

The truth about Ukraine's far-Right militias

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Russia has empowered dangerous factions in Zelenskyy's army

Like any war, but perhaps more than most, the war in Ukraine has seen a bewildering barrage of claims and counter-claims made by the online supporters of each side. Truth, partial truths and outright lies compete for dominance in the media narrative. Vladimir Putin's claim that Russia invaded Ukraine to "de-Nazify" the country is surely one of the clearest examples. The Russian claim that the Maidan revolution of 2014 was a "fascist coup" and that Ukraine is a Nazi state has been used for years by Putin and his supporters to justify his occupation of Crimea and support for Russian-speaking separatists in the country's east, winning many online adherents.

But the Russian claim is false: Ukraine is a genuine liberal-democratic state, though an imperfect one, with free elections that produce significant changes of power, including the election, in 2019, of the liberal-populist reformer, Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Ukraine is, unequivocally, not a Nazi state: the Russian *casus belli* is a lie. And yet, there is a danger that the understandable desire by Ukrainian and Western commentators not to provide ammunition for Russian propaganda has led to an over-correction — and one that may not ultimately serve Ukraine's best interests.

During one recent news bulletin on BBC Radio 4, the correspondent referred to "Putin's baseless claim that the Ukrainian state supports Nazis". This is, itself, disinformation: it is an observable fact, which [the BBC itself](#) has previously reported on [accurately](#) and [well](#), that the Ukrainian state has, since 2014, provided funding, weapons and other forms of support to extreme Right-wing militias, including neo-Nazi ones. This is not a new or controversial observation. Back in 2019, I spent time in Ukraine interviewing senior figures in the constellation of state-backed extreme Right-wing groups [for Harper's magazine](#); they were all quite open about their ideology and plans for the future.

Indeed, some of the best coverage of Ukraine's extreme Right-wing groups has come from the open-source intelligence outlet Bellingcat, which is not known for a favourable attitude towards Russian propaganda. Bellingcat's excellent reporting of this under-discussed topic over the past few years has largely focused on the Azov movement, Ukraine's most powerful extreme Right-wing group, and the one most favoured by the state's largesse.

Over the past few years, Bellingcat researchers have explored Azov's [outreach effort to American white nationalists](#) and its funding by the Ukrainian state to teach "[patriotic education](#)" and [to support demobilised veterans](#); it has looked into Azov's hosting of [neo-Nazi black metal music festivals](#), and its support of the exiled, anti-Putin Russian [neo-Nazi group Wotanjugend](#) — practitioners of a very marginal form of [esoteric Nazism](#), who share space with Azov in their Kyiv headquarters, fight alongside them in the front line, and have also played a role [translating and disseminating](#) a Russian-language version of the Christchurch shooter's manifesto. Unfortunately, Bellingcat's invaluable coverage of Ukraine's extreme-Right ecosystem has not been updated since the current hostilities began, despite the war with Russia providing these groups with something of a renaissance.

The [Azov movement](#) was founded in 2014 by [Andriy Biletsky](#), former leader of the Ukrainian neo-Nazi group [Patriot of Ukraine](#), during the battle for control of Kyiv's central Independence Square during the Maidan Revolution against the country's Russia-leaning, elected president Viktor Yanukovich. Back in 2010, Biletsky [claimed](#) that it would one day be Ukraine's role to "lead the white races of the world in a final crusade... against Semite-led *untermenschen*". The revolution, and the war which followed, would give him the national stage for which he had so long craved.

Alongside other far-Right groups, such as [Right Sector](#), the nascent Azov movement played an outside role in the fighting against Ukrainian security police which left 121 dead and secured the success of the revolution. Acquiring control of a large property, just off Independence Square, from the Ministry of Defence, Azov turned the building, [now named Cossack House](#), into its Kyiv headquarters and recruiting centre. Though Azov has since toned down its rhetoric, and many of its fighters may be non-ideological and simply attracted by its martial reputation, its activists are often to be seen covered in tattoos of SS *totenkopfs* and lightning bolt runes, or sporting the [Sonnenrad](#) or Black Sun symbol of esoteric Nazism. Derived from a pattern created for Himmler at [Wewelsburg](#) castle in Germany, chosen as an occultic Camelot for senior SS officers, the *Sonnenrad* is like the [Wolfsangel](#) rune of the SS Das Reich division one of Azov's official symbols, worn on their unit [patches](#) and on the shields behind which their fighters parade in [evocative torchlit ceremonies](#).

I've visited Cossack House multiple times to interview senior Azov figures, including the leader of its [National Militia](#) (which provides auxiliary patrolling muscle to Ukraine's official police force), Ihor Mikhailenko, and Azov's International Secretary and intellectual linchpin, Olena Semenyaka. It's an impressive setup: along with classrooms for the educational lectures they provide with state funding, Cossack House is home to Azov's literary salon and publishing house, [Plomin](#), where glamorous young hipster intellectuals busy themselves with organising Right-wing seminars and book translations, beneath glossy posters of fascist luminaries such as Yukio Mishima, Cornelius Codreanu, and Julius Evola.

But Azov's power derives from the gun, not their literary efforts. Back in 2014, when the Ukrainian army was weak and underequipped, Azov volunteers under Biletsky's leadership fought at the vanguard of the battle against Russian-speaking separatists in the east, reconquering the city of Mariupol, where they are currently under siege. Effective, courageous and highly ideological fighters, Azov's efforts in the east won them great renown as defenders of the nation, and the support of a grateful Ukrainian state, which incorporated Azov as [an official regiment of Ukraine's National Guard](#). In this, Azov is believed to have enjoyed the support of [Arsen Avakov](#), a powerful oligarch and Ukraine's Interior Minister between 2014 and 2019.

Both Ukrainian human rights activists and leaders of rival extreme Right-wing groups have complained to me, in interviews, about the unfair advantage Avakov's patronage gave the Azov movement in establishing its dominant role in Ukraine's Rightwing sphere — including official functions as [election observers](#) and [state-sanctioned auxiliary police](#). Ukraine is not a Nazi state, but the Ukrainian state's support — for whatever reasons, valid or otherwise — of neo-Nazi or Nazi-aligned groups makes the country [an outlier](#) in Europe. The continent has many extreme Right-wing groups, but only in Ukraine do they possess their own [tank and artillery units](#), with the state's support.

This awkwardly close relationship between a liberal-democratic state supported by the West and armed proponents of a very different ideology has caused [some discomfort](#) in the past for Ukraine's Western backers. The US Congress has gone [back and forth](#) in recent years on whether Azov should be blocked from receiving American arms shipments, with Democrat lawmakers even [urging in 2019](#) that Azov be listed as a global terrorist organisation. In interviews, Semenyaka complained to me that this unease was a result of their listening to Russian propaganda, and insisted that American

cooperation with Azov would be beneficial for both parties.

In this, the current war has surely come as a blessed relief for Azov. Biletsky's attempt to found a political party — [the National Corps](#) — met with almost zero success, with even a united bloc of Ukraine's far- and extreme Right-wing parties failing to clear the very low hurdle for parliamentary representation in the last election: Ukrainian voters simply do not want what they are selling, and reject their worldview. Yet in time of war, Azov and similar groups come to the forefront, with the Russian invasion seemingly reversing the downward spiral that set in for them following [Avakov's resignation](#) due to international pressure. [Judging by their social media](#), Azov's armed units are expanding: they're forming new battalions in Kharkiv and Dnipro, a new special forces unit in Kyiv (where Biletsky is organising [at least some aspects](#) of the capital's defence) and local defence militias in western cities such as Ivano-Frankivsk.

Along with other extreme Right-wing groups such as [Karpatska Sich](#) (whose militancy against Western Ukraine's Hungarian-speaking minority, including Roma, has drawn criticism from the Hungarian government), the Eastern Orthodox group [Tradition and Order](#), the [neo-Nazi group C14](#), and the extreme Right-wing militia [Freikorps](#), the Russian invasion has allowed Azov to restore its earlier prominence, burnishing its heroic reputation with [its dogged defence of Mariupol](#) alongside regular Ukrainian marines. While just a few weeks ago there was still a concerted Western effort to not directly arm Azov, now they seem to be a prime beneficiary of Western munitions and training: [these pictures tweeted](#) by the Belarusian opposition outlet NEXTA show Azov fighters being instructed in the use of British-made NLAW anti-tank munitions by blurred-out trainers.

Similarly, until the Russian invasion, Western governments and news outlets [frequently warned](#) of the dangers of [Western neo-Nazis and white supremacists](#) gaining combat experience fighting alongside Azov and their [allied Nazi subfactions](#). Yet in the heat of the moment, these concerns seem to have dissipated: [a recent photograph of newly-arrived Western volunteers](#), including Britons, in Kyiv shows Azov's Olena Semenyaka smiling happily in the background, alongside the Swedish neo-Nazi and former Azov sniper [Mikael Skiltt](#). Indeed, [Misanthropic Division](#), a unit of Western neo-Nazis fighting alongside Azov, is [currently advertising](#) on Telegram for European militants to join the flow of volunteers and link up with them in Ukraine, "for victory and Valhalla."

Like Ukraine's other extreme Right-wing militias, Azov are dogged, disciplined and committed fighters, which is why the weak Ukrainian state has found itself forced to rely upon their muscle during its hours of greatest need: during the Maidan revolution, during the war against separatists from 2014 onwards, [and now to fend off the Russian invasion](#). There has been a certain new-found reticence abroad to speak frankly about their role, no doubt for fear that doing so will provide ammunition for Russian propaganda. This fear is surely misplaced: after all, groups such as Azov are only prominent precisely *because* of Russia's meddling in Ukraine. Instead of de-Nazifying the country, Russian aggression has helped solidify the role and presence of extreme Right-wing factions in Ukraine's military, reinvigorating a waning political force rejected by the overwhelming majority of Ukrainians.

If anything, the primary threat posed by groups such as Azov is not to the Russian state — Russia happily supports extreme Right-wing elements in its [Wagner mercenary group](#) and in [the separatist republics](#), after all — nor to Western nations whose disaffected citizens may find themselves drawn to a combat role alongside them. Instead, the threat is to the future stability of the Ukrainian state itself, as [Amnesty](#) and [Human Rights Watch](#) have long warned. While they may be useful now, in the event of the decapitation or evacuation of Ukraine's liberal government from Kyiv, perhaps to Poland or Lviv, or more likely, in the event of Zelenskyy being forced by events to sign a peace deal surrendering Ukrainian territory, groups like Azov may find a golden opportunity to challenge what remains of the state and consolidate their own power bases, even if only locally.

Back in 2019, I asked Semenyaka if Azov still saw itself as a revolutionary movement. Thinking carefully, she replied, “We are ready for different scenarios. If Zelenskyy is even worse than [ex-president] Poroshenko, if he is the same kind of populist, but without certain skills, connections and background, then, of course, Ukrainians would be heavily in danger. And we have already developed a plan of what can be done, how we can develop parallel state structures, how we can customise these entry strategies to save the Ukrainian state, if [Zelenskyy] would become a puppet of the Kremlin, for instance. Because it’s quite possible.”

Senior Azov figures have been explicit, over the course of years, in stating that Ukraine has unique potential as a springboard for the “[reconquest](#)” of Europe from liberals, homosexuals and immigrants. While their broader continental ambitions may have a very doubtful chance of success, a broken, impoverished and angry postwar Ukraine, or worse, a Ukraine suffering years of bombardment and occupation with large areas outside central government control, would surely be a fertile breeding ground for a form of extreme Right-wing militancy not seen in Europe for many decades.

Right now, Ukraine and Zelenskyy may well need the military capabilities and ideological zeal of nationalist and extreme Right-wing militias simply to fight and win their battle for national survival. But when the war ends, both Zelenskyy and his Western backers must be very careful to ensure that they have not empowered groups whose goals are in direct conflict with the liberal-democratic norms they both pledge adherence to. Arming and funding Azov, [Tradition and Order](#) and [Karpatska Sich](#) may well be one of the hard choices forced by war, but disarming them must surely be a priority when the war ends.

As we have seen in Syria, there is nothing that radicalises a civilian population more than dispossession, bombing and bombardment. Just as in Syria, there is surely a danger that temporarily empowering extremist factions for their military utility, even indirectly, may have grave and unintended consequences. And in Syria, too, there were strong early taboos among Western commentators in discussing the rise of extremist militias that would later cannibalise the rebel cause, for fear of validating Assad’s propaganda that the rebels were all terrorists: this early reticence did not, in the end, work in the rebels’ favour.

It is not doing Putin’s work for him to observe frankly that there are extremist elements fighting against him in Ukraine: indeed, it is only by carefully monitoring — and perhaps, curtailing — their activities now, that we can ensure they will not deepen Ukraine’s misery in the years to come. For years, liberal Western commentators complained that the Ukrainian state was turning a blind eye to its Right-wing extremist factions: it serves no good purpose for the same commentators to now do the same thing themselves.

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