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Kiwis on the Eastern Front: The motivations of New Zealand veterans fighting for Ukraine

Acknowledgement

This article is dedicated to Kane Te Tai, NZ Veteran, formerly of 2/1 Battalion, The Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment. Killed in action in the Battle of Vuhledar, Donbas Oblast on 20 March 2023 whilst serving as a team leader with the International Legion's Special Service Group. Kane was the primary source for much of the information derived from interviews with NZ veterans serving in the International Legion of Territorial Defence for this article, and in the interests of full disclosure was also my friend.

Introduction

The conflict in Ukraine, which began with the 2014 annexation of Crimea by Russia, escalated in February 2022 into a full-fledged conventional war, attracting international attention and triggering a surge of volunteers from around the world. Among these volunteers are New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) veterans from New Zealand, who have chosen to join the fight in support of Ukraine. This article explores the underlying motivations of these New Zealand veterans to engage in a conflict far from home; delving into the various personal, social, and political factors that have influenced their decision to serve in Ukraine. Through interviews with personnel currently fighting in Ukraine, and returnees, as well as analysis

of primary data, this research seeks to shed light on the unique experiences and driving forces that have brought these individuals to the front lines, contributing to a broader understanding of the complex motivations at play in international volunteerism in times of conflict.

Background of the conflict in Ukraine

After the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) quickly expanded eastward, eventually taking in most of the European nations that had been in the former Warsaw Pact sphere. The Baltic republics of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, once parts of the Soviet Union, joined NATO, as did Poland, Romania, and others. That placed NATO military forces hundreds of kilometres closer to Moscow, and for the first time since its inception, directly bordering Russia. In 2008, NATO leaders publicly stated an intent to eventually enrol Ukraine. Russian President Vladimir Putin has described the Soviet disintegration as one of the greatest catastrophes of the 20th century, and one that robbed Russia of its rightful place among the world's great powers. He has spent his two decades in power rebuilding Russia's military and reasserting its geopolitical clout across the globe. The Russian President has called NATO's expansion eastward menacing, and publicly describes the prospect of Ukraine joining the organization a major threat to Russia's sovereignty. As Russia has grown more assertive geopolitically and stronger militarily, President Putin's complaints about the military alliance have grown more strident. He has repeatedly invoked the threat of American ballistic missiles and combat forces being deployed in Ukraine, though US, Ukrainian and NATO officials insist there have been no such deployments.

President Putin has also insisted that Ukraine is fundamentally part of Russia: culturally and historically, ignoring ample evidence to the contrary, including the belief of the majority of Ukrainians. Ukrainian-Russian relations worsened significantly in early 2014, when mass protests in Ukraine forced out the Ukrainian president closely allied with Mr Putin. Moscow also raised, trained, and sustained a separatist rebellion that took control of part of the Donbas Oblast of Ukraine in a war that had killed more than 13,000 people up to the invasion last year. In December 2021, a few months before invading, Russia presented NATO and the United States with a set of written demands that it stated were required to be met to ensure its security but were impossible for the West to practically meet. Foremost among them were a guarantee that Ukraine never join NATO, and that NATO draw down its forces in the Eastern European countries that had already joined. On 24 February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine with the intention of annexing the entire country.

New Zealand's stance on the conflict

The New Zealand government views the Russian invasion of Ukraine as an unprovoked and illegal attack. It has provided a range of humanitarian and military support to Ukraine including funding directly to NATO, New Zealand Defence Force training teams to train Ukrainian military recruits, and intelligence/logistics/liason/administrative support. However, no NZDF forces have been acknowledged as having operated in Ukraine itself at the time of this article.

New Zealand discourages its citizens from enlisting in the Armed Forces of Ukraine. However, it is legal for New Zealanders to enlist in the International Legion under New Zealand law. In New Zealand, mercenary activities are prohibited under the Mercenary Activities (Prohibition) Act 2004,¹ however the Act's definition of a mercenary is relatively limited. The criteria include that a person must be motivated by private gain and be paid substantially more than local soldiers, both of which are relatively subjective. New Zealand's terrorism suppression laws² are also somewhat relevant to foreign fighters in offshore conflicts, but these only apply if the person engages in terrorism. Apart from these two categories, there is no specific law governing foreign fighting, and therefore nothing that prevents a New Zealand citizen from volunteering to fight in Ukraine. Although New Zealand has not taken legislative action to prevent volunteer fighting more generally, the government does not encourage it. New Zealand has specifically advised against travelling to Ukraine and stated that it may not be able to provide consular assistance to citizens who choose to fight there.

Involvement of foreign veterans in the conflict

In Ukraine, a 2016 presidential decree³ made it possible for non-Ukrainian citizens to enlist in Ukraine's armed forces, and in February 2022, in the wake of Russia's invasion, it was announced that the newly established International Legion of Territorial Defence of Ukraine would form part of the nation's armed forces. Ukraine's call for foreign volunteers to fight was primarily driven by a desire to harness their potential to exploit for information operations abroad, principally in the West.

¹ Mercenary Activities (Prohibition) Act 2004, Public Act 2004, no. 69 of 6 July 2004, New Zealand Legislation, <https://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2004/0069/latest/whole.html> [accessed: 05 April 2023].

² Terrorism Suppression Act 2002, Public Act 2002, no. 34 of 17 October 2002, New Zealand Legislation, <https://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2002/0034/latest/DLM151491.html?src=qs> [accessed: 05 April 2023].

³ Presidential Decree of Ukraine of 10 June 2016, no. 248/2016, amendment of 1 August 2022 about the approval of the Regulations on passing of military service in the Armed Forces of Ukraine foreigners and stateless persons, <https://cis-legislation.com/document.fwx?rgn=86889> [accessed: 22 March 2023].

However, the Ukrainian army wants soldiers with qualifications in specific Western equipment it had been supplied, such as the FGM-148 Javelin Anti-Tank missile, and advanced technical infantry skills that Western militaries have greater institutional knowledge of such as sniping.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba claimed that by 6 March 2022, more than 20,000 volunteers from 52 countries had enlisted to fight for Ukraine.⁴ Despite these claims of the total number of foreign volunteers, Ukrainian Ministry of Defence officials have consistently refused to give more precise figures for those currently deployed in frontline combat, or numbers relating to nationality. Multiple sources report that the International Legion of Territorial Defence of Ukraine is currently organized into a brigade of three battalions, with an estimated manning state of between 1,500 to 3,000 members at any one time.⁵

The Ukrainian government advises prospective International Legion volunteers to contact the Defence Attaché of the Ukrainian embassy in their respective country.⁶ The criteria listed for joining included having prior military or medical experience and submitting documents as proof of military service to the Ministry of Defence official at the Ukrainian embassy.

Examining the topic of foreign fighters is inherently challenging, particularly in the midst of an ongoing war. Due to operational security and potential legal implications, whether in their home countries or following their capture, much of their activity is covert. Conversely, a number of foreign volunteers, including one Kiwi veteran, have been very active across social media.

New Zealand veterans fighting for Ukraine

According to Oleksandr Kirichuk, Ukraine's honorary consul in Auckland, by the first week of March 2022, over 500 New Zealanders had volunteered to fight in Ukraine against Russia.⁷ Most of these volunteers did not proceed past the enquiry

⁴ *Ukraine says 20,000 volunteers from 52 countries sign up to fight*, "The Times of Israel", 07 March 2022, https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/ukraine-says-20000-volunteers-from-52-countries-sign-up-to-fight/ [accessed: 22 March 2023].

⁵ A. Clapp, *Fighters with Ukraine's foreign legion are being asked to sign indefinite contracts. Some have refused*, "The Economist, 1843 Magazine", 11 March 2022, <https://www.economist.com/1843/2022/03/11/fighters-with-ukraines-foreign-legion-are-being-asked-to-sign-indefinite-contracts-some-have-refused> [accessed: 29 March 2023].

⁶ V. Zelenskyy, *Appeal to foreign citizens to help Ukraine in fighting against Russia's aggression*, President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy Official Website, 27 February 2022, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/zvernennya-do-gromadyan-inozemnih-derzhav-yaki-pragnut-dopom-73213> [accessed: 22 March 2023].

⁷ R. Sadler, *Over 500 Kiwis volunteer to fight for Ukraine International Legion against Russia despite a 'do not travel' warning*, Newshub, 08 March 2022, <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/new-zealand/2022/03/over-500-kiwis-volunteer-to-fight-for-ukraine-international-legion-against-russia-despite-a-do-not-travel-warning.html> [accessed: 22 March 2023].

stage, however a small but significant number of NZ veterans have followed through the enlistment process and are now serving, or have served, in the International Legion. As of this article two of them, Dominic Abelen⁸ and Kane Te Tai,⁹ have been killed in action during combat operations in the Donbass Oblast. Both of these men were serving in the International Legion's Special Service Group (LSSG), which is composed of foreign fighters and was established by the Ukrainian Defence Ministry's intelligence directorate (Головне управління розвідки). The exact number of New Zealand veterans fighting in Ukraine fluctuates on a weekly or even daily basis as NZ veterans are killed, wounded or simply decide they have done enough and return home. However, from interviews with veterans it can be estimated that there are somewhere between 15–25 New Zealanders posted to front line combat units at any particular time. The total of New Zealand veterans who have fought from the beginning of the conflict is estimated anecdotally to be approximately 50 personnel.

Motivations behind New Zealand veterans' participation

The motivations of New Zealand veterans fighting in Ukraine are complex and multifaceted, reflecting a unique blend of personal, political, and cultural factors. These include actively attempting to live up to the ideals and values of the historical legacy of the ANZAC myth. The majority of NZ veterans, compelled by a strong moral compass, view the conflict as a fight for democracy, human rights, and the protection of innocent lives. At the same time, their willingness to face danger and adversity is fuelled by a sense of duty, a thirst for adventure, a drive to test their military training in a high intensity conflict, and a desire to rekindle past experiences of camaraderie with their new comrades, particularly fellow Kiwis.

Historical context and the ANZAC spirit

In order to understand the motivations of New Zealand veterans fighting in Ukraine, it is crucial to consider the historical context influencing their actions. The concept of the 'ANZAC spirit' – the enduring values of courage, mate-ship, and sacrifice – is deeply ingrained in the national psyche of New Zealand and its sibling nation, Australia. This sense of camaraderie and shared sacrifice has its roots in the Gallipoli campaign of World War I, where soldiers from the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) fought side by side.

⁸ Ch. Graham-McLay, *New Zealand soldier who joined Ukraine foreign legion confirmed killed*, "The Guardian", 25 August 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/aug/25/new-zealand-soldier-who-joined-ukraine-foreign-legion-confirmed-killed> [accessed: 29 March 2023].

⁹ Eadem, *Former New Zealand soldier killed fighting Russian forces in Ukraine*, "The Guardian", 23 March 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/23/former-new-zealand-soldier-kane-te-tai-confirmed-killed-ukraine-russia-war> [accessed: 29 March 2023].

New Zealand's history is marked by its involvement in several major conflicts, including the World Wars and the Vietnam War, as well as numerous smaller operational deployments, particularly throughout the 1990's and into the 2000's. This legacy influences NZ veterans' decision to fight in Ukraine, as they draw parallels between past struggles and the current conflict. They see their actions as a continuation of their nation's tradition of standing up against injustice and tyranny.

For many New Zealand veterans, the motivation to fight in Ukraine is reminiscent of the sense of duty and moral obligation that drove their forebears to fight in earlier conflicts, and why they themselves deployed to such theatres as East Timor and Afghanistan whilst serving with the NZDF. The ANZAC spirit serves as a powerful source of inspiration for these veterans, who see their decision to join the fight in Ukraine as an extension of the same values that their ancestors fought for.

Military experience and opportunity to demonstrate combat skill sets

Many New Zealand veterans fighting in Ukraine, particularly those of the combat trades such as Infantry, are motivated in large part by a deep desire to test their military training and skill sets in a conventional conflict and gain much coveted combat experience. New Zealand Army combat trade training emphasizes land based, conventional operations skill sets throughout a soldier's career, yet most of New Zealand's recent historical operational deployments have not given veterans the opportunity to employ these skill sets to a large degree.¹⁰ Many of the NZ veterans in Ukraine have previously deployed operationally to East Timor, Afghanistan and other conflicts whilst serving in the New Zealand Defence Force, but feel dissatisfied with their experiences, in particular the relative lack of close combat, and seek to test their skills at the highest perceived operational level and finally gain experience in a 'real' war. These veterans often seek to validate their past service and affirm their veteran identity by engaging in the type of combat operations they were trained to fight in, but during their service in the NZDF did not have the opportunity to participate in.

Personal motivations and the pursuit of justice

Beyond the historical context and the influence of the ANZAC spirit, more personal motivations also play a significant role in driving New Zealand veterans to join the conflict in Ukraine. For many, a sense of justice and the desire to defend the underdog are powerful motivators. This value has been reinforced particularly in veterans of East Timor, Afghanistan, and other countries where they experienced situations of great suffering by the civilian populace at the hands of aggressors. They view the Ukrainian conflict as an opportunity to stand up for a nation that has been the victim of aggression and territorial incursion from a larger, better-armed neighbour. In his appeal for foreign

¹⁰ Interview with NZ veteran serving in the International Legion of Territorial Defense.

volunteers, President Zelenskyy of Ukraine described the conflict as being ‘the beginning of a war against Europe, against European structures.’¹¹ In this sense, NZ veterans achieve ideological alignment with Ukraine’s cause.

A number of NZ veterans have had difficulty transitioning from their military careers back into civilian life. Estimates of 20–25% have been made in academic papers, which is relative to statistics from Australia, Canadian, American, and British studies. Unable or even unwilling to adjust to civilian life, some NZ veterans feel alienated from society and, as a result, experience difficulty in maintaining gainful employment, relationships outside of their veteran cohort, and finding satisfaction overall in their post-military service lives. To these veterans, the war in Ukraine has presented an opportunity to reinforce their identity as soldiers and regain the value they feel they have lost since entering civilian society. NZ veterans who reported feeling ‘numb’ and ‘lost’ during their post-service lives describe being emotionally and psychologically ‘recharged’ at the thought of fighting in Ukraine.¹²

The desire to help others in need is also a powerful motivator for many New Zealand veterans. The NZDF has been predominately employed on Operations Other Than War since the 1990’s, with the majority of deployments over that time period being United Nations peacekeeping and humanitarian missions. As such, most NZ veterans are to a degree inculcated to view the inhabitants of countries they deploy to with empathy, as a result of both their training and operational experience. NZ veterans have seen the suffering of Ukrainian people in the media, and their sense of compassion compels a number of them to act. This altruistic drive may also be rooted in New Zealand’s cultural values of empathy and social responsibility.

Political motivations:

The defence of democracy and the international rules-based system

In addition to personal motivations, the political landscape plays a significant role in shaping the motivations of New Zealand veterans fighting in Ukraine. For many, the conflict in Ukraine represents a struggle for democracy and self-determination of a sovereign nation. In that, there are close parallels to the situation in East Timor during 1999, which led directly to the NZDF’s operational deployment there for its largest mission since the Malayan Emergency in the 1950’s. By joining the fight in the Ukrainian war, these veterans are expressing their commitment as individuals to the principles of freedom, human rights, and the international rules-based system. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has been widely framed as a struggle between democratic values and authoritarian aggression. Many New Zealand veterans view their

¹¹ N.K.-T. Habtom, *The Composition and Challenges of Foreign Fighters in Ukraine*, “Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies” 2022, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 79–90, <https://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.151>.

¹² Interview with NZ veteran serving in the International Legion of Territorial Defense.

involvement in the conflict as a defence of democracy and a stand against the expansion of authoritarian Russian influence in Europe. This perspective aligns with New Zealand's long-standing commitment to democratic principles and the rule of law.

Furthermore, the veterans' decision to fight in Ukraine can also be viewed as a personal response to the perceived inaction or insufficient action of the New Zealand government. Although the government has provided funding and peripheral military support – training, logistics, intelligence – no NZDF personnel have been deployed to Ukraine nor is New Zealand willing to take part in direct combat, in line with the rest of the West's stance. By taking matters into their own hands, these veterans are demonstrating their personal ethos about the importance of standing up for democratic values and taking direct action to fight aggression when national leadership is seen by some of them to fall short of their own values.

The allure of adventure and the warrior ethos

It is important not to overlook the intertwined roles of adventure seeking and the warrior ethos in motivating New Zealand veterans to fight in Ukraine. Many of these veterans have spent their lives training for and participating in military operations, and the prospect of engaging in a new and righteous conflict can be a powerful draw. In particular, NZ veterans of the Afghan campaign widely feel that their efforts and sacrifices were wasted, and that, ultimately, the campaign was not a 'good fight'. Conversely, the war in the Ukraine is widely accepted as being a morally 'right' war, and therefore one worth fighting and sacrificing for.¹³

The NZ Army is an *iwi* (*Tē Reo Māori* for tribe) in its own right, *Ngāti Tumatauenga* – which translates literally as 'The tribe of the War God'.¹⁴ *Ngāti Tumatauenga* blends the customs and warrior traditions of *Māori* (New Zealand's indigenous people) and European military tradition to lay the basis of the New Zealand Army's ethos and values. Also, the 28th Māori Battalion, an infantry unit composed primarily of *Māori* soldiers, of the NZ 2nd Division, fought with distinction in World War II. The unit's legacy of courage and sacrifice is a source of pride for many NZ veterans, both *Māori* and *Pākehā*, to this day.

For many veterans, the opportunity to test their skills in high intensity, conventional military operations is a significantly motivating factor in travelling to Ukraine to fight. Although exposed to a high tempo of NZDF operational deployments from the late 1990's till the mid 2010's, the majority of NZ veterans did not experience any combat in the form of employing their personal weapons against a threat, with limited overall exposure close combat actions overall. Many combat trade veterans of the NZDF feel that despite multiple operational deployments

¹³ Interview with NZ veteran serving in the International Legion of Territorial Defense

¹⁴ P. McKenzie, *How the NZ Army became an iwi*, Newsroom, 25 November 2018, <https://www.newsroom.co.nz/peter-mckenzie-on-army-as-an-iwi-for-monday> [accessed: 05 April 2023].

throughout their careers, they have not had the opportunity to truly earn the title of veteran, having never seen combat on par with other countries' veterans or their ANZAC forefathers, and demonstrate their commitment to the warrior ethos, particularly NZ Army veterans with regard to *Ngāti Tumatuenga*.

Camaraderie

For some veterans, the opportunity to fight in Ukraine represents an adventure and a chance to forge new friendships that allows them to reengage the level of camaraderie that they lost upon leaving NZDF service.¹⁵ The camaraderie that develops among soldiers is well-documented and can create immensely strong bonds, transcending national and cultural differences. These veterans are drawn to the experience of shared adversity and the opportunity to bond with like-minded individuals.

Personal connections

Some New Zealand veterans have personal connections to Ukraine or the wider region, such as family members or close friends, as there is a significant Ukrainian diaspora in New Zealand. This creates a strong emotional attachment to the conflict for some veterans and a heightened sense of responsibility to fight in Ukraine.

Global security and stability

New Zealand veterans recognize that the conflict in Ukraine has implications for global security and stability. They feel that their participation in the conflict helps to prevent the spread of violence and instability in the region, which could have negative consequences for international relations and the global economy. This follows on from their service in the NZDF, particularly operational deployments, which were couched to them in terms of promoting and enabling stability and security across the globe.

Alliance solidarity

New Zealand has a history of supporting its allies in times of conflict, from its participation in the world wars to its involvement in more recent conflicts such as Afghanistan and Iraq. The veterans fighting in Ukraine see their actions as an extension of this tradition, demonstrating solidarity with Ukraine and its many allies in the face of Russian aggression. Veterans from different countries fighting in Ukraine, such as America, New Zealand, and Australia, often bond initially over shared experiences in coalition operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. They view fighting in Ukraine as an organic extension of that shared desire to protect common values.

¹⁵ Interview with NZ veteran serving in the International Legion of Territorial Defense.

Economic incentives

Whilst opponents of foreign fighters in Ukraine, including those denigrating NZ veterans fighting there, often portray them as being motivated to fight for financial reasons, the fact that the International Legion of Territorial Defence of Ukraine pay rate is the same as the wider Ukrainian Armed Forces – adjusted for trade and rank – makes that unlikely. At approximately £7,000 a month (US\$230),¹⁶ this pay rate is significantly lower than Western militaries. NZ volunteers also have to pay their own way to Ukraine and back, as well as purchase much of their own equipment, food, and ancillaries whilst on the ground.¹⁷

Impact on society

Considering that New Zealand has a relatively limited veterans support system that caters for only those NZDF personnel who have deployed on gazetted operations,¹⁸ there is no formal, practical support available for NZ veterans returning home from fighting in the Ukraine. There are concerns amongst some within New Zealand that the experience of war, particularly a war such as this, with levels of violence unseen in Europe since the end of the Second World War, may see volunteers bring the emotional, psychological, and physical effects of this violence back to their home country.

Conclusion

The motivations of New Zealand veterans fighting in Ukraine are complex and multifaceted, reflecting a unique blend of personal, political, and cultural factors. These include the intent of actively living up to the ideals of the historical legacy of the ANZAC myth as well as the warrior ethos and values of *Ngāti Tūmatuenga*. The majority of these individuals, compelled by a strong moral compass, view the conflict as a fight for democracy, human rights, and the protection of innocent lives. At the same time, their willingness to face danger and adversity is fuelled by a sense of duty and a shared bond with their fellow soldiers, particularly fellow Kiwis. While the individual motivations may vary, these New Zealand veterans' actions in Ukraine ultimately demonstrate their unwavering commitment to making a difference in a volatile world and standing up for the principles they hold dear.

¹⁶ A. Clapp, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ Interview with NZ veteran serving in the International Legion of Territorial Defense.

¹⁸ *Qualifying Service*, Veterans' Affairs New Zealand, 08 February 2023, <https://www.veteransaffairs.mil.nz/eligibility/qualifying-service/> [accessed: 05 April 2023].

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Abstract

According to Oleksandr Kirichuk, Ukraine's honorary consul in Auckland, by the first week of March 2022, over 500 New Zealanders had volunteered to fight in Ukraine against Russia. The exact number of New Zealand veterans fighting in Ukraine fluctuates on a weekly or even daily basis as NZ veterans are killed, wounded or simply decide they have done enough and return home. However, from interviews with veterans, it can be estimated that there are somewhere between 15–25 New Zealanders posted to front line combat units at any particular time. The motivations of New Zealand veterans fighting in Ukraine are complex and multifaceted, reflecting a unique blend of personal, political, and cultural factors. This article explores the underlying motivations of these New Zealand veterans to engage in a conflict far from home; delving into the various personal, social, and political factors that have influenced their decision to serve in Ukraine.

Keywords: Ukraine conflict, New Zealand veterans, New Zealand Defence Force, International Legion of Territorial Defence