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Over the recent decades the gradual erosion of state power led to a growing importance of non-state actors. In conjunction with the growing interdependence of the global economy and the rising aversion of the public’s opinion to war, states have increasingly pursued their goals through non-state proxies. Using these surrogates, states were able to stay out of the major interstate wars while not avoiding armed conflicts altogether. Unsurprisingly, contemporary War Studies have put an emphasis on such concepts as limited war, irregular warfare, hybrid war and of course the proxy war.

During the Cold War, proxy wars have been largely seen as superpower-induced wars fought on the soil of the third party. Since then, it appears they were driven more by regional powers via the cross-border percolation of militia groups. New questions arose when the revolution in military affairs has opened up the discussion to include the field of robotics and cyberwarfare. Thus, despite certainly not being a new phenomenon, proxy warfare still remains an unclear and undefined concept. Michael Innes’s book Making Sense of Proxy Wars: States, Surrogates and the Use of Force attempts to clarify this subject.

The Book takes the reader through a disjointed collection of case studies, which, if taken at a face value, are interesting and informative. However, based on the book’s title one would think that, at the very least, it will define the term proxy war. It is striking, that it fails to do so, and leaves the fundamental question “What is a proxy war?” unanswered. That, however is not the work’s only transgression. Allow me to start at the beginning.

The introduction into previous literature is done rather sloppily, it avoids even the very little that was written about the subject and completely refuses to mention what the International Relations theories can say about the subject, making the book come across as shallow and superficial.

Moving on, the preface leaves the impression that it was written solely for the first chapter about the state supported terrorism, which provides a categorization of types of relationships between states and their terrorist allies. The chapter, though, never explains how the proxy relationship comes into being. Other literature usually sees it as the product of a relationship between a benefactor, a target agent and a proxy agent. In a situation of an existing interest incompatibility between the benefactor and the target agent and the impossibility of their direct confrontation, the proxy is chosen by the benefactor to engage the target agent.

Moreover, the book does not distinguish between proxy strategies and tactics. Testament to this claim is the second chapter about the IRA’s bombing campaign and its use of civilians in

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this process. While other chapters look at how certain non-state actors are (or are not) predisposed to be used in armed conflicts as surrogates for states, here we clearly see a different approach. The goal of the chapter is to put the motives of suicidal bombers under scrutiny. Meanwhile, the term proxy is seen as a mere involuntary or unaware agent used in a terrorist attack. One cannot help but think that this chapter has very little relevance to the rest of the book.

The third chapter deals with the topic of proxy militias, which is presented in a series of case studies - the Iraq war, the Bosnian war, conflict in Chechnya and the Soviet war in Afghanistan. What is strange is that besides being included into the third chapter, the latter (Afghan) case study can be found also as the fourth standalone chapter of the book. Granted that we are talking about two separate texts written by two different authors, it is true that besides the use of proxies by the Soviets, the fourth chapter also discusses the proxies’ role after the fall of communist regime up to the 2012. Still, one feels that the same facts are being presented all over again. Being a rather short publication, this is from a reviewer’s viewpoint a rather substantial issue.

The last two chapters dealing with private military companies and multinational corporations in the conflict zones are concerned more with the nature of these actors than with the issue of proxyization. The fourth chapter provides an extensive overview of the activities that PMCs have conducted, but it completely fails to explain the reason behind their increasingly important role in contemporary conflicts. The book simply leaves you with a brief explanation of how governments try to avoid the body bag effect. On the other hand, the chapter includes a needless part about the history of mercenaries and the categorization of the "Warrior Class" that incorporates such types of combatants as the child soldier and the religiously motivated warrior. The author also automatically assumes that PMCs are proxy actors and never bothers to explain how did he come to this conclusion. One could argue that even though military contractors are used to outsource certain functions, because their military capacity is regulated economically and contractually, delivery of their service is direct, rather than indirect.

Assessing the Shell’s counterinsurgency responses, the sixth and the final chapter is basically just a case study of Shell Nigeria, which has faced a serious opposition to its activities in the Niger Delta for decades. The chapter has very little relevance to proxy warfare, in fact, I think that besides its title “Multinational Corporations: Potential Proxies for Counterinsurgency?” the word proxy is not used even once. It deals with counterinsurgency, which does not necessarily equate (and that is certainly true for this chapter) proxy warfare. Strikingly, at the end of the chapter, the author comes to the conclusion that relying on multinational corporations in the conflict zones makes little sense. For these reasons, incorporation of this text remains a mystery.

Michael Innes’s book is an interesting read but it hardly brings anything new. As a disjointed set of case studies, which have very little in common Innes’s book ultimately fails in its task to explain the sense of proxy wars.