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## The Search for Meaning in War: Foreign Fighters in a Comparative Perspective

by Dietrich Jung



### ABSTRACT

In comparing the Spanish Civil War with the current war in Syria, this paper puts the phenomenon of contemporary Jihadist foreign fighters within a longer tradition of modern violent conflicts. To be sure, the cases of Spain and Syria are profoundly different in both context and ideology. Yet, becoming a war volunteer seemingly has not only historical roots but also a transcultural face. From this perspective both cases raise the same central question as to what drives young people in their search for meaning in war. Who are these volunteers? Why do they become foreign fighters? In deliberately putting its focus on so-called Western foreign fighters and the similarities that characterise the two cases, the paper first takes a closer look at the individual profiles of foreign fighters in Syria and Spain. In a second step it analyses the recruiting patterns behind foreign fighters as a mass phenomenon. Based on this analysis, the paper concludes that the most promising strategy to address the foreign fighter problem would seem to start at the structural level. While groups of cognitively or behaviourally radicalised youth have emerged continuously throughout history, foreign fighters appear in large numbers only when the ideological and organisational structures are in place to facilitate their mobilisation for war.

*Syrian conflict | Islamist groups | Religion*

keywords

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### Introduction

On 19 April 1824, the British poet Lord Byron died of a septic fever in the Greek town of Messolonghi on the Gulf of Patras. Byron was one of the most prominent representatives of those European and American Philhellenes who left their homelands to participate in the Greek War of Independence (1821-1833). These Philhellenes shared an utterly romanticist sentiment for Greece,<sup>1</sup> and in joining the insurrection in the Ottoman Empire they were driven by a "bizarre enthusiasm" for the Greek cause. They perceived the Greek rebellion against Ottoman rule as a war between civilisation and barbarism, as an apocalyptic struggle between the forces of good and evil, which called for their active engagement.<sup>2</sup>

More than 100 years after Byron's death, the American novelist Ernest Hemingway wrote a romanticist and adventurous account of another civil war. Between 1937 and 1938, Hemingway went to Spain four times, where he covered the Spanish Civil War as a journalist.<sup>3</sup> In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Hemingway created a literary commemoration of the thousands of Americans and Europeans who made their way as war volunteers to the battlefields of the civil war in Spain. The novel's hero,

<sup>1</sup> Douglas Dakin, *British and American Philhellenes during the War of Independence, 1821-1833*, Thessaloniki, Institute for Balkan Studies, 1955, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Gary J. Bass, *Freedom's Battle. The Origins of Humanitarian Intervention*, New York, Vintage, 2009, p. 48.

<sup>3</sup> Allen Josephs, *For Whom the Bell Tolls. Ernest Hemingway's Undiscovered Country*, New York, Twayne Publishers, 1994, p. xv-xvi.

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Robert Jordan, epitomised the typical war volunteer “who thought of himself as taking part in a crusade.”<sup>4</sup> More than 40,000 of these foreign fighters joined the republican, or loyalist, side, whose propaganda portrayed the civil war in Spain as an existential struggle between Fascism and democracy.<sup>5</sup> They enlisted with the International Brigades, whose ranks were filled through the systematic recruitment efforts of Comintern, the Communist International Organisation founded in 1915.

To a certain extent, the Philhellenes and the war volunteers in Spain represent historical predecessors of the foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq today. Their line of thought was characterised by a “Manichaeian streak,” perceiving the world as clearly demarcated between good and evil realms.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, they share the core feature of a group of people joining wars which are not their own. To be sure, this comparative view does not aim at equating these cases. On the contrary, the foreign fighter phenomena of nineteenth-century Greece, of twentieth-century Spain, and of the contemporary civil war in Syria are profoundly different in context and ideology. Furthermore, the combination of violent excesses and their dissemination via the world-wide-web by the so-called Islamic State have no precedence. Yet all historical cases of the foreign fighter phenomenon raise the same central question as to what drives young people in their search for meaning in war. Who are these volunteers? Why do they become foreign fighters?

In this paper I try to give tentative answers to these questions through a comparative view of those foreign fighters who took part in the Spanish Civil War and those who are currently joining Islamist groups in Syria and Iraq. In so doing, my research is guided by the attempt to de-exoticise contemporary foreign fighters by viewing them within a longer tradition of modern violent conflicts. While the very term “foreign fighter” is a recent invention, not regularly employed before the late 1980s,<sup>7</sup> the phenomenon as such is not new and has historical roots. Furthermore, I restrict the term foreign fighter to a number of criteria that distinguish those it designates from other foreign combatants. Following Thomas Hegghammer’s definition, I designate foreign fighters as those war volunteers who deliberately join an insurgency, who are not linked to the warring factions by citizenship or kinship ties, who are not part of an official military organisation, and who do not receive payment like mercenaries.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the paper focuses primarily on those foreign fighters who come from so-called Western countries, that is to say those who grew up in liberal democracies.

<sup>4</sup> Robert A. Rosenstone, *Crusade of the Left. The Lincoln Battalion in the Spanish Civil War*, New York, Pegasus, 1969, p. 271.

<sup>5</sup> Stanley G. Payne, *The Spanish Civil War*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 91.

<sup>6</sup> Robert A. Rosenstone, *Crusade of the Left*, cit., p. 261.

<sup>7</sup> David Malet, “Why Foreign Fighters? Historical Perspectives and Solutions”, in *Orbis*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (Winter 2010), p. 107, [http://davidmalet.com/uploads/Why\\_Foreign\\_Fighters\\_Malet.pdf](http://davidmalet.com/uploads/Why_Foreign_Fighters_Malet.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Hegghammer, “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad”, in *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (Winter 2010/11), p. 58, <http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/20601>.

I start my comparison with a look at the current situation in Syria and the phenomenon of Jihadist foreign fighters. The next section gives a brief descriptive analysis of the foreign fighter phenomenon in the Spanish Civil War. The third section focuses on common recruitment patterns with regard to both historical cases. Finally, I draw some very tentative conclusions in the form of lessons we could learn from this historical comparison. To be sure, these lessons provide only very preliminary answers to the above-mentioned questions. This paper only aims to make a small contribution to the ongoing debate about foreign fighters in contemporary wars. Rather than providing its readers with accomplished research findings, it presents some early comparative reflections on the subject in order to open possibly fruitful avenues for future research.

I consider this paper an appeal for further engagement in more historically diachronic research on the foreign fighter phenomenon. This kind of comparative research is needed to balance attempts to understand contemporary Muslim foreign fighters predicated on the allegedly intrinsic cultural and religious traits of Islam alone. There is no doubt that the ideologues of transnational Jihad can use references to Islamic religious traditions to underpin their confrontational worldviews and legitimise militant action. At the same time, however, other Muslims might invoke these traditions in their justification of democratic institutions and human rights regimes. Religious traditions themselves do not generate specific forms of social action; rather, it is through their interpretation by contemporary actors that they become the means by which to justify specific political worldviews. Comparing the profiles and recruitment patterns of foreign fighters in the civil wars of Syria and Spain, therefore, may open up research strategies for understanding this phenomenon in a more general and not so culturally biased way.

## 1. "Fighting for the Caliphate": Foreign fighters in the Syrian Civil War

In September 2014, the US administration estimated that since early 2012, between 12,000 and 15,000 foreign fighters from approximately eighty different countries had joined the civil war in Syria.<sup>9</sup> Only a few months later, in February 2015, these estimates were raised to more than 20,000, with the overwhelming majority of the fighters filling the ranks of radical Jihadist militias such as Jabhat al-Nusra or the Islamic State (IS). While most of these war volunteers come from Arab countries, in particular from Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Libya, and Morocco, about 3,400 of the foreigners currently fighting in Syria and Iraq originate from the United States or countries in Western Europe.<sup>10</sup> Already in winter 2013, the number of Western

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro, "Be Afraid. Be A Little Afraid: The Threat of Terrorism from Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq", in *Brookings Foreign Policy Papers*, No. 34 (November 2014), p. 9, <http://brook.gs/1Q3TKSU>.

<sup>10</sup> Daniel Byman, "The Homecomings: What Happens When Arab Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria Return?", in *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 38, No. 8 (2015), p. 582; Mohammed Masbah,

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foreign fighters was estimated to have reached up to 1,700 individuals from Europe alone.<sup>11</sup>

The increasing number of foreign fighters originating from Australia, Europe, and the United States represents a departure from previous wars in which Muslim foreign fighters took part, such as those in Afghanistan, Chechnya, Iraq, or former Yugoslavia. During the war in Afghanistan, approximately 20,000 foreign fighters engaged in combat against Soviet troops; however, only very few of them were from Europe or the United States.<sup>12</sup> In Chechnya, even the Arab dimension of the foreign fighter phenomenon was almost negligible, at least in terms of numbers, with about 80 Arabs engaged in the first round of the war between 1994 and 1996.<sup>13</sup> During the Sunni insurgency in Iraq in 2004 and 2005, only about 100 of the estimated 4,000 foreign fighters came from Western Europe.<sup>14</sup> According to the Sinjar Records,<sup>15</sup> the dominant nationalities among al-Qaida's foreign fighters in Iraq were Saudi Arabian, at 41 percent, and Libyan, at 18.8 percent.<sup>16</sup> This significant change in the origin of Muslim foreign fighters with respect to the civil war in Syria has been a major concern of Western governments. Still, the majority of foreign fighters have their national background in regional Middle Eastern states. Yet the number of young Western Muslims travelling to Syria and Iraq has reached an unprecedented level.

To be sure, at the current moment we only have rather weak data on the numbers and origins of these foreign fighters, resulting from disclosed intelligence reports, journalists' accounts, and often questionable sources from the Internet. In August 2014, for instance, Swedish intelligence estimated that about 80 Swedish citizens had left for Syria, while in an interview a Swedish foreign fighter believed the number of Swedes in Syria to be more than 200.<sup>17</sup> While our knowledge on foreign

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"Moroccan Foreign Fighters. Evolution of the Phenomenon, Promotive Factors, and the Limits of Hardline Policies", in *SWP Comments*, No. 46 (October 2015), [http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2015C46\\_msb.pdf](http://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2015C46_msb.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Edwin Bakker, Christophe Paulussen and Eva Entenmann, "Dealing with European Foreign Fighters in Syria: Governance Challenges & Legal Implications", in *ICCT Research Papers*, December 2013, p. 2, <http://dx.doi.org/10.19165/2013.1.08>.

<sup>12</sup> Evan Kohlmann and Laith Alkhouri, "Profiles of Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq", in *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 7, No. 9 (September 2014), p. 1, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Publications/Detail/?id=184689>.

<sup>13</sup> Cerwyn Moore and Paul Tumelty, "Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya: A Critical Assessment", in *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 31, No. 5 (2008), p. 418.

<sup>14</sup> Timothy Holman, "Belgian and French Foreign Fighters in Iraq 2003-2005: A Comparative Case Study", in *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 38, No. 8 (2015), p. 604.

<sup>15</sup> The Sinjar records contain information on the fighters of the then al-Qaida affiliated militias of the Islamic State of Iraq that were captured by coalition forces in a raid close to the Iraqi town Sinjar in October 2007. See Joseph Felner and Brian Fishman, "Al-Qa'ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq. A First Look at the Sinjar Records", in *CTC Reports*, 2007, p. 3, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Publications/Detail/?id=45910>.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Marco Nilsson, "Foreign Fighters and the Radicalization of Local Jihad: Interview Evidence from Swedish Jihadists", in *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 38, No. 5 (2015), p. 343-344.

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fighters remains imprecise in terms of quantitative data, we know more regarding the micro level, that is to say the life stories and individual backgrounds of some of those who have gone to fight.<sup>18</sup> In 2014, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, to take one example, estimated that about 60 Australians had been fighting in Syria and Iraq, of whom 15 had been killed on the battlefield. Based on the very small number of those killed in battle, the typical Australian foreign fighter was under 30 years old, predominantly male, and of Lebanese- or Turkish-Australian background; of these, some had families while others were single men, and most of them had criminal records with the Australian security authorities.<sup>19</sup>

The general picture seems to confirm in part this profile of the Australian volunteers in terms of age, gender, and social background. A study of the small group of Belgian and French foreign fighters who joined al-Qaida in Iraq concluded that they represented a small group of mostly single young males from rather modest socio-economic backgrounds who were connected through local friendship and kinship ties.<sup>20</sup> Olivier Roy describes French war volunteers as young people of mixed social backgrounds who often have a history of petty delinquency. The majority are second-generation Muslim immigrants; however, there are also a significant number of converts among them.<sup>21</sup> Yet beyond these rather broad patterns, it is very difficult to generalise any further with respect to the socio-economic status, the political and religious attitudes, or the educational status of Western foreign fighters.<sup>22</sup> In short, these young Muslims leaving the West to fight in the Middle East are a very mixed group of individuals with different personal backgrounds.

Equally vague are the motivations driving foreign fighters to leave home and fight wars which are not their own. Generalisations with respect to motivations are especially problematic. In an interview with the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs, Richard Barrett gave a hesitant and very considered account of the motivational background of foreign fighters in Syria.<sup>23</sup> According to him, we can only discern some common themes among these volunteers, such as a general disillusionment with national and international politics, a lack of social belonging,

<sup>18</sup> Olivier Roy, "What is the Driving Force behind Jihadist Terrorism? A Scientific Perspective on the Causes/Circumstances of Joining the Scene", Speech at the BKA Autumn Conference *International Terrorism: How Can Prevention and Repression Keep Pace?*, Mainz, 18-19 November 2015, p. 3, [http://www.bka.de/nn\\_256982/SharedDocs/Downloads/EN/Publications/AutumnConferences/2015/herbsttagung2015Roy.pdf](http://www.bka.de/nn_256982/SharedDocs/Downloads/EN/Publications/AutumnConferences/2015/herbsttagung2015Roy.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Zammit, "New Developments in Australian Foreign Fighter Activity", in *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 7, No. 9 (September 2014), p. 6, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Publications/Detail/?id=184689>.

<sup>20</sup> Timothy Holman, "Belgian and French Foreign Fighters in Iraq 2003-2005", cit., p. 615.

<sup>21</sup> Olivier Roy, "What is the Driving Force behind Jihadist Terrorism?", cit.

<sup>22</sup> Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger, "ISIS and the Foreign-Fighter Phenomenon", in *The Atlantic*, 8 March 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/03/isis-and-the-foreign-fighter-problem/387166>.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Barret interview with Joanne J. Myers, "Foreign Fighters in Syria", in *Global Ethics Forum TV Series*, 23 September 2014, <https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/studio/multimedia/20140923>.

a desire for respect and recognition, a search for religious spirituality, and the necessity to defend Islam. This description fits well with the observations of other authors. Marion van San, for instance, discerned among young Belgian and Dutch supporters of transnational Jihad a “highly romanticized image of what it meant to actually participate in armed combat.”<sup>24</sup> These Muslim youngsters perceived the world as divided into victims and oppressors in a war against Islam.<sup>25</sup>

When it comes to religion, this perception of “Islam oppressed” is often accompanied by a remarkable ignorance of the teachings of Islam and of the local conditions on the ground in Syria. With respect to the French scene, Olivier Roy states that the religious knowledge of French Jihadists is low. According to him, the rigid ideology of Jihadist Salafism provides a religion for “disenfranchised youngsters” representing a radicalised youth movement.<sup>26</sup> Generally speaking, the motivation to go to war seems to vary extremely among the fighters, and a number of not necessarily mutually shared, often very individual, grievances may play a role. Rather than discerning clear general patterns of individual motivations, we can observe certain ideological Islamist templates at work which are able to turn complex patterns of individual grievances into push factors.<sup>27</sup>

## 2. “Fighting against Fascism”: Foreign fighters in the Spanish Civil War

These admittedly very tentative findings regarding contemporary Muslim foreign fighters show striking parallels with the profile and motivation of those war volunteers who travelled to Spain almost 80 years ago. This applies in particular to the volunteers who joined the ranks of the “republican” International Brigades. From their formation in late October 1936 until February 1937, the International Brigades were able to recruit about 25,000 foreign fighters.<sup>28</sup> This number increased to approximately 41,000 volunteers from fifty different countries during the year 1937. When applying the definition of a foreign fighter given in the introduction to this paper, the contingent of Comintern-recruited fighters exceeded by far the fewer than 1,500 to 3,000 volunteers who deliberately joined the nationalist side of General Franco.<sup>29</sup> However, in total numbers of foreign combatants, international

<sup>24</sup> Marion van San, “Striving in the Way of God: Justifying Jihad by Young Belgian and Dutch Muslims”, in *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 38, No. 5 (2015), p. 331.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 331-340.

<sup>26</sup> Olivier Roy, “What is the Driving Force behind Jihadist Terrorism?”, *cit.*

<sup>27</sup> Richard Barret interview with Joanne J. Myers, “Foreign Fighters in Syria”, *cit.*

<sup>28</sup> R. Dan Richardson, “Foreign Fighters in Spanish Militias: The Spanish Civil War 1936-1939”, in *Military Affairs*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (February 1976), p. 11.

<sup>29</sup> Judith Keene, *Fighting for Franco. International Volunteers in Nationalist Spain during the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939*, London and New York, Leicester University Press, 2001; Gabriel Jackson, “Foreword”, in Judith Keene, *Fighting for Franco*, *cit.*, p. vi; Christopher Othen, *Franco’s International Brigades. Adventurers, Fascists, and Christian Crusaders in the Spanish Civil War*, London, Hurst, 2013, p. 4.

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support for Franco's troops was actually much higher. In the course of the war the nationalist side enlisted some 78,000 soldiers from Morocco and about 8,000 fighters from Portugal, while the fascist regimes of Germany and Italy supported the nationalist cause with 35,000 and about 80,000 troops respectively.<sup>30</sup> In particular, the Moroccan troops played a key role in the first months of combat and suffered "disproportionately heavy casualties with approximately 11,000 killed."<sup>31</sup>

In his studies of the approximately 3,000 Americans who sailed across the Atlantic to fight with the International Brigades in Spain, Robert Rosenstone presents a similarly complex picture regarding the origin and motivational background of the volunteers in the Abraham Lincoln Battalion.<sup>32</sup> The majority of these American volunteers were males under the age of 30 with an urban background and previous experience with labour unions and/or radical political parties.<sup>33</sup> They were convinced that "Fascism had to be defeated in all its manifestations throughout the world."<sup>34</sup> The American foreign fighters were from a broad range of occupational backgrounds, however, with a majority coming from two groups, the working class and students.<sup>35</sup> In their ethnic and religious composition, the brigadists were very heterogeneous, many of them born abroad or first-generation immigrants to the United States.<sup>36</sup>

The common themes motivating these American war volunteers were related to the radicalised political narratives of a rather small group of people in the United States that emerged in the historical context of both the Great Depression and the rise of Fascism in Europe. The typical American foreign fighter took his decision to leave for an unknown war in the atmosphere of a "world in crisis." Most of them were guided by an unspecific amalgam of left-wing feelings, ideals, theories, and beliefs that seemed to offer a solution to the global crisis.<sup>37</sup> In Spain, American and European brigadists were collectively "defending civilization against fascism," but they did so with very different attitudes, motivations, and personal approaches.<sup>38</sup> Although international Communism and the Soviet Union were behind the organisation of the Brigades, many of the volunteers did not have a doctrinal approach to communist ideology. In the American case, only very few foreign fighters had ever read Marxist literature; if they had any doctrinal knowledge at all, it came from their selective reading of the left-wing press. Moreover, many of them had adopted their leftist attitudes only recently or even developed them as late as in

<sup>30</sup> Christopher Othen, *Franco's International Brigades*, p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> Stanley G. Payne, *The Spanish Civil War*, cit., p. 126.

<sup>32</sup> Robert A. Rosenstone, "The Men of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion", in *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (September 1967), p. 327-338; Robert A. Rosenstone, *Crusade of the Left*, cit.

<sup>33</sup> Robert A. Rosenstone, *Crusade of the Left*, cit., p. 104.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 258.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>36</sup> Robert A. Rosenstone, "The Men of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion", cit, p. 329 and 331; Robert A. Rosenstone, *Crusade of the Left*, cit., p. 109-110.

<sup>37</sup> Robert A. Rosenstone, *Crusade of the Left*, cit., Chapter two.

<sup>38</sup> R. Dan Richardson, "Foreign Fighters in Spanish Militias", cit., p. 9.

the context of the Spanish Civil War.<sup>39</sup>

In conclusion, at least at a very general level the foreign fighters in Syria seemingly share a number of traits with their predecessors who enlisted voluntarily in the International Brigades in Spain: they are young, male,<sup>40</sup> of mixed socio-economic status, and of a recent immigration background. The war volunteers in Syria, like those in Spain, seem to represent a generation that has grown up in a certain atmosphere of crisis, the alleged or real threats of which they apprehend with reference to broader, globally relevant ideologies. Both groups were attracted by a “defensive messaging” that speaks to individuals’ very particular fears and frames a distant conflict as an existential threat to an imagined transnational identity group.<sup>41</sup> The theoretical and/or theological underpinnings of these ideological frameworks, however, are to a large extent far beyond their comprehension. Furthermore, they travel to war zones about which they often do not have any deeper knowledge. How then are these heterogeneous groups of young people recruited?

### 3. Recruitment patterns of the foreign fighter phenomenon

In his excellent study on Muslim foreign fighters written before the beginning of the Arab uprisings in 2010/11, Thomas Hegghammer convincingly argued that there are two crucial structural components, ideological and organisational features on a transnational level, that are necessary for the facilitation of any large-scale mobilisation of foreign fighters. First of all, the transformation of individual push factors into forms of collective action requires a strong and convincing ideological framework. The recruitment of foreign fighters works through the appeal to defensive action in the name of solidarity within an imagined transnational community under existential threat. Secondly, there must be a “strong cadre of transnationalist activists” who are able to mobilise volunteers and facilitate their move to the battlefield. While these organisational cadres act in relative autonomy from direct state control, they have at the same time “access to state-like resources and privileges.”<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Robert A. Rosenstone, “The Men of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion”, cit. p. 337.

<sup>40</sup> It should be mentioned that, as was the case in Spain, women have also joined the warring groups in Syria. However in both cases women join the armed groups in much fewer numbers than men and mostly not as combatants. In Spain, the republican side mobilised women in emancipative terms, while the Nationalists emphasised their traditional roles, using them in various social, economic, and medical activities (see Stanley G. Payne, *The Spanish Civil War*, cit., p. 128). With regard to the war in Syria, women play an important role as disseminators in the media (see Jytte Klausen, “Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq”, in *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (2015), p. 15-16, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2014.974948>). In addition it is estimated that about 10 percent of Western foreigners who have joined the Islamic State are women. Yet these women are predominantly envisaged in patriarchal terms and have non-combat roles. See Anita Peresin and Albert Cevone, “The Western Muhajirat of ISIS”, in *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 38, No. 7 (2015), p. 499.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. David Malet, “Why Foreign Fighters?”, cit., p. 99-101.

<sup>42</sup> Thomas Hegghammer, “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters”, cit., p. 90.

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With regard to the first component, the “defensive messaging” and appeal to transnational solidarity,<sup>43</sup> we can clearly discern a globally relevant dichotomy of ideologies mobilising for action in both cases. In Spain and in Syria we observe confrontations that from all sides are narrated in terms of an existential struggle between good and evil, inviting people to “participate in a moment of history.”<sup>44</sup> The global battle against Fascism and the transnational Jihad for an Islamic Caliphate share this character of being staged by their protagonists as world historical moments. In spite of all their differences in values and worldviews, both the International Brigades and the militias of the Islamic State provide war volunteers with opportunity structures to take part in such an existential confrontation; on the battlefields in Spain and Syria foreign fighters have been able to convert their specific political ideologies into the reality of an armed struggle. More specifically, the transnationalist Communist and Islamist ideologies at work provide templates that give meaning to a complex variety of individual grievances, personal circumstances, and national particularities, channelling them toward a common course of action. In being part of such an existential struggle, foreign fighters turn a war previously unknown to them into a meaningful war of their own.

Turning to Hegghammer’s second component behind the foreign fighter phenomenon, the organisational features of recruitment and mobilisation, transnational networks and strong states have been involved in the mobilisation of foreign war recruits in Syria, just as they were in Spain. In Spain it was the Comintern and the Soviet Union. The International Brigades “had their own officers, mostly Communists, and at first the top commanders were Red Army or Soviet military intelligence officers of non-Russian nationality.”<sup>45</sup> In the United States it was cadres of the American Communist Party recruiting volunteers for the Lincoln Battalion.<sup>46</sup> For Dan Richardson, the International Brigades in Spain always remained the representatives of a Comintern-controlled force whose military and organisational strength was built entirely on the experience of Red Army officers and Soviet advisers.<sup>47</sup>

Returning to the present, the recent mobilisation of foreign fighters in Syria has been facilitated by transnational Jihadist networks and influential Sunni states such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. From an historical perspective, in particular the role of Saudi Arabia has been instrumental in the development and dissemination of the necessary ideological structures for the rise of the Muslim foreign fighters phenomenon. Since the 1960s, the Saudi state has provided the institutions, resources, and ideological underpinnings for the emergence of a new

<sup>43</sup> David Malet, “Why Foreign Fighters?”, cit., p. 101.

<sup>44</sup> Richard Barret interview with Joanne J. Myers, “Foreign Fighters in Syria”, cit.

<sup>45</sup> Stanley G. Payne, *The Spanish Civil War*, cit., p. 153.

<sup>46</sup> Robert A. Rosenstone, *Crusade of the Left*, cit.

<sup>47</sup> R. Dan Richardson, *Comintern Army. The International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War*, Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 1982, p. 178.

pan-Islamic movement, making the Saudi region of the Hijaz into a “melting pot of international Islamists.” These pan-Islamic activists have created an “alarmist, self-victimizing, conspiratorial, and xenophobic” identity discourse of Muslim unity that has spread over the whole globe.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, in the involvement of former Baath officers and Iraqi security personnel in the military structure of IS,<sup>49</sup> we can see clear parallels to the role of security personnel in the International Brigades in Spain, who received their military training through institutions of the Soviet state.

This brief comparison of the recruitment patterns of the foreign fighter phenomenon in Spain and Syria shows significant parallels between the two cases regarding pull factors such as ideology, resources, transnational networks, indirect state support, and recruiting infrastructures. The emergence of the foreign fighter phenomenon relies on a necessary support structure in ideological, material, and communication terms. Without this support structure, it would be impossible for the phenomenon to develop to such an extent. More difficult, however, is defining the concrete push factors, that is to say the individual reasons that eventually make these young men go. Support structures facilitate the recruitment of foreign fighters, but they do not make recruits. While opportunity structures are necessary to explain the phenomenon, they are by no means sufficient. Why do groups of predominantly young men with very different historical, cultural, socio-economic, and religious backgrounds find it an attractive proposition to join foreign militias and fight their wars? Why do they want to take part and even die in a local war imagined as an existential struggle of humankind?

These questions bring us back to the existentialist and romanticist traits of the Philhellenic worldview, of Ernest Hemingway’s novel, and of the more general fascination with collective violence committed in the name of a just cause. Robert Rosenstone emphasised that for most of the fighters of the Lincoln Battalion, the search for adventure in combination with the mutually reinforcing power of friendship played an important role in the decision to go.<sup>50</sup> This certainly also applies to the current situation in Syria and is emphasised by the enticement strategies of the propaganda videos of the Islamic State. While the display of stark violence accounts for only about 10 percent of the content of foreign fighter postings in social media, IS propaganda is increasingly characterised by its emphasis on friendship, brotherhood, and family life. Becoming a foreign fighter is therefore also pictured as a kind of “life-style decision.”<sup>51</sup> Whatever it actually means for the respective individual, many Western foreign fighters may have been motivated by a combination of both “a romantic desire to defend Islam and Muslims under

<sup>48</sup> Thomas Hegghammer, “The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters:”, cit., p. 81-83.

<sup>49</sup> Charles Lister, “Assessing Syria’s Jihad”, in *Survival*, Vol. 56, No. 6 (December 2014-January 2015), p. 90.

<sup>50</sup> Robert A. Rosenstone, “The Men of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion”, cit., p. 337.

<sup>51</sup> Jytte Klausen, “Tweeting the Jihad”, cit., p. 10 and 17.

threat"<sup>52</sup> and a search for social inclusion.<sup>53</sup>

In our attempts to fully comprehend the foreign fighter phenomenon, we should take these indications of a more general fascination with violent conflict seriously. Not only for those who fight, but also for the spectator, war seems to hold a certain attraction. In Spain, for instance, the nationalist side invited European tourists to visit the country in the midst of war. Thousands of Europeans participated in organised bus tours which staged human suffering as a tourist spectacle and served the nationalist camp as a means of sacralising both "the battle sites and the Nationalist soldiers who had conquered the land."<sup>54</sup> In dismissing war as a pathology of modernity, we too easily endorse uncritically peaceful narratives of modernisation. Yet modernity and violence are not necessarily opposite poles. On the contrary, the relationship between war and modernity is ambiguous, and foreign fighters have been a recurring phenomenon in modern wars.<sup>55</sup>

## Conclusions: Lessons to learn

This paper has focused on similarities in a historically diachronic comparison between the foreign fighter phenomena in Spain and Syria. There is no doubt that such a comparison could also discern a large number of differences. Most important among those may be the role of social media, in particular with respect to the recruitment of war volunteers. Here, a large field of future research is waiting and this paper has not aimed at going in this direction. In his essay on Norwegian foreign fighters in Spain and Syria, Thomas Hegghammer pointed to two other main differences between these cases. Firstly, Hegghammer emphasised that in terms of brutality, those who have joined the ranks of the Islamic State are now living among host militias who relentlessly display pleasure in committing war atrocities. These IS fighters not only commit horrible war crimes, but also display their atrocities through videos on the Internet. Secondly, the Norwegians who went to war in Spain mostly did so with the intention of defending democracy against Fascism, whereas the typical foreign fighters joining IS express a profound disdain for liberal democratic societies and might even be willing to fight against their own societies after their return home.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro, "Be Afraid. Be A Little Afraid", cit., p. 12.

<sup>53</sup> This combination of the defense of Islam with a desire for social inclusion goes also like a red thread through the biographies of those young Danes who have been described in a recent book by the Danish journalist Jakob Sheikh. See Jakob Sheikh, *Danmarks børn I hellig krig*, Copenhagen, Lindhardt og Ringhof, 2015.

<sup>54</sup> Sandie Holguín, "National Spain Invites You: Battlefield Tourism during the Spanish Civil War", in *American Historical Review*, Vol. 110, No. 5 (December 2005), p. 1400.

<sup>55</sup> Kristin M. Bakke, "Help Wanted? The Mixed Record of Foreign Fighters in Domestic Insurgencies", in *International Security*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Spring 2014), p. 155, <http://belfercenter.hks.harvard.edu/publication/24266>.

<sup>56</sup> Thomas Hegghammer, "Norske fremmedkrigere I går og I dag", in *Norsk statsvitenskapelig tidsskrift*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (2014), p. 277-288, [http://hegghammer.com/\\_files/Hegghammer\\_-\\_Norske\\_](http://hegghammer.com/_files/Hegghammer_-_Norske_)

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I largely agree with Hegghammer's reasoning but would qualify his point about the different degrees of brutality in the two cases. While it is true that international media and the republican regime portrayed the Spanish Civil War as the struggle of a parliamentary democracy against Fascist assaults, that picture did not accurately reflect the realities on the ground. As Stanley Payne convincingly shows, the events in Spain rather were characteristic of a revolution in which the democratic republican left soon became marginalised within the revolutionary Popular Front. From the very beginning the two sides framed the civil war as an existential and almost apocalyptic contest in which the respective enemy was "perceived not as an ordinary political rival, but as a kind of metaphysical incarnation of evil that must be eradicated before it infects, or imposes the same terror on, one's own side."<sup>57</sup>

This description of the Spanish Civil War is strongly confirmed by the atrocities committed on both sides. While the combined military deaths amounted to approximately 150,000 troops, the execution squads of both republicans and nationalists together killed more than 120,000 people within three years, more than 0.5 percent of Spain's entire population. The Franco regime then continued to execute the opposition after the war, leading to at least 28,000 people killed by the nationalists between 1939 and 1942.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, in the initial phase of the war, some leftist militias, most probably irregular anarchist groups, hunted down the Catholic clergy in the loyalist zone, killing 6,832 priest, bishops, seminarists, monks, and nuns.<sup>59</sup> In this process, the actual methods of killing seem to have been no less brutal than those employed by the Islamic State. According to a study by Julio de la Cueva, the victims were frequently exposed to public mockery and torture before being "hanged, drowned, suffocated, burned to death or buried alive."<sup>60</sup> When it comes to war atrocities, the host militias of the wars in Spain and Syria apparently displayed similar degrees of brutality. However, any massive involvement of foreign fighters in war crimes in Spain, at least with regard to our example of the Lincoln Battalion, does lack documented proof.<sup>61</sup>

When it comes to the lessons to be learned from the above comparison, I would like to emphasise three points. First of all, this comparison shows that the current foreign fighter phenomenon is not as exceptional as it has been purported to be in the public debate. The often romanticist, adventurist, and existentialist nature of the motivations for becoming a war volunteer seemingly has not only historical roots but also a transcultural face. We can trace this attitude back from Syria via Spain into the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire as a particular face of violent insurgencies of modern times. Viewed through the lenses of transnational

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<sup>57</sup> Stanley G. Payne, *The Spanish Civil War*, cit., p. 80 and 103.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>59</sup> Julio de la Cueva, "Religious Persecution, Anticlerical Tradition and Revolution: On Atrocities against the Clergy during the Spanish Civil War", in *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (July 1998), p. 355.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 356.

<sup>61</sup> Robert A. Rosenstone, *Crusade of the Left*, cit., p. 375.

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ideological templates for a minority group of people, foreign wars turn into stages in the search for meaning in violent conflict. The precise individual motivations of these people, however, are of a complex and rather idiosyncratic nature. Brian Williams' characterisation of the Taliban prisoners in an Afghan prison camp in Sheberghan also applies to our two cases. Interviewing imprisoned foreign fighters, he concluded that these people represented a heterogeneous group of adventurers, believers, escapist-dreamers, mercenaries, misfits, and genuine fanatics who joined the Taliban in search of meaning in war.<sup>62</sup>

Secondly, given this historical continuity, transcultural face, and – at the micro level – idiosyncratic nature of the foreign fighter phenomenon, it seems that preventing it through attempts to avoid processes of radicalisation at the individual level would be a problematic undertaking. This applies to both those who think in terms of preventing cognitive radicalisation, that is, individuals adopting extremist beliefs, and those who want to counter behavioural radicalisation, that is, individuals taking up violent means.<sup>63</sup> Instead, the most promising strategy to address the foreign fighter problem seems to start at the structural level. While groups of cognitively or behaviourally radicalised youth have emerged continuously throughout history, foreign fighters appear in large numbers only when the ideological and organisational structures are in place to facilitate their mobilisation for war. Despite other factors such as direct support by foreign troops, the lack of specific organisational facilitators can explain the relatively low number of foreign fighters on the Spanish nationalist side. In Ireland, 5,000 to 6,000 volunteers were willing to join Franco's troops in order to fight what they considered to be a "Crusade against Communism." However, due to a lack of funding, logistics, and means of transportation only 100 of them eventually arrived in Spain.<sup>64</sup>

Thirdly and finally, the cases of Syria and Spain clearly prove that these ideological and organisational structures facilitating the foreign fighter phenomenon only thrive under the protection of, and with implicit or explicit support from, national states. While ideologies and recruiting networks are of a transnational nature, their very coming into existence and duration over time cannot be explained independent of the resources, dynamics, and power configurations of a still dominant organisation of world politics as a system of national states. Any attempt to tackle the foreign fighter problem must therefore take into account the important role that states play with regard to the facilitating structures.

*Updated 14 February 2016*

<sup>62</sup> Brian Glyn Williams, "On the Trail of the 'Lions of Islam': Foreign Fighters in Afghanistan and Pakistan 1980-2010", in *Orbis*, Vol. 55, No. 2 (Spring 2011), p. 217, <http://www.fpri.org/node/629>.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Peter R. Neumann, "The Trouble with Radicalization", in *International Affairs*, Vol. 89, No. 4 (July 2013), p. 873-893.

<sup>64</sup> Robert Stradling, "Franco's Irish Volunteers", in *History Today*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (March 1995), p. 40-47.

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