



# GROUP COHESION IN INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEER MILITARY UNITS: INSIGHTS FROM THE UKRAINE CONFLICT

*Cristian PANAIT, PhD\**

*This paper investigates the emergence and maintenance of group cohesion in international volunteer military units, using the Ukraine conflict as a focal case. Conventional models of military cohesion emphasize prolonged training, shared routines, and extensive interpersonal bonding, processes generally unavailable to rapidly assembled volunteer forces. The study synthesizes the adaptive mechanisms enabling cohesive action in these unconventional units, through a documentation analysis of scholarly articles, field reports, and publicly available interviews with international volunteer fighters in Ukraine.*

*The findings highlight three primary pathways that compensate for the absence of traditional cohesion-building processes. Firstly, swift trust, based on role-based expectations and urgent shared objectives, allows strangers to form immediate functional relationships. Secondly, leadership-driven cohesion emerges when leaders act as psychological anchors, instilling unity and providing guidance in high-stress settings; strong leadership effectively substitutes for weaker peer bonds. Thirdly, stress-induced bonding underscores how shared combat hardships forge powerful interpersonal links, solidifying group solidarity despite members' diverse backgrounds and limited collective experience.*

*These insights expand conventional models of military group dynamics and have practical implications for training, organizational design, and psychological support in crisis-driven environments. By elucidating how international volunteer units in Ukraine cohere under minimal pre-deployment preparation, the paper challenges the assumption that lengthy, structured conditioning is the sole path to effective military teamwork. In doing so, it offers strategic lessons for future conflict scenarios involving spontaneously formed units, underscoring the potential for rapid yet resilient group cohesion through clearly defined roles, adaptive leadership, and collective stress experiences.*

**Keywords:** *Volunteer Military Units; Group Cohesion, Swift Trust; Leadership; Stress-Induced Bonding; Ukraine Conflict; Rapid Mobilization; Combat Stress; Resilience in High-Stakes Environments.*

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**\* Lieutenant Colonel Cristian PANAIT, PhD, works within the Air Force Academy "Henri Coandă", Braşov, Romania. E-mail: [cristian.panait@afahc.ro](mailto:cristian.panait@afahc.ro)**



## Introduction

In military science, group cohesion is often described as the “glue” that binds members of a unit together, facilitating effective cooperation, resilience under stress, and combat readiness (Siebold & Kelly, 1988). This phenomenon of cohesion has been observed to play a pivotal role in the performance and psychological endurance of military units across diverse settings. Traditionally, cohesion in military units is fostered through extensive, shared training experiences, structured routines, and prolonged social interactions that establish trust and shared identity among unit members. Classic studies of military cohesion, largely based on research from state-led, professionalized Western armies, emphasize the necessity of these prolonged training periods and interpersonal bonding to develop mutual trust and loyalty. Just as soldiers train, live together, and fight alongside each other for extended periods of time, they form robust interpersonal bonds that enhance unit solidarity, providing psychological support and a strong sense of unity in the face of adversity. However, this traditional model faces challenges in application when considering the increasingly frequent reliance on volunteer or rapidly assembled combat units that lack the time or resources for traditional cohesion-building processes.

The Ukraine conflict provides a timely and urgent context to explore cohesion within these types of emergent military units. Unlike conventional military formations, Ukraine’s international volunteer battalions were assembled with limited lead time and composed of individuals from various civilian backgrounds, with little or no formal military training or prior association with one another. These volunteer units are often mobilized under immediate, high-stakes conditions, driven by a shared sense of national duty rather than pre-established military discipline. This phenomenon raises intriguing questions about how cohesion emerges in such spontaneously formed units, especially given that cohesion has been closely tied to shared, intensive training in traditional military contexts. Without the typical pathways for building trust, reliability, and shared understanding, how do volunteer soldiers come to work cohesively and effectively on the battlefield?

This article seeks to answer this question by conducting a documentation analysis of existing research on military cohesion, focusing on non-traditional forms of cohesion that may be applicable to volunteer forces such as those in Ukraine. Specifically, this study examines concepts of “swift trust”, the role of leadership as a substitute for peer bonding, and the psycho-social factors that allow soldiers to adapt to high-stress environments with minimal prior association. Documentation analysis provides a suitable methodology for this investigation, as it enables the synthesis of insights from multiple studies on cohesion in various military and paramilitary contexts. By examining existing research on cohesion in spontaneous or short-term military units, this study aims to provide a synthesized understanding of the mechanisms through which cohesion can emerge in rapidly assembled combat groups.



*Swift trust*, a relatively recent concept in the study of group cohesion, plays a central role in this analysis. Originally studied in temporary teams and ad-hoc organizations, *swift trust* refers to a form of immediate trust that does not rely on prolonged interaction or familiarity but instead on role expectations and shared goals. *Swift trust* is often seen in teams that are formed for a single purpose, where the urgency of the shared mission enables members to bypass traditional trust-building stages. In military settings, *swift trust* has been observed in temporary or coalition units where soldiers from different backgrounds or nationalities must quickly collaborate under extreme conditions. For Ukraine's volunteer forces, *swift trust* may serve as a crucial adaptation, allowing individuals with limited military experience and no prior relationships to function as a cohesive unit.

The role of leadership is another key factor in understanding cohesion within Ukraine's volunteer battalions. In conventional military units, peer bonds are strengthened over time through training and shared experiences. However, in ad-hoc or volunteer units, leadership often fills this gap, acting as a psychological and motivational anchor for soldiers who lack strong peer connections. Studies on cohesion in military psychology suggest that effective leaders can foster a sense of unity and stability by setting clear expectations, modeling resilience, and providing consistent support. This top-down approach to cohesion becomes especially important in volunteer units, where members may have varied backgrounds and training levels, and where the presence of a strong, dependable leader can create a unifying force in the face of combat stress.

Additionally, shared stress experiences are examined as a potential catalyst for cohesion within volunteer units. Combat situations inherently involve high levels of psychological and physical stress, which can foster a unique bond among soldiers. Research indicates that shared stress can act as a bonding agent, creating a mutual understanding and solidarity among soldiers as they navigate high-stakes environments together. For Ukraine's international volunteer units, this shared stress may provide an alternative pathway to cohesion, as individuals who undergo intense, life-threatening experiences together are often bonded by a sense of collective resilience. Unlike traditional military units, where cohesion develops gradually over time, volunteer units may form bonds quickly through shared exposure to combat stress, leading to a unique form of unity that is both resilient and adaptive.

Through a documentation analysis of relevant studies, this article explores how these non-traditional cohesion mechanisms *swift trust*, leadership driven cohesion, and stress-based bonding manifest in volunteer military units like those in Ukraine. By synthesizing insights from research on cohesion in diverse military contexts, the findings presented here aim to contribute to the broader understanding of how cohesion can emerge in spontaneous military formations. Ultimately, this study seeks to inform military psychology and organizational behavior by examining cohesion



in the unique context of volunteer forces, offering insights that may prove valuable for military planning, policy-making, and organizational strategies in future conflicts involving ad-hoc combat groups.

## **1. Literature review**

### ***1.1. Theoretical Background of Military Group Cohesion***

Military group cohesion is a complex, multi-faceted construct that has been shown to significantly impact unit performance, morale, and resilience in combat settings. Foundational studies on military cohesion frequently define it in terms of two primary components: social cohesion, which pertains to interpersonal bonds and mutual trust among soldiers, and task cohesion, which reflects the shared commitment to accomplishing group objectives (MacCoun, 1993). According to Siebold and Kelly's (1988) model, effective military cohesion typically results from three distinct but interrelated forms of bonding: horizontal bonding (peer-to-peer), vertical bonding (leader-to-soldier), and organizational bonding (group's connection to the broader military institution). Traditional research posits that cohesion emerges gradually over time, as soldiers engage in prolonged, intensive training exercises that not only develop individual skills but also foster a shared identity and collective trust. This model, while robust in explaining cohesion within conventional, professionalized armies, faces limitations when applied to the emergent, rapidly assembled volunteer forces characteristic of certain modern conflicts, including the Ukraine war.

In the traditional cohesion model, time spent in shared training environments is seen as critical for establishing bonds between soldiers. In military boot camps and subsequent unit-based training, recruits often undergo rigorous physical and psychological challenges, designed not only to prepare them for combat but also to foster a sense of mutual reliance and solidarity. This process has been shown to yield strong social and task cohesion, as soldiers come to view each other as dependable teammates in whom they can place their *trust*. Such interpersonal bonds are further solidified in field exercises and simulated combat environments, where soldiers learn to depend on one another to achieve mission objectives, thereby strengthening the unit's collective efficacy. The traditional model presumes that without this shared experience, units are likely to suffer from weaker cohesion, reduced morale, and ultimately diminished combat effectiveness.

However, recent developments in military sociology and psychology have called attention to alternative mechanisms of cohesion that may operate in ad-hoc or volunteer units, which often lack the extended training and bonding time available to professionalized military forces. This emerging body of literature suggests that cohesion can still manifest in these units, albeit through different pathways than



those identified in conventional cohesion models. In particular, concepts such as “swift trust” and leadership-driven cohesion are gaining traction as explanatory frameworks for how cohesion might emerge quickly and effectively in newly formed combat units. This literature review synthesizes insights from the contemporary studies to frame a theoretical understanding of cohesion in spontaneous units like Ukraine’s volunteer battalions.

### ***1.2. Swift Trust and temporary cohesion in combat settings***

The concept of “swift trust” has emerged as a critical theoretical lens through which to understand cohesion in temporary or spontaneously formed military units. Originally developed within organizational behavior studies, *swift trust* describes a form of immediate trust that arises in temporary, high-stakes environments, where individuals lack the time to develop conventional trust through extended interactions. Meyerson, Weick, and Kramer (1996) first introduced this concept in the context of temporary work teams, suggesting that members in such groups rely on role expectations and shared goals as substitutes for interpersonal familiarity. This form of trust is typically seen in situations where the urgency of the shared task necessitates rapid trust formation, allowing individuals to focus on fulfilling their roles rather than on forming personal relationships.

In military settings, *swift trust* has been observed in coalition forces, where soldiers from different national and cultural backgrounds must collaborate under extreme conditions without the benefit of prior relationship-building. Research by Ben-Shalom, Lehrer, and Ben-Ari (2005) illustrates how *swift trust* can emerge in temporary Israeli combat units, where soldiers are often assigned to ad-hoc teams and must rely on each other despite limited prior interaction. This study found that in such settings, soldiers quickly adopt role-based trust, where they place confidence in their teammates’ abilities to fulfill assigned roles, regardless of interpersonal familiarity. The researchers noted that *swift trust* is facilitated by clear mission objectives, role definitions, and an overarching sense of purpose, which collectively provide a framework within which soldiers can act cohesively.

The relevance of *swift trust* to international volunteer units in Ukraine lies in its applicability to situations where soldiers come together without extensive training or prior association. In the absence of deep interpersonal bonds, Ukrainian volunteer soldiers may rely on role-based expectations and mission alignment to establish a functional level of trust. Swift trust thus enables these individuals to work cohesively, focusing on their shared objective of defending their nation. This concept is particularly significant in high-stakes combat environments, where survival depends on each member’s ability to perform their role effectively. Consequently, *swift trust* provides a mechanism through which volunteer units can achieve cohesion despite the absence of traditional trust-building processes.

### ***1.3. The role of leadership and adaptation in emerging cohesion***

Leadership has long been recognized as a crucial factor in building and maintaining cohesion within military units, and its importance becomes even more pronounced in volunteer units where peer cohesion may be underdeveloped (Bekesiene and Smaliukienė, 2022). In conventional military settings, leadership serves as a stabilizing influence, providing structure and guidance that reinforce cohesion through clear expectations and strategic direction. In volunteer units, however, the role of leadership extends beyond mere command, leaders often act as psychological anchors, offering consistency and unity in environments characterized by unpredictability and stress. Bekesiene and Smaliukienė (2022) explore this phenomenon in their study of cohesion in military training, highlighting how effective leaders can mitigate stress and foster resilience among soldiers who lack strong pre-existing bonds with one another.

For international volunteer units in Ukraine, leaders assume the dual role of combat guides and cohesion facilitators, compensating for the limited interpersonal connections within their units. Research suggests that in groups where soldiers lack extensive training together, leaders can create a shared sense of purpose and instill confidence by modeling resilience, setting clear goals, and maintaining morale (Griffith, 2002). This form of cohesion, which relies on vertical (leader-to-soldier) bonding rather than horizontal (peer-to-peer) bonds, can be instrumental in ensuring that volunteer soldiers act as a cohesive unit. Additionally, effective leadership in these settings has been shown to reduce the psychological burden on individual soldiers, as the presence of a trusted leader provides a focal point of stability amidst the chaos of combat.

Griffith's (2002) multilevel analysis of cohesion in military settings supports the notion that leadership can act as a substitute for peer bonding in units with low horizontal cohesion. His findings indicate that soldiers who report higher trust and alignment with their leaders tend to experience a stronger sense of unit cohesion, even when peer bonds are weaker. This leadership-driven cohesion is particularly beneficial in high-stress environments, where soldiers rely on their leaders not only for tactical direction but also for psychological support. For Ukraine's international volunteer units, where soldiers may vary widely in terms of training and background, strong leadership can thus create a unifying force that enhances cohesion and combat readiness.

### ***1.4. Stress as a catalyst for cohesion***

The role of shared stress as a bonding agent in combat settings has been widely documented, suggesting that stressful experiences can foster solidarity among soldiers, even in the absence of prior relationships. Research by Bekesiene et al. (2022) on stress resilience in military settings indicates that the shared experience





of stress can lead to a form of cohesion based on collective resilience. In high-stakes situations, soldiers often develop an implicit understanding of each other's strengths and weaknesses as they navigate challenging environments together. This phenomenon, sometimes referred to as "combat bonding", allows individuals to feel a sense of unity and reliance on each other that transcends personal familiarity.

For international volunteer units in Ukraine, shared exposure to combat stress likely serves as an alternative pathway to cohesion, as soldiers experience similar physical and psychological challenges in their mission to defend their country. The stress of combat creates a context in which individuals come to view each other as indispensable allies in a collective struggle. This shared hardship can foster a sense of empathy and mutual understanding, leading to a form of cohesion that is resilient and adaptive. Studies on stress and group cohesion in both military and non-military settings have shown that individuals who endure hardships together often develop lasting bonds based on their shared experiences, which can serve as a foundation for sustained group cohesion in combat scenarios (Ben-Shalom, Lehrer, and Ben-Ari 2005).

In summary, the literature on military cohesion suggests that cohesion within spontaneous or volunteer units can emerge through alternative mechanisms, such as *swift trust*, leadership-driven cohesion, and shared stress experiences. These factors, while distinct from the traditional pathways to cohesion seen in professionalized armies, offer valuable insights into how volunteer units in conflicts like the Ukraine war can achieve effective group cohesion without extensive prior training or pre-existing relationships. This synthesis of theoretical frameworks provides a foundation for understanding the unique dynamics of cohesion in ad-hoc military formations, laying the groundwork for further exploration of these mechanisms in real-world conflict settings.

## 2. Methodology

This study employs a documentation analysis methodology to investigate the dynamics of group cohesion within spontaneously formed or volunteer military units, with a specific focus on the context of the Ukraine conflict. Documentation analysis, also known as document analysis, is a qualitative research method that involves systematically evaluating and synthesizing existing written materials, including academic articles, field studies, reports, and theoretical papers. This approach is particularly well-suited to research areas that are complex and multifaceted, as it allows for the consolidation of insights from a wide array of sources to form a comprehensive understanding of the topic (Bowen, 2009). In this study, documentation analysis enables the exploration of diverse perspectives and findings on military cohesion in unconventional or ad-hoc combat settings, where traditional training and bonding processes may be absent.



### ***Rationale for Documentation Analysis***

The selection of documentation analysis as the primary research method in this study is motivated by several key factors. First, the use of secondary data sources is essential when examining an ongoing conflict, such as the Ukraine war, where direct field research and empirical data collection can be logistically challenging, risky, or impractical. By drawing on existing literature from relevant military contexts, documentation analysis provides a way to access established findings, theoretical frameworks, and observational insights that can inform an understanding of group cohesion in similar emergent combat situations. Given the ongoing and dynamic nature of the Ukraine conflict, in such circumstances, utilizing YouTube interviews with international volunteers provides a valuable alternative for accessing firsthand perspectives and experiences. These interviews offer insights into the lived realities of individuals involved in the conflict, contributing to a deeper understanding of the phenomena under investigation, such as group cohesion and adaptation within international volunteer units. While acknowledging the potential limitations of user-generated content, it is crucial to recognize that in situations of limited access, such as active conflict zones, YouTube interviews can serve as a valuable source of qualitative data, offering unique perspectives that might otherwise be inaccessible to researchers.

While traditional research often relies on controlled environments and direct data collection, the rise of digital platforms like YouTube has opened new avenues for qualitative research (Sharma, 2023). A systematic review of public health research utilizing YouTube data demonstrated the platform's increasing use in academic inquiry. This shift is particularly relevant in situations where conventional research methods are impractical or pose safety risks, such as ongoing conflicts. YouTube provides a readily accessible repository of firsthand accounts, enabling researchers to gather diverse perspectives and experiences that might otherwise be unattainable (Burgess, 2009). Furthermore, the platform's accessibility allows for the examination of evolving situations and dynamic social interactions, offering valuable insights into public perceptions and individual experiences in real-time. By adhering to ethical guidelines and critically evaluating the information presented, YouTube can be a valuable tool for qualitative research, particularly in contexts where traditional methods are limited. This approach also allows for the integration of perspectives from different disciplines, including sociology, psychology, organizational behavior, and military science, which collectively offer a nuanced understanding of cohesion mechanisms.

Secondly, given the complexity of the topic, which involves psychological, social, and structural dimensions of group dynamics, documentation analysis offers flexibility in synthesizing evidence across various domains. This methodology facilitates a holistic view of how cohesion might emerge in volunteer units, exploring



not only interpersonal factors (such as trust and bonding) but also organizational and situational factors (such as leadership and stress). Through documentation analysis, this study aims to construct a well-rounded, evidence-based perspective on cohesion in ad-hoc military formations, synthesizing knowledge that may be applicable to volunteer units beyond the Ukraine context.

### ***Data Collection and Selection Criteria***

In line with best practices in documentation analysis, this study adheres to a structured approach to data collection, focusing on peer-reviewed scholarly journals articles, military reports, and theoretical papers that explore cohesion within both conventional and unconventional military units. The initial phase of data collection involved a comprehensive search across academic databases, including PROQUEST Central, CABI Digital Library ebooks, Elsevier Ebooks, Emerald eBooks Collection, JSTOR, Wiley Ebooks, and Google Scholar, using keywords such as “military group cohesion” (31953 results), “swift trust”, (60,370 results) “volunteer units”, (289,470 results) “leadership in combat”, (121,413 results) and “stress and bonding in military” (10,196 results). This search yielded a broad array of sources, which were subsequently screened for relevance based on their methodological rigor, thematic focus, and applicability to the research topic. After applying all the filter criteria, a total of 21 articles and reports were selected.

The inclusion criteria for sources in this analysis emphasized works that met the following conditions:

1. Direct relevance to military cohesion: selected sources primarily focus on cohesion within military or paramilitary units, particularly in relation to social and task cohesion, leadership dynamics, and resilience under stress.
2. Relevance to Ad-Hoc or volunteer units: given the focus on volunteer units in Ukraine, priority was given to studies that explore cohesion in unconventional military settings, such as military international volunteers, spontaneously assembled units, coalition forces, or units formed under temporary, high-stakes conditions.
3. Use of empirical or observational evidence: although theoretical papers were included to provide foundational concepts, sources containing empirical findings whether through field studies, observational research, or documented case studies were prioritized to enhance the validity and applicability of the analysis.
4. Diversity of perspectives: to ensure a well-rounded synthesis, this study incorporated sources from various disciplines, including military sociology, psychology, and organizational behavior. This interdisciplinary approach facilitated a comprehensive understanding of cohesion mechanisms applicable to volunteer units.

Following the initial selection, each document was subjected to a critical appraisal to assess its methodological quality, theoretical grounding, and relevance



to the study's objectives. Documents that demonstrated strong methodological rigor and relevant insights on cohesion mechanisms were categorized and coded based on key themes, such as swift trust, leadership-driven cohesion, and stress as a bonding agent. These themes were identified based on the frequency and prominence of related terms in the literature, as well as their theoretical relevance to cohesion in volunteer military units.

For the interviews presented on the YouTube platform, in order to mitigate the confirmation bias and the risk of propaganda, in order to ensure the data reliability, only YouTube channels that were created before February 2022 were considered for inclusion. This criterion was established to exclude channels that may have been specifically created for wartime information campaigns or propaganda dissemination. By selecting content from pre-existing channels with a history of diverse content, the study aims to enhance the authenticity and neutrality of the narratives analyzed. Additionally, the number of followers of a channel was considered as a secondary verification factor since YouTube employs engagement-based algorithms and verification processes that prioritize content from established creators. Channels with a significant follower base are more likely to undergo stricter content authentication by the platform, reducing the likelihood of misinformation or fabricated narratives. However, to maintain balance, smaller channels with verifiable pre-war content were also considered to ensure a diverse range of perspectives. I selected a number of five interviews and transcribed them with timestamps, a total time of around 380 minutes using Otter.ai, an automated speech-to-text application known for its relatively high accuracy and efficiency. The initial machine-generated transcripts were then manually reviewed and corrected to ensure fidelity to the speakers' original statements.

### ***Analytical framework***

The analysis of selected documents was conducted using a thematic synthesis approach, which allows for the identification and integration of key themes across diverse sources. Thematic synthesis is particularly suitable for qualitative documentation analysis, as it facilitates the organization of complex information into coherent themes that reflect the primary concerns of the research question (Thomas & Harden, 2008, 45). In this study, thematic synthesis was used to categorize and interpret findings on cohesion mechanisms, with a focus on understanding how cohesion can emerge in units without traditional training structures.

The analysis proceeded through three main stages:

1. Coding of key concepts: each document (from the selected total of 21 articles and reports) was reviewed in detail, and relevant concepts were coded based on their thematic alignment with cohesion mechanisms in emergent military units. Coding categories included terms such as "swift trust", "role-based trust", "leader-driven

cohesion”, “stress bonding”, and “combat motivation”. This initial coding facilitated the identification of recurrent themes and patterns across sources.

2. Synthesis of themes: after coding, the findings were grouped into broader themes that aligned with the main research focus. For example, findings related to rapid trust formation were synthesized under the theme of “swift trust”, while discussions of leader influence on group unity were organized under “leadership-driven cohesion”. This thematic synthesis allowed for the consolidation of insights across studies, providing a structured narrative on the ways in which cohesion develops in volunteer units.

3. Interpretation and integration: in the final stage, synthesized themes were interpreted within the context of the Ukraine international volunteer units, with particular attention to how documented cohesion mechanisms might apply to combat groups with minimal prior training or established relationships. This interpretative phase also involved comparing findings from traditional military units with those of ad-hoc groups, identifying both commonalities and unique dynamics.

The thematic review of 21 peer-reviewed articles provided the conceptual foundation for analyzing the interview transcripts with international volunteer fighters. Key themes such as swift trust, leadership-driven cohesion, and stress-induced bonding, were identified in the literature and then operationalized as coding categories. Each relevant segment of the interview data was compared to these themes in order to evaluate whether the volunteers’ experiences confirmed, contradicted, or enriched existing theoretical perspectives. In other words, the reviewed articles functioned as an analytical lens that guided how we interpreted and grouped the volunteers’ narratives. This approach enabled to ground the findings in established scholarly work while also allowing new or unexpected insights from the interview data to refine and extend those theoretical frameworks.

### ***Limitations of documentation analysis***

While documentation analysis offers a practical and flexible approach to studying cohesion in volunteer units, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The reliance on secondary sources means that this study is constrained by the scope and quality of available research, which may not fully capture the nuances of cohesion dynamics in the specific context of the Ukraine conflict. Additionally, the extrapolation of findings from studies on traditional military units to volunteer forces may introduce biases, as these units operate under different organizational, cultural, and structural conditions, especially the “International Legion for the Defence of Ukraine” (The Ministry of Defense of Ukraine, 2024). To mitigate these limitations, this study has carefully selected sources that closely align with the characteristics of volunteer units and has integrated insights from a variety of military settings to strengthen the applicability of the findings.



It is important to acknowledge the limitations associated with the YouTube interviews analyzed in this study. While a curated selection of channels was employed to mitigate potential biases, the inherent subjectivity of user-generated content and the potential for editing or manipulation cannot be entirely discounted. The transcripts generated from these interviews, while meticulously created, represent an interpretation of spoken language, and nuances or contextual cues may be lost in the transcription process. Furthermore, the anonymity afforded by online platforms may influence the candor or accuracy of the information shared by interviewees. These limitations underscore the need for careful consideration and critical analysis of the YouTube data within the broader context of the study's methodology.

Despite these limitations, documentation analysis remains a valuable methodology for synthesizing existing knowledge on military cohesion, particularly in contexts where direct field research is not feasible (Bowen, 2009). By systematically examining and integrating findings from multiple studies, this approach provides a robust foundation for understanding the unique cohesion mechanisms that may enable volunteer units to function effectively in combat environments. The insights derived from this analysis aim to contribute to the broader discourse on military cohesion, offering potential applications for military planners, policymakers, and researchers interested in the dynamics of emergent combat groups.

### 3. Analysis

The analysis of cohesion within international volunteer units in military contexts, particularly those like the volunteer forces in Ukraine, highlights several adaptive mechanisms that allow cohesion to form even in the absence of prolonged training or pre-existing interpersonal bonds. Drawing from themes identified in the literature, this section examines three primary mechanisms that underpin cohesion in these units: *swift trust*, *leadership-driven cohesion*, and *stress-induced bonding*. These variables represented the main purpose of understanding and analyzing the interviews with the volunteer fighters in Ukraine. Each mechanism provides a unique pathway for building unity and operational effectiveness, enabling volunteer soldiers to function as cohesive units despite limited preparatory time. Together, these factors create a framework for understanding how cohesion manifests and operates in spontaneously assembled combat units.

In traditional military settings, trust is typically built over time through shared experiences, rigorous training, and gradual development of interpersonal bonds. However, in emergent or temporary units such as volunteer groups formed under crisis conditions there is rarely sufficient time for these processes to unfold. In such cases, the concept of “swift trust” becomes essential. In the military context, swift trust has been observed in various ad-hoc settings, including coalition forces



and temporary combat units, where soldiers from different backgrounds and with minimal prior association must collaborate effectively under extreme conditions. Ben-Shalom, Lehrer, and Ben-Ari (2005) highlight how *swift trust* functions as a substitute for traditional trust in Israeli military units formed temporarily for specific missions. According to their findings, soldiers in these units do not rely on personal bonds but instead place trust in their teammates' roles and the shared objective of the mission. This phenomenon has been mirrored in other studies, which suggest that when soldiers understand their roles and believe in the collective mission, they are more likely to assume mutual reliability, thus fostering a rapid yet functional level of trust.

In the context of the Ukraine conflict, swift trust likely plays a central role in the cohesion of volunteer units. Many of these units comprise individuals with diverse backgrounds former civilians, reservists, and even foreign fighters brought together under the urgent need to defend their nation. Without the benefit of extensive training or pre-existing bonds, these volunteers rely on the role-based expectations inherent in swift trust. In these settings, individuals trust their teammates not necessarily because of interpersonal familiarity but because they share a common purpose, a clear understanding of roles, and a commitment to the overarching goal of defending Ukraine. This trust is further reinforced by the high-stakes nature of their mission, which creates a sense of urgency and collective responsibility that facilitates quick adaptation to group dynamics.

Leadership plays a pivotal role in fostering cohesion within volunteer military units, particularly in contexts where horizontal (peer-to-peer) bonds are either weak or underdeveloped. In conventional military settings, leadership functions as one of several cohesion-building mechanisms, complementing the interpersonal relationships cultivated through shared training and operational experience. However, in volunteer or emergent units, leadership often assumes a central role, compensating for the absence of pre-existing interpersonal connections. Research by Bekesiene and Smaliukienė (2022) underscores the critical function of leadership in military training environments, highlighting that effective leaders act as psychological anchors, providing stability, direction, and motivation to soldiers who lack well-established bonds with their peers.

The experiences of volunteers further illustrate the essential nature of leadership in cohesion formation, particularly in units where conventional structures are less defined (Garand Thumb, 2024; Lindybeige, 2022, 2023; WarLeaks – Military Blog, 2024a, 2024b). One volunteer's appreciation for his competent platoon commander (Lindybeige, 2022, 34:22-35:01) exemplifies how strong leadership contributes to unit stability and morale, stating: "The presence of capable leaders played a significant role in shaping unit cohesion. One volunteer described his platoon commander as 'intelligent, competent, professional, and a nice bloke'". This observation aligns with



findings by Bekesiene and Smaliukienė (2022), who emphasize that leaders serve as stabilizing influences, fostering resilience and cohesion among soldiers with limited prior connections.

Furthermore, the role of experienced military personnel in training and structuring international volunteer units is crucial in enhancing cohesion and operational effectiveness. The presence of a seasoned Canadian Colonel, who provided instruction aligned with NATO standards, significantly contributed to the professionalism and confidence of volunteer soldiers. As one volunteer remarked: “Experienced leaders contributed significantly to the training and development of volunteer units. The presence of a “Canadian Colonel... helped train us to NATO standards’ fostered a sense of professionalism and instilled confidence in the volunteers, enhancing unit cohesion and effectiveness” (Lindybeige, 2022, 49:50-50:23). This observation aligns with the work of Wei et al. (2024), which suggests that leadership exerts a significant influence on military unit performance, particularly in fostering a shared understanding of objectives and reinforcing collective responsibility.

The impact of decisive leadership on combat effectiveness and unit safety is further illustrated by an incident described by a volunteer. While serving as a patrol leader, he made the critical decision to relocate his team to a safe position after detecting an enemy drone, likely preventing casualties from an impending artillery strike (Garand Thumb, 2024, 29:10-30:11). He recounted: “As the patrol leader, I made a call... go ahead and boogie back a couple hundred meters to our last hard cover position... about 20 seconds after getting off that point... that whole area just gets smashed by 120mm mortars”. This account supports research on leadership-driven cohesion in military environments, which highlights that effective leaders promote unity and stability by setting clear expectations, making decisive judgments under pressure, and prioritizing team safety. In this instance, the leader’s rapid decision-making and tactical awareness not only safeguarded his unit but also reinforced trust in his leadership, thereby strengthening overall cohesion.

In international volunteer units, where soldiers may come from disparate backgrounds and possess varying levels of military experience, leaders are tasked with uniting these individuals around a shared purpose. Leaders in these contexts fulfill multiple functions that contribute to cohesion. They set clear expectations, model resilience under stress, and reinforce the group’s mission, thereby fostering a sense of unity and purpose among team members. Griffith’s (2002) multilevel analysis of military cohesion further supports the idea that in situations of low peer bonding, strong leadership can create a “vertical cohesion” that binds the group. This vertical cohesion is especially beneficial in high-stress environments, where soldiers rely on their leaders not only for tactical guidance but also for psychological support.

In the Ukraine conflict, leaders in international volunteer units are often informal figures, including veterans or individuals with prior military experience, who assume





responsibility for organizing and directing operations. The leadership style in such units tends to be adaptive and participatory, allowing leaders to respond flexibly to the unique needs and challenges of volunteer forces (Wei et al. 2024). These leaders create cohesion by setting clear operational goals, encouraging camaraderie, and promoting resilience among team members. In addition, the presence of a strong, dependable leader provides a central figure around whom volunteers can rally, instilling confidence and reinforcing the group's commitment to their shared mission. Leadership-driven cohesion thus becomes a vital source of stability and purpose in volunteer units, enabling them to operate cohesively in the absence of extensive peer bonds.

Combat environments are inherently stressful, and shared exposure to stress can serve as a powerful bonding mechanism among soldiers. The concept of stress-induced bonding is well-documented in military psychology, with studies indicating that soldiers who endure hardships together often develop a unique form of solidarity based on mutual understanding and collective resilience. Bekesiene et al. (2022) explore this phenomenon in their study of stress resilience in military units, finding that shared experiences of stress can foster cohesion by creating a sense of collective identity and reliance on one another for support. In environments characterized by constant threat and high physical demands, soldiers often bond over the shared experience of navigating these challenges, which fosters a sense of unity and mutual respect.

One of the volunteers provides compelling evidence of stress-induced bonding, where shared experiences of hardship and adversity create strong bonds among individuals. His description of the missile attack and the subsequent efforts to help injured comrades and find his friends (Lindybeige, 2022, 13:14-14:20) illustrates the potential for traumatic events to foster unity and mutual reliance. Shared traumatic experiences, such as enduring a missile attack, fostered strong bonds among the volunteers. The volunteer described the chaotic aftermath of the attack, where they “were all running around trying to find our mates and providing support to those in need. This shared adversity likely contributed to a sense of unity and mutual reliance, characteristic of stress-induced bonding”. This aligns with research by Bekesiene et al. (2022) on stress resilience in military settings, which suggests that shared experiences of stress can lead to a form of cohesion based on collective resilience and a sense of shared identity. Furthermore, the volunteer's experience of contracting Lyme disease and witnessing the widespread illness among his comrades (Lindybeige, 2022, 46:29-48:41) further illustrates how shared stressors, even beyond direct combat, can contribute to bonding. This aligns with research on stress and social bonding in rats, which found that moderate stress increased social support-seeking behavior and facilitated long-term sharing of resources. In the context of the Ukraine conflict, these shared hardships likely fostered a sense of camaraderie and mutual support among the volunteers. Another volunteer describes a combat



scenario where his partner experienced a weapon malfunction, but continued to push forward and rejoined the fight as soon as the issue was resolved. This demonstrates the resilience and mutual support fostered by stress-induced bonding. “My partner had a malfunction... he continues moving behind me... fixes that problem and gets right back in the fight... he isn’t like ‘hey buddy I’m back in the fight’ it’s just up and bang bang bang.” (Garand Thumb, 2024, 46:14 - 47:10). This aligns with research on stress-induced bonding in combat settings, which suggests that soldiers who endure challenging situations together often develop a deep sense of camaraderie and mutual reliance. In this case, the shared experience of combat and the partner’s determination to rejoin the fight likely strengthened their bond and contributed to the unit’s overall cohesion.

For Ukraine’s international volunteer units, shared exposure to the stresses of combat likely acts as a key driver of cohesion. Many volunteers enter the conflict with little formal training or prior combat experience, facing intense physical and psychological demands from the outset. The shared experience of navigating these challenges creates a powerful sense of empathy and understanding among unit members, as they recognize that they are all enduring the same hardships in pursuit of a common goal. This shared stress experience serves as a foundation for bonding, creating a form of cohesion that is both resilient and adaptive. Research on stress and cohesion suggests that individuals who undergo intense, life-threatening experiences together often develop bonds that persist even in the absence of traditional interpersonal familiarity (Bekesiene and Smaliukienė 2022).

The concept of “combat bonding” further illuminates this mechanism. Combat bonding refers to the intense solidarity that develops among soldiers who face danger together, often described as a “band of brothers” effect. This bond is reinforced by the high-stakes nature of combat, where each individual’s survival depends on the competence and support of their teammates. For international volunteer units in Ukraine, combat bonding may manifest as a profound sense of unity, driven by the mutual recognition of shared risk and the reliance on each other’s contributions to the mission. Unlike traditional units, where cohesion may develop gradually, volunteer units achieve a form of “instant cohesion” through the shared experience of combat stress, which fosters a unique resilience and commitment to the group.

The cohesion mechanisms observed in volunteer units contrast in significant ways with those in traditional military units. In conventional settings, cohesion is built through long-term training and the development of interpersonal bonds that provide a stable foundation for teamwork and trust. These units typically rely on a combination of social cohesion, based on personal familiarity, and task cohesion, based on collective mission objectives. By contrast, volunteer units are often composed of individuals who lack shared history or extensive training, necessitating reliance on alternative forms of cohesion.



*Swift trust* allows for rapid trust formation based on role expectations rather than personal familiarity, providing a functional level of trust that enables immediate cooperation. Leadership-driven cohesion compensates for the absence of horizontal bonds, with leaders serving as focal points of stability and unity. Finally, stress-induced bonding reinforces cohesion through the shared experience of hardship, creating a form of empathy and mutual reliance that supports the group's resilience. Together, these mechanisms illustrate how cohesion can emerge adaptively in volunteer units, enabling them to function effectively in combat despite limited preparatory time and established interpersonal connections. A volunteer exemplifies the concept of swift trust, where individuals in temporary, high-stakes environments rapidly develop trust based on shared goals and role expectations, rather than personal familiarity. This is evident in his description of forming a group with strangers at the airport (Lindybeige, 2022, 0:34-1:08): "We sort of formed this little group... everyone's a bit nervous... but they were so nice... they gave us cigarettes and stuff". This aligns with Meyerson et al.'s (1996) research on swift trust, which highlights the role of initial assumptions of trustworthiness and the importance of early positive interactions in fostering trust within temporary groups. Despite the inherent uncertainty and potential risks, the volunteers quickly formed a bond based on their shared purpose and initial acts of camaraderie. Furthermore, the volunteer's account of trusting his Georgian comrades who had acquired weapons through unconventional means (Lindybeige, 2022, 19:37-20:11) demonstrates the reliance on role-based trust in challenging situations. This aligns with Ben-Shalom, Lehrer, and Ben-Ari's (2005) findings on swift trust in Israeli combat units, where soldiers rely on their teammates' abilities to fulfill assigned roles, regardless of personal familiarity. In this case, the urgency of the situation and the shared goal of self-defence facilitated trust in the Georgians' competence, despite their unorthodox methods.

Another volunteer emphasizes the importance of maintaining spacing between soldiers during patrols to mitigate the risk of shared casualties from mines and explosives. This demonstrates a practical application of swift trust, where soldiers rely on their comrades to adhere to safety procedures, even in the absence of close personal bonds. "Spacing between guys... is standard... to mitigate threat of exploding ordinance... if you've got 5-10m spacing you know that if a guy 5-10m in front of you gets hit the chances are that shrapnel is not coming life-threateningly close to you". (Garand Thumb, 2024, 33:22 - 33:54). This checks with research on swift trust in high-risk environments, which suggests that individuals rely on shared expectations and adherence to protocols to establish trust quickly, enabling them to function effectively as a unit. In this case, the shared understanding of the danger posed by mines and the adherence to spacing protocols fosters trust and enhances unit safety.

The analysis reveals that cohesion within volunteer units such as those in Ukraine emerges through alternative mechanisms that adapt to the constraints of



rapid mobilization and diverse member backgrounds. Swift trust, leadership-driven cohesion, and stress as a bonding agent each play a vital role in facilitating unit cohesion, compensating for the lack of traditional bonding time. This model of emergent cohesion demonstrates that, while volunteer units may lack the depth of interpersonal relationships seen in traditional units, they can still achieve functional and resilient cohesion through adaptive mechanisms. These findings underscore the flexibility of cohesion as a construct, illustrating its capacity to manifest in varied forms across different military contexts.

In conclusion, the cohesion mechanisms observed in volunteer units are not merely substitutes for traditional forms of bonding but are uniquely suited to the urgent, high-stakes nature of ad-hoc combat units. By leveraging swift trust, effective leadership, and shared stress experiences, volunteer units can build a strong sense of unity and mission focus, enabling them to operate cohesively in challenging environments. This adaptive model of cohesion has significant implications for military strategy and organizational behaviour, suggesting that cohesion is not solely dependent on extensive training or personal familiarity but can emerge rapidly through the alignment of roles, goals, and shared experiences in crisis situations.

### **Conclusions**

The findings of this study reveal that group cohesion within volunteer military units, particularly those assembled in crisis contexts like the Ukraine conflict, emerges through alternative mechanisms that compensate for the absence of conventional training and bonding processes. This documentation analysis identifies three primary pathways: swift trust, leadership-driven cohesion, and stress-induced bonding, that collectively enable volunteer units to operate effectively and cohesively despite their lack of traditional preparation. Each of these mechanisms provides unique insights into how cohesion can be fostered quickly and adaptively in ad-hoc combat environments, challenging the assumption that extensive interpersonal familiarity is a prerequisite for effective group functioning in military settings.

Swift trust allows volunteer soldiers to establish immediate functional trust, which is based on role expectations and shared mission objectives rather than personal familiarity. This form of trust is particularly suited to temporary, high-stakes settings where there is no time to build relationships gradually. In the Ukraine conflict, swift trust facilitates rapid adaptation to group dynamics, enabling individuals from diverse backgrounds to work together toward a common goal.

Leadership-driven cohesion plays a crucial role in units where horizontal peer bonding is limited. Leaders in volunteer units act as unifying figures, providing structure, modeling resilience, and promoting a shared sense of purpose. This vertical cohesion compensates for the absence of extensive peer bonds and enhances



unit stability and morale, making leadership a central component of cohesion in ad-hoc military groups.

Stress as a bonding agent further strengthens cohesion within volunteer units by creating a sense of shared hardship and mutual reliance. The experience of combat stress fosters empathy and collective resilience, leading to a “combat bonding” effect that underpins unit solidarity. This mechanism aligns with theories of “combat motivation” and illustrates how challenging experiences can foster deep, lasting bonds, even in newly formed groups.

The insights from this study carry significant implications for military strategy, particularly in the organization and deployment of volunteer or ad-hoc combat units. Military planners and commanders can benefit from understanding that cohesion in volunteer units can be fostered through adaptive mechanisms that do not require extended training periods. Emphasizing swift trust and providing clear role definitions can facilitate rapid trust formation among soldiers. Additionally, assigning experienced leaders to these units can create a focal point for unity and morale, which is essential for maintaining operational effectiveness in the absence of strong peer bonds.

These findings also suggest that organizational approaches to military cohesion need to be flexible, recognizing that cohesion is not a one-size-fits-all construct. The adaptive model of cohesion observed in volunteer units underscores the potential for cohesion to emerge under varied conditions, which has implications for both military and non-military organizations that operate in crisis environments. For instance, emergency response teams, humanitarian missions, and crisis intervention groups could adopt similar cohesion-building strategies, leveraging swift trust and leadership-driven unity to enhance group performance in time-sensitive situations.

Understanding the cohesion mechanisms at play in volunteer units can inform psychological support services designed to support soldiers in ad-hoc combat environments. Recognizing the role of stress as a bonding agent, for example, can guide the development of resilience-building programs that encourage mutual reliance and group support among soldiers. Additionally, training programs could focus on developing adaptive leadership skills that enable leaders to foster cohesion quickly, even in diverse and untrained groups.

The insights from this study may also have implications for mental health care providers working with veterans from volunteer units or other ad-hoc military formations. The unique dynamics of cohesion in these units relying heavily on stress bonding and swift trust may lead to distinct psychological experiences compared to those of traditional units. Mental health interventions could be tailored to acknowledge the intense bonds formed through shared stress, which may impact veterans’ post-deployment adjustment, social reintegration, and resilience.

While this study provides a foundational understanding of cohesion mechanisms in international volunteer units, further research is needed to expand and refine these



findings. Empirical field studies in active or post-conflict settings could provide observational data on how cohesion manifests in volunteer units, enabling researchers to validate and potentially refine the concepts of swift trust, leadership-driven cohesion, and stress bonding. Such studies could also explore the long-term durability of these bonds, investigating whether the cohesion formed through swift trust and shared stress persists over time or diminishes after the immediate crisis has passed.

Future research might also examine how cohesion mechanisms in international volunteer units influence combat effectiveness and psychological well-being, comparing these outcomes to those observed in traditional military units. Exploring these comparisons could reveal whether adaptive cohesion models offer advantages in specific combat scenarios or have implications for post-combat resilience and veteran mental health. Additionally, studying cohesion across a range of cultural and organizational contexts could help determine whether these findings can be generalized to other situations, such as international peacekeeping forces or multinational coalitions.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that group cohesion within volunteer military units is both achievable and adaptable, arising through mechanisms that align with the unique demands of crisis-driven combat environments. The adaptive model of cohesion encompassing swift trust, leadership-driven unity, and stress-based bonding provides a pathway for ad-hoc units to form effective, resilient teams, despite limited training or pre-existing relationships. These insights contribute to the broader understanding of military cohesion, illustrating the flexibility and resilience of soldiers in spontaneous combat formations. As volunteer forces and ad-hoc military groups become increasingly relevant in contemporary conflict settings, understanding and harnessing these cohesion mechanisms will be critical for military strategy, organizational behavior, and psychological support services.

The findings presented in the study highlight the dynamic nature of cohesion, revealing that even in the most challenging conditions, individuals can come together to form strong, united teams through shared purpose, adaptive leadership, and collective resilience. This adaptability not only underscores the human capacity for cohesion under pressure but also offers practical guidance for supporting and organizing combat units that may be called upon to respond to future crises with minimal preparation.

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