

Azov Battalion



AT A GLANCE

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HOW TO CITE

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SUMMARY

Formed: March 2014¹

Disbanded: Active

First Attack: April 2014²

Last Attack: 2022

OVERVIEW

The Azov Battalion is an extreme-right nationalist paramilitary organization based in Ukraine. Founded in 2014, the group promotes Ukrainian nationalism and neo-Nazism through its National Militia paramilitary organization and National Corps political wing. It is notable for its recruitment of far-right foreign fighters from the U.S. and Europe as well as its extensive transnational ties with other far-right organizations. In 2022, the group came to prominence again for fighting against Russian forces in Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Mariupol.

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

The Azov Battalion formed in March 2014 as a volunteer brigade to fight Russian-backed separatist in Donetsk and Luhansk.³⁴ The battalion's origins lie in the extreme-right "Patriot of Ukraine" militant organization.

In 2005, Andriy Biletsky created the Kharkiv-based Patriot of Ukraine (PU) to champion white nationalist, anti-immigrant extreme-right ideas in Ukraine. In November 2008, Biletsky created the umbrella Social Nationalist Assembly (SNA) movement.⁵ The movement was a derivative of

the earlier political party Social-National Party of Ukraine (SNPU), which later became known as Svoboda. The SNA contained members from a collection of nationalist and extreme-right groups in Ukraine which promoted a neo-Nazi ideology.⁶ The PU became the de facto armed wing of the SNA.

In March 2014, following the annexation of Crimea, the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense encouraged volunteer military units to mobilize a resistance campaign against Russian-backed separatists in Donbas.⁷ Volunteer military units would help “fill the gap” in the Ukrainian military’s defenses.⁸ Biletsky and several other Patriot of Ukraine members formed the Azov Battalion in response to this call. The group’s first violent attack occurred shortly after its formation in April 2014 when fighters clashed with Russian-backed separatists in Donetsk.⁹

In June 2014, the group gained international notoriety when it helped re-capture the southeastern city of Mariupol from Russian-backed forces. Approximately half of the 400 pro-Ukrainian forces who took control were from the Azov Battalion.¹⁰ Regaining control of Mariupol for the government in Kyiv had critical strategic implications for the larger War in Donbas. Mariupol lies on major roads from its port on the Sea of Azov in Southeastern Ukraine, near the Russian border, as an access point into the rest of Ukraine.¹¹ Azov’s role in retaking, and holding, Mariupol from the separatist forces was the group’s first significant victory, and earned it international credibility.¹²

During the Battle for Mariupol, the group came to attention for its neo-Nazi iconography on the battlefield including the battalion patch, which featured a Wolfsangel symbol.¹³ The Wolfsangel is a historical symbol of independence that was later co-opted by the German Nazi Party. Originally, Biletsky’s PU claimed the symbol was actually an amalgamation of the letters “I” and “N” (the Idea of the Nation), representing the organization’s nationalist beliefs. However, the symbol is widely associated with the modern far-right.¹⁴

Azov leaders publicly downplay or deny the group as a white supremacist or Neo-Nazi organization. The Azov Battalion denies the symbol’s far-right associations and invokes the reasoning as the PU.¹⁵ However, the Wolfsangel is far from Azov’s only allusion to Nazi ideology. Biletsky once stated in 2010 that it was Ukraine’s national mission to “lead the white races of the world in a final crusade...against semite-led untermenschen (subhumans)”¹⁶ Furthermore, interviews with members of the Battalion openly espouse neo-Nazi and white supremacist views. Many fighters hold an aspirational belief of marching on Kyiv once the war is over, and that Ukraine “needs a strong dictator to come to power who could shed plenty of blood but unite the nation in the process.”¹⁷

After months of fighting in 2014, the Azov Battalion cemented its status as a core defense unit. On September 17, 2014, Ukraine designated the Azov Battalion “regiment” status.¹⁸ This gave it official recognition as an auxiliary security force. In October 2014, Biletsky left the group to participate in politics. He used his unit’s victory in Mariupol to launch a successful political campaign. Biletsky was elected to Ukrainian Parliament as an independent in November 2014, and remained a member until 2019.

On November 12, 2014, Ukraine designated the Azov Battalion “Special Purpose Regiment” status and formally integrated it into the National Guard.¹⁹ In December 2014, the Patriot of Ukraine formally disbanded and remaining members integrated into the Azov Battalion.²⁰

Early on, the Azov Battalion was able to fund itself due to patronage support from interior minister of Ukraine, Arsen Avakov.²¹ The Azov Battalion was incorporated into the Ukrainian National Guard while Avakov was the Interior Minister.²² A direct relationship between Avakov and Biletsky predates the formation of Azov though. From 2005-2010 Patriot Ukraine, Biletsky’s precursor to the Azov Battalion, was active in the city of Kharkiv, where Avakov was governor. During this time Patriot Ukraine coordinated closely with local police and authorities, particularly in monitoring migrants and raiding kiosks, whose owners were not loyal to Avakov’s government.²³ Biletsky, first with Patriot Ukraine and subsequently with Azov, benefited from the patronage of Avakov for nearly a decade during Avakov’s time as governor and then as Minister of the Interior.²⁴

As the Azov Battalion continued to grow, it pursued international relationships and recruitment of foreign fighters. The group was initially composed of half eastern Ukrainians and half foreign fighters from Sweden, Spain, Italy, Canada, France, and Russia.²⁵ The group later recruited from Belarus, Germany, and possibly the United States.²⁶ The Soufan Center reported that between 2014-2019 approximately 50,000 people from 17 countries – including the United States – traveled to fight in Ukraine although it is hard to determine how many specifically fought with Azov.²⁷ Foreign fighters also reported traveling to Ukraine to join the group due to their attraction to the group’s white ethno-nationalist views.²⁸

The group’s ability to inspire and recruit foreign fighters has contributed to Ukraine’s reputation as a bastion for the far-right.²⁹ The Azov Battalion specifically cites its desire for American recruits to join Azov and help counter perceived “pro-Kremlin” narratives in the U.S.³⁰ In interviews with far-right researchers, the Atomwaffen Division claimed to have sent members to Ukraine to obtain battlefield experience.³¹ Members of the American “Rise Above Movement” (RAM) have also openly publicized meetings with members of the Azov Battalion and National Corps. Robert Rundo, leader of RAM, traveled to Kyiv and fought in mixed martial arts matches with members of the Azov Battalion in a facility owned by Azov, called the “Reconquista Club.”³² Greg Johnson, an American white nationalist author also traveled to Kyiv to give a lecture and meet with members of the Azov.³³ A number of Russian nationals have also joined the Azov Battalion, due to their lack of political dissent options against Putin’s regime from within Russia, and the fact that Azov is a largely Russian speaking organization.³⁴

In 2015, as intermittent fighting in Donbas continued, the U.S. government placed a ban on any of its material or financial aid to Ukraine going to the Azov Battalion due to its far-right association. While the ban was lifted in 2016, Congress reinstated it again as part of a Defense Appropriations bill in 2018.³⁵

In 2016, Olena Semenyaka, a new spokeswoman and head of Azov’s International Outreach Office, embarked on a new set of efforts to grow the group’s international ties. She is the principal coordinator behind Azov’s vast transnational network in and around Europe. Semenyaka networked and organized events with far right organizations and ideologues from

Europe and the U.S.³⁶ Since 2016, she has regularly traveled across Europe, meeting with far right groups, including Italy's CasaPound, and Germany's National Democratic Party, largely attempting to win their support instead of Putin.³⁷ Semenyaka also spoke at the far right Scandza Forum in Sweden, alongside Mark Collett, a Neo-Nazi activist from Britain's National Party and self-described nazi sympathizer.³⁸ Azov has also hosted members and communicated with members of several different American organizations. In 2020, two members of the U.S. based neo-nazi group, Atomwaffen Division, were deported by the Ukrainian government after they attempted to set up a local affiliate and join the Azov Battalion.³⁹

In 2016, Biletsky partially returned to the Azov Battalion to found a far-right ultra-nationalist political wing called the National Corps. As part of this political wing's creation, he toned down some of his political rhetoric and white supremacist views.⁴⁰ Olena Semenyaka became actively involved in the National Corps' leadership.⁴¹

In 2017, Azov created an umbrella organization with other far-right groups to boost the National Corp's presence in elections.⁴² Described as a nationalist hate group by the U.S. government, National Corps barely registered in the national polls in 2019 and failed to meet the 5% threshold to obtain Parliamentary seats.⁴³ In 2018, the National Corps was estimated to have less than 20,000 members, and ran on a platform of re-establishing Ukraine as a nuclear power, and opposing European institutions.⁴⁴ The National Corps also supports Azov's international recruitment, providing housing and logistical support to arriving foreign volunteers.⁴⁵ It is difficult to know exactly how many foreign fighters have joined the Azov Battalion. A report by the Counter Extremism Project estimates that foreign fighters with ties to right wing extremism number in the hundreds, and cites the Azov Battalion as the key organization at the center of this recruitment.⁴⁶

In 2017, the organization created a new street wing faction known as the National Druzhyna or National Militia.⁴⁷ The National Militia patrolled neighborhoods in small groups to ostensibly promote law and order. It also harassed public officials and clashed with police in January 2018.⁴⁸ The National Militia conducted attacks against Roma and other minority targets.⁴⁹

In February 2018, the National Militia formally announced its existence during a public assembly and torchlit march of 600 followers in Kiev. During the march, members swore allegiance to Andriy Biletsky and the Azov Battalion.⁵⁰

In 2019, Ukraine's Central Election Commission granted the National Militia permission to officially monitor the presidential election. Although the commission specified the group was not permitted to use force, members openly stated they were willing to take matters into their own hands to stop election fraud.⁵¹ Members of the Azov Battalion, the National Corps, and the National Militia appear to flow between the three branches.⁵² Since the creation of all three groups - the Azov Battalion, the National Corps, and the National Militia - collectively they are often referred to as the "Azov Movement".

In February 2022, the group came to prominence again during the Russian military build-up on the border with Ukraine. When Vladimir Putin announced the invasion of Ukraine, calling it a "special military operation... to demilitarise and de-Nazify Ukraine", the Azov Battalion was

thought to be one of the organizations he referred to.⁵³ In response to the Russian invasion though, far right militia leaders across Europe are posting declarations to join the fight against Russia.⁵⁴ Members of the Azov Battalion see the invasion as an opportunity to raise their profile, and gain increased political influence.⁵⁵ Olena Semenyaka, spokeswoman for Azov, referenced Azov's role in Ukraine as an opportunity to play a bigger role in Ukraine's future politics.⁵⁶

Prior to the invasion, Azov ran training for civilians in Mariupol including medical care, survival and evacuation, and weapons training.⁵⁷ In Kyiv, roughly 350 attended a paramilitary training event run by Azov.⁵⁸ Azov leadership has been using the threat from the Russian military as a recruitment tool, amplifying their online recruitment resources.⁵⁹

On February 24, Russian forces began to lay siege to the city of Mariupol. Azov fighters took up arms yet again and were one of the central defense forces in the city.⁶⁰ Reporters also noted Azov regiments fighting against Russian forces in Kyiv and Kharkiv.⁶¹

In early March 2022, President Zelensky of Ukraine again announced the formation of an "international legion" to facilitate the arrival of pro-Ukrainian foreign fighters.⁶² In a similar call to 2014, the Ukrainian government once again encouraged "Territorial Defense Forces" to mobilize and help resist the Russian invasion. As of March 6, 2022, approximately 16,000 international volunteers have estimated to have signed up, although it is difficult to estimate the number specifically joining Azov and its affiliates.⁶³

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

A. LEADERSHIP

- Andriy Biletsky (March 2014 to October 2014): Biletsky was the original leader of the group. He was formerly the leader of the extreme-right Patriot Ukraine and nationalist Social Assembly Organization.⁶⁴ In 2011, he was arrested as part of a larger round-up of Patriot of Ukraine members for an attempted murder. In February 2014, he was released from prison following a government law exonerating all political prisoners.⁶⁵ He left the group in October 2014 to become a member of Ukraine's Parliament. He held this position until 2019.⁶⁶
- Ihor Mosiychuk (2014 to 2014): Mosiychuk was a founding member and deputy commander of the group.⁶⁷ He was charged with trying to bomb a statue of Vladimir Lenin in 2011, which led to his arrest as part of the "Vasylkiv 3" along with Serhiy Bevza and Volodymyr Shpara. In February 2014, he was released from prison following a government law exonerating all political prisoners and helped create the Azov Battalion.⁶⁸ In the fall of 2014, he left the Azov Battalion to run for Parliament with the nationalist Radical Party and won.⁶⁹ He served in Parliament from November 2014 to October 2019 until his party lost all its seats.
- Oleh Odnorozhenko (2014 to ?): Odnorozhenko was a deputy commander of the group in its initial phase.⁷⁰

- Ihor Mykhailenko (October 2014 to November 2016): Mykhailenko was a member of the Patriots of Ukraine prior to 2014. He joined the group early on and took over as the principal commander following Biletsky's departure to Parliament.⁷¹ He later became the head of the National Militia wing in 2018.⁷²
- Maksym Zhorin (August 2016 to September 2017): Zhorin briefly served as the group's commander before transitioning to a spokesman role.⁷³
- Olena Semenyaka (2016 to Present): Semenyaka is the head of the National Corps political wing and head of international outreach for the Azov Battalion.⁷⁴ She has met with members of other far-right organizations including French Identitarians, the Italian CasaPound, German NDP, and U.S. Rise Above Movement. Prior to joining, she was the press secretary for Right Sector from 2014 to 2016. She became the de facto head of the National Corps in 2016.⁷⁵
- Denis Prokopenko (? to Present): Prokopenko joined the group in 2014 and was one of their earliest members. By 2020, Prokopenko was leading the group in Mariupol.⁷⁶ In February 2022, he was overseeing the Azov Regiment in Mariupol.⁷⁷

B. NAME CHANGES

- Azov Special Operations Detachment
- Azov Regiment

C. SIZE ESTIMATES

- March 2014: 50 men (Gomza and Zajaczkowski)⁷⁸
- June 2014: 200 men (Gomza and Zajaczkowski)⁷⁹
- July 2014: 300 men (BBC, Al Jazeera America)⁸⁰
- August 2014: 500 (Foreign Policy)⁸¹
- March 2015: 1000 men (Reuters)⁸²
- 2019: 10,000 followers (Foreign Policy)⁸³
- 2019: 22,500 followers (20,000 National Corps members, 1500 Azov Regiment, 1000 National Militia) (Gomza and Zajaczkowski)⁸⁴

D. RESOURCES

The group initially received funding from Ukrainian oligarch and governor of Donetsk, Serhiy Taruta.⁸⁵ Taruta was a billionaire who was appointed to the Donetsk region in March 2014 shortly before a separatist insurgency broke out.⁸⁶

The founder of the Azov Battalion, Andriy Biletsky, allegedly had close ties with Ukrainian Interior Minister Arsen Avakov starting in 2008.⁸⁷ Avakov was a patron and government

protector of the Azov Battalion, prior to his resignation in 2021.⁸⁸ The Azov Battalion was incorporated into the Ukrainian National Guard while Avakov was the Interior Minister.⁸⁹ A direct relationship between Avakov and Andriy Biletsky predates the formation of Azov though. From 2005-2010 Patriot Ukraine, Biletsky's precursor to the Azov Battalion, was active in the city of Kharkiv, where Avakov was governor. During this time Patriot Ukraine coordinated closely with local police and authorities, particularly in monitoring migrants and raiding kiosks, whose owners were not loyal to Avakov's government.⁹⁰ Biletsky, first with Patriot Ukraine and subsequently with Azov, benefited from the patronage of Avakov for nearly a decade during Avakov's time as governor and then as Minister of the Interior.⁹¹

In 2016, members of the Azov Battalion and National Corps traveled to Poland where they received special operations training from the European Security Academy.⁹² The group also received funding from charity donations, diaspora funds, and other European far-right groups.⁹³

The group has an active social media presence that it uses for recruitment, fundraising, and messaging. It previously used Facebook and Instagram before it was deplatformed in 2016 for being a "dangerous organization."⁹⁴ There is suggestive evidence that the group may receive support from online goods advertised on Instagram and Facebook through the Misanthropic Division and Wolknvt shopfronts.⁹⁵ In 2022, it was using Telegram to broadcast messages about the fight in Mariupol.⁹⁶

Azov runs an international outreach program, headed by Olena Semenyaka, which networks with other far-right organizations across the U.S. and Europe.⁹⁷ This has included running events and recruitment efforts out of European and American white supremacist and neo-nazi groups such as the Nordic Resistance Movement, Rise Above Movement, Casa Pound, and Atomwaffen Division.⁹⁸

International recruitment efforts run through Azov's international events, in particular mixed martial arts competitions.⁹⁹ Individual recruits from abroad are brought through the "Cossack House", a social center run by the Azov Battalion in Kyiv. The Cossack House operates as a hub for arriving recruits.¹⁰⁰

E. GEOGRAPHIC LOCATIONS

Disclaimer: This is a partial list of where the militant organization has bases and where it operates. This does not include information on where the group conducts major attacks or has external influences.

The Azov Battalion initially mobilized in eastern Ukraine and primarily operates around Mariupol.¹⁰¹ In the spring of 2014, it had a training camp in Urzuf, Ukraine at a former presidential summer beach home.¹⁰²

It fought in several major engagements outside Mariupol in 2014.¹⁰³ In February 2022, the group was fighting in Mariupol.¹⁰⁴ Azov attachments were also reportedly fighting in Kyiv and Kharkiv.¹⁰⁵

STRATEGY

A. IDEOLOGY AND GOALS

Azov's founder, Andriy Biletsky, stated it was Ukraine's mission to "Lead the white races of the world in a final crusade... against semite-led subhumans."¹⁰⁶ Biletsky's group, Patriot Ukraine, precursor to the Azov Battalion, was characterized as a neo-nazi and ultra-nationalist organization, and Patriot Ukraine was assimilated into Azov in 2014.¹⁰⁷ Members and leaders of the Azov Battalion later denied its neo-Nazi ties despite members having swastika tattoos and patches with extreme-right insignia.¹⁰⁸

Olena Semenyaka, spokeswoman and head of Azov's international outreach office, has articulated a vision in which Azov takes over Ukraine. In remarks to the Nordic Resistance Movement, Semenyaka said "We are on the march to power and we will either have to get there by parliament or by other means".¹⁰⁹ In interviews with The Guardian in 2014, members of the Azov Battalion openly commented on aspirational beliefs of marching on Kyiv when the fighting with Russian forces and separatists was over. The same interviews revealed a common view amongst Azov's members that Ukraine "needs a strong dictator to come to power who could shed plenty of blood but unite the nation in the process".¹¹⁰ An instructor at an Azov run summer camp for Ukrainian children stated that "only nationalists can give something to this country, not democrats, not liberals".¹¹¹ Azov's political ambitions are slow and steady. Characterized as "metapolitics", Azov pursues a political strategy centered around gradually shifting the mainstream closer to themselves to capture cultural power as a precondition for the capture of political power.¹¹² Semenyaka has referred to this strategy in her public remarks, stating that Azov's strategy is to build "cultural hegemony" as a means to building political hegemony.¹¹³

The National Corps platform champions a "natsiokratiya" (natiocracy) political system, which champions nationalism as a state's defining purpose. The wing supports a number of far-right and ultra-nationalist political positions as well as support for Ukraine re-acquiring nuclear weapons.¹¹⁴

B. POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

In November 2008, Biletsky created the umbrella Social Nationalist Assembly (SNA) movement.¹¹⁵ The movement was a derivative of the earlier political party Social-National Party of Ukraine (SNPU), which later became known as Svoboda. The SNA contained members from a collection of nationalist and extreme-right groups in Ukraine which promoted a neo-Nazi ideology.¹¹⁶ Members from the SNA later joined Azov.

In 2016, the Azov Battalion created a political party known as the National Corps.¹¹⁷ Biletsky became the de facto political leader of the National Corps although he did not have an official position. Olena Semenyaka was the head and spokesperson for the National Corps.¹¹⁸ The National Corps did not have substantial political support and only had 2 members in Parliament as of 2019. In 2019, the National Corps ran in Parliamentary elections with a larger far-right coalition including the Right Sector and Svoboda to try to hit the minimum 5 percent electoral threshold for representation. However, the coalition only garnered 2.3% of the vote and failed to

gain any seats.¹¹⁹ Some scholars suggested the group did not have ambitions to command large political power, but to radicalize the population and help normalize extreme-right, neo-Nazi ideas in Ukrainian politics.¹²⁰

C. TARGETS AND TACTICS

The Azov Battalion is predominantly a light infantry force, but does possess heavier equipment including armored personnel carriers, artillery and tanks.¹²¹ From 2014-2022 Azov conducted patrols around Mariupol in search of pro-Russian forces, dug trenches and defensive positions, and organized cells around Mariupol to fortify the city's defenses.¹²²

In 2014 and 2015, the Azov Battalion reportedly engaged in the detention, interrogations, and torture of a Mariupol resident.¹²³ In 2016, members of the Azov Battalion forcibly obstructed the entrance to a Ukrainian TV channel station after the TV channel broadcast a Russian journalist.¹²⁴ In 2018, the National Militia targeted Roma and LGBT minorities in Ukraine.¹²⁵ The National Militia publicized their attacks through livestreams on Facebook.

In January and February 2022, the Azov Battalion conducted civilian training programs in Kyiv and Mariupol in preparation for a Russian invasion.¹²⁶ The Russian invasion led to a siege of Mariupol beginning in March 2022 where Azov forces once again resisted enemy forces using a combination of small arms, defensive maneuvers, and lightly-armed attacks.¹²⁷

MAJOR ATTACKS

Disclaimer: These are some selected major attacks in the militant organization's history. It is not a comprehensive listing but captures some of the most famous attacks or turning points during the campaign.

- **April 2014:** The group's first violent attack was in April 2014 when it clashed with Russian-backed separatists in Donetsk (Unknown Killed, Unknown Wounded).¹²⁸
- **June 13, 2014:** The group seized Mariupol from Russian-backed separatists (36 Killed, 24 Wounded).¹²⁹
- **June 2018:** Members of the National Militia attacked a Roma camp outside Kyiv. Twenty men destroyed the camp and live-streamed it on Facebook (Zero Killed, Zero Wounded).¹³⁰
- **February - March 2022:** On February 22, Russian forces invaded Ukraine. Combat forces clashed with members of the Azov Regiment in Mariupol, Kyiv, and Kharkiv (Unknown Killed, Unknown Wounded).¹³¹

INTERACTIONS

A. DESIGNATED/LISTED

In May 2014, Ukraine designated the Azov Battalion official volunteer battalion status.¹³²

On September 17, 2014, Ukraine designated the Azov Battalion “regiment” status.¹³³

On November 12, 2014, Ukraine designated the Azov Battalion “Special Purpose Regiment” status and formally integrated it into the National Guard.¹³⁴

In 2016, Facebook designated the Azov Battalion a “dangerous organization,” which allows it to regulate Azov content and deplatform Azov-related pages.¹³⁵ In February 2022, Facebook’s parent company Meta announced that it would be temporarily loosening this designation to allow discussion of the Azov Battalion in the context of Ukrainian defense efforts. The ban still prohibited Azov from using Facebook for messaging, advertising, and recruiting.¹³⁶

In 2018, the U.S. Congress passed a bill banning arms sales to the Azov Battalion.¹³⁷

B. COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Azov operated an annual children’s camp in 2015 and 2017, where attendees were known as “Azovets.” The purpose of these camps is to instill in children a sense of patriotism, nationalist ideas, and promote support for Azov.¹³⁸ The camps involve mock military drills, instruction in nationalist beliefs, and other tutelage.¹³⁹

Azov has a street wing faction known as the National Druzhyna or National Militia, which aims to promote law and order within local neighborhoods.¹⁴⁰

The group held parades in Mariupol to commemorate the anniversary of the 2014 battle.¹⁴¹

Prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Azov ran training session for civilians in Mariupol including medical care, survival and evacuation, and weapons training.¹⁴² In Kyiv, roughly 350 civilians attended a paramilitary training event run by Azov.¹⁴³

C. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER GROUPS

European Far-Right and Identitarian Movement. Members of the Azov Battalion have met with members of other European far-right political parties including Italy’s CasaPound and Germany’s National Democratic Party.¹⁴⁴ In 2017, the Azov Battalion hosted a conference at which a CasaPound representative emphasized the far-right in Europe’s movement was about “redefining politics — language, symbolism and aesthetics.”¹⁴⁵ Other attendees at the conference included members from the French identitarian Union Defense Group (GUD), Alliansen – Alternativ for Norge, American white nationalist Greg Johnson.¹⁴⁶

Olga Semenyaka is a prominent “diplomat” of the Azov Battalion. She has extensively traveled around Europe to network with other far-right nationalist and Identitarian movements in Europe. She gave a lecture at an Identitarian Conference in 2019 where Jared Taylor and Kevin MacDonald were present. She also attended a Eesti Konservatiivne Rahvaerakond (EKRE)-sponsored celebration in 2019 and a Portuguese Identitarian conference with Escudo Identitario in 2019.¹⁴⁷ She has also engaged with the hate rock scene and met with members of Wotan Jugend as well as the German group Absurd, the French Peste Noire, and the Finnish Goatmoon.¹⁴⁸

Right Sector. The Right Sector has been described as a “sister group” of the Azov Battalion.¹⁴⁹ Right Sector was one of the most prominent far-right Ukrainian groups involved in the Euromaidan protests, which toppled president Yanukovich. Right Sector was an extreme-right, ultra-nationalist group which favored authoritarian politics and later opposed pro-Russian separatists.¹⁵⁰ Right Sector was described as an umbrella organization for other militant organizations including Trident, the Patriots of Ukraine, and the Social National Assembly.¹⁵¹

Misanthropic Division. Azov has a strong affiliation with the Misanthropic Division. The Misanthropic Division is a nihilistic neo-Nazi paramilitary organization with similar ideological views as Azov. It originally formed around 2014 and participated in the Euromaidan Protests. In 2015, the Misanthropic Division published a manifesto pledging “immediate support” for the Azov Battalion.¹⁵² By 2021, Misanthropic had largely merged with the Azov Battalion and disavowed militant activities.¹⁵³ However, Misanthropic Division remained active on social media setting up various shopfronts for selling merchandise, advertising, and fundraising through the Walknvt platform.¹⁵⁴

C14/S14. C14 is a neo-Nazi nationalist group in Kyiv. It conducted an attack with Right Sector and Azov in 2016 against the left-wing Autonomous Resistance in Lviv.¹⁵⁵ The group typically attacks Roma and minority communities.¹⁵⁶

Atomwaffen Division. AWD has made contact with the Azov Battalion, a unit of the Ukrainian National Guard that promotes white supremacy extremism and neo-Nazi beliefs. With the aid of foreign fighters recruited from around the world, the Azov Battalion has fought against pro-Russian separatists in the eastern half of the country. In 2015, AWD founder Brandon Russell reached out to an anonymous member of the Azov Battalion online. Presenting himself as “an avid supporter of the Azov Battalion” under the username “Odin,” Russell requested “some advice from you about my militia that I lead in the US.”¹⁵⁷ It is unclear what, if any, assistance he may have received from Azov Battalion members. In addition to Russell, the Azov Battalion is known to have made contact with at least one other member of AWD. In January 2016, Andrew Oneschuk, a roommate of Russell, served as a guest on the Azov Battalion’s podcast, which frequently hosts representatives of far-right organizations in Europe and North America. He spoke about challenges facing Americans who wish to join the Azov Battalion in Ukraine as foreign fighters and expressed interest in learning tips in boosting membership of the extreme right.¹⁵⁸ In October 2020, Ukraine deported two American Atomwaffen members who were allegedly trying to join the Azov Battalion in order to gain experience fighting.¹⁵⁹

AWD Ukraine. Ukraine allegedly hosts a group claiming to be an AWD affiliate, though the cell is not sanctioned by AWD central in the United States. Like AWD Russia, the official name of this organization is unclear; for ease of reference, this profile has adopted the term “self-declared AWD Ukraine.” Some sources have referred to this group by the name “AWD Galizien.”¹⁶⁰ “Galizien” is a reference to a unit of the Nazi Waffen-SS composed largely of ethnic Ukrainians during the Second World War. In December 2019, the self-declared AWD Ukraine released a video featuring five men wearing camouflage fatigues with AWD patches and threatening violence against Ukrainian politicians.¹⁶¹ The men also wore blurred-out patches for two Ukrainian far-right organizations, the Azov Battalion and Right Sector.¹⁶²

Rise Above Movement. In Ukraine, Olena Semenyaka, head of the National Corps hosted members of the U.S.-based extreme right Rise Above Movement (RAM).¹⁶³ Semenyaka later stated that the RAM’s leader Rundo and his compatriots “came to learn our ways” and “showed interest in learning how to create youth forces in the ways Azov has.”¹⁶⁴ During their visit, the RAM members joined the Azov Battalion for sparring at the Reconquista Club, an mixed martial arts (MMA) club affiliated with the group.¹⁶⁵ Rundo entered an MMA competition for white supremacists from across Europe, supposedly the first American to take part in the history of the event.¹⁶⁶ While in Kiev, Rundo also got a tattoo of the Viking warrior logo of White Rex, a clothing label founded by Russian MMA fighter and Azov Battalion associate Denis Nikitin.¹⁶⁷

Russian Imperial Movement. The Russian Imperial Movement is an adversary of the Azov Battalion in the Ukrainian conflict.¹⁶⁸ In 2014 and 2015, RIM’s paramilitary force fought alongside pro-Russian separatists. Though Azov and RIM share some white supremacy extremist beliefs, they have fought on opposite sides in Ukraine’s civil war.

Brendon Tarrant. Press later reported a connection between the Christchurch shooting of a mosque in New Zealand and the Azov Battalion. Brendon Tarrant visited Ukraine and wore the “Wolfsangel” patch that Azov is associated with although no formal connection exists.¹⁶⁹

D. STATE SPONSORS AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

Ukraine designated the Azov Battalion official volunteer battalion status in May 2014.¹⁷⁰ It became an official part of the Interior Ministry’s National Guard.¹⁷¹

Azov is notable for its recruitment of far-right foreign fighters from the U.S. and Europe as well as its extensive transnational ties with other far-right organizations. Azov recruits foreign fighters on the basis of its white supremacist and neo-Nazi ideology to fight against pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine. The group has recruited fighters from eastern Ukraine as well as Belarus, Germany, Sweden, Spain, Italy, Canada, France, and Russia.¹⁷² The Soufan Center reported that between 2014-2019 approximately 50,000 people from 17 countries – including the United States – traveled to fight in Ukraine although it is hard to determine how many specifically fought with Azov.¹⁷³ A report by the Counter Extremism Project estimates that western foreign fighters in Ukraine with previous ties to right wing extremism numbered in the hundreds, and that the Azov Battalion is the key hub for these extremists.¹⁷⁴

American citizens have been amongst the extremists traveling to Ukraine with the expressed purpose of training with, or joining the Azov Battalion. American extremists traveling to Ukraine have included avowed neo-Nazis and white supremacists, as well as individuals subject to criminal investigation and arrest by American law enforcement. For example, four members of the violent white supremacist group, Rise Above Movement, were arrested by the FBI for violence at protests. In the FBI's criminal complaint, the investigators noted the four arrestees had traveled to Ukraine with the expressed purpose of training with the Azov Battalion.¹⁷⁵ Two members of the U.S. based Atomwaffen Division, an accelerationist Neo-Nazi group, were deported by Ukrainian authorities in 2020 for attempting to join the Azov Battalion.¹⁷⁶ American military veterans have also joined Azov through their international recruitment program alongside far right European volunteers.¹⁷⁷

Far right European volunteers have included veterans of European militaries, including the Swedish and Croatian militaries.¹⁷⁸ Russian dissidents have also joined the Azov Battalion. Unable to protest in Russia, these individuals traveled to Ukraine to directly join the fighting, and signed up for the Azov Battalion since it is predominantly a Russian speaking group.¹⁷⁹

In 2016, members of the Azov Battalion and National Corps traveled to Poland where they received special operations training from the European Security Academy.¹⁸⁰ The group also received funding from charity donations, diaspora funds, and other European far-right groups.¹⁸¹ In early 2022, President Zelensky announced the formation of the International Legion, an organization specifically organized around foreign fighters travelling to Ukraine to fight against the Russian military.¹⁸² As of March 6th, 2022, President Zelensky claimed 16,000 foreigners had already volunteered to fight, again though it is difficult to estimate how many of these are joining the Azov Battalion specifically.¹⁸³

MAPS

- Global Right-Wing Extremism

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