

# From the role of international volunteers to debates about Western intervention, there are many comparisons to be made between Ukraine and the Spanish Civil War



[Professor Sir Paul Preston](#) points to similarities between Putin's war in Ukraine and the Spanish Civil War, including those concerning the involvement of international volunteers and Western non-intervention. He writes that direct comparisons are nevertheless complicated.

There are numerous potential comparisons between the war in Ukraine and the Spanish Civil War. Both conflicts feature a ruthless dictator, masquerading as a 'Saviour', launch an unprovoked attack on a democratically elected government, with targeted attacks on civilian populations, appalling loss of life, war crimes, and the massive displacement of tens of thousands of refugees. Both wars saw a legitimate government locked in combat with a better armed enemy. In Spain, a tightly organised military coup was launched against the legally elected government of the Second Republic, which was forced to defend itself against a ruthless rebel army under Francisco Franco and military forces sent by Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini. As is likely to happen in Ukraine, the western powers' policy of supposed 'non-intervention' in Spain ensured the defeat of the Republic despite the military support provided by Stalin.

The hesitant role played by decision-makers in Britain, France, and the United States during the Spanish war echoes the response of NATO regarding Ukraine, which finds itself battling one of the most powerful military forces on the planet, tacitly supported by a policy of non-intervention in the other great power, China. While both responses understandably are concerned with the desire to avoid world war, even this comparison is complicated because of the differences in the global issues being played out in the two wars and their wider consequences.

The Spanish Civil War proved to be the first battle in wider European Civil War that culminated in World War II. It is impossible to predict the outcome of the current invasion of Ukraine. On the one hand, any direct military intervention in Ukraine by NATO could trigger a wider conflict with the possible use of nuclear weapons and may well force China to enter the conflict on the Russian side. On the other hand, as happened in Spain, a failure to act in Ukraine might prove to be the opening battle in a wider conflict. History shows that dictators rarely know when to stop once their paranoid, nationalist, and murderous ambitions are unleashed.

The area in which the most pertinent comparisons can be made is regarding the role of international volunteers in bolstering the morale and forces of the beleaguered Ukrainian people – and, as happened in Spain and then Syria, particularly in terms of the parent governments of the volunteers themselves. In various ways, the governments whose citizens went to Spain and Syria tried to control the flow and made threats about sanctions ranging from withdrawal of citizenship to the imprisonment of volunteers. Approximately 2500 men and women from Britain and more than three times that number from France volunteered to defend the democratic regime in Spain. Despite infinitely more sophisticated communications, technology and travel facilities, far fewer volunteers went to the Middle East. Around 700 French, four 400 British and around 100 Spanish citizens went to fight in Syria. Prior to the Foreign Enlistment Act 1870, British volunteers had fought in Greece and Spanish America. The act, which is still in force, deemed that enlistment in foreign conflicts constitutes mercenary activity and is deemed to be criminal.

There is no comparison to be made between, on the one hand, the jihadist volunteers from Western countries in Syria and, on the other, the men and women who served in the International Brigades in Spain and those contemplating volunteering to fight in Ukraine. In 1936, they went to resist the relentless spread of fascism across Europe and, in 2022, the principal motivation of defending Ukraine also has a dimension of stopping the expansion of another dictatorship.

In Spain, volunteers from the world over flocked to defend the democratic Republic with a clear idea of why they had come: to fight fascism. For the exiled victims of the fascist regimes of Mussolini and Hitler, it was a chance to fight back against an enemy whose bestiality they knew only too well. They had nothing to lose but their exile and were fighting to go back to their homes. Here there is an obvious comparison with the role of Ukrainians resident in the UK and EU countries who are now returning. They, like the German, Italian, Austrian, and Czech volunteers in Spain, will be fighting to support their homeland against a foreign invader and to create a home for their families. For British, French, and American volunteers, the need to fight in Spain was somewhat different. They made the hazardous journey to Spain driven by the awful presentiment of what defeat for the Spanish Republic might mean for the rest of the world. They believed that, by combating fascism in Spain, they were fighting its threat in their own countries.

That 'your children will be next' is being passionately argued by President Zelensky in support of pleas for the West to intervene directly in the conflict as opposed to only deploying economic sanctions. The pleas are being rejected because the consequences of doing so pose an existential threat to the planet. In the short term, this leaves the military defence of Ukraine to the country's armed forces and domestic and foreign volunteers.

There are huge differences between the use of untrained volunteer militias in 1936 Spain and in twenty-first century conflicts. In the Spanish civil war, at least in the early days, there was a degree of technological parity between the two sides. Even so, in the early months from July to September 1936, untrained Spanish militiamen confronting professional soldiers, particularly Franco's Moroccan mercenaries, suffered an appalling attrition rate. Before going into action in November 1936, although the International Brigade volunteers received rudimentary training, they were used as shock troops and suffered massively disproportionate casualties. In the 2020s, there is a massively larger imbalance between untrained volunteers and highly trained professionals with air support, missiles, and cluster bombs. The risks of massive casualties are huge. In Ukraine, combining civilians, international and Ukrainian, with army personnel in the resistance against the Russian invasion has a great international propaganda value but, given the weaponry available to the Russians, will be accompanied by hugely increased civilian casualties.

Furthermore, after the war, and possible long-term insurgency, an area of contention will be the reception awaiting surviving volunteers as they attempt to return to their homes. As was the case with jihadists returning from Syria to western countries, the volunteers of the International Brigades had faced hostility from the British and other western governments. The suspicion was that the majority of returnees were strongly imbued with revolutionary sentiments and would want to make Communist propaganda within the working class. During the Syrian war, the equivalent for western governments was the worry about Muslim volunteers returning to radicalise Muslim youth at home. These fears will not apply in the wake of the Ukrainian war but, pace Liz Truss, volunteers returning to the UK will probably still face the 1870 Foreign Enlistment Act.

---

## About the Author



[Professor Sir Paul Preston](#) is School Professor for the LSE Department of International History.