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UKRAINE: The Azov Battalion: Is it really a “Nazi” regiment? Answer to Putin

The Azov Battalion: Is it really a “Nazi” regiment?

By Massimo Introvigne for *Human Rights Without Frontiers*

HRWF (21.03.2022) – Since the beginning of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Vladimir Putin has used the words “Nazis” and

“denazification” in his official speeches more than 30 times, claiming Ukraine is in the grip of neo-Nazi bands. An elite corps still commonly referred to as the “Azov Battalion,” even if it is now the Azov Regiment, is offered as evidence that “Nazis” play an important role among those who fight the Russians.

Who was Bandera?

When referring to the Azov Battalion, Russians often use “Banderist” as synonym of “Nazi,” referring to nationalist leader Stepan Bandera. The fact that Bandera is honored through dozens of monuments and streets are named after him is offered as evidence that Ukrainians are still not free from their Nazi past. To understand Bandera, one needs to start with the ferocious war the Ukrainians fought – unsuccessfully – with the Bolsheviks for their independence between 1917 and 1920, and the Soviet repression of any possible independence movement after 1920. This culminated in the Holodomor, the artificial famine created by Stalin to exterminate Ukrainian small landowners, regarded as the backbone of the pro-independence movement, in which at least three and a half million Ukrainians died of starvation in 1932 and 1933.

The hatred against Stalin following the Holodomor, which Ukrainians (and several Western scholars) consider a genocide, explains why many were prepared to ally with anybody who would fight the Soviets and promise to restore independence. Nationalist Ukrainian leaders in exile, of whom the most prominent was Bandera, accepted the German proposal to raise within the Ukrainian diaspora two regiments that invaded the Soviet Union together with the Wehrmacht in 1941. Once in Ukraine, Bandera unilaterally proclaimed the independence of his country. But the Germans never had any intention to keep their promises. As Bandera insisted on independence, he was arrested and deported to Sachsenhausen. His two brothers were

taken to Auschwitz, where they died.

Only in 1944, when defeat appeared probable, did the Germans liberate Bandera and send him back to Ukraine, hoping his partisans will slow down the progress of the Soviets. After Germany lost, Bandera escaped to the West. "Banderist" partisans took to the forests and continued to harass the Soviets and promote other forms of opposition well into the 1950s, until in 1959 KGB agents assassinated Bandera in Munich.

Anti-Semitism and Bandera

The ugliest part of Ukrainian nationalism was antisemitism. Between 1917 and 1920 some 40,000 Jews died in Ukrainian pogroms. More were exterminated during World War II, and "Banderists" collaborated with the Nazis in the killings even in the period when Bandera was himself in a Nazi concentration camp.

Not all Banderists were Nazis. Although Bandera made despicable antisemitic statements, one of the charges the Nazis brought against him was that he saved Jews who were members of his party by delivering them false passports. Yet, there is no denying that a sizable number of Banderists collaborated in the Nazi extermination of the Ukrainian Jews, and Bandera's own antisemitic rhetoric contributed to their criminal attitude.

After 1991, Bandera was honored in independent Ukraine for his anti-Soviet fight, glossing over his alliance with the Nazis. When Ukraine started seeking membership in the European Union, the European Parliament expressed some reproaches about honors

granted to Bandera. Several Ukrainian leaders took their criticisms seriously. By 2021, [a poll showed](#) that only one third of the Ukrainians had a favorable view of Bandera, and a majority was not against a revision of the official honors bestowed to him.

Neo-Nazism in Ukraine

After independence a small neo-Nazi movement developed in Ukraine. It did not consist of veterans of World War II "Banderism," few of whom were still alive. As in other countries with neo-Nazi movements, a good percentage of the new, young Nazis came from the violent fringes of football fans. Extreme right-wing parties were founded, including the Social-National Party of Ukraine (SNPU). Their electoral success was minimal, remaining under 1%, but they managed to establish para-military wings that targeted and sometimes killed immigrants, Jews, and citizens from the Roma minority.

These parties did not play any significant role in the Orange Revolution of 2004, but the situation was different in the second anti-Russian revolution, Euromaidan, in 2013–2014. When it started, several leaders of the extreme right were in jail. A law was passed to set them free, as it was believed their paramilitary experience would help in the war with Russia many saw coming.

Neo-Nazis did participate in the Euromaidan, but were far from being the majority or even an important minority of the protesters. They also organized to fight the pro-Russian separatists of Eastern Ukraine, under the main leadership of Andriy Bilets'kyi, the 35-year-old leader of a group called the Patriots of Ukraine. Bilets'kyi [has claimed](#) that some of his pre-Euromaidan Nazi statements actually come from false documents fabricated by the Russians. Most scholars of right-wing extremism in Ukraine, however, believe that most

statements are genuine, although when at the end of 2014 Bilets'kyi became a jacket-and-tie politician and was elected to the Parliament he tried to hide or repudiate them.

Azov

Before this, however, Bilets'kyi had become famous for different reasons. In the Spring of 2014, he gathered followers in Kiev and went to fight against the Donbass separatists. Since their organization was founded in Berdyansk, on the Azov Sea, they called it the Azov Battalion. Unlike the early Christian Banderists, many of the Azov fighters were neo-Pagan who dreamed of restoring the ancient Ukrainian religion. This was reflected in the choice of their logo, with a letter I partially covered by a letter N, meaning "Idea of a Nation." The logo is a mirror image of the Wolfsangel (wolf's hook), an old German symbol that existed before Nazism but was adopted both by two divisions of the SS and by later neo-Nazi and neo-Pagan movements across Europe.

The Azov Battalion had only some 400 members, but fought bravely, particularly in the recovery of Mariupol from the separatists. It was later incorporated into the National Guard, and became the Azov Regiment, with some 2,500 soldiers. By that time, Bilets'kyi had left to enter politics, and most of the new recruits just wanted to join an elite corps and did not come from the extreme right-wing milieu of the early founders.

As Andreas Umland, [the main Western scholar](#) of the Azov Battalion, has put it, the Battalion, now Regiment, "[is not Nazi,](#)" but it did include Nazis among its founders and still has some Nazis among both its Ukrainian soldiers and the foreign fighters who enrolled to help them. Umland believes the Nazis are now a small minority in the Azov, yet are the

only one who get interviewed by international media.

There are Nazis in the other camp, too, fighting with the Russians, particularly among the members of the Russian National Unity (RNU), a neo-Nazi party theoretically banned in Russia in 1999 but still active and used by the Russian intelligence, and very much present in Donbass. After a scandal erupted when the first "People's Governor" of the "People's Republic of Donetsk," Pabel Gubarev, a RNU member who was photographed with a swastika on his sleeve, the Donbass branch of the RNU quickly replaced the swastika in its logo with a cross.

In an ideal world, the Azov Regiment should also change its Wolfsangel-connected logo and clearly disassociate itself from the neo-Nazis among its founders. It is reluctant to do so, however, because it was under that symbol and commanders that it achieved its mythologized but not imaginary successes of 2014. And rarely are symbols changed in the middle of a war.

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