will not be prosecuted for their military activities in Ukraine, and thus, will remain free to travel abroad. Due to the proximity of Canada and the relative openness of their border, some American returnees could easily return to Canada.

In Canada, [MDTs](#) have achieved positive results managing the return of Canadians from Syria and Iraq with a [trauma-informed model](#), particularly traumatized women and children previously associated with extremist groups. While the Canadian federal government invested time and resources to coordinate services upon entry, Canada benefited from the ability to control the flow of returnees. This was largely due to its policy of repatriating only women and children, which limited the scope of reintegration efforts to this specific group and Canada's responsibilities under the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security. Current policies and programs of reintegration are not always equipped to address the vulnerabilities and the experiences of volunteers coming back from Ukraine.

[Where services do exist](#), they are often underfunded, frequently saturated with clients, and typically focused on specific forms of violent extremism — such as jihadist, far-right, and increasingly nihilistic-deviant individuals. Additionally, the coordination between service providers and federal, state, regional, and municipal government remains limited, particularly in the field of mental health and risk assessment.

Moreover, the United States and Canada may lack the political will to set up or increase funding of such programs as the West perceives the war as a distant, politically strategic fight to protect alliances, making the rehabilitation of returnees seem [unnecessary](#). In the context of an economic recession and [massive cuts](#)

[in social programs](#), combined with a growing perception that America has overspent on defending Ukraine, it appears doubtful that any agencies or political parties will be willing to campaign for additional support.

Without properly tailored reintegration programs, returnees face a difficult transition marked by unresolved psychological traumas, which can easily translate to a return to the frontlines for “battle chasers,” as the difficulties faced in Ukraine [may seem more enticing](#) than the struggle of returning to peace at home. In worse scenarios, individuals might be drifting toward criminal or extremist organizations willing to exploit their skill set acquired in the Ukrainian trenches.

Conclusion

American foreign fighters in Ukraine represent one of the largest contingents along Georgians, Colombians, and Belarusians. The report has underlined the important representation of former military personnel and individuals who fought in other war theaters such as Syria, Ukraine in 2014-2015, and Iraq. The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine has mostly attracted individuals with altruistic motivations rather than ideological. The representation of far-right and far-left ideologies is minimal compared to 2014 and 2015 or other European contingents of foreign fighters.

Because of the conditions on the battlefield, the predominance of urban and trench warfare and the omnipresence of UAVs, many volunteers have experienced PTSDs, increasing their vulnerabilities upon their return. Combined with the political climate in the United States and increased far-right activities and social polarization in the country, the lack of reintegration programs and support systems create the ripe conditions to witness a perfect storm resulting in social and security problems in the long term.

Although the research is focused on American fighters and the current context in the United States, it is important to note that the risk is not confined to American territory. While smaller in number, the Canadian contingent faces similar vulnerabilities and threats. Moreover, most American fighters, except those with criminal convictions, face no mobility restrictions within North America and can travel to Canada with ease.