

# Ukraine, Right-wing Radicalism, and the War: Frequently Asked Questions

Wednesday 1 February 2023, by [LICHACHEV Vyacheslav](#), [VRABEC Aljaž](#) (Date first published: 21 January 2023).

**Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is a Jew, but Russia has been dropping bombs in Ukraine for nine months now and occupying foreign territory in a name of denazification. Russian propaganda and its supporters keep circulating photos of Ukrainians allegedly worshiping Nazism, but with little context as to when and where the photos were taken. The matter is even more unclear because we do not see any different footage from the Russian side either, where is also a lot of Nazi symbolism.**

## **Is Ukraine a Nazi state as Russians says?**

This is a very easy question - no, Ukraine is not a Nazi state.

### **Why?**

Far-right movements trends in Ukraine are extremely poor. We had a lot of problems with the far right ten years ago during Viktor Yanukovich's government, but times have changed. Ten years ago, the far-right party Svoboda received 10.45 percent of the vote and had 37 members of parliament, today Svoboda has one member - a female - in parliament, as it won only 2.15 percent of the vote in the last elections.

The extreme right in Ukraine has been losing popularity for ten years. At the political level, it is completely marginal, people do not vote for it, and it is especially insignificant when compared to other European countries. In Poland, Hungary, France, Sweden and Italy, the extreme right-wingers even hold power or are in the second round of presidential elections. Marie Le Pen, for example, won 41.45 percent of the vote, while the far-right presidential candidate in Ukraine, Ruslan Koshulinsky, had only 1.62 percent of the vote. Moreover, even the Jew Volodymyr Zelensky became the president with more than 70 percent, which is not the case for any other European country to have a Jew for a president.

## **In what context can we place videos and photos of Ukrainian soldiers wearing patches with Nazi symbols, saluting with the right hand, flags with a swastika...**

The photos are real (most of them), but only show specific people or groups. Since photos are very illustrative, they have more power than data and trends, so we think we have a general picture after looking at the photos, but currently there are 900,000 people in the Ukrainian army, so a few dozen photos with Nazi symbols, slogans or salutes do not show us the majority of the Ukrainian society. In addition to Nazi symbols, we can also add Viking and neo-pagan symbols, which belong more to toxic masculinity than to following Nazi ideology.

In one case, the users of Nazi symbols did defend themselves that they used them as a joke, saying if Russian propaganda says »we are Nazis, then we are«, but such trolling is not very smart, and I'm

not even sure if the apology was completely sincere.

Many of these photos are not even recent, but from 2014, when far-right fighters joined the National Guard. They even created several private battalions, including the Azov battalion, but this was a problem in 2014, although even then a huge part of Ukrainian society rejected them, which is clearly reflected in all elections.

### **Why we often see a black and red flag, for example on the central monument in Kherson?**

This flag is the original symbol of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists. During the two world wars it was an underground organization, during the second world war it tried to form an army to fight against the Soviet Union, but in the last years of the second world war it also fought against the Polish nationalist underground.

Most memorable are a few months in 1941, when Ukrainian nationalists tried to connect with the German army in order to drive out the Soviet army together and declare an independent Ukraine, but later the Ukrainian nationalists also resisted the German army, as the Germans began the occupation of Ukraine of the territory.

The organization of Ukrainian nationalists had several branches, the most famous was under the leadership of Stefan Bandera. At that time, the party was very radical, as Bandera's ideology was totalitarian, ethnocentric and xenophobic. His personal experience of the cooperation with Nazi Germany, although short-lived, and above all participation of some of the Ukrainian nationalists in the massacres of Jews, is a black stain on Ukrainian society and on Ukrainian historical memory.

The party still exists, in the last presidential election they had a common candidate with several right-wing parties, that is the already mentioned Košulinski, but they completely failed. The party has changed several times in the meantime, and their main slogan is that they will win Ukrainian independence or die in battle.

But the red-black flag now has a significantly wider meaning during the war and is a symbol of Ukraine's struggle for independence, so it is used even by people who have nothing to do with Ukrainian nationalists, nor do they vote for such parties. However, its use is not so widespread that most Ukrainian people would identify with it.

### **But also others Nazi symbols can be seen on the soldiers, such as the black sun and the symbol of the SS (Waffen-SS) combat unit.**

No one denies the existence of far-right extremists in Ukraine, but photographs of individuals do not represent the whole Ukrainian society. Whether a society is Nazi or not, this is not revealed by the symbols on individuals, but by the ideology of the society and leading politicians.

For example, after the first Russian occupation in 2014, Mariupol was liberated by the Azov Battalion, which has a reputation outside of Ukraine as a Nazi battalion, but the Jewish and Muslim communities there were never victims of hatred. Mariupol is a port city, it has always had a lot of foreigners, but during the time of Ukrainian control, this city was peaceful and all minorities and foreigners lived without any problems. At most, both synagogues in the city were destroyed by the Russian army after this year's re-occupation.

### **Is it even possible to separate the Nazi ideology and the Azov battalion?**

The Azov battalion was made up of three different groups. The main group was represented by Andrej Biletski and his assistants, the second group was football hooligans who are closely

connected with the Nazi subculture in the entire Eastern European area, and the third group was formed during the Maidan revolution, which previously had no connections with the extreme right.

The founders of the Azov battalion are definitely very problematic. Biletski and his assistants have a strong Nazi mentality, he was also a member of the National Assembly for five years, and his appearances were always extreme and radical. In addition to Biletski, Israeli citizen Nathan Khazin was also there from the beginning, which was a really strange and controversial connection. Initially, Biletski had the strongest influence in the battalion, as he had the motive to create an extreme right-wing unit from the beginning.

From the beginning, Azov was also part of the Ministry of the Interior, initially as a special unit of the police and later of the army. Biletski then soon went into politics, so he left the Azov battalion after only five months. When he became a deputy, he wanted to maintain his influence over the battalion and build his popularity on heroic symbolism, especially after the liberation of Mariupol in 2014, but he was never successful in political self-realization. In reality, he is a political loser. Later, he tried to establish a social movement of Azov for political action, where he wanted to include Azov veterans, but this was only a very bad advertisement for the current fighters in the battalion. Especially after 2017, when the new leadership of the Azon battalion took a step away from the old neo-Nazi connections, as the battalion today has very little in common with the battalion from 2014. Denis Prokopenko, the last commander of Azov, for example, really does not have any far-right background.

**Why such a battalion does even exist? Who can become part of Azov? Why there is not just a regular Ukrainian army?**

The main reason for the creation of the battalion was the Russian aggression that began in 2014. The battalion became one of the many volunteer units, where everyone came who wanted to defend Ukrainian state sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence itself. The battalion was subordinate to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, not subordinate to the Ministry of Defense, but in a broad sense, like all units of the National Guard, the detachment was part of the armed forces of Ukraine. The battalion has never been a self-governing independent "militia".

**Why was Biletski honored with Order For Courage? Would not be more normal that country doesn't reward such people?**

Because Biletski definitely deserved this order. Of course, he was not awarded for political views. The political views that he previously professed do not matter at all in this context. Such awards are not given for political views. The liberation of Mariupol and the ensuing battles for Shyrokyne were important steps in Ukraine's defense against Russian aggression, and there is no doubt that those who designed and carried out these operations deserved to be rewarded.

**And recently a Nazi cell was discovered in Italy (nearby Slovenia) and they had the same symbolism like Ukrainian Nacis. Police said that they are connected. And again - many people used this news to say how Ukraine is a nazi state.**

I have heard a little bit about the neo-Nazi group which was arrested in Italy; they allegedly suspect in preparation of a terrorist act even. It's worth to mention that in Ukraine itself there were no Far Right terrorism for decades; the last case I remember has taken place in 2004. Therefore, I don't think there is any ground for claims about the "Ukrainian export" of the Far Right terrorism in this case. Anyway, come on - the ruling party in Italy has neo-fascist background literally. Is it Ukraine a Nazi state really in this case? ;)

**We have already talked about Bandera and his participation in the massacre of Jews. Why are streets and squares named after such a man in Ukraine?**

Due to the same context as the flag - it is a symbolic man in the fight for Ukrainian independence. Bandera is certainly a very controversial figure, his cooperation with Nazi Germany is a dark period of Ukrainian history, but this is only part of his life story. Later, he too was imprisoned in a concentration camp, and his brother also died in the camp. After World War II, he regained his status as a leading Ukrainian nationalist, but was soon assassinated by a Soviet spy.

He has always been a great enemy of the Soviets, so the Soviets have always tried very hard to emphasize only his cooperation with Germany, as if this was the only thing he did in his political career, and at the same time they want to show that the struggle for Ukrainian independence is associated with Nazism. Stepan Bandera is now a symbol on both sides; in Ukraine for independence and in Russia for a Nazi who fought for the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

They have a similar case in Israel. In Jerusalem, one of the streets is named after Abraham Stern, although he wanted to be associated with Hitler in his time. Stern was a far-right Zionist from the days of British control of Palestine, and as the leader of a terrorist and radical group, he was convinced that German anti-Semitism was good for the Zionist movement. He thought that even more Jews from Germany could come to Palestine, at the same time he saw in Germany a good ally against the common enemy - Great Britain. He later went to Beirut to meet with representatives of Nazi Germany, but was soon killed by representatives of the British security services. Although he wanted to work with Hitler, a street in Jerusalem is named in his honor, because he is valued as a fighter for the independence of Israel. At least in this context, Bandera is the same example.

**Same already said also president Zelensky. However, in any case, for a healthier development of society, wouldn't it be better if Ukraine did not celebrate such people?**

That Bandera is one of the symbols for Ukrainian independence does not seem problematic to me at all. Especially since it is a country that has been threatened from various directions throughout its history. For a country that has suffered for its independence for so long, it is to be expected that a certain part of society glorifies such people, but he is by no means the mass hero of all Ukrainian people, as Russia and its supporters want to portray him. A few monuments and streets in honor of Bandera do not pose any threat to the development of Ukrainian society. But this does not mean that I am also his supporter, quite the contrary. I don't think it's a good example to glorify Ukrainian history.

**What role did the extreme right-wing have during the Maidan revolution. Even then we saw some Nazi symbols.**

They were visible because of the government media, as it was in the interest of the then government to present the Maidan as an extreme right-wing movement. The Russian media did the same, and they were even more successful in this propaganda.

No one denies that extreme rightists also participated in the Maidan, but a few hundred extreme rightists are completely insignificant compared to the two million people who were at the protests. In Kiev alone, there were a million people at the protests at one time! Anyone who attributes extreme rightism to the Maidan is simply repeating Russian propaganda without any context.

**The tragedy in Odessa, when 46 representatives of the Russian minority died in clashes and a fire, has the same sign.**

The tragedy in Odessa began with an attack by pro-Russian supporters on pro-Maidan supporters. When the fighting started, the police was quite passive, so there are theories that they were connected to pro-Russian supporters. Although the pro-Russian protesters also used firearms, the pro-Maidan protesters did not disperse, as there were significantly more of them. The pro-Russian protesters therefore took refuge in a multi-storey building, Molotov cocktails started flying in different directions, and the building caught fire and most of the people died in the fire.

But I don't know what this has to do with the Ukrainian extreme right? Yes, there were also extreme right-wingers in the crowd, especially since football hooligans joined it after the match, but there were also extreme right-wingers among the pro-Russian protesters, but none of that is essential, as it is about significantly broader background. The same protest was held that day in Donetsk, Kharkiv and Luhansk, where pro-Maidan supporters were also attacked by pro-Russian supporters.

**Very often we can hear the explanation that this particular case in Odessa show us the attitude of Ukrainians towards the Russian minority.**

Come on. In this case, who is Ukrainian and who is a Russian minority? After all, all the Pro-Maidan protesters were also Russian-speaking, because Odessa is a Russian-speaking city. The only difference is that these are people who want to preserve Ukrainian independence and opposed the then Russian occupation of Crimea and Donbass. Everything else is just repeated Russian propaganda.

**And they also say that Russian language is forbidden in Ukraine.**

Of course, it is not banned, but the process of Ukrainization has been going on for several years so that Ukrainian has more influence in the public sphere, but none of this means that Russian is banned. Just some examples of why it goes; if you have a publishing house in Ukraine, by law you have to publish more books in Ukrainian than in Russian. And if you have a website registered in Ukraine, the first page must be in Ukrainian, but then you can have versions in Russian, English, Chinese or any language you want. This is the most problematic article, because I also do not agree that the state interferes in private property and determines in which language you must have the initial website.

But is it really so strange if Ukraine wants to give more validity to Ukrainian? At most, it is about eliminating the colonial history of the Soviet Union in Ukraine, and the regime in the Kremlin now wants to turn the language change to its advantage. But again - none of this means that people should not speak Russian. After all, even the state Ukrainian television still broadcasts in Russian! Or the case of Alexei Arestovich, Volodymyr Zelensky's personal adviser, when every evening he conducts an extremely popular video interview with Russian lawyer Marko Feygin and they analyze the events of the war - in Russian.

**If until now we talked about Nazi symbols in the Ukrainian army and special battalions, it is no different in the Russian army. There are also plenty of photos and videos of Russian soldiers worshiping Nazi ideology, they have Wagner Group ...**

In the Russian army, there are even more such individuals with Nazi symbols, tattoos and flags, and they also cause more crimes against all minorities, but the peculiarity of Russia is that it does not have free political action. If in Ukraine it is possible for even extreme right-wingers to realize themselves in politics and participate in elections, in Russia everything is under the control of the secret services and the Kremlin. That is why extreme right-wing groups are not in the public eye, but are under control by the secret police for war purposes, as they are mostly men who like violence, torture and have no qualms about killing, which the Russian government has enabled them to do in

the war in Ukraine.

But even Russian individuals with Nazi symbols, tattoos and patches are unimportant in the whole story. In everything that we are talking about, the only real big problem is official Russian policy. Just look at what the most important Russian politicians are constantly saying and publishing. Vladimir Putin says that Ukraine is not a real country and that the Ukrainian nation does not exist. Practically every post by Dimitri Medvedev is extreme right-wing, even fascist, full of homophobia, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and direct calls for violence. We see a lot of this even with Sergey Lavrov, not to mention all the state officials who appear on television every day, when they no longer even say that Ukrainians are Nazis, but they say that Ukrainians are religious enemies, Satanists, zombies... Such statements are everywhere else in Europe just at political marginal, but in Russia the most important politicians say this all the time on state television.

Instead of counting which Ukrainian or Russian soldier are wearing a Nazi symbol, we should therefore look at what the official state ideology is and what the most important politicians in the country are saying.

**What we can say about Russians sign Z? Is this new age Naci symbol? What does it represent?**

I don't think it's correct to interpret this symbol as Nazi. However, it is a symbol of aggressive Russian imperialism, and it is a symbol of this particular genocidal war against the Ukrainian nation. Certainly, the symbolism that incites mass murder today is much more dangerous than the symbolism associated with mass murder almost a century ago.

**Many also forget that it was Putin who financed the far-right in Italy, Hungary, France...**

Exactly like that.

**Why do you think that many people are more disturbed by the image of Bandera on a Ukrainian soldier than Putin's speech that Ukraine is not a real country?**

I think it's three different levels. The first is Russian propaganda, which by no means started this year, not even in 2014, but much earlier. A more significant change began already in 2004 after the Orange Revolution, for which the Kremlin invested a lot of money and it is paying off. A good example is precisely Bandera, because outside of Ukraine they only know about him that he was a collaborator of the German Nazis, but not at all that he later rebelled against the Germans himself, that he was imprisoned in a concentration camp and that his family members died because of Nazism.

The second level is that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has put the entire European society and politics in an uncomfortable position. The sense of stability has been greatly shaken, so people want an end to the war and everything as before, while they don't even care too much about the consequences for Ukraine. They also listen to propaganda about Ukrainian nationalism, which is an excellent excuse to do nothing. The result is that an artificial debate is being created, saying that Russia is right and that the Ukrainian government is to blame for persecuting the Russian minority, although reality in the war shows us that these are only Russian excuses.

And the third level is the obsession with the United States of America. There is a strong anti-American feeling in China, India, Iran, Turkey and some Latin and African countries, so the Ukrainians are to blame for many just because they are supported by the Americans in this war, even though we Ukrainians have nothing to do with American actions elsewhere in the world.

And so we come to the absurdity that soldiers' bracelets and tattoos are more important than the massacres in Buča, Mariupol and thousands of civilians killed in just a few months.

**But even for Buča there are still people who claim that it is Ukrainian and Western propaganda and that film actors were lying on the side of the road.**

In all these dilemmas, who is telling the truth, there is a big difference between Ukraine and Russia - international investigators have access to Ukraine, but not to Russia. Foreign experts also conducted an investigation in Buča, so this is not something that Ukraine would just announce and then deny access to the crime scene. The UN human rights monitoring mission is present everywhere in the territory under Ukrainian control, but has absolutely no access to areas controlled by Russia. For example, they cannot get to Mariupol at the moment. They also have access to Russian soldiers in Ukrainian captivity and no access to Ukrainian soldiers in Russian prisons. There is a huge difference between what we know about what is happening in the territory under Ukrainian control and what is happening in the territory under Russian control. These are two completely different realities.

**But Russian side does not say much differently than Ukraine - that it defends itself against the threat of the West and that it protects the Russian minority in Ukraine in the Donbass.**

The chronology of events is quite clear. Russian aggression began with the annexation of Crimea without any referendums. They simply took the foreign territory, and the Ukrainian side did not even react at first. Then the Russians came to Donbas, but it was more difficult there, so they had to use their proxy military units, when Russian soldiers pretended to be unofficial fighters, and only then the Ukrainian government launched an anti-terrorist operation. So it is clear who took the first step - Russia with the unilateral annexation of Crimea. What happened in Donbass and also in Odesa is only the result of Russian military intervention in another sovereign state.

**Why did the agreements in Minsk fail?**

The problem is that no one had any real intention to implement the agreements in Minsk, which is blame for both Ukraine and Russia. The bottom line is that there was no program how to implement the agreement in the first place, as they did not set any chronological. They agreed to hold independent elections in Donetsk and Lugansk and to leave the territory of all foreign military forces, but no one decided which would come first - the departure of the foreign army or the elections.

Clearly, Ukraine wanted the Russian army to leave first, and Russia wanted the elections first. Time has shown that the only purpose of the agreements in Minsk was to freeze the conflict, which they succeeded in their own way, as the violence decreased significantly and the border also became stable, but everything collapsed again when the Russian army launched a complete military offensive. It is quite clear that the blame is completely asymmetrical.

**And if we were just talking about right wing in Ukraine, what is situation with the left wing? Who is their leader, what they advocate, who are most powerful parties?**

Leftist groups are experiencing a systemic crisis in Ukraine. A significant part of the parties on the left supported the Russian invasion in 2014, so they lost their legitimacy in the eyes of society. In addition, parties that are directly associated with the criminal Soviet communist regime and its ideology were banned several years ago, as well as parties associated with Nazi ideology. There are no influential left parties in Ukraine now.

## **What kind of politician is Volodymyr Zelensky? What ideology does he advocate?**

He had no political background before becoming a politician. He certainly has extremely liberal views on society, from economics to religious issues. I am not his supporter, I will always be quite critical of his actions, but at least during the war I started to respect him. He proved that he is a strong leader in difficult times, although certain authoritarian trends are visible, which will be especially problematic after the war.

## **What's bothering you about Zelensky?**

He entered in politics with great personal ambitions, but without a real vision of how to develop the country. Several important issues were raised in 2019, Zelenski had the will, but not the right skills and knowledge about the economy, diplomacy and the military. He didn't even have a good team and a plan to take a step forward. He enjoyed popularity above all, so he said what the people liked to listen to. That is why he was not effective in many ways, he was without a real plan even during the pandemic, which is why I am surprised how well, decisively and stably he managed during the war.

## **And how would you describe Putin?**

He is ruling the Russia for more than twenty years, and he became the leader of Russia through the war. The second Chechen war is the reason Putin became president. The terrorist attacks at the time were orchestrated by Putin and the FSB secret service, which is not a conspiracy theory. He literally participated in the removal of opposition politicians and journalists, so the political opposition practically has no more validity. He landed in a bubble and no longer has real contact with reality. He wants to go down in the history books, the same as Peter the Great, to be remembered for restoring the great Russian Empire. And he will not stop in his desires.

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**P.S.**

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