



US veteran who volunteered to fight for Ukraine describes ‘suicide mission’

Description

USA: An American volunteer for Ukraine tells The Grayzone how his foreign legion tried to use him as cannon fodder.

A decade after Henry Hoefft joined the US Army at age 18, he was back on the battlefield, but this time as a volunteer for a foreign military engaged in a proxy war against a powerful foe. After answering the Ukrainian government’s call for foreign fighters this February, however, the American veteran quickly decided he was being sent on a “suicide mission” against the Russian military.

After escaping with his life, claiming his own allies had threatened to shoot him in the back, Hoefft posted a viral message advising other Westerners against joining the fight in Ukraine. Within days, he was at the center of a global information war, with the military for which he had volunteered publicly branding him a Russian agent.

It was not the first time Hoefft had placed himself in the middle of controversy. Years before his ill-fated mission in Ukraine, his passion for guns and the Second Amendment led him into the ranks the Boogaloo Boys, an enigmatic militia-style organization that confounds even self-styled extremism experts.

Members of the Boogaloo Boys uphold a staunchly anti-communist, anarchistic perspective that incorporates political positions and symbols familiar to both radical right and leftist movements. They have marched in support of Black Lives Matter, to the obvious discomfort of many liberal social justice activists, and protested coronavirus lockdowns, usually while openly toting assault rifles and sporting the Hawaiian shirts that have become their trademark.

Hoefft was a prominent figure in the Ohio chapter of the Boogaloos and appeared at the Ohio statehouse in Columbus to [deliver](#) introductory remarks at an armed “unity rally.” There, he emphasized the group’s non-partisan politics and defended a transgender activist from insults.



Henry Hoeft at a Boogaloo Boys event at the Columbus, Ohio statehouse on January 17, 2021

But Hoeft said it was not his former affiliation with a militia-style organization that drew him back into the field of armed combat. Instead, it was the emotional impact of news flashing across his Facebook timeline about Russia's invasion of Ukraine this February and being taken in by heart-rending stories of civilian suffering. He was a father now, and he saw his own child in the faces of Ukrainian youth fleeing for their lives from the Russian military onslaught.

So the moment Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky implored Westerners to travel thousands of miles across the ocean to join his country's fight, Hoeft mobilized. "Every friend of Ukraine who wants to join Ukraine in defending the country please come over, we will give you weapons," Zelensky [appealed](#) days after the full-scale war erupted.

When he arrived in Ukraine, however, he was forced to confront the dispiriting reality of a rag-tag volunteer paramilitary thrust into a proxy war against a powerful military machine. After about a week, he decided he had signed up for his own death.

“They’re trying to send us to Kiev with no fucking weapons, no kit, no plates. The people who are lucky enough to get weapons are only getting magazines with like 10 fucking rounds,” Hoeft [complained](#) in a viral video rant from the field. “People need to stop coming here. It’s a trap and they’re not letting you fucking leave.”

Hoeft went on to make a series of explosive claims, including that the passports of Westerners trying to leave Ukraine were being torn up; that foreigners were being sent to the front lines without rifles; and that the Georgian Legion was threatening to shoot those who refused.

Once it became clear that Hoeft’s account was undermining Kiev’s public relations campaign, the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine denounced him on its official Twitter account, branding the American as a stooge of Russian President Vladimir Putin, and posting his photo beside the caption “Made in Russia.”

??CCD warns:??uses American extremists for its international propaganda. Recently,??has been spreading info about former??military Henry Hoeft, who allegedly “left the ranks of?? territorial defense forces due to lack of weapons”. He’s from “boogaloo boys” extremist movement?? <https://t.co/UzdzVoZTPw>

— NSDC of Ukraine (@NSDC_ua) [March 24, 2022](#)

Next, Georgian Legion fighters joined the social media assault, denouncing Hoeft and branding him as a liar. “Whatever may or not be circling right now from Henry,” one American volunteer [claimed](#) in a video published by Daily Wire reporter Kassy Dillon, “it is completely false.”

Finally, the corporate media trained its sights on Hoeft.

“Ukraine’s foreign fighters ridicule American Boogaloo Boy who RAN AWAY,” a headline from the Daily Mail tabloid [said](#). “A Boogaloo Boi Tried to Join the Foreign Legion In Ukraine — It Didn’t End Well,” [claimed](#) Rolling Stone. And [via](#) the aggregator Raw Story: “Boogaloo Boi’s attempt to fight in Ukraine ends in disaster and him fleeing.”

Amidst the corporate media’s taunting, Hoeft agreed to an interview with The Grayzone. He told this reporter that he was determined to set the record straight about his connection with the Boogaloo Boys, his political views, and most importantly, the serious dangers volunteers face on the Ukrainian battlefield.

“There’s no such thing as glory in death,” Hoeft told The Grayzone. “You’re going to die in a trench and you’re going to get left there and it’s gross and it’s bad.”

“We can possibly stop a world war”

When Henry Hoeft signed up for the Ukrainian Foreign Legion in late February 2022, he was

convinced his experience as an army veteran trained in infantry tactics and mortar fire would make him a valuable asset. Tens of thousands of foreigners who flocked to Ukraine, pouring across the Polish border with the quiet assent of NATO governments, and zealous encouragement from Kiev, apparently felt the same.

“Being a veteran that has a specific skill set, I felt like I could put it to better use there in Ukraine than sitting here on my couch while watching women and children be targeted by Russian forces,” Hoeft told The Grayzone.

A few days before shipping off to Ukraine, he [told](#) The Columbus Dispatch, his hometown paper, about the raw emotion that was driving his decision: “Russia is firing on civilian structures, and there are kids who died. The fact that so many veterans across countries are stepping up, that’s very inspiring to me. We feel like if we can hold Putin for long enough, we can possibly stop a world war.”

Today, Hoeft says, “I still feel the same way. But I never had an intention of going to Ukraine on a suicide mission. I have a child. I have work. I have school. My original intent wasn’t even to be a frontline combat soldier. I intended to volunteer, which I did, and provide training, medical supplies and support.”

Hoeft submitted to the Ukrainian Embassy in Washington, DC a copy of his passport and proof of his military experience, the sole requirements of foreigners looking to fight for Ukraine.

Once he arrived in Poland, getting over the border was “a very easy process,” he said. “It was very fast paced. It took us probably five, ten minutes to get into Ukraine.”

But as Hoeft explained to The Grayzone, getting out was not so easy.

Inside the Georgian National Legion

After entering Ukraine, Hoeft and a few fellow volunteers made their way to Lviv. “In the town center of Lviv, they’re recruiting people from a bunch of different groups. You had Georgians, Ukrainians from local militias, and you also had more hostile groups like Azov and stuff like that,” Hoeft recalled.

Since the Ukrainian Foreign Legion required a contract, Hoeft opted to join the Georgian Legion, which was conveniently stationed nearby.

Incorporated into the Ukrainian military, the Georgian Legion [runs](#) three bases with hundreds of fighters. Previously a unit that fought on the front lines against Donbass, the Georgian Legion is now headquartered in the West where it is led by Mamuka Mamulashvili, a veteran of four previous wars with Russia, including Georgia’s disastrous invasion of South Ossetia.

Mamulashvili and a small group of men he led during the Maidan coup d’etat have been [accused](#) by fellow Georgian fighter Alexander Revazishvili of carrying out a dastardly false flag massacre in Kiev’s central square. According to Revashishvili, Mamulashvili ordered his snipers to open fire on a crowd, killing 49 protesters in a cynical attempt to escalate the conflict by pinning the blame on the government they were seeking to topple.



Mamuka Mamulashvili poses with then-House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Eliot Engel in 2017

[Photos](#) from both 2017 and 2018 posted on Facebook by Mamulashvili show the Georgian hard-man inside the US Capitol rubbing elbows with some of the top figures on the House Foreign Relations Committee. They included then-Rep. Eliot Engel, Rep. Carolyn Maloney, former Rep. Sander Levin, Rep. Doug Lamborn, and former Rep. Dana Rohrabacher. He posted more photos showing him visiting Senate offices, including that of Sen. Dianne Feinstein, the former chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Over the years, a number of infamous foreigners have passed through the ranks of the Georgian Legion, including American veteran Craig Lang, who is [accused](#) of a grisly double-murder in Florida, [Joachim Furholm](#), a Norwegian neo-Nazi and bank robber, and Ethan Tilling, a former member of the neo-Nazi Right Wing Resistance group in Australia.



American fugitive Craig Lang gives an interview on behalf of the Georgian Legion from the front lines in Donbass in 2016

After arriving in Ukraine, Hoefft and a detachment of Western volunteers for the Georgian Legion found themselves based in old hospital converted to a military base in Dubliany, on the outskirts of the

western city of Lviv. There, Hoeft trained Georgians in American military tactics as he grew increasingly aware of the paramilitary group's seamy side.

After Hoeft and other volunteers snuck back into Poland with aid from a handful of British volunteers, they gave an extensive interview to British media, which Hoeft recorded surreptitiously and provided to The Grayzone. During the hour-long interview, the former volunteers detailed the brutal practices they witnessed by Ukrainian-aligned forces.

Hoeft recalled the story of two unfortunate civilians who attempted to pass through a checkpoint. They were yanked out of their car by Ukrainian soldiers, "blackbagged," then taken into a building to have their throats slit. "We don't even know if they were actually spies or just people who ran through a checkpoint," Hoeft said in the recording.

A British volunteer then told a story of an old man who wandered onto his compound. "They grabbed this bloke, and they did everything, and he got thrown out. And they fucking basically searched him then and there. And I know, what are they going to do to him afterwards?"

Hoeft went on to claim that the Georgian Legion had even welcomed jihadist elements into its ranks. Another American ex-volunteer commented to the UK journalists, "Not that it's wrong, not that it's bad, I had a guy in a prayer cap and a big fucking beard run up to me... I'm in fucking Ukraine, why am I hearing Arabic?"

On March 13, Russia struck the so-called "[International Peacekeeping and Security Center](#)" in Yavoriv, the active base of the "International Legion of Territorial Defense of Ukraine," or the "Foreign Legion." Previously the location had hosted US and Canadian training for Ukrainian fighters.

Ukraine's Yavoriv, a de facto NATO base shoveling foreign "bodies against advancing Russians," was hit by 30 cruise missiles <https://t.co/9fJnUxtDuQ> pic.twitter.com/7krG7QZiBu

— Max Blumenthal (@MaxBlumenthal) [March 14, 2022](#)

Hoeft was in Dubliany that night, where he and the Georgian Legion faced nightly air raids. But unlike the nearby base in Yavoriv, his barracks was never hit directly.

Russian has claimed 180 fighters were killed in the strike in Yavoriv, while Western sources put the number at 35.

"While I was there, it was 35 dead and 150 wounded or missing, but those missing could definitely have been found to be [killed in combat]," Hoeft told The Grayzone. "Especially in explosions, you might not know how many are dead, and I think they're counting them all as Ukrainian at this point because they just don't have the logistics to figure out who's who and where they come from."

According to multiple testimonies from volunteers, the Ukrainian government is giving foreign fighters permanent residence and counting their deaths as Ukrainian.

On the night that the Foreign Legion base was struck in Yavoriv, "all of our alarms started going off as well," Hoeft said. That's when Hoeft says he was consumed with a sense of dread.

Georgians “ran into our barracks room and they were like, ‘Hey, get your equipment, go to the woods.’”

According to Hoeft, he and others refused the order because they had no weapons. “That’s just a recipe for disaster, even if we didn’t make contact with Russian troops,” he said. “You can be shot in the back just because you don’t speak their language. It can be a miscommunication.”

About three days after arriving, the Georgian Legion “sent a group of volunteers to Kiev with nothing. No plates, no weapon, no kit. They told them that they would get weapons once they got there,” Hoeft recalled.

Days later, the volunteers deployed to Kiev sent his group text messages complaining that had yet to receive the weapons they were promised.

“One guy was like, ‘Oh, I got a weapon, but I only got ten rounds of ammunition.’ We heard a story of one guy getting a Glock and being sent to go patrol an airport. Some of those volunteers that they sent had no military experience,” Hoeft said. “One of them, a young British kid, had never even picked up a weapon in his life.”

Hoeft and his cohorts decided then that they would not go to Kiev unless given proper weapons and ammunition. “You can be ambushed on your way to Kiev,” he said, and “that’s it.”



Hoeft takes shelter in a trench during a Russian air raid

The Georgians apparently learned that Hoeft and company had drawn a line in the sand, and were incensed.

“A Ukrainian soldier came up to us while we were having, like one of our little meetings, and he was like, ‘Hey, the Georgians know you’re not going... they’re pissed,’” Hoeft said. The Ukrainian told them that the Georgians were “threatening to shoot you in the back.”

As The Grayzone previously [reported](#), the ratline of armaments from the West to Ukraine has amounted to “one of the largest and fastest arms transfers in history.” Yet, Hoeft was not the only foreign volunteer to describe his role in Ukraine as cannon fodder.

“I think most of the Western equipment is going directly to the Ukrainian military,” Hoeft told The Grayzone. “They want to keep the casualties of their people to a minimum. So if you have a bunch of foreigners that come to volunteer, send them first.”

Once he and his group were told that the Georgians had plans to execute them and pass off the killings as combat-related, they hurriedly gathered their gear, hid in the back of an ambulance and headed straight for Lviv. Before long, they were crossing back over the Polish border.

On their way out of the country, Hoefft said he and “two or three” were approached by “a couple of British guys that were doing other things,” Hoefft said.

Hoefft was reluctant to divulge exactly what the Brits were up to. “They took us to a secure location and they gave us contacts to, you know, American special forces guys,” was all he would say.

Hoefft recalled the British fighters warning them about a foreign legion tent near the border crossing that was full of fighters turning back anyone attempting to cross with military gear.

“They’re basically sending them back and they’re taking their passports and sending them back,” the Brits told him.

Now that Hoefft is back in the United States, he says he is determined to warn other American veterans considering taking the trip to Ukraine that this conflict is dramatically different than the more familiar counter-insurgencies of Iraq and Afghanistan.

“The last time maybe we got into something this bad could have been Vietnam, but we even had air support then,” he said. “You don’t have air support [in Ukraine], you don’t have the superiority of the artillery. You know, Russia’s the one with the rockets, they’re the ones with the cruise missiles, they’re the ones with the jets flying overhead, drones, all that. And I just think everyone needs to carefully think about every possible scenario.”

“I just want to make sure that everyone takes that into account and knows that, hey, you’re not a Ukrainian soldier, you are a foreign fighter,” Hoefft emphasized. “They’re going to probably use you first.”

by ALEXANDER RUBINSTEIN

Category

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