



Edited by, Paweł Bernat, Cüneyt Güler, and Cyprian Aleksander Kozera, *Proxy Wars from a Global Perspective: Non-State Actors and Armed Conflicts*. Bloomsbury Academic: 2023.

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With the ongoing discourse concerning *hybrid warfare* and *grey-zone operations* another critical term has seen a resurgence of use by scholars, that of proxy war. Proxy wars usually conjure up images of the Cold War competition between the United States and the Soviet Union over dominance of world geopolitics through the supplying of lesser powers to fight on its behalf. Vietnam, Afghanistan, Nicaragua, Angola, etc., are among the most famous examples of such. However, the current situation with the

resurgence of great power competition in a context of globalized complexity and interconnectedness requires new paradigms for understanding the phenomenon of proxy wars. This is where the current volume *Proxy Wars from a Global Perspective: Non-State Actors and Armed Conflicts* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2023) comes into play. It is an anthology of essays written by various scholars on the diverse aspects of the phenomenon of proxy wars. The essays are divided into three parts: the first part deals with the more theoretical frameworks for the study of proxy wars, the second (and largest part) deals with different case studies, and the final part seeks to outline a new paradigm for proxy wars. A complete summary of each chapter is nearly impossible to do justice to each contributor, but here is an attempt to outline some of the most insightful chapters for this reviewer.

The first chapter, “Toward Conceptualization of Contemporary Proxy Warfare,” written by Pawel Bernat and Cyprian Aleksander Kozera seeks to outline the major conceptual and theoretical parameters of what exactly proxy war means and how best to define it. A major obstacle to this endeavour is that most conceptual understandings of proxy war are stuck in Cold War era definitions, but seem to neglect that the changing realities of the twenty-first century necessitate more updated definitions to account for the multi-faceted world we live in. This necessity not only applies in terms of present-day realities, but even a short history of proxy wars dating back to antiquity is provided to demonstrate that proxy wars are neither strictly a contemporary issue nor an invention of the Cold War era.

Chapter three, “States and Non-State Actors Interacting in Conflict: Explaining State Use of Proxies” by Cüneyt Gürer, outlines how the phenomenon of proxy wars and non-state actors has been grossly understudied in International Relations literature. However, the major theories within the field (Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism) can each help explain the dynamics of proxy wars. Realism with its focus on power, Liberalism with its focus on cooperation, and finally Constructivism with its focus on ideas and identities, each has its own comparable strengths and weaknesses when analyzing the world around us, and the dynamics of proxy wars in particular.

Chapter four by Pawel Bernat, Viacheslav Semenenko, Pavlo Openko and Daniel Michalski concerns the nature of Russian methods of proxy and hybrid warfare in Ukraine between 2014-2022. This chapter helps demonstrate the complexity of the phenomenon. Chapter five by Tamir Sinai concerns Ukraine’s use of foreign volunteers (which are labelled *legionnaires*) and how the use of such forces by state actors adds a

vital but understudied aspect to debates about the use of proxy forces. One great strength of this volume is how although the first part is the primary theoretical component of the book, each chapter in the historical case study section seeks to add some new nuance to the definitions of *proxy wars* and the wider geopolitical context(s) it occurs, even if the major focus of that particular chapter is a more specific case study. This is an important element to consider when addressing the all-too common theory-practice(praxis) divide that results in theory being too abstract from actual reality, whilst specific case studies are too contextualized to be meaningful on a more generalized level. The first chapter does a significant decent job in outlining the general premises of the theoretical discussions concerning the nature of proxy wars, but without precluding particular nuances that might apply in some cases but not others. The specific case studies are there to help fill in those details as needed. One example in the book is that although chapter five is focused on Ukraine's use of *legionnaires*, it does make mention of the research of Elizabeth Grasmeder's research into the wider phenomenon that could also lead to further research. Although briefly mentioned in the present volume, Grasmeder references the use of non-Germans by the Wehrmacht during World War II to assist with its depleted manpower resources as the war dragged on (pg. 77). This reference alone provides considerable potential material for another case study that builds upon scholarship that has examined this in greater depth such as *The Waffen-SS: A European History* (Oxford University Press, 2016) edited by Jochen Böhrer and Robert Gerwarth alongside *Joining Hitler's Crusade: European Nations and the Invasion of the Soviet Union, 1941* (Cambridge University Press, 2017) edited by David Stahel. Both volumes address the wider European contexts of the German war effort and its ability to foster a certain pan-Europeanism for its own purposes.

This example helps demonstrate (alongside the ongoing Ukraine example) that proxy actors are situated within a larger global context, and the participants are pursuing their own agendas and utilizing willing partners to achieve such aims. This is not a novel idea, for even Cold War proxies were often interpreted through that prism. At the same time, the agency of those actual proxies was too often reduced to their global contexts, that is, being pawns of the greater superpower supporters. Both in the case of World War II, foreign volunteers for the German Wehrmacht, and Cold War proxies, the interplay of global and local dynamics converged.

Chapter fourteen by Ümit Namli and Cüneyt Gürer introduces the concept of transnational organized crime (TOC) networks as potential key players in the arming and

supply of non-state actors and proxies. More recent examples such as the potential use of organized crime by the Russian state to supply its proxies in Ukraine are provided (which corresponds and relates to the arguments made in chapter four), but even going back to the Troubles of Northern Ireland saw the collaboration between the Irish Republican Army (I.R.A) and Irish-American organized crime groups cooperating to support a common cause against the British. Even during World War II, there was a rumoured relationship between the U.S. military and the Italian-American mafia for intelligence purposes, cooperating against a common enemy (Mussolini's Fascist regime brutally suppressed the mafia in Italy). Of course, more famously was the cooperation between the Central Intelligence Agency (C.I.A.) with the Italian mafia during the Cold War to potentially assassinate and overthrow Castro and his Communist regime in Cuba in the early 1960s. Although many of these examples are from the Cold War era, they still do assist in expanding the definitions of proxy warfare from the standard paradigms of that era to align it with the more comprehensive and cross-historical frameworks attempted by the authors of this volume.

Graeme Herd's chapter "The Salience of the New Proxy War Paradigm" returns and builds upon the arguments made in chapter one concerning the fact that the Cold War era paradigm of proxy war still remains the dominant one, but yet the emergence of our "increasingly multipolar and polycentric world" of the 21st century (pg.245) creates the necessity for new and more comprehensive paradigms.

Returning to and building upon the analysis of International Relations theory from chapter three: The main dividing line between the schools of thought mentioned (Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism), however, seem to be an emphasis on the "material structure of the international system" as is the case with Realism and Liberalism (pg. 49); whilst Constructivism focuses more on the non-material and ideational factors. This raises the question of whether or not the material-ideational divide can truly be bridged, and one possible solution to bridging this theoretical divide is to formulate a more integralist meta-paradigm that could assist in bringing together the insights of different schools of thought together. Even if it is not exactly a single framework, at least a wider multi-paradigmatic approach could be most suitable for the purposes of understanding proxy wars. Such an approach has been recently proposed elsewhere in the War Studies field by Ben Zweibelson in *Reconceptualizing War* (Helion and Company, 2025), which includes the use of the Sociology of Knowledge in understanding wars (or proxy wars in this particular case) as complex social endeavours. Complexity theory has

also made significant inroads into the analysis of our current world order and the overlapping natures of current conflicts that do not conform to one single paradigmatic framework. Even the English School of International Relations (which is not addressed neither in the specific chapter or the book as a whole) has also addressed issues related to different forms of international systems and societies, which could be truly relevant to any research on the wider geopolitical nature of proxy wars in our contemporary world. Thus, the necessity for a more Integralistic and multi-paradigmatic framework for understanding proxy wars that utilizes the great strengths of different International Relations theories whilst bypassing their inherent limitations is established, which relates back to the arguments presented in chapter three.

If there is a major weakness to the volume, it is that several of the case studies analyzed in the book are still ongoing affairs, and the analysis provided by the authors maybe already be outdated due to the fast-paced changes on the ground. The most prominent examples are Ukraine (as it regards to Russia's standing on the world stage as a result of the conflict, a matter of debate when regarding the non-Western world), as well as Syria, with the fall of the Assad regime in December of 2024. In fairness, it should be noted that the authors seem fully aware of these limitations and openly acknowledge them, stressing their analyses are based on the available sources at the time of publication. Furthermore, case studies remain a viable part of military and strategic studies, which rely heavily on historical examples to help inform more theoretical discussions. Theory without any connection to case studies is simply not feasible nor desirable.

Despite this inherent and perhaps unavoidable limitation, this volume does make a noble attempt to bridge together both theoretical and case studies-based scholarship into a single work. Each topic could be a wider discussion on its own, as noted in this very review about how the conceptual and theoretical topics addressed could and should be researched in greater depth by scholars. As far as providing a significant foundation and platform for such wider discussions, this volume seems to fulfill its mission rather well.

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