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Steven O’connor, Guillaume Piketty

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Introduction – Foreign fighters and multinational armies: from civil conflicts to coalition wars, 1848-2015

Steven O'Connor

Laboratoire Histoire et Dynamique des Espaces Anglophones (HDEA),
Sorbonne University, Paris, France

Guillaume Piketty

Sciences Po, Center for History at Sciences Po (CHSP), Paris, France

The last two decades have seen the term ‘foreign fighter’ enter our everyday vocabulary. The insurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Syrian Civil War and the rise and fall of the Islamic State group have sparked public interest in the phenomenon of people choosing to leave their own country and fight in a foreign conflict. Foreign fighters, their origins, motives, activities and potential danger to their home countries have become subjects of debate, attracting contributions from politicians, military personnel, the media, security analysts, political scientists, legal scholars but to a much lesser extent from historians. The ten articles of this special issue showcase new historical research on foreign military labour, including an overview of the early modern period and numerous case studies which cover the last 165 years and stretch over five continents. The aim is to better understand the experiences and challenges faced by both the foreigners and the host country, particularly its armed forces, and to highlight the significance of these trends to the contemporary debate on foreign fighters. Designed after a conference held in June 2018 at the Centre for History at Sciences Po, Paris the issue is inspired by a number of key questions. What motivated individuals to join a foreign conflict or army? How were they treated and perceived by their host, and, when taken prisoners, by the enemy? How complete was their integration in the host’s combat formations? How did foreigners perform in battle? What happened to them after the war ended? Some articles address most of these questions, others focus entirely on one or two.

In the contemporary debate, foreign soldiers are often presented as abnormal, problematic, outside the accepted norms of warfare but, as this special issue shows, foreign, or indeed transnational, soldiers have been a common feature in conflicts for centuries. Many military historians have long regarded the French revolution as the beginning of an age of national armies, manned exclusively by citizens and sustained by the emergence of national states, universal conscription and the new bond between the people and their state.¹ Thus, the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars heralded the end, so they say, of the practice by many European states of employing foreign soldiers in their armies. In fact, multinational armies

did not disappear. During this period, Napoleon's armies depended heavily on troops from occupied and allied countries while the British army recruited thousands of German soldiers.² The peace settlement in Vienna (1815) was quickly followed by a number of conflicts involving the recruitment of foreign volunteers: the wars to liberate Spanish America, the Greek War of Independence (1821-9), the Portuguese (1828-34) and first Spanish (1835-8) civil wars, later conflicts in South America, the United States civil war (1861-1865) and the Anglo-Boer wars, to name a few. Even in the twentieth century, when concepts of nationality and citizenship were consolidated, the presence of foreign troops persisted. In the First World War, Germany recruited captured Irish and Polish soldiers when Garibaldian volunteers from Italy and, more broadly, people from around 50 different national origins joined the French army.³ After 1917, as the conflict failed to end, the progressive redefinition of national borders in Europe notably resulted in the emergence of groups of foreign fighters, be they volunteers or sent by their own country.⁴ Moving on to the Second World War, at the end of 1941, 43,000 citizens from occupied or neutral countries were serving with the *Waffen-SS* and the *Wehrmacht* and the same sources at the same date provided 86,000 personnel to the British forces. By the end of the Second World War, almost one million men had served in the *Waffen-SS*, over half of whom were not German while over 230,000 European exiles had fought with the British forces.⁵

What do we mean by 'foreign'? This issue focuses on people who leave their country of nationality or residence and join a military force in another country. Moreover, as will have become evident from the above examples, the mobilisation of foreign military personnel has taken different forms. This issue concerns itself with three main categories. Foreign professional soldiers employed by a state for their military skills, pejoratively referred to as 'mercenaries'. Foreign 'fighters' or 'volunteers' who participate in a conflict for reasons other than financial gain (typically portrayed as political and/or ideological although there can be a range of personal motives too). Soldiers and military units from a belligerent power who serve in the army of a co-belligerent or in an allied combined organisation in the context of a coalition war. Though not examined in this issue, perhaps a fourth category could be colonial soldiers. The status of such troops was ambiguous, given that they were neither citizens of European states nor, in some cases, conscripts simply coerced into serving a colonial master. For example, the British Indian army which played a vital role in the defence and expansion of the British empire provided about 3.5 million volunteers in two world wars.⁶ While the service of Indian Sepoys was not 'foreign', it could be considered, as Nir Arielli points out, 'transnational insofar as multinational empires are understood as transnational entities'.⁷ Another striking example is given by the Free French during the Second World War, nearly half of whom came from the territories of the French Empire that had rallied to General Charles de Gaulle.⁸

The particular strengths of this special issue

An important influence present in this issue is transnational history. Patricia Clavin defines transnational history as 'the desire to highlight the importance of connections and transfers across boundaries at the sub- or supra-state level, the composition of categories, and the character and exploitation of boundaries'.⁹ The approach originated in the study of migration, business and the dissemination of scientific knowledge but has spread to other areas. In

parallel with the development of transnational history, the last three decades have seen the emergence of a burgeoning literature on foreign military labour in the modern era. To give one example, the Spanish Civil War has been a particular focus for study. While foreign volunteers in the Republican International Brigades have been readily identified as participating in a transnational movement, many studies follow a distinctly national approach.¹⁰ They concentrate on the experiences of the volunteers and give scant attention to the perspective of the host. This goes against what Kiran Klaus Patel calls a ‘central element’ of transnational history: ‘The analysis of intercultural transfer — sensitive to the context of all societies concerned, to the actors involved in such processes, and to the transformative experience of transfer’.¹¹ Some recent studies have begun to address this gap.¹² Many articles in the current issue extend our understanding of the interactions between foreigner and host, paying attention to the perspectives of both sides.

Another strength of the issue is its breadth. In order to widen and enrich the debate on foreign military personnel, we have adopted a global scope: the issue includes ten case studies of which six involve Europeans on other continents. The contributions are as diverse as foreign officers in the Ottoman military, Germans in the American Civil War and Communist volunteers fighting in the civil wars in Russia, Spain, China, Angola and Latin America.

A final distinction is that the issue places a focus on participants in coalition warfare during the Second World War (see introduction to Part 3 below). The creation of large multinational armies, involving the integration of national units from minor allies into the military formations of the leading Allied and Axis powers, is an understudied phenomenon.¹³ For decades the historiography of the 1939-45 conflict has been dominated by a nationally-compartmentalised understanding of the war, where the armed forces of the major powers have been largely treated as monolithic national institutions. For example, though Britain incorporated tens of thousands of foreign military personnel into its land, naval and air forces, leading to the formation of new divisions, squadrons and flotillas, none of the volumes of the substantial British official history of the war were devoted to the organisation of these Allied forces.¹⁴ Moreover, the German equivalent treats foreign formations and allies at some length though always within the framework of German leadership and agency.¹⁵ This predominantly national approach has begun to be supplanted by a transnational one. In 2014, Professor Robert Gerwarth (University College Dublin) launched a collective project on the transnational history of collaboration in Europe during the war.¹⁶ Likewise, the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies in the Netherlands has coordinated a project which explores the trajectories of ‘transnational resisters’ – defined as those active *behind* enemy lines and outside their country of origin.¹⁷ Our special issue contributes to this emerging wider history of the conflict in two ways, firstly by focusing on transnational resisters who operated outside their country as part of *conventional coalition military forces*, and secondly, by exposing the internationalism of the combined organisations established by the Allies (see Thomas Bottellier’s article for further discussion of the historiography, particularly the history of internationalism).

Part 1: The impact of foreign soldiers and foreign fighters over the *longue durée*

The reality of foreign military service has been persistently distorted over the centuries by certain ideologies and actors, making an assessment of its impact in various wars a

complicated task. Considering the omnipresence of foreign military labour in the early modern period, we would be remiss if we did not open this special issue with an overview of these important antecedents for the modern era. Thus, Peter Wilson argues that the terms ‘mercenary’, ‘volunteer’ and ‘citizens-in-arms’ are problematic because they ‘are largely moral and ideological constructs which have been powerfully shaped by Western, Christian just war doctrine and its definition of legitimate killing’. Wilson suggests the term ‘foreign soldier’ as a replacement for ‘mercenary’. The latter implies a fighter motivated purely by financial gain whereas, in reality, it is extremely difficult to disentangle motives which could change even for the same individual according to circumstances. Moreover, Nir Arielli, examining the Spanish Civil War, the Yugoslav Wars and the 2014-15 conflict in eastern Ukraine, points to another distortion of foreign military service: the idealised or demonised image (depending on the disseminator’s loyalties) of foreign fighters widely promoted by literary accounts, sensationalist media coverage and state propaganda. These representations, for better or worse, tend to exaggerate the importance of foreign volunteers which leads us to the question of how significant an impact did they have on the conflicts they joined? In the Spanish Civil War, for example, despite the place of the International Brigades in the public imagination, Arielli advises caution since foreigners were a very small minority (about 50,000 on the Republican side) within the overall number of combatants. In his study of Communist foreign fighters, David Malet finds that comparable numbers also fought in the lesser known Russian and Chinese civil wars. In all three cases, Malet argues that the creation of internationalist units was a pragmatic rather than an ideological strategy: the need to overcome manpower shortages led local Communist forces to recruit and organise foreigners who were already present in the country (as opposed to the later, proactive strategy, led by the Cubans, of exporting wars of national liberation to developing countries like Angola and Nicaragua). As outsiders, the Bolsheviks considered foreign fighters ideal for coercing the civilian population but in Spain they tended to be wasted as cannon fodder on the battlefield. In the early modern era, the employment of foreign soldiers was a central element of what Wilson calls the ‘European Fiscal-Military System’, in which principalities and city-states provided war-making resources to other, larger states, in partnerships involving non-state actors. Though sometimes used as cannon fodder, European states generally valued foreign soldiers, such as the Swiss regiments, as high-quality troops, a perception that was reinforced by the unreliability in battle of the French *levée en masse* in the 1790s. Finally, ideologically motivated foreign fighters are not an exclusively modern phenomenon. Wilson locates their emergence not in the late-18th century revolutions but during the Reformation. The religious division of Europe created new links between otherwise disparate groups: for example, the Britons who defied their government by joining the wars in France, the Netherlands and Germany in the 1620s and 1630s, in order to defend fellow Protestants. These early modern foreign fighters encountered the same problems faced by their contemporary equivalents, including often being at odds with their own government, facing considerable practical difficulties travelling to the war zone (Wilson), becoming disillusioned by the reality of the conflict resulting in many volunteers deserting or returning home (Arielli), being distrusted by the local population and finding cultural differences a barrier to integration (Malet).

Part 2: The motivations and experiences of foreign fighters

Thanks to examples taken from the US Civil War, the Ottoman imperial army, the Second Anglo-Boer War and finally the Spanish Civil War, the second series of contributions deals with the motivations and experiences of foreign fighters. Despite the variety of periods, conflicts and perspectives, some common features can be acknowledged. As it is notably underlined by Chris Holdridge and Matthew Kennedy, there could be multiple pathways to volunteering. Like the western commanders in the late Ottoman army studied by Houssine Alloul, and especially Belgian baron Charles de Schwartzenberg (also known as Emin Bey), some decided to join a multinational system because they knew that the very essence of that system allowed possibly swift ascending military careers. Furthermore, the search for adventure and for personal construction, for money and social advancement, for professional promotion and power, even for redemption could play its part (Alloul) and sometimes even overcome religion (Alloul) or religious taboos (Cade). Of course, many joined in order to fight for a “good cause” such as anti-slavery (Cade), the will to oppose a new aristocracy (Cade) or simply freedom (Holdridge-Kennedy), against a specific ideology and in the service of another one (Kruizinga), or at least for an idea and to defend a social system (Cade). In the case of the German immigrants and the German-Americans born in the United States studied by Anthony Cade, and beyond any idea of earning good money and/or of fighting in memory of the failed 1848 revolution, to participate in the Civil War was seen as a means to integrate more deeply in a newly founded country, to prove one’s full commitment to the values of one’s new homeland and also, it has to be said, to enhance a socio-economic system in which one hoped one would have the opportunity to fully thrive. In an interesting blowback effect, explains Cade, such a commitment to the survival of the new country was sometimes experienced as a way to put forward some of the values of the lost fatherland, and even to prepare the ground for future help, or at least for a future support of the latter. Then, the ways and means of integration in multinational forces varied considerably (Kruizinga), as well as the missions given to foreign fighters (conventional fighting, commando, guerrilla, medical services) and thus the possible transfers of experience (Holdridge-Kennedy). As is shown in Samuël Kruizinga’s study of the Dutchmen who joined the International Brigades in Spain, the foreign volunteers’ efficiency in the field could be rather poor and, in any case, depended on multiple factors. Some rivalries could even arise between national contingents of foreign fighters. Casualties but also desertion could be the result of the poor integration and the mistreatment of foreign fighters (Holdridge-Kennedy and Kruizinga). Lastly, the experience of joining and then fighting as a foreign volunteer usually led to specific representations of one’s commitment and career (Alloul), to conclusions about the type of warfare one had been part of (Holdridge-Kennedy), and also to immediate and practical, sometimes uneasy, consequences in the home country (Kruizinga).

Part 3: The nature of coalition warfare during the Second World War

The Second World War was a conflict between alliances, i.e. an armed struggle that literally institutionalized the recourse to foreign fighters both in the field and at the high-command level. In other words, the belligerents devoted a great deal of time, thinking and means to enhance a coherence that they knew was necessary, and even vital. They showed a more or less spontaneous openness to the other’s war, to the other’s needs, habits and practices. They devised new ways of integrating foreign fighters. As demonstrated by the last three

contributions to this special issue, that was particularly the case of the alliance led by Britain and the United States.

This phenomenon took place in the field as it is perfectly exemplified by British-commanded allied forces between 1940 and 1943. The Czechoslovaks presented by Paul Lenormand and the Free French analysed by Steven O'Connor went through a transnational experience of logistics and materiel within the British army, and found themselves fighting a "beggars war". They had to integrate into a new, and sometimes surprising, military system despite differences of language, culture and initial training. Being confronted by a new command culture, they had to make important compromises, notably in terms of autonomy. During the Libyan campaign of 1942, the Free French dealt in a rather rough way with the British army's liaison mission led by General Edward Spears whose role, organisation and work are precisely presented by Steven O'Connor. The situation of the Czechoslovaks fighting as a battalion within the forces of the British Empire during the invasion of Vichy Syria (June-July 1941) and later in Libya under Polish command was not much easier (Lenormand). Furthermore, waging war as foreign fighters within transnational armies sometimes turned out to be a means to reinforce national unity, as in the case of the Free French in Libya who followed the instructions *and* at the same time regularly bypassed the Spears mission, and who performed well on the battlefield during the defence of Bir Hakeim (O'Connor). But it could also be a way to weaken national consensus / unity in a war as is shown by the growing dissent between Czechs, on the one hand, and Palestinian Jews of Czechoslovak origin, German speakers and Slovaks, on the other hand, presented by Paul Lenormand. In any case, the transfers of military experience had some legacies in terms of ways and means to wage war, and more broadly in terms of military culture.¹⁸

But, during World War Two, the integration of foreign fighters also took place at the high-command level. As is shown by the British-led invasion of Vichy Syria (Lenormand) or by the war in the Libyan desert (O'Connor), the phenomenon was common practice and became widespread among military leaders. Furthermore, explains Thomas Bottellier, it constituted a frequently overlooked specificity of the Second World War as the Allies became a "site of mid-twentieth-century internationalism", i.e. an amazing feature of truly shared leadership and authority in a time usually considered, according to Yves Cohen, as a "century of leaders".¹⁹ In other words, a series of "combined" organs designed to plan Allied grand strategy and operations, pool their productive resources, and unify their theatre-level military commands", were successively created by Great Britain and the United States (Bottellier). They involved representatives of other allies such as Canada, France and some other European actors. In these so-called "combined organs", planners had to – and did – put the needs of the Alliance ahead of any national interest. In other words, a new type of foreign fighter was born, that of staffer in a multinational military body. It laid the roots for future military cooperation and alliances.

Conclusion and pathways for future research

The age of national armies, ushered in by the French revolution, was never as complete as once imagined by modern historians. The foreign fighter phenomenon is not a product of recent wars, which have seen the rise of the transnational jihadi movement, but rather a persistent trend dating back centuries. Thus, this special issue increases our understanding of

the different forms of foreign military service, in particular the foreign soldier/mercenary, the foreign fighter/volunteer, the transnational resister and the coalition technocrat. Our global approach has allowed contributors to integrate geographical areas, which have long been absent from the debate on foreign fighters, as well as from national histories and military histories of various conflicts. Focusing on Dutch, Belgian, Free French and Czechoslovakian actors, among others, the issue heeds the words of Patricia Clavin by placing European history in transnational and international contexts in order “to illuminate and integrate the history of European countries whose historians traditionally have inclined to look inwards in an effort to define and facilitate their nation’s emergence from the shadow of others”.²⁰

Our authors shed light on the complex range of motives of foreign fighters, their activities and their fragile relationships, both between them and their hosts and between foreign fighters of different origins. However, more research needs to be done about combat and its immediate consequences. Several articles in this issue touch upon questions that will merit further attention, such as the emotional life of foreign fighters; the kinds of violence inflicted and suffered; wounds, medical treatments and the relationship to death; the treatment inflicted on foreign fighters taken prisoner; women, children and teenagers as foreign fighters or their auxiliaries.

A second theme which our issue has not addressed in depth is the post-conflict trajectories of foreign military personnel. This aspect throws up several interesting questions for future research. For example, how were former foreign fighters reinserted into society and which society/country? How many continued on to other wars and transferred their experiences? Did some conflicts, such as the Second World War, give birth to new generations of lifelong foreign fighters? Did the host state establish a moral economy of gratitude which officially recognised and rewarded the wartime contribution of foreign volunteers? Do they have a place in the public memory of the conflict in the host country and/or their homeland? More broadly, in what ways did the multinational armies and combined organisations of the 1939-45 conflict influence the development of post-war military alliances?

In spite of the contemporary debate on foreign fighters giving so much attention to Islamist militants, we should not forget that the post-1945 period has seen the return of the foreign soldier/mercenary. Indeed, the era of the Cold War and decolonisation represented a golden age for foreign soldiers²¹ – a golden age which shows every sign of continuing into the twentieth-first century but in the mercenaries’ reinvented form as military contractors employed by private military and security companies (PMSCs). It is, therefore, timely that this special issue re-examines foreign military service in its various forms and how it has evolved over time.

Notes

¹ See, for example, Strachan, *European Armies and the Conduct of War*.

² Arielli and Collins (ed.s), *Transnational Soldiers*, 3-4.

³ Heyriès, “The Garibaldian Volunteers in France during the First World War”; Irish Military Archives, Bureau of Military History, Maurice Meade, witness statement 891; Destenay, “La captivité des prisonniers de guerre irlandais dans les camps allemands”; Watson, “Fighting for Another Fatherland”.

⁴ See, for example, Gerwarth, *The Vanquished*.

⁵ O’Connor and Gutmann, “Under a foreign flag”, 322, 334; The National Archives, UK, Cabinet Papers 66/49/30, Report on the Organisation of Allied Naval, Army and Air Contingents, 27 April 1944.

⁶ Brown and Louis (ed.s), *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, 117, 312. See also, for example, Barkawi, *Soldiers of Empire*.

⁷ Arielli, *From Byron to Bin Laden*, 8.

⁸ Muracciole, *Les Français libres*, 33-37.

⁹ Clavin, "Time, Manner, Space", 625. See also Clavin, "Defining Transnationalism", 421-439.

¹⁰ See, for example, Carroll, *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*; Stradling, *The Irish and the Spanish Civil War*; Baxell, *British Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War*. For foreign volunteers on the Nationalist side see, for example, Othen, *Franco's International Brigades*.

¹¹ Patel, "An Emperor without Clothes?"

¹² Malet, *Foreign Fighters*; Arielli and Rodogno (eds.), "Foreign War Volunteers in the Twentieth Century", special issue in the *Journal of Modern European History* 14, no. 3 (2016); Arielli, *From Byron to Bin Laden*.

¹³ For early research in this area see, for example, Brown, *Airmen in Exile*; Conway and Gotovitch (eds.), *Europe in Exile*; Bennett and Latawski (eds.), *Exile Armies*.

¹⁴ The British government's *History of the Second World War* included 34 volumes on military operations and the War Office produced 30 supplementary volumes.

¹⁵ H. Boog et al., *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, 10 volumes.

¹⁶ One notable result is Bohler and Gerwarth, *The Waffen-SS*.

¹⁷ See the special issue on 'Resistance and Collaboration in the Second World War as Transnational Phenomena', guest-edited by Robert Gerwarth and Robert Gildea in the *Journal of Modern European History* 16, no. 2 (2018). See also Gildea, *Fighters in the Shadows*.

¹⁸ Wilson, "Defining Military Culture". See also Hull, *Absolute destruction*, 98.

¹⁹ Cohen, *Le siècle des Chefs*.

²⁰ Clavin, "Time, Manner, Space", 633.

²¹ See, for example, works by Walter Bruyère-Ostells: *Histoire des mercenaires*; *Dans l'ombre de Bob Denard*; *Les volontaires armés*.

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Notes on contributors

Steven O'Connor is a *maître de conférences en civilisation britannique* (Lecturer in British History and Institutions) at Sorbonne University, Paris, France. His article is based on research carried out during his Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellowship at Sciences Po's Centre for History, Paris from 2016 to 2018. He has a PhD from University College Dublin and has previously published a monograph on *Irish Officers in the British Forces, 1922-45* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

Guillaume Piketty is a Full Professor of History at Sciences Po (Paris). He was a Visiting Research Scholar at Yale University (2010-12), and a Visiting Fellow at Worcester College and Associate Member of the History Faculty, Oxford University (2012-18). His research focuses on the social and cultural history of the Second World War in Europe and, more broadly, on war, resistance and society since the beginning of the US Civil War. He currently works on the day-to-day experience of the European exiles during the Second World War. He

is also developing a research project about war, sensibility and emotions during the twentieth century.

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