

The Truth About Ukrainian Nationalism and Claims It's Tainted by Nazism

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In light of Russian propaganda, Haaretz is delving into the concept of Ukrainian nationalism, to better understand its historical and contemporary meaning, and find out where the Azov Battalion fits in

A little over a year ago, a robust public debate began in Ukraine surrounding the parade by ultranationalist groups in Kyiv commemorating the Ukrainian SS division known as the 1st Galician. Hundreds of people marched in the capital city center with the flags of the Ukrainian volunteer unit established in April 1943, as part of the Waffen SS.

Ceremonies and parades honoring the division had been held regularly in previous years in Lviv, but [the demonstration in the capital](#) aroused far more interest. Russian propaganda had a field day, blowing the event out of proportion. Israel and Germany issued condemnations, as did President Zelenskyy and his party members; Kyiv municipal authorities also distanced themselves from it.

This February, the “de-Nazification” of Ukraine became one of Russia’s leading excuses for its invasion. For years, Russian state broadcasts have been pumping messages about the “fascist regime” in Kyiv and aired torchlight parades in Ukraine honoring the nationalist Ukrainian leader in the 1930s and 1940s, [Stepan Bandera](#). The campaign reached a fever pitch on February 21 in Russian President Vladimir Putin’s speech to the nation, in which he accused Ukraine of “the genocide of almost four million [Donbas residents] who didn’t agree with the coup ... and rose up against a movement of nationalism and savage, aggressive neo-Nazism.”

It is not just homages to a Ukrainian SS unit or flag marches that fuel Russian propaganda. Upon the [capture of the Azovstal steel plant](#) in Mariupol, Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Igor Konashenkov boasted of the “surrender of the Azov Nazis,” and pro-Russian media outlets and Telegram channels shared videos showed the Ukrainian captives coming out of the plant taking off their clothes and allegedly revealing Nazi tattoos – a swastika, the numbers 14 and 88, the symbols of the SS, and the Black Sun symbol. Some Russian lawmakers are now calling to ban any exchange of the Azovstal prisoners for Russian ones, to have them tried and to overturn the ban on capital punishment.

In light of the [Russian propaganda](#) and Ukrainian counter-propaganda, Haaretz is delving into the concept of Ukrainian nationalism, to better understand its historical and contemporary meaning, and find out where the Azov Battalion fits in.

Russian vanguard

The two historical names most associated with the term “Ukrainian nationalism” are Stepan Bandera, leader of one of the factions of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (ONU) during World War II, and Roman Shukhevych, commander of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, the

organization's military wing. Since 2014, dozens of streets in Ukraine have been named after the two men, who are commemorated on boulevards in Kyiv as well.

Bandera operated underground for most of his life, and spent almost a total of a decade in prison – in Poland before the war, and during it in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp in Germany. In 1959, he was murdered by a KGB agent while living as an exile in Germany and became a national icon. In the Soviet narrative, and now the Russian, Bandera's name symbolizes Ukrainian nationalists' collaborations with the Nazis, and the expression "Bandera men" has become an insult. To some Ukrainian exiles and dissidents in the past, and some Ukrainians today, Bandera has become synonymous with a Ukrainian freedom fighter.

The truth, it seems, is in the middle. "Most collaborators, including those who helped the Nazis persecute the Jews in occupied Ukraine, were not Ukrainian nationalists," says Andriy Usach, a historian at Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv and head of the After the Silence organization, which collects testimonies about World War II. "German researchers place the number of [Ukrainians who participated in persecution of the Jews](#) – those who served in the police, village leaders, and so on – at 30,000-40,000. I think the number was higher – up to 90,000 people. Most were not Ukrainian nationalists.

Most Ukrainian nationalists, for their part, were not collaborators and did not serve in the police,"he says."This does not negate the fact that among Ukrainian nationalists, some served in the police and took part in the Holocaust. This doesn't mean that they killed with their own hands, but they guarded mass murder sites – which is to say, they bore direct responsibility for all the Jews of a given town who were murdered. This issue was not discussed for a long time. The number of Ukrainian historians who dealt with the subject can be counted on two hands."

According to Yuri Radchenko, a Jewish Ukrainian historian and director of the Center for Research on Interethnic Relations in Eastern Europe, Bandera was just another local ultranationalist leader whose importance has been overblown, partly because the purging of alternatives in Soviet Ukraine. The OUN followed "a totalitarian-authoritarian ideology, with a significant antisemitic component and an affinity for Nazi Germany," says Radchenko.

An example of this ideology can be found in the summary document of the OUN conference held in Krakow in April 1941, where the organization's plan to achieve Ukrainian independence under war conditions was set. "The Jews in the Soviet Union are the most devoted supporters of the Bolshevik regime and the vanguard of Moscow's imperialism in Ukraine," states the section referring to Jews, adding: "The anti-Jewish sentiments of the Ukrainian masses serve the Moscow government to divert their attention from the real cause of the catastrophe and to direct them to pogroms against the Jews at a time of collapse. [The Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists](#) fights the Jews as the bulwark of the Muscovite-Bolshevik regime, while reminding the masses that Moscow is the main enemy."

In 1940, the OUN split into two factions – one led by Bandera, which was considered to be more radical, and the one led by Andriy Melnyk, considered to be more moderate, but also more antisemitic. According to Radchenko, Melnyk, as opposed to Bandera, had his signature on antisemitic flyers. According to [the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center](#)'s history of the Holocaust in Ukraine, edited by Holocaust researcher Karel Berkhoff, members of Melnyk's OUN aided the Nazis after the conquest of Kyiv. They contributed greatly to the formation of the local police auxiliary, which threatened local residents with death if they did not hand over Jews, Soviet secret police members and communists, and served as translators for the SS Einsatzgruppen that carried out [the murders at Babyn Yar](#), as well as many others.

For their part, the members of Bandera's faction made up the two famous battalions, Roland and

Nachtigall, which were established at the beginning of 1941 in advance of the German invasion of the Soviet Union and were trained by the Abwehr, German military intelligence. In the fall of 1941, the two battalions were broken up and reorganized into a single battalion of Ukrainian auxiliary police, the Schutzmannschaft, which fought against partisans in Belarus. Members of the OUN and UPA killed Jews without orders from the Nazis, mostly out of the belief that the Jews were active or potential collaborators with the Soviets, said Usach. For example, two incidents of executions of Jews in Ukraine by the Nachtigall are known. Roman Shukhevych was the deputy commander of that battalion. As for the Roland Battalion, no evidence exists that it participated in executions.

The attitude of the Ukrainian nationalists, especially the Bandera faction toward the Nazis changed over the course of the war. Their tensions with Germany erupted in the summer of 1941, when it became clear that the Germans had no intention whatsoever of promoting Ukrainian independence. Bandera was isolated from his supporters, and within a short time he was imprisoned. The tensions between the Ukrainian battalions and the German command led to their dissolution in 1942, and in 1943 the army of Ukrainian rebels headed by Shukhevych – which was partially composed of the former soldiers of the Roland and Nachtigall battalions – was fighting against everyone else: The Soviets, Germans, Jews, and Poles; based on some testimonies, it did not show mercy for the Ukrainian rural community, either.

The antisemitic views of the nationalists may have softened during the war, but only in a minor way. “In 1942, there was a document in which Bandera’s men stated that the destruction of the Jews was a German matter, in which they were not taking part,” says Usach. “But at the same time, almost no Jews remained in Ukraine. Remorse was not voiced over previous statements on the. The OUN also never established a network to aid the Jews, in contrast for example to the Polish underground, which also had a lot of antisemites, and its members murdered Jews too.”

No longer antisemites

Bandera’s and Shukhevych’s controversial actions have served as a tool of anti-Ukrainian propaganda in Russia and put the patriotic segments of Ukrainian society in a sensitive position – between reappropriating nationalism and defensiveness. “In terms of public awareness, the only thing that is important about these two figures is that they fought for Ukrainian independence, period,” says Vyacheslav Likhachev, a historian and public activist with Israeli citizenship who has lived in Ukraine for decades. “All the details that are important to other people are not important as far as the Ukrainian public is concerned, especially after 2014, when the attention to them became relevant based on the Ukraine’s struggle for independence.”

But in practice, the situation is much more complicated. The names Shukhevych and Bandera were at the center of a public dispute in Ukraine even before 2014. Declaring them national heroes and naming streets and other sites after them was a matter for debate and public and legal dispute since at least 2007, and still continues. A survey conducted last year by the Democratic Initiatives Foundation in cooperation with the Razumkov Center, a Ukrainian public policy think tank, showed that 46 percent of Ukrainians supported recognition of the soldiers of the Ukrainian rebel army as having fought for Ukraine’s independence. Thirty-two percent of respondents felt Stepan Bandera’s activities had a positive effect on Ukraine. As might be expected, support for the rebel army and Bandera was significantly stronger in western Ukraine compared to the center – and much more so than in the east and south.

Canadian journalist Michael Colborne, who [monitors the far right in Ukraine](#) and around the world, recently wrote a book on the Azov movement: “From the Fires of War: Ukraine’s Azov Movement and the Global Far Right.” He says that people who are active in the Ukrainian public sphere often promote the controversial figures, organizations and symbols linked to them. “They do so not

because they are right wing-extremists or radical nationalists. They see the positive side of national liberation, but unfortunately don't want to recognize or deal with the more complex sides of these movements and the horrors they took part in."

Monument to Nazi collaborator Roman Shukhevych (in Edmonton, Alberta), OUN-UPA leader, took orders from Abwehr [#WW2. pic.twitter.com/1hQmNnoDii](#)

— Russia in Canada (@RussianEmbassyC) [July 26, 2016](#)

Ukrainian political sociologist Volodymyr Ishchenko, a researcher at the Institute of Eastern European Studies of the Free University of Berlin, is more scathing in his analysis. The far right in Ukraine influences politics much more than one might conclude from its electoral size, said Ishchenko. The far-right Svoboda ("freedom") party may have only won slightly more than 2 percent of the vote in the most recent parliamentary election and failed to pass the electoral threshold, but Ishchenko makes it clear that as far as he is concerned, the far right has managed to set the public agenda even without representation in the parliament.

"What was the goal of the radicals until 2014 - banning the Communist Party, the Russification of the OUN, has become mainstream, beginning in 2014," he says. Since 2014, when Russia seized the Crimean Peninsula and the Russian-backed separatist war in the Donbas began, the far right has received support outside of parliament too, Ishchenko adds. "They received access to weapons, the possibility of shaping organized ideological groups, and in politics of this type they had no competitors."

Ishchenko says that an example of this is the blocking of amendments to the constitution meant to grant a special status to the Donbas region, in line with the Minsk Protocol, which was supposed to end the Donbas war. In 2015, after parliament gave initial approval to the amendments, Svoboda activists held a violent protest next to the parliament building that ended in a grenade being thrown that killed four police officers who were guarding the building. In the end, the law failed to move forward. Another incident showing the far right's influence on policy came in October 2019, when Azov veterans occupied the village of Zolote in the Luhansk region and refused to leave, in spite of President Zelenskyy's intention to withdraw Ukrainian forces from the town to begin the implementation of the Minsk Protocol, says Ishchenko.

He says that according to polling, Ukrainians mostly approved of the Minsk agreements in 2015 and opposed the "no-surrender" campaign the right wing launched in 2019. "There is a pretty large gap between what Ukrainian society thinks and Ukrainian civil society thinks - that is, activists who voice their opinions on social media and go out and protest."

Institutionalization and moderation

In his book, Colborne describes the Azov movement, which grew out of the battalion, as an umbrella organization under whose auspices there are [different groups](#) with varying degrees of closeness to itself. In recent years, this umbrella has become a place where the entire radical right in Ukraine moves. At the heart of the movement are the Azov Battalion and the National Corps party led by Andriy Biletsky, who previously stood at the head of the far-right organization Patriot of Ukraine, was one of the founders of the neo-Nazi organization the Social-National Assembly and has espoused white supremacist beliefs on many occasions.

Biletsky was the first commander of the Azov Battalion and continues to represent the unit in his public appearances, even though he is no longer officially connected to it. A long list of other

organizations are linked to the Azov movement, whether officially or not, including ones involved in violence, including attacks on feminists, LGBTQ groups, communists and pro-Russian activists, says Colborne.

[Feminist historian Marta Havryshko](#) says that a few years ago, she participated in a meeting held by a LGBTQ group in Kharkiv and received threats from the extremist Tradition and Order organization, which both Havryshko and Colborne say has connections to the Azov movement. Because of the threats, the location of the meeting was not made public and participants were only informed of the location at the last moment.

Tradition and Order activists went to a different location, where they expected the meeting would be held, with flyers and gas canisters, she says. "That is the atmosphere in which we needed to conduct the discussion. The organizers realized that it could spill over into violence. When this threat is constantly in the background, it is not a comfortable feeling."

In spite of this, Colborne says that the Azov Battalion has undergone changes and become established over the years. In the first few years after it was founded, just a small minority of its soldiers had a connection to the far right; today, these numbers are even smaller and the use of neo-Nazi symbols among its members has been reduced greatly, he says.

The Azov Battalion and the entire Azov movement are almost completely untainted by antisemitism now, he adds. "Not only for Azov but for all the far-right movements in Ukraine, especially since 2014, antisemitism has lost its importance. When I compare this to what is happening with the extreme right in other countries in Europe, the level of antisemitism and the open antisemitic rhetoric there is much higher than anything I have seen in the right-wing movements in Ukraine in recent years." White supremacy is also not an idea that the leaders of the far right, with Biletsky at their head, have been publicly endorsing in the past few years.

Nonetheless, besides for Ukrainian patriotism, the Azov movement and radical right in Ukraine in general have been left with a collection of conservative values that very much remind one of the ideologies the Kremlin relies on today: Opposition to feminism, hatred of the LGBTQ community and devotion to "traditional values."

"What happened to Russia, and specifically to Putin, in recent years is growing much closer to the 'Nazis' against whom he claims he is fighting in Ukraine," Colborne says. "There are differences between them, but they are much closer on the ideological spectrum than what any of the sides wants to admit."

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