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The Western Media Is Whitewashing the Azov Battalion

Before Russia invaded Ukraine, these fighters were neo-Nazis. They still are.

By [Lev Golinkin](#)

TODAY 5:00 AM

Brownshirt brigade? The evidence that Azov has moved beyond its neo-Nazi paramilitary origins is scant.

ladimir Putin's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine has already resulted in millions of losers—chief among them the civilians who've been tortured, murdered, forced to

V become refugees, or forced to spend their days worrying about loved ones fighting Russia.

But there are also winners: the neofascists whom Putin's war has turned into heroes.

For seven years, Western institutions have warned about Ukraine's Azov Movement, which began as a neo-Nazi paramilitary group in 2014 and became notorious for its worldwide recruitment of extremists.

Then came Russia's invasion. Within months, Azov fighters were being feted in Congress and at Stanford University. MSNBC swooned over a Ukrainian soldier whose Twitter account overflowed with neo-Nazi images. Facebook made the stunning decision to allow posts praising the Azov Battalion, even though the company admitted that it was a hate group.

This overnight normalization of white supremacy was possible because Western institutions, driven by a zeal to ignore anything negative about our Ukrainian allies, decided that a neo-Nazi military formation in a war-torn nation had suddenly and miraculously stopped being neo-Nazi.

But the truth is that this is an easily debunked fantasy spun out by a handful of propagandists. Yet Western media has repeated their falsehoods with a neglect for the

basic tenets of journalism that stretches beyond the fog of war into the realm of intentional blindness.

Our whitewashing of Azov takes place amid a deadly surge of white supremacy that stretches from New Zealand to Buffalo, N.Y. That makes this a story about more than Ukraine. It's about the deepest, nothing-matters cynicism that screams about 300 neo-Nazis in polo shirts yet embraces a brigade of battle-hardened extremists. It's about warning that white supremacy—especially after being mainstreamed by Donald Trump and Fox News—is an existential threat to our society, while making it clear that some exclusions apply.

It's about "good people on both sides."

## FROM STREET GANG TO A HUB OF WHITE SUPREMACY

Azov was born shortly after the 2014 uprising that ousted Ukraine's pro-Russian president, Viktor Yanukovych. Those events triggered a counter-revolt by Russian-backed separatists in Ukraine's eastern regions who supported Yanukovych.

It quickly became apparent that the Ukrainian Army had been severely degraded by decades of corruption, leaving the new government struggling to combat the rebels. Into that void stepped far-right groups that formed volunteer battalions to fight for Kyiv. One of these groups, created out of the Patriot of Ukraine neo-Nazi gang, gained fame by helping restore Ukrainian government control over the city of Mariupol, a port on the Sea of Azov. It became known as the Azov Battalion.

Azov's tactics and ideology were exactly what you'd expect from a paramilitary element formed by neo-Nazis. Its insignia features popular neo-Nazi symbols: the *Wolfsangel* (a runic double hook) and the *Sonnenrad* (sun wheel). Since then, the unit has become infamous for torture and for its aggressive recruitment of white supremacists from around the globe.

In November 2014, Kyiv sought to gain control of the Azov Battalion by absorbing it into the government. Azov became a regiment in Ukraine's National Guard, which made it a potential direct recipient of American aid. The prospect of organized white fanatics being aided by the US quickly came to the attention of Congress, where lawmakers attempted to ban the Pentagon from working with Azov, though they were ultimately unsuccessful. Later, in 2018, a ban on providing US military aid to the Azov Regiment did pass.

The media also ramped up scrutiny. "Volunteer Ukrainian Unit Includes Nazis," *USA Today* reported in March 2015. *The Daily Beast* followed with a piece titled "How Many Neo-Nazis Is the U.S. Backing in Ukraine?"
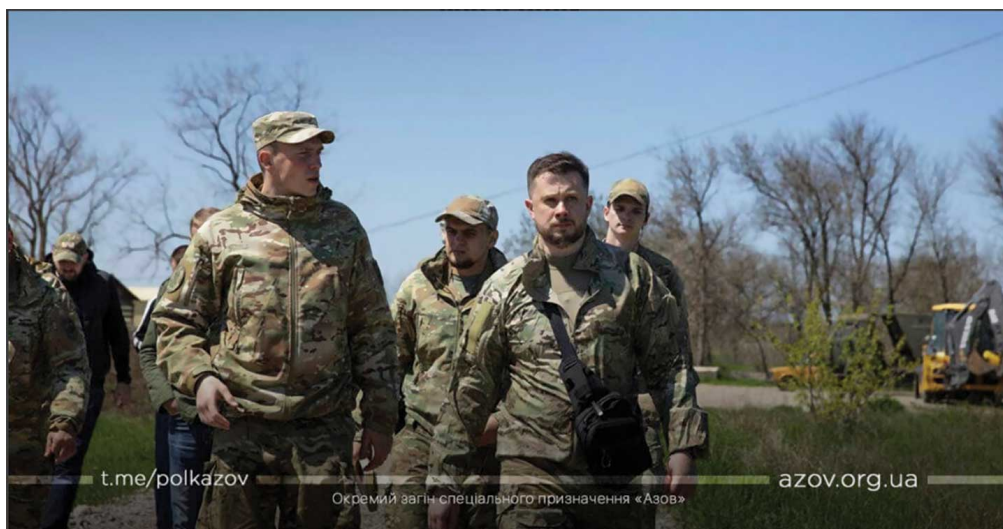
Patriot of Ukraine—the gang whose members formed the original core of the Azov Battalion—always had geopolitical ambitions. Its leader, Andriy Biletsky, who was Azov's first commander, capitalized on its notoriety to develop political and street-muscle wings for the Azov brand. The regiment soon became just one part of a far larger entity: the Azov Movement.

In 2016, Biletsky, who by then had left the regiment, established the far-right National Corps Party, headed by Azov veterans. Ukraine, despite Putin's lies, is not teeming with fascists, which is why the National Corps has performed abysmally in elections. Where it did find success was in global networking with extremists.

Azov began sponsoring neo-Nazi concerts and sporting tournaments that attracted radicals: In 2018, the FBI arrested California white supremacists who had met with a member of the Azov Movement.

By 2021, the Azov Movement's position as a premier hub of transnational white supremacy was firmly established. It was tracked by researchers; its fighters were banned from receiving military aid by Congress; and it was kicked off Facebook. The State Department declared its political wing a "nationalist hate group." Journalists exposed its enlistment of fighters from Sweden to Australia.

Then came Russia's invasion. Within months, many of these same institutions had plunged into an Orwellian stampede to persuade the West that Ukraine's neo-Nazi

regiment was suddenly not a problem.

It wasn't pretty. In 2018, *The Guardian* had published an article titled "Neo-Nazi Groups Recruit Britons to Fight in Ukraine," in which the Azov Regiment was called "a notorious Ukrainian fascist militia." Indeed, as late as November 2020, *The Guardian* was calling Azov a "neo-Nazi extremist movement."

But by February 2023, *The Guardian* was assuring readers that Azov's fighters "are now leading the defence of Mariupol, insisting they have shed their previous dubious politics and rapidly becoming Ukrainian heroes." The campaign believed to have recruited British far-right activists was now a thing of the past.

The BBC had been among the first to warn of Azov, criticizing Kyiv in 2014 for ignoring a group that "sports three Nazi symbols on its insignia." A 2018 report noted Azov's "well-established links to the far right."

Shortly after Putin's invasion, though, the BBC began to assert that although "to Russia, they are neo-Nazis and their origins lie in a neo-Nazi group," the Azov Regiment was being "falsely portrayed as Nazi" by Moscow.

Meanwhile, Germany's state-owned *Deutsche Welle* required only three months after the invasion to pivot from calling Azov "a neo-Nazi volunteer regiment" to saying it was "accused of having [a] neo-Nazi past" by Russia. By this logic, the BBC's and *Deutsche Welle*'s previous Azov coverage had been lies concocted by the Kremlin.

There is a kernel of truth in the allegations that Azov is just a Russian bogeyman. The Kremlin and Ukraine's neo-Nazis have a symbiotic relationship that reaches to the very heart of this war: Putin needed a pretext to justify his illegal invasion; for that, he turned to Azov. Moscow seized on Azov's existence to paint all of Ukraine as a cesspool of fascism in need of "denazification." Azov is the linchpin in Putin's narrative—without it, his excuse for the war is gone.

In turn, Azov's defenders have capitalized on Russia's obsession by implying that anyone who criticizes the group is a Putin apologist. Moscow and Azov use each other to defend the indefensible: For Russia, it's acceptable to invade a sovereign country to fight neo-Nazis; for the West, it's appropriate to lionize neo-Nazis because they're fighting Russia.

Plus ça change: Members of the disbanded ultranationalist group Patriot of Ukraine form the backbone of the active Azov Battalion. *(CC 2.0)*

OUT WITH THE OLD, IN WITH THE OLD

The problem with insisting that Azov's neo-Nazism is just a Russian lie is the abundance of evidence to the contrary. Seven years' worth of Western articles chronicling the group's nature was too much to ignore. This left Azov's whitewashers with the unenviable task of cobbling together a come-to-Jesus story in which Azov began as a neo-Nazi paramilitary group but somehow saw the error of its ways before 2022.

The narrative that emerged goes like this: (a) Azov's deradicalization started after it joined Ukraine's National Guard—over time, Biletsky and other veterans of the 2014 battalion were filtered out, implying that the new leadership is neo-Nazi free; (b) yes, there are a few leftover neo-Nazis in the National Corps, Azov's political party; but (c) that doesn't matter, because the Azov Regiment—later a brigade—has long since separated from the National Corps, which is little more than a fringe political sideshow.

These talking points were propagated by Kyiv, Azov, and a handful of experts furnishing quotes from one journalist to the next; the press, in turn, dashed out articles reporting these claims as fact. In reading these pieces, one quickly notes the absence of evidence. The "Azov has been denazified" story is presented as verified truth, often using quotes from the same few experts who also state it without offering proof.

There's a reason for that: The whole thing is composed of easily disprovable falsehoods.

Take the notion that Azov was deradicalized after joining the National Guard in November 2014. This ignores the fact that Western outlets routinely documented Azov's neo-Nazism over the next seven years, through 2021.

Whatever reformative influence Kyiv had to offer clearly didn't work: Azov continued to recruit white supremacists, and in 2016, it was accused by human rights groups of committing war crimes—the only difference being that after 2014, it did so as part of a NATO-trained force.

Next is the lie that Azov denazified itself by jettisoning veterans of the original 2014 neo-Nazi battalion—a claim echoed by Reuters, *The Financial Times*, the AP, *The Jerusalem Post*, and others around the spring of 2022, when the regiment was commanded by Denys Prokopenko and his deputy, Svyatoslav Palamar.

The problem is that both Prokopenko and Palamar were Azov members going back to 2014. Supposedly led by new blood, the unit was actually commanded by veterans of its far-right beginning.

Palamar's neo-Nazi roots reach back even further—he belonged to the Patriot of Ukraine gang that formed Azov. Yet the AP and *Haaretz* both cited Palamar downplaying Azov's extremism while reporting nothing about his past with Patriot of Ukraine.

Prokopenko, for his part, came out of the White Boys Club, superfans of the Dynamo Kyiv soccer team (far-right groups organized around soccer teams are common across Europe), who celebrated him when he was given

an award in October 2022. The group's Facebook posts have typically included phrases like "100% White" and "88" (code for "Heil Hitler"), praise for Holocaust perpetrators, and Waffen-SS insignia.

During his time in Azov, Prokopenko's platoon was unofficially called the Borodach Division. Its insignia was the *Totenkopf*, the skull-and-crossbones design used by the SS, which has become a popular neo-Nazi symbol. (Azov's version added some fascist whimsy by giving the skull a beard and hipster mustache.)

Azov's current acting commander—who took over in June 2022, after Prokopenko surrendered to Russian forces—is also an original Azov veteran.

But that's just the first Azov Brigade. Over the past year, the movement has spawned new formations led by extremists.

MORE HEADS FOR THE HYDRA

In February 2022, as Russian tanks tore across the land, Ukraine began activating territorial defense forces (TDFs), militia units based in cities. Prominent ones included Azov offshoots in Kyiv, Dnipro, and Sumy, which were eventually merged. Today, the Azov Movement counts two brigades: the initial one in the National Guard and the recently created one in the army.

Maksym Zhorin, an Azov TDF commander in Kyiv who's a veteran of the 2014 battalion and a leader in the National Corps (Azov's far-right party, which the Western media assures us has been severed from the military units) worked closely with Biletsky.

Rodion Kudryashev, the deputy commander of Azov's army brigade, is also a 2014 veteran and a National Corps leader; he says Biletsky is the first person he turns to for guidance. An Azov SSO Regiment commander, Denys Sokur, previously headed the National Corps' Sumy branch.

Dmytro Kukharchuk, one of the main commanders of Azov's army brigade (he commands the unit's Second Battalion), is another 2014 veteran who worships Biletsky and has been photographed with a T-shirt of the Reconquista Club, a thinly veiled reference to the white supremacist movement to "reconquer" Europe.

Azov runs its own military school, an example of the enormous autonomy that Kyiv grants the movement. Its commander, Kyrylo Berkal, is another 2014 veteran whose social media featured Nazi symbols.

These are only some examples of Azov military units commanded by veterans of the original neo-Nazi battalion and/or leaders of the National Corps. So much for denazification.

NEO-NAZI BRIGADE CHECKS ITS WHITE PRIVILEGE

A few years ago, the ex–Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke embarked on a rebranding campaign by telling journalists that he was not a white supremacist but a "human rights activist." His claim was covered by *Esquire*, ABC, *Politico*, and *The New York Times*.

Whether Duke sincerely meant what he said depends on one's definition of "human." Yet none of the outlets that reported on his rebranding were naive enough—or, given

the recent rise of white terrorism, oblivious enough—to start referring to the former Grand Wizard of the KKK as "human rights activist David Duke."

In their rush to lionize Azov, however, Western institutions have been far more reckless. *The Times* of London celebrated Azov's supposed conversion by referring to it as "an elite battalion challenging its far-right reputation." The purported evidence for this included a Ukrainian soldier's claim that "We are patriots but we are not Nazis," and a statement by "an expert on the European right" that "Azov has evolved so far from its origins as to make its far-right roots meaningless."

The photos *The Times* ran with the article show an Azov soldier wearing a T-shirt for M8L8TH, a vicious neo-Nazi band with songs praising Hitler and featuring unabashed anti-Semitism. M8L8TH is linked to Azov; the California neo-Nazis arrested by the FBI had met with its lead singer in Kyiv. It's hard to find a more fitting illustration of the media blithely whitewashing neo-Nazis.

Forbes similarly cheered Azov's alleged denazification by running the demonstrably false claim that it had stopped using the *Wolfsangel* symbol. The *Wolfsangel* is one of the first things you see on Azov's website, just as it was on the day the *Forbes* story ran; in fact, it's the profile photo for all Azov's social media accounts.

The whitewashing of neo-Nazi history extends even to Biletsky, who had been so toxic that even Azov's defenders refused to normalize him. That didn't stop the *Financial Times* from running Biletsky's quotes about Azov being "patriotic" and "nationalist." The *FT* then quoted him praising Stepan Bandera, a Nazi collaborator whose men massacred Jews, as a hero.

A far more dangerous platforming came from Facebook, which had banned Azov in 2019. In February 2022, Facebook loosened the ban in surreal, Dril-esque fashion: The company acknowledged that Azov remained a hate group but decided to allow posts praising it, as long as the praise was about defending Ukraine. It was a "both-sides-ing" of white supremacy, a chilling message that, sometimes, neo-Nazis are heroes.

Meta, Facebook's parent company, later simplified matters by removing the Azov Regiment from its list of dangerous organizations.

Others, too, said the quiet part out loud. "Finally, it is worth noting that the 'neo-Nazi Azov regiment' has never been implicated in any actual extremist acts—with the sole exception of credible reports of human rights violations, including torture of detainees, by Azov fighters in the Donbas in 2015–2016," wrote *The Bulwark*.

They may have tortured people, but nobody's perfect.

PRIME TIME

By September 2022, as the campaign to transform Azov into paladins of democracy purred along, America rolled out the red carpet.

Azov's US tour was initially reported by researcher Moss Robeson. The group made stops in Washington, D.C., and in New Jersey, where its soldiers—including a founder of the original battalion—met with Senators Rick Scott and Todd Young and Representatives Pete Sessions, Dan Crenshaw, Adam Schiff, and Michael Waltz, among others.

Then came Stanford University, which welcomed Azov even though seven months earlier its own program for tracking extremism had published an exhaustive study detailing Azov's Nazi ties. The event was attended by Michael McFaul, a former US ambassador to Russia and an adherent of the "Azov has been denazified" myth, who stood in front of a projection of its *Wolfsangel* insignia.

It sometimes seems that we're witnessing an experiment in America's willingness to ignore what's in front of our own eyes. In February, an employee of the federal government's US Helsinki Commission giddily tweeted out photos of himself posing with the Azov *Wolfsangel* and wearing a patch with a picture of a Ukrainian Nazi collaborator; the employee continued defending the tweets, even as he eventually deleted them. It's hard to imagine this being tolerated with other Holocaust perpetrators (see the media storms surrounding similar collaborators).

Or take Azov's press officer, Dmytro Kozatsky, who was paraded around Congress, MSNBC, *Vogue*, and a Manhattan film festival. As Robeson reported, Kozatsky's Twitter account was a Whitman's Sampler of white supremacy, including the "1488" neo-Nazi code, Waffen-SS insignia, a swastika, and myriad "likes" for images such as a *Totenkopf*, Adolf Hitler, Nazi murderer Amon Goeth, the KKK, and graffiti reading "Death to Kikes."

THE CHOICE

As Azov's defenders in Washington love to point out, the brigade and its offshoots are merely a tiny fraction of Ukraine's armed forces. Why focus on them? they intone. That's what Putin does!

The saddest thing about this logic—aside from stating that a battle-hardened neo-Nazi formation in an unstable, war-torn country isn't a big deal—is that it's true.

Azov is a small fraction of those fighting to save Ukraine. For every feat attributed to Azov units, there were many more accomplished by others. Even the legendary siege of Mariupol last year that made Azov famous involved Ukrainian marines who suffered and held out just as bravely. We could have honored them. Instead, we went out of our way to glorify Azov.

Nobody forced us to. It's been a choice, and considering that Googling Azov's name yields hit after hit about white supremacy, it's a conscious, informed one.

Putin isn't the only one obsessed with Azov. We can't get enough of them. They're our neo-Nazis. N

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