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Driven by Revenge: Why Chechen Foreign Fighters Have Joined Ukraine Against Russia

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Abstract

While the motivations of individuals to become foreign fighters have been at the forefront of academic interest, an important motive—revenge—has so far remained under-researched. Drawing on the case study of pro-Ukrainian Chechen foreign fighters self-deployed in the ongoing Russo-Ukraine War, this article seeks to fill the gap in the extant literature by identifying and conceptualizing revenge. This article posits that two intertwined motives—revenge for perceived historical injustices and revenge for personal wrongs—have played an important role in motivating Chechens to become foreign fighters in the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war. This article suggests that while revenge might be a potent driving force of foreign fighting, its appeal may be stronger in the cultures of honor with the persisting notion of retaliation.

Keywords: foreign fighters; Russia; Chechens; revenge

Introduction

Why might revenge be a crucial motivation for foreign fighters? Drawing on open sources pertaining to the participation of Chechen combatants on the Ukrainian side against Russia, this article makes the first step in the academic literature to conceptualize the phenomenon of revenge as a vehicle of foreign fighting. The paper identifies revenge for perceived historical injustices and revenge for personal wrongs as two interlinked mechanisms that explain why individuals seek to become foreign fighters.

The contribution of this article is twofold. First, we introduce the concept of revenge as a potent motive for foreign fighters to join distant battlefields, while pointing to the cultures of honor as a particularly rich reservoir of revenge-driven foreign fighters. Second, and empirically, we offer the first article in the academic literature dealing exclusively with the motivations of pro-Ukrainian Chechen foreign fighters, an over-represented group of people relative to their general population, in the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war.¹ This article is the first in the literature to systematize what is known as revenge as a potent driving force for foreign fighting. While this paper draws its findings on a single case study, the identified revenge-centered motivations may apply to a universe of cases. Future research on this phenomenon involving distinct case studies might help identify other revenge-centered motivations that would shed light on the complexity of factors driving individuals to foreign fighting.

Triggered by an unprecedented influx of foreign fighters to the Syrian Civil War, the literature has grown exponentially over the recent decade in order to explain the perplexed motivations

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beyond individual decisions to deliberately leave their homes and families in order to join fighting in distant armed conflicts. Thanks to this new branch of research, our understanding of a plethora of foreign fighter motives has improved significantly, such as boredom, wartime thrill, status-seeking, willingness to impress peers, acquiring a sense of belonging, overcoming individual frustration and anger, to help out a community in need, and so on.

Russia's full-fledged invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 further cemented academic interest in the phenomenon as dozens of thousands of foreign fighters from all over the world flocked to the war zone in order to join, particularly, the Ukrainian side of the conflict. Surprisingly, while anecdotal evidence has resurfaced from time to time of revenge as a vehicle of foreign fighting, to the best of our knowledge, no study has been published so far focusing explicitly and exclusively on this key phenomenon.

This article is organized as follows. In the next chapter, the literature on foreign fighting motivations is reviewed to illustrate the "revenge gap" in the literature on foreign fighting. We then conceptualize revenge as a motivation for foreign fighting, offering two revenge-centered mechanisms that we have identified in our empirical research. The following chapter deals with the data and methods. Empirical chapters follow. First, a brief background section singles out Chechen units fighting in Ukraine against (pro-)Russian forces alongside the Ukrainian military since the Donbas invasion of 2014. Second, the available evidence is presented in the empirical chapter of Chechen foreign fighters relating to two revenge-centered motivations as their motive for traveling to Ukraine to participate in the ongoing armed conflict. The findings of the article are summarized in the conclusion.

Why Become a Foreign Fighter? A Literature Review

The literature on foreign fighters has identified a plethora of factors, from religion to material incentives, that have motivated individuals to become foreign fighters. Expectedly, owing to the heterogeneity and perplexity of individual cases, no wide-ranging consensus about the motives had been established, in that these are neither rarely simple nor singular, nor are they static (Öztop 2022, 554). A willingness to take up arms and cross borders is a product of both "push" factors, such as grievances, as well as "pull" factors, such as the defense of an identity-based group, which can evolve over time (Borum and Fein 2017, 262). This chapter seeks to provide a fundamental overview of the main motives for becoming a foreign fighter, as observed by the extant literature.

Religious, Ideological Motivation and Protection of Collective Identity

One of the most common motives for becoming a foreign fighter is a political ideology, including radical religious discourse (Öztop 2022, 555; Bou Nassif 2021). Ideology serves foreign fighters as the reason, even a moral obligation, to fight in an armed conflict on the global level (Sheikh 2016; Juergensmeyer 2005; Wiktorowicz 2005; Borum and Fein 2017; Hafez 2009; Hegghammer 2010; Gerges 2005; Sageman 2004). Some fighters cross borders and take up arms to defend a group or community with whom they share an identity; for example, tribe, clan, ethnicity, or the Muslim world (*ummah*) (Jørgensen 2023). Others may feel more strongly compelled to defend a political "cause" (Borum and Fein 2017, 250). Such "adherence to the ideology" is taken to mean the idea of collective identity, which in turn is rooted in either ideology or ethno-religious belonging (Frenett and Silverman 2016, 68; Ahmed and Pisiou 2014).

Alex P. Schmid and Judith Tinnes drew attention to the influence of religion and emphasized that a common point of many jihadi foreign fighters is that they are either second-generation children of Muslim immigrants or recent converts to Salafist Islam. In addition, while they indicate the main pushing factors such as "reaction to traumatic experiences of violence," "personal identity crisis," and "unresolved political conflicts and perceived absence of solutions by state actors," they also rank the main pulling factors, such as the existence of an extremist ideology, the presence of a

charismatic leader, and the lure of adventure (Schmid and Tinnes 2015; Öztop 2022, 555; Jørgensen 2023).

Foreign fighting has been mostly associated with Islamism or jihadism when the participation of foreign fighters has been religiously sanctioned as an individual duty, by defending coreligionists against foreign aggression (Warren 2016, 58; Rekawek 2023). However, there are many examples of ideologically motivated foreign fighters outside the jihadi milieu, such as the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War (1936–39) or far-right and far-left foreign fighters in Russia’s war against Ukraine since 2014. Russian foreign fighters on the Ukrainian side were motivated by strong anti-Putin and anti-Kremlin sentiments, while Russian foreign fighters on the secessionist side were often motivated by ultra-nationalist imperialism and anti-Western political Orthodox beliefs (Rekawek 2020).

For Muslim foreign fighters, the powerful ideological discourse is the protection of Muslims under threat (Malet 2009, 2013). They often characterize themselves as protectors of *ummah* against non-Muslim aggression (Sageman 2011; Jørgensen 2023). Solidarity with the jihadists and civilian victims of the conflict encourages transnational members who share an identity with the group under threat to help fight the oppressor as their participation in the conflict is vital for the group’s survival (van San, 2015; Malet 2009, 99–100). Such motivation is also linked to the necessity to protect the local civilian population from the repressions and brutality of incumbent regimes —“to help the weak” (Zelin 2015; Bakker and de Bont 2016; Jørgensen 2023). For instance, going to the conflict zone to help the Syrian civil population and combat the Assad regime has been used as an exculpatory narrative and a motivational factor among foreign fighters, and as a recruitment strategy by ISIS (Jørgensen 2023).

Foreign fighters are often lured by jihadi preachers and local belligerents’ recruitment messaging, playing on the “identity” of the prospective fighters. This messaging would be aimed at and crafted especially for people marginalized in a given society (Malet 2020). Dass and Singh (2023) note that the role model of charismatic personalities was the primary factor for mobilizing Malaysian jihadists to fight in Syria and Iraq. Rekawek notes that in Ukraine, recruitment efforts successfully targeted the “marginalized”—individuals who were often seen as outcasts by the majority of their fellow citizens. Additionally, both right-wing and left-wing extremists from the West traveled to Ukraine to participate in the conflict. (Rekawek 2023).

Socio-Economic Factors

A considerable number of researchers argue that socioeconomic factors are critical. Studies supporting this argument include Edwin Bakker’s and Roel de Bondt’s analysis of the characteristics, motivations, and roles of foreign fighters in the war in Syria and Iraq through a comparison between the Belgian and Dutch cases, Kartika Bhatia’s and Hafez Ghanem’s conclusion that education and unemployment affect support for violent extremism, John C. Amble’s and Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens’s extensive study on jihadist radicalization in East Africa, Kwesi Aning and Mustapha Abdallah’s analyses of socioeconomic and political dynamics as sources of Islamic radicalization and violence in Ghana, and Gabriel A. Acevedo and Ali R. Chaudhary’s suggestion that young American Muslims with low socioeconomic status have become more radical than before (Öztop 2022, 554).

Poverty and the desire for socio-economic change can be powerful sources for the mobilization of foreign fighters. It is also a source of uncertainty that pushes individuals, after a critical moment, to look for support and a safe network (Metodieva 2023, 26). Numerous studies highlight that feeling depressed and hopeless as a consequence of the real and perceived social and economic inequality, deprivation, and structural inequalities, including discrimination in the job market and higher education, is a strong driving force for engaging in political violence (Coolsaet 2015; 2016; Bakker 2011: 140; Sageman 2011). It may result in apathy and a lack of meaningfulness in their lives

prior to traveling to fight in foreign countries. Such persons no longer felt they had a future in their residence or home country (Bakker and de Bont 2016, 845).

However, Mishali-Ram and Fox (2022) claim that motivation for individuals to become foreign fighters is not connected to objective discrimination in non-Muslim-majority countries. According to them, it implies that some grievances relate to personal circumstances, or that immigrant minorities are more likely to perceive gaps in inequality in wealthier countries. It means that wealthier countries are more likely to produce foreign fighters because high income might increase relative deprivation because this deprivation is based on perceived contrasts. That is, Muslim immigrant minorities may be more likely to perceive a gap between their status and that of the majority in wealthier countries because of the perceived wealth of the majority (Mishali-Ram and Fox 2022).

Personal Motivations – Frustrations, Search for Identity, and Sense of Belonging

Personal motives such as frustration, trauma, excitement, discontent, and search for meaning in life might be powerful drivers to foreign fighting. Rik Coolsaet discovered that young people who are discontented with their lives and find it meaningless are more likely to become foreign fighters. Similarly, Aleksandar Nacev and Dimitar Bogatinov emphasized that young people who want to give meaning to their lives gravitate toward conflict zones. The prominent components in both studies are the lack of a sense of belonging and the feeling of exclusion. Furthermore, several studies have illustrated that personal trauma can be a motivational factor. An analysis of German foreign fighters by Dorle Hellmuth indicated that people who experience a traumatic event at some point in their lives are more prone to developing new identities and thoughts, and this may enable them to become foreign fighters (Öztop 2022, 554).

Personal-level motives such as sensation-seeking, the sense of communal belonging, and being part of a fighter fraternity are important contributing factors to violent mobilization in general and foreign fighters' mobilization in particular (Nussio 2017; Dawson and Amarasingam 2017; Bakker and de Bont 2016). Personal motivation is frequently driven by the lack of life-embeddedness resulting in the willingness to satisfy the need for belonging and identity. People suffering from uncertainties about their identity are often driven by these identity-uncertainty factors (likewise, Slooman and Tillie 2006 71; Bjørge and Horgan 2009). Frustration and unhappiness with personal life circumstances and other motives, such as seeking contribution to a deeply meaningful political or religious cause are also important motivational drivers for foreign fighting.

Search for meaning and identity is meant to fill the perceived “vacuum” of an individual's identity and to achieve some sense of personal fulfilment. It is linked to the need to consolidate a self-perceived identity and a relational meaning to perpetuate this identity. Frenett and Silverman claim that fulfilment of foreign fighting is “inherently related to self-identification—feeling that you share and understand the problems or experiences of someone else; and the act of identifying yourself as a particular kind of person” (Frenett and Silverman 2016, 71–72). Such a search for identity and meaning in life within the personal context is not inherently political, but personal. This craving for purpose can be strengthened among those who feel that their life currently holds no purpose or power to change things (see the above reference).

Many foreign fighters participate in wars because they seek recognition and esteem from others through their group affiliations. Some of them are attracted to the group because of the prospects for excitement, a sense of adventure, fame, glory, and the chance to be part of something exciting and exclusive and to project themselves on a world stage. These foreign fighters pursue a particular lifestyle, marked by a strong presence of various specific subcultural elements such as music, clothing, and symbols with a ‘jihadi is cool’ attitude, animated by Rambo-style violence (Ahmed and Pisiu 2014; Coolsaet 2016).

However, personal motivation may also stem from deviant behavior, including personality disorders and the hope to evade prison sentences (Coolsaet 2016). People with serious psychological

problems, sometimes having a serious criminal background, regularly go to battlefields in foreign countries. It might be, in some cases, encouraged by a domestic country in order to get rid of problematic, hard-to-handle people (Rącz 2017, 68).

Revenge as a Motive for Foreign Fighters

This article is the first in the extant literature to conceptualize revenge as a motive for foreign fighting; the literature brings only anecdotal evidence across cases of revenge as a motivation for foreign fighters. Looking at the deployment of Bosnian foreign fighters in the Syrian Civil War, Vlado Azinović and Muhamed Jusić make a cursory mention of “revenge for real or imagined injustices” as sometimes “an even stronger motivator than the reductionist interpretation of religion,” without backing their claim with evidence (Azinović and Jusić 2016, 72).

Drawing his insights from the American Muslim youth who joined Al Qaeda, John Venhaus terms a certain segment of foreign fighters as revenge seekers—these are individuals who see themselves as the victims of the allegedly anti-Muslim policies of the Western nations which they regard as the main reason behind the worldwide suffering of fellow Muslims (Venhaus 2010).

Researching Turkish foreign fighters’ participation in the Syrian Civil War, Murat Haner, Ashley Wichern, and Marissa Fleenor identify “exacting revenge from the *kuffar* due to the tragedies occurring in the Muslim world” as one of the motivations (Haner, Wichern, and Fleenor 2020). This motive appears to be widespread among jihadists in general, home-grown terrorists, and foreign fighters alike (Mans and Tuitel 2016; De Bie, de Poot, and van der Leun 2015). Conversely, a group of researchers observed that, unlike internal (non-foreign) fighters who are often driven by revenge, foreign fighters are more likely to be motivated by identity and status-centered incentives (Donnelly, Sanderson, and Fellman 2017).

Before presenting our main arguments, it is essential to differentiate between grievance and revenge. We define revenge as a function and subset of grievance. The latter is a fairly broad term; scholars of irregular warfare and civil war have routinely utilized the concept of grievance to address any sort of resentment against unfair behavior or mistreatment. Grievance encompasses a spectrum of perceptions of discrimination, including, *inter alia*, political, social, and communal maltreatment. People may be aggrieved by their (comparatively inferior) quality of life—or relative deprivation—as well as due to racial, (sub)ethnic, (sub)religious, and class prejudices. Hence, grievance is a rather general phenomenon, a state of mind centered on the perception of unfair treatment.

In contrast to grievance, we understand revenge as a mechanism, a pathway to action. Grievance in itself is not conducive to violent action; being unfairly treated doesn’t imply action to remedy a wrongful deed. In fact, grievance is an omnipresent phenomenon; the sense of unfair treatment is notorious by how easily it can be produced. In other words, not all grievances may lead to violent action, while willingness to exact revenge in itself is a call for violent action. While grievance may ultimately trigger revenge, certain factors make this transformation more likely.

The central argument of this paper highlights two specific types of revenge that can serve as significant motivations for foreign fighters: revenge for perceived historical injustices (historical revenge) and revenge for personal wrongs (personal revenge). These motivations are particularly strong within cultures of honor.² Historical revenge is rooted in long-standing grievances and perceived wrongs committed against a community over an extended period. Personal wrongs refer to direct or indirect harms experienced by individuals, such as the loss of family members, destruction of property, or personal suffering at the hands of the enemy. The present article utilizes the case study of Chechen foreign fighters who joined the Ukrainian side in their fight against Russian military aggression. The illustrative case of Chechen foreign fighters exemplifies how these intrinsically intertwined mechanisms of revenge involve foreign fighter mobilization.

Revenge in the cultures of honor

While both grievance and revenge are common, the latter may be culturally determined. A by-product of grievance, revenge is more likely to incur violence in honor cultures in that it is embedded in the local socio-cultural norms. In the cultures of honor, an offense, be it physical—in the form of a fatal injury, killing, or psychological in the form of immense humiliation—incentivizes individuals to take violent action to “wash off” the stain to their individual and collective (family, clan, tribal) reputation. Unwillingness or inability to avenge a wrongful deed may lead to individuals and their entire families and clans losing their social status and, relatedly, to social sanctions within their communities. In fact, in the cultures of honor, social sanctions serve as an important source of mobilization in that to avoid loss of status and ostracism, “offended” individuals and their clans routinely resort to violent action to avenge offenses to restore their honor (Sommers 2009; Brown and Osterman 2012; Souleimanov and Aliyev 2015).

Even in cultures of honor, where the institutionalized custom of blood revenge (retaliation by the offended kinship group against the offender *and* his kinship group) has faded away, the culture of retaliation (retaliation by the offended individual per se against the offender per se and a loosely defined group associated with the offender) is likely to persist. Using the case study of Dagestani jihadists, Ratelle and Souleimanov illustrate that even in societies where the custom of blood revenge is gradually disappearing, the culture of retaliation remains embedded in the cultural norms of the populations, prompting individuals to exact revenge against perceived injustices that are often impersonal (Ratelle and Souleimanov 2017).

A recently published cross-case analysis of the phenomenon of blood revenge validates this assumption showing that decades following the demise of blood revenge as an institutionalized social norm, the culture of retaliation persists in the cultures of honor making revenge against perceived injustices, personal or impersonal, more likely (Colombo and Souleimanov 2023). Having said this, in the cultures of honor—which constitute a substantial share, if not the majority, of countries generating foreign fighters—revenge appears to be a more likely outcome of grievance than in post-honor cultures. We thus expect that revenge is likely to be a more potent motivation for foreign fighters in the culture of honor, relative to the foreign fighters coming from post-honor cultures.

Historical revenge

The perception of revenge is manifold. In colonial and post-colonial settings, dominating ethno-nationalist narratives often revolve around the notion of grievance or “ancestral hatred.” This is likely to encode the need for revenge as a meaningful—and socially justified—quest for redressing past injustices. As ethno-nationalist narratives centered on the notion of heroic resistance and injustice are passed from generation to generation, so might be the quest for revenge for the misdeeds of the colonizers (Haiven 2017; Rogers 2006).

This results in what we term “historical revenge”—a historically grounded and ethnic community-centered quest for revenge that seeks to redress past injustices using current retaliation. The idea of “repaying the debt” is an integral part of historical grievances. For example, following Russia’s engagement in the Syrian Civil War and the Russo-Ukraine War, dozens of Georgians traveled to these areas to become foreign fighters, to exact revenge against Russia’s colonial support for and continuous occupation of Georgia’s separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Pokalova 2020; Rękawek 2023).

Similarly, Turkish Kurds came to fight against Turkey in Syria and Iraq to avenge what they saw as the mistreatment and discrimination of Kurds in Turkey over the last century, and particularly to avenge Turkey’s harsh counter-insurgency in the country’s southeast since the 1980s (Ferhad 2001; Gunes 2015; Salim 2023).

Personal revenge

In the cultures of honor, revenge has traditionally been linked to personal or kinship-level offenses. Hence it is rather personal, or personally conceived of. Revenge—particularly blood revenge—is triggered by personal or kinship group-related wrongs. In fact, some scholars have pointed to the fact that, in the cultures of honor, personal grievances may be stronger sources of violent action than general—political or social—grievances. Aase 2017; Souleimanov and Aliyev 2017; Souleimanov and Aliyev 2015).

Relatedly, revenge is often apolitical. While grievances are known to be politically imbued, avengers often carry out violent action regardless of their political preferences, or even in spite of the latter. Souleimanov and Aliyev (2015; 2017) have shown that many Chechen insurgents mobilized during the Russo-Chechen wars did so not because of their political opinions, but despite them. Even those fighters who had previously been indifferent to or even critical of Chechnya's separatist elites or the quest for independence sought violent action following a fatal injury, killing, or humiliation inflicted by Russian counter-insurgents or their Chechen proxies. This makes foreign fighters' desire for revenge a possible important factor in the honor culture-based immigrant communities—not least in the second and third generation.

Researching the motivations of ethnic Pashtuns residing in Pakistan's Waziristan province, Shah, Ehsan, and Malik conclude that it was the socially embedded code of retaliation, not jihad, that ultimately drove Pashtun individuals to travel to Afghanistan to participate in the local war against the Coalition forces and their Afghan proxies in order to restore tribal honor (Shah, Ehsan, and Malik 2019). Hicham Bou Nassif, in his study of Lebanese foreign fighters in ISIS, claims that the suffering of family members at the hands of the Syrian regime or Lebanese state played an important role in terms of generating revenge-driven foreign fighters—in fact, according to the author's estimates, nearly 40 percent of all Lebanese foreign fighters were driven by a desire to exact revenge (Bou Nassif 2021). Jean-Francois Ratelle observes that retaliation was a motive for rural Dagestanis to be deployed in jihadist armed groups during the Syrian Civil War (Ratelle 2020). A study by the Canadian Government lists "collective revenge" as an important motive utilized by ISIS for foreign fighter mobilization (World Watch 2016), a motive echoed elsewhere (Analisi di Difesa 2016).

Our taxonomy of revenge is by no means conclusive. We assume that other subsets of revenge exist, such as revenge against perceived discrimination and maltreatment of co-religionists, as observed in the literature on jihadist radicalization and Muslim foreign fighters. The two revenge-centered motivations were identified through the study of the empirical case study of Chechen foreign fighters in Ukraine. Although it is our assumption that other subtypes of revenge exist that need to be identified and conceptualized, the current article represents the first empirically grounded step toward a better understanding of the universe of revenge-driven motivations.

While motives for becoming foreign fighters are rarely monocausal and involve a spectrum of push and pull factors, we expect revenge to be one of the dominant motives for prospective foreign fighters coming from honor culture-based backgrounds. We also expect the two subtypes of revenge to be particularly relevant in the immigrant communities, not least in the second and third generations, as these motivations draw on the notion of historical experience with colonial powers, and direct family-level experience with an injustice inflicted upon family members.

Data and Case Selection

Since the outbreak of war in 2014, two Chechen volunteer battalions, the Dzhokhar Dudayev Battalion and the Sheikh Mansur Battalion, were formed in Ukraine to fight against the Russian army and Moscow's rebel proxies. Many of the Chechen commanders and rank-and-file fighters had experience from the war for independent Ichkeria in the 1990s and early 2000s (Mikhailchenko 2022a). Several new Chechen volunteer units were formed after Russia's reinvasion of Ukraine

in 2022, such as OBON, which is loyal to one of the exiled leaders, Akhmed Zakayev, while the established battalions reactivated in 2022. The list below gives background information about the pro-Kyiv Chechen volunteer units employed in Ukraine.

Dzhokhar Dudayev Battalion

The first Chechen battalion was founded and commanded by Isa Munayev, former military commandant of Grozny during the First Chechen War and an Ichkeria field commander during the Second Chechen War. Munayev died in a battle at Debaltsevo in February 2015 and was succeeded by Adam Osmayev as commander, who joined the battalion in November after his release from pre-trial detention due to his alleged (and presumably fabricated) assassination attempt on Vladimir Putin during his visit to Ukraine in 2012 (Sergatskova 2019). The deputy commander since August 2022 is Muslim Madiyev, who has experience from the First Chechen War.

Sheikh Mansur Battalion

This battalion splintered from the Dzhokhar Dudayev Battalion in October 2014 and is commanded by Muslim Cheberloyevskiy (unconfirmed real name Umkhan Avtaye, or Razhabdibir Gusinov). The battalion joined the Voluntary Ukrainian Corps—Right Sector (*Dobrovolchyi ukrainskyi korpus “Pravyi sektor,”* DUK PS) and was named after Sheikh Mansur, an 18th century Chechen military hero, religious leader, and staunch opponent of the expansionist Russian Empire of Catherine II the Great (Rácz 2017, 67). The battalion has been active also after Russia’s re-invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Separate Special Purpose Battalion of the Ministry of Defense of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (OBON)

OBON serves as part of the International Legion of Territorial Defense of Ukraine and most of its members fought against Russia in the first and second Chechen wars (1994–96 and 1999–2009, respectively). The OBON’s creation was announced by Akhmed Zakayev, a preeminent representative of the Chechen opposition in exile (Hussein 2023). Zakayev also invited Rustam Adzhiev to Ukraine to command the resurrected Armed Forces of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria with OBON as the main (and probably the only) part of that armed formation (Doukaev 2022). Adzhiev came to Ukraine in October 2022 with a group of Chechen and Syrian war veterans. Before he arrived in Ukraine, Adzhiev commanded the Latakia-based Ajnad al-Kavkaz group between 2013 and 2019.

This article is a proof of a concept study, in that it demonstrates the empirical relevance of revenge-centered motivations by using Chechen foreign fighters as an illustrative case. This is done by leveraging sources such as statements, public speeches, and media interviews with commanders and fighters from Chechen voluntary units in Ukraine. Units like the Sheikh Mansur Battalion, which relies on donations, often use media interviews to gain visibility. Consequently, since they are of interest to the media, there is ample primary data available from these interviews. Numerous interviews with Chechen volunteers, especially commanders and deputy commanders, reveal their motives for joining the Ukrainian side in the fight against the Russian invasion.

Conducting interviews with these fighters is challenging under war conditions. With no secured access to the battlefields to carry out interviews with Chechen foreign fighters, the authors have had to rely on available open source data. The latter relates to confessions expressed in secondary-source interviews carried out by journalists, where participants acknowledge that revenge, whether personal or historical, impacted their decision to join the war against Russia. For that purpose, the authors have carried out research into *all* available Russian and English-language sources that

have, up to the moment of submitting this article, brought to the general audience interviews with Chechen foreign fighters self-deployed in Ukraine, fighting against the Russian military.

The article frequently employs direct quotations to provide first-hand evidence that revenge motivated individual Chechen fighters to militarily aid Ukraine in its defense against Russia's invasion. By using these available firsthand confessions, the article seeks to derive insights into why revenge acts as a vehicle for these individuals to engage in combat. The present article, as a single-case study, aims to explain specific outcomes, selecting Chechen foreign fighters as an illustrative case where the outcome of interest occurs. (referencing Levy 2008; Goertz and Mahoney 2006). Being the first-ever piece of research into revenge as a motive for foreign fighting, this proof-of-concept article paves the ground for more academic work on the under-researched phenomenon

Empirical Section

The combination of historic grievances and a culture of retaliation could be identified among Chechen foreign fighters in Ukraine as a mechanism for bringing people to fight. Chechen foreign fighters seeking retaliation might stem from a particular personal experience, such as the loss of family members and/or friends killed by the Russian Army during the Chechen wars, or by the willingness to revenge the oppression of the Chechen people suffering from Russian imperialism and subjugated by Ramzan Kadyrov's despotic rule.

Historical revenge

Historic grievances might serve as an explanation of the ethnic revenge of the foreign fighters considered to be oppressed by the primordial and eternal enemy. In cultures of honor, such as in the Chechen one, historical injustices are remembered and can be passed down through generations, fostering a desire for retribution. Historical revenge is fueled by the imagination of a homeland oppressed, occupied, or conquered by the eternal enemy as part of the identity and self-consciousness. This specific revenge-centered motivation involves a long history of conflict. Meanwhile, bloodshed caused by this enemy against the community and wars in the new battlefields, other than their homeland, provide the window of opportunity for revenge (Muraskaite 2020). Chechens have a long history of conflict with the Russian state and have roots in mass-scale atrocities and scorched-earth tactics of the Tsarist army during the Caucasian War (Shafee 2015).

Historical narratives and collective memory play crucial roles in shaping the identity of cultures of honor, and acts of foreign aggression or occupation are often seen as deep insults that demand redress. In the Chechen case, Russian General Alexei Yermolov has a special place in historical revenge against Russia. He epitomized Russia's brutal and indiscriminate violence against Chechens through cruel tactics, such as the extermination of entire villages, forced deportations, and resettlement (Shafee 2015). Traditionally viewed as the mastermind behind 19th-century Russian military expansion in the Caucasus, Yermolov effectively conducted a 19th-century version of total war, aimed at leaving the local population with no choice but to submit to Russian rule. His implementation of mass reprisals and the principle of collective responsibility against civilians was a critical moment in the history of Russian-Chechen relations (Elkner 2002, 203–211).

In Chechen narratives and historical memory, which serve as the source for historical revenge, Yermolov is seen as the "executioner of the Chechen people," even more so than Stalin, Beria, and Yeltsin (Elkner 2002, 206). Elkner (2002, 212) notes that Yermolov's legacy continues to haunt both Chechnya and Russia. In Russia, his reputation is experiencing a resurgence within nationalist circles (Uzzell, undated). In Chechnya, Yermolov is regarded as the architect of genocidal practices against the Chechen nation that must be avenged. Fighters in the Sheikh Mansur Battalion speak of settling a 400-year-old blood feud, stating: "In tsarist Russia, General Yermolov stole everything

from us. But we survived him. Stalin died. Putin will die. We will outlive these people,” according to a fighter named Mansur (Feng 2022).

The interaction with Russia as a colonizing imperialist power is seen as the never-ending fight for independence and revenge for the tragical imprint left on Chechens throughout history with several most significant milestones: Yermolov’s conquests, Stalin’s deportation of the entire Chechen population in 1944, and the recent independence war which started in the early 1990s and was suppressed by Putin’s regime in 2000s. In Chechen collective memory, the mass resettlement of the 19th century and the tragic consequences of the 1944 deportation are very much alive. The same applies to their fight against Russian/Soviet rule. The recurrence of two themes—Russian oppression and Chechen resistance—holds a significant place in Chechen history and memory (Shafee 2015).

The name of the Sheikh Mansur Battalion itself refers to historic grievances, named after a legendary religious and military Chechen leader who fought the Russian Empire in the 18th century (Query and Farrell 2022). Sheikh Mansur aimed to thwart Russian Empress Catherine the Great’s imperial expansion into the Caucasus during the late 1700s. He is remembered for uniting the Caucasus against the increasing Russian presence and, when pursued by Russian troops, declared a holy war against the Empire (Kossov 2023).

Chechen foreign fighters, driven by historical grievances of dispossession and suppression by Moscow resulting in revenge as a motivation to fight, repeat the narrative of a 400-year-old ongoing war against Russian imperialism (Gall 2023; Krykunenko 2022). For them, Russia is the first and eternal enemy (Losh 2015). Muslim Cheberloyevskiy, the commander of the Sheikh Mansur Battalion, often tells the media, “We have been at war with the Russians for centuries, for 400 years” (Magomedov 2022).

Part of the grievances and historical revenge-seeking stems from memories of the recent war for independence, which many Chechen foreign fighters experienced, which is not finished for them. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and reinvasion in 2022 allowed them to hop back on the train and continue the unfinished business. Revenge-seeking as the mechanism for foreign fighting could be projected into the urge to avenge the suffering, deaths, and oppression of ethnic Chechens during the two Russian-Chechen wars in the 1990s and 2000s.

The Chechen Wars were among the bloodiest of all wars in the post-Soviet area. The two wars triggered huge refugee movements, and almost half of the Chechen population was affected by displacement. The mass media portrayed the horrible picture of the Russian aerial bombardment of Grozny and other cities in Chechnya. Human rights organizations reported numerous cases of arbitrary killings, detention, and torture. The dominant reason for the ongoing conflict between Russia and Chechnya was the history of four centuries of struggle of the North Caucasian people against Russian dominance (Shafee 2015). In this way, Isa Munayev, former commander of the Dzhokhar Dudayev Battalion, killed in 2015, talked about the unfinished war of Chechens against Russia:

We [the Chechens] have been at war with an inhuman country [Russia] for 23 years! My people have been dying for generations in the defense of the honor and freedom of our people, our land. [...] Putin and his terrorists, thugs, killed 300,000 innocent people – women, children, and the elderly. Forty-two thousand innocent children. About 300,000 were left crippled for life. In a one-million nation. Do you understand? He [Putin] destroyed not only my people – he took everything we held dear. (Kozak 2015)

In June 2014, Munayev posted a video message accusing Russia of the genocide of Chechens during the Chechen wars (Chizhova 2015). Rustam Adzhiyev explained revenge as his motivation to fight to Al-Monitor in October 2022: “We go to Ukraine to fight the Russians who killed and committed the most heinous crimes against our people in the 1990s” (al-Kanj 2022). Muslim Madiyev, deputy commander of Sheikh Mansur Battalion, recalls that:

Russia was purposefully targeting civilians, destroying civilian houses, just like they are destroying them in Ukraine now. We had very high casualties among the civilian population. When the Russians were losing the battle, they would turn their weapons on civilians and destroy them, deliberately bombing convoys of refugees. (Ivanov 2022)

The Chechen veteran is sure that the Russian soldiers did this on instructions from Moscow (Ivanov 2022). Muslim Cheberloyevskiy said on this topic of historical revenge:

You have only now realized the true face of the Russians; we remember it from 1991. You saw Bucha and Irpin. We went through this twice, but it was tens and hundreds of times more brutal in 1994-1996 and 1999-2000, this was happening all over Chechnya every day. [...] We know the price of [our] own country, freedom and the price of losing it. Because today, Chechnya and the entire Caucasus are [] 90% occupied by Russians or Putin's local foot soldiers. During these two wars, 300,000 out of 1 million Chechens were killed, 42,000 of them children. This is almost 30% of the total population - imagine that out of 43 million, Ukrainians would have lost 13 million. Another 300,000 people who disagree with Putin and Kadyrov's regime have left Chechnya and are now wandering around the world. Therefore, we know what it means to lose our homeland, land, freedom, and honor. That is why we are participating in this war. (Krykunenko 2022)

In another interview, Cheberloyevskiy added:

... Shooting of tied-up people, violence, torture? We went through all this in both wars. I don't know if they want to intimidate in this way or if they enjoy it. In our villages, they shot civilians in the same way, laughing and throwing grenades into basements with women with children. (Hlukhovskiy and Prysyzhnyuk 2022)

Personal revenge

Another source of revenge-seeking in the culture of retaliation is the personal experience of suffering and killing of relatives and friends that must be avenged against the same enemy on other battlefields. In cultures of honor, personal slights and injuries are taken very seriously, often compelling individuals to seek vengeance to restore their honor. Such motivation is regularly expressed by individual Chechen foreign fighters fighting against Russia on the Ukrainian side. A Chechen fighter with the call-sign Makhno, from the Separate Special Purpose Battalion (OBON), said that in both Chechen wars, Russian forces were responsible for the torture of prisoners and executions: "Whatever they were doing here [in Ukraine], they did it to our relatives at home first," Makhno said. "Each of us has had relatives and neighbors killed. We know this system better than anyone else. And that's why we're fighting here" (Khurshudyan, Dixon, and Morgunov 2022).

Many Chechen foreign fighters experienced brutal and harsh treatment by the Russian forces against their families that had to be revenged in this war. Some of them lost their relatives and friends, which only strengthened their willingness to avenge their deaths. Isa Munayev, former commander of the Dzhokhar Dudayev Battalion said at the press conference in 2014 in Odesa: "I tell you as a father of killed daughters, as a son of a murdered father. I could tell you many other things, but I won't, it's my pain, it's my loss. They [Russians] must be stopped at all costs" (Odeskiy mediatsentr 2014). His successor, Adam Osmayev, had many personal reasons to fight against Russians and their Chechen proxies both before and after the reinvasion in 2022.

Hitmen ambushed and killed his wife Amina Okuyeva while they were driving a car in the Kyiv region in October 2017. It was the second assassination attempt after a Chechen hitman, disguised as a French journalist, tried to kill Osmayev in the car, but his wife reacted quickly and shot the assassin. In his video interview with the Globe, Osmayev said: "It was personal for me before [the

killing of his wife]. But now it's even more personal. A lot of innocent people from my nation have been killed. But when it touched my family, I put a lot more effort into this war" (Mackinnon 2022).

Muslim Cheberloyevskiy, commander of the Sheik Mansur Battalion, said to the media that he had to leave Chechnya in the late 2000s, but his relatives refused to leave the country and were tortured (Krykunenko 2022). He also said that was the witness of all the horrors of the war first-hand in Grozny, a city annihilated by Moscow's forces. "I have buried two brothers, several cousins, and many friends," he said. "Russia wanted to take us back to the Stone Age" (Losh 2015). During the two Chechen Wars, the issue of collective responsibility and mass reprisals came back, reassembling the Chechens' tragic moments of their history—the horrors of Yermolov's genocidal campaigns and Stalin's mass deportations to Central Asia in 1944.

Such memories revived historical grievances that were complemented by a personal motivation of revenge for people whose friends and relatives suffered in Russia's indiscriminate violence against civilians. The village of Samashki became a symbol of the senseless slaughter carried out by the Russian authorities in April 1995, in which several hundred civilians were killed. According to Elkner, a direct parallel can be drawn to the rationale underlying the methods used in the more recent wars to punish villages suspected of sheltering rebels by Yermolov's soldiers (Elkner 2002, 211). A fighter named Sabakh from the Sheikh Mansur Battalion claimed he came from Samashki and remembers the First Chechen War, which began when he was eight years old:

The Russian soldiers vowed that they would simply inspect everybody's passports and leave without hurting anyone if residents removed anyone who might put up resistance from the village. And people believed them. But [then] the Russians came in and started committing atrocities. Our family only survived because we sat in a cellar under the ruins of a house. I remember the Russian soldiers walking right over our heads and searching for people. Shouting back and forth, 'Sanya! Vanya!' They looted, just like they're doing now in Ukraine. (Mikhalchenko 2022b)

After a long period of indecision, Sabakh went to Mariupol in 2019 and enlisted. "I'm going to fight against Russia my entire life. I'm going to avenge the Chechens who were killed. I'll never forgive [Russia], and if I have sons, they'll continue [my efforts]" (Mikhalchenko 2022b). Sabakh's cousin Mansur, the deputy commander in the Sheikh Mansur Battalion, reportedly invited him to join. Mansur was thirteen years old when Russian soldiers destroyed Samashki. Wielding flamethrowers, the Russians burned Mansur's neighbors alive in their homes, threw grenades into basements, and executed the men:

Russia ruined everything I had. I grew up with war, and the war shaped me in all respects [...] If I had been born in America or Canada, I wouldn't come here to Ukraine. But because Russia took everything from me, I have to resist. Nothing else matters. (Feng 2022)

Wherever Russia wages war in the world, Mansur says, his battalion will follow to fight it. Their only purpose in life now is to take up arms against Russia—wherever that might be (Feng 2022).

Another Chechen foreign fighter, Naib (name changed by iStories), was a college student in 1994:

I was walking through Grozny after classes at my college [one day], and I saw Russian planes bomb the city. Civilians were killed in front of my eyes. I saw gathered corpses, and I changed completely that day. It was as if I'd lost my soul. Nothing on this planet makes me happy or interests me. I became empty.

In 2014, Naib left the European country where he was living at the time and joined the war in Ukraine (Mikhalchenko 2022b). Abu, one of the deputy commanders of the Sheikh Mansur Battalion, says he was just seven years old in 1994 when his family's district on the outskirts of

Grozny came under bombardment. “We moved from the village to the city and back to the village, always heading to where it was quiet, where bombs weren’t falling.” He was the youngest of seven brothers, two of whom died in 1996. “We only found their bodies, full of bullet holes” (Reuter 2023).

Aslan Ocherkhadzhiiev, a Chechen foreign fighter from the Sheik Mansur Battalion, said he came from Norway to Ukraine to get a shot at the old enemy that crushed his people in the Chechen wars and denied them an independent state (Kossov 2022). “Unfortunately, I had to experience a lot,” Ocherkhadzhiiev said of his years in Chechnya. “A lot of death, a lot of mutilated people. I was wounded too.” He says he lost his finger in the year 2000 when he was trying to take down Russian armor. “I saw prisons,” he continues. “When I was in Grozny, I was very ill and they arrested me.” He says he was tortured and forced to confess to terrorism, which he denies engaging in. After spending three years in prison, he was released, then arrested and reimprisoned shortly afterward, for a total of over five years behind bars. Ocherkhadzhiiev escaped Chechnya a few years after getting out of prison. Since then, Russia has put out new accusations against him, alleging that he was involved in the murders of police officers and military personnel, which he denies (Kossov 2022).

Aslan Malsagov from Dzhokhar Dudayev Battalion comes from the Chechen village of Venedo. He commented on his personal experience in the following way: “My whole family died. My parents, and my sister, were at their home in Venedo in 2000. A shell hit the house. My brothers fought together with me. They both died in different years, defending Grozny.” In 2014, his comrade-in-arms, Isa Munayev, came to visit him: “he said he was going to join the new war against Russia. I wanted to go with him; we went to a base near the Dnipro. Muslim Cheberloyevskiy, the present commander of the Sheikh Mansur battalion, was there. I tore up and threw away my Russian passport in front of everyone, so my comrades knew: I’m with them to the end” (Mikhailchenko 2023).

Fatkhi Barayev, a fighter from the OBON battalion, combines two motivations for joining the fights in Ukraine:

I came to Ukraine to avenge my people [...] the murdered children, women and old people in Chechnya, Ingushetia, Syria and now also in Ukraine. When the news about the events in Bucha and Irpin spread around the world, I decided to go to Ukraine to do something. I just remembered my childhood, the first Chechen war and then the second, where there were massacres of civilians in Aldy, I was 16-17 years old, and I could be of any help. Now, many years later, watching the arbitrary actions of the Russians in Ukraine, neither I nor my friends could stand aside. We remember how they [Russian forces] destroyed Grozny, we remember about Samashki, and we see how this is being transferred to Ukraine - only on a larger scale. (Ponomareva 2023)

Conclusion

This article demonstrates that revenge may serve as a strong motivation for foreign fighting. The idea of revenge in itself is not culturally determined as it is an integral part of human behavior; it exists across various cultural settings. Yet we expect revenge to be a particularly potent motivation for foreign fighters in cultures of honor. Centered around the notion of retaliation, it often draws on the socio-cultural code of blood revenge, or its remnants. In the cultures of honor, revenge persists as a socially sanctioned form of retaliatory violence driven by the belief that men ought to safeguard their honor against affronts or perceived injustices. Drawing on the empirical case study of Chechen foreign fighters, this article has identified two forms of revenge—historical and personal—that appear to have played an important role in driving ethnic-Chechen foreign fighters to the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war to help Ukraine’s war effort.³

As revealed by Chechen foreign fighters’ testimonies, in historical revenge, foreign fighters have sought participation in the war to retaliate against Russia’s perceived historical injustices inflicted

upon the Chechen people from time immemorial. While this subtype of revenge is rather impersonal, it reverberates strongly within Chechnya's ethno-nationalist narratives of being oppressed and colonized by respective Russian states. In line with the notion of retaliation for past wrongs, Chechen foreign fighters considered it their duty to be deployed in Ukraine to retaliate against Russia's historical injustices in their homeland. In personal revenge, Chechen foreign fighters have confessed to being driven to the ongoing war to retaliate against Russia for the personally sensed wrongs and offenses inflicted by Russia's military in Chechnya since the First Russo-Chechen War of 1994–1996. In contrast to historical revenge, this subset of injustices is unmediated as it contains direct experience with killings, fatal injuries, and humiliation inflicted by Russian military personnel and the Russian state apparatus in general against the present fighters, their kin, and their communities.

Drawing our insights on a single case study, we admit that our twofold taxonomy of revenge is by no means conclusive. We expect this to be a small segment of revenge-related mechanisms that exist across cases. As we illustrate in the article, anecdotal evidence exists of revenge against perceived discrimination and maltreatment of co-religionists, particularly in Western-based Muslim diaspora communities, in the literature on Muslim foreign fighters. Intriguingly, this particular subtype of anti-discriminatory revenge is missing in the testimonies of Chechen foreign fighters deployed in Ukraine, although most of them came from Western-based diaspora communities. We also admit that, within a plethora of motives, revenge is unlikely to be a single driving force of foreign fighting. Usually, as in any human behavior, and particularly when it comes to complex decision-making, such as engagement in violence, an interplay of motives, not a single one, drives individuals. Having said this, our article offers the first step toward the conceptualization of revenge as an important motive for foreign fighting that requires further scholarly attention, with various case studies contributing to a better understanding of the universe of revenge-centered mechanisms.

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Notes

- 1 From a somewhat different angle, a recently published article (first online) by Souleimanov and Colombo (2024) sheds light on the differential motivations of Western-based Chechen youth to become foreign fighters either in Syria or later on in the Ukraine wars.
- 2 “Cultures of honor are those placing a high emphasis on the importance of a man as willing and able to violently, and sometimes lethally, retaliate against anyone who insults his honor, family, or values.” (Atari 2018).
- 3 Our empirical evidence illustrates how closely interlinked the notions of historical and personal revenge are. In fact, both forms of revenge—historical and personal—draw on the need to exact revenge for the wrongs carried out against what is basically a kinship group in the cultures of honor: a family (clan) and an ethnic group as an amalgam of families (clans). The notion of revenge as a potent motive for foreign fighting is likely to come into play in the cultures of honor when historical (ethnic) motivations overlap with family-centered family-centred “oral history” of wrongs that are inherited across generations.

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