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NBC's Richard Engel promotes Ukraine's neo-Nazi Azov Battalion

In a news broadcast Monday evening, NBC's chief foreign policy correspondent Richard Engel told viewers how "some communities" in Ukraine are preparing for a war with Russia by "taking matters into their own hands."

The report showed Ukrainian soldiers delivering "basic training for the whole family", "first aid" and "weapons training" to a small group of Mariupol residents, including children and the elderly. One of them, 79-year-old Valentyna Konstantynovska, wielding an AK-47, was made the face of "Ukrainian resistance" by the world's newspapers.

Engel left out of his account the fact that the military formation providing Konstantynovska's training was the neo-Nazi Azov Battalion, clearly identifiable by their *Wolfsangel* insignia used by Hitler's SS in the Second World War.



A Ukrainian soldier fires an NLAW anti-tank weapon during an exercise in the Joint Forces Operation, in the Donetsk region, eastern Ukraine, Tuesday, February 15, 2022. (AP Photo/Vadim Ghirda)

The concealed promotion of fascist militias says more about the US-led war drive against Russia over Ukraine than a hundred lying press conferences. Any conflict would not be a war for “democracy” or “self-determination” but a bloodbath of the Russian and Ukrainian working class, designed to dismantle Russia. Far-right forces built up over years with US support would be centrally involved.

The Azov Battalion was founded by the anti-Semite Andriy Biletsky in 2014. It incorporated many members of Biletsky’s former ultranationalist, white supremacist organisations, Patriot of Ukraine and the Social-National Assembly. These tendencies trace their political roots back to the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), headed by Stepan Bandera, and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA).

During World War II, the OUN and the UPA allied with Nazi Germany against the Soviet Union and carried out massacres of tens of thousands of Jews, Poles and Ukrainians sympathetic to the Soviet Union. After the war, both US and British intelligence services lent support to Bandera and the UPA.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, scores of far-right organisations sprang up in Ukraine, as in all the former Soviet states, drawing on this filthy anti-communist heritage and supported by the imperialist powers. The Viktor Yushchenko government, installed by the US-backed “Orange Revolution” in 2004, declared Bandera a national hero, honoured OUN and UPA fighters and heavily promoted the OUN successor organisation, the Congress of Ukrainian Nationalists, and the neo-Nazi Svoboda party.

During the “Euromaidan” events of 2013-14, then US Undersecretary of State for Europe and Asia Victoria Nuland admitted that Washington spent \$5 billion on Ukraine since the 1990s, promoting “democratic skills ... civic participation and good governance”—that is, bankrolling any and every political force conducive to US interests.

The Ukrainian far and fascistic right was then mobilised in 2013-14 to overthrow the more pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich. The SNA and the Patriot of Ukraine, together

with Svoboda and other far-right organisations gathered in the Right Sector umbrella group, played the key role in transforming amorphous anti-government protests into violent confrontations and ultimately a coup.

Substantial evidence suggests snipers who shot protestors dead were organised by the far-right opposition to inflame the situation.

Yanukovich fled the country on February 21, and the new government swiftly integrated its fascist midwives into the security structures of the state. Svoboda received several key posts, including Secretary of the National Security and Defence Council for party co-founder Andriy Parubiy; Vice Prime Minister for Oleksandr Sych; Prosecutor-General for Oleh Makhnitskyi and Minister of Education for Serhiy Kvit.

Right Sector leader Dmytro Yarosh was offered the position of Parubiy's deputy but rejected it. He later became an advisor to the commander of Ukraine's armed forces, Viktor Muzhenko.

In April 2014, this far-right government authorized the creation of volunteer paramilitary formations to crush resistance in the rest of the country. The Azov Battalion was formed and quickly involved in multiple bloody clashes with pro-Russian separatists in Mariupol, Marinka, Ilovaisk and Novoazovsk. It was incorporated into the National Guard of Ukraine in November 2014.



Emblem of the Azov Battalion

In 2015-2016, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights connected Azov with war crimes including mass looting, unlawful detention and torture.

Since Yanukovich's ouster, the US and its allies have ensured that the Ukrainian regime, particularly its far-right paramilitaries, remain a significant and threatening force. Billions of dollars were spent supporting the government and supplying and training its armed forces.

In April 2015, nearly 300 members of the US 173rd Airborne Brigade were sent to Ukraine to train Ukrainian soldiers, including members of the Azov Battalion. They were joined by British, Canadian and Polish soldiers in Operation Fearless Guardian.

That December, President Barack Obama signed into law the 2016 Consolidated Appropriations Act, deliberately omitting an amendment reading, “None of the funds made available by this Act may be used to provide arms, training, or other assistance to the Azov Battalion.” It had been passed unanimously by the House of Representatives but not sent to the Senate after pressure from the Pentagon.

With the war drive against Russia again in full swing, the Azov fascists are now dutifully presented on America’s TV screens as the providers of “basic training for the whole family”.

Two essential facts of the Ukraine crisis are underscored by Engel’s report.

First, that Ukraine is being used as a breeding ground for fascist anti-Russian forces, potential provocateurs of a military confrontation in the Donbass, Crimea or across the Russian border. Azov’s founder and then commander Biletsky denounced the September 2014 ceasefire with Donbass separatists, saying, “If it was a tactical move there is nothing wrong with it... if it’s an attempt to reach an agreement concerning Ukrainian soil with separatists then obviously it’s a betrayal.”

Second, not a single word or image presented by the corporate media in the imperialist countries can be believed. Its journalists are so embedded in the military-security apparatus and foreign policy establishment, especially in the United States, that they serve as a conduit for a state psy-ops operation levelled against the population.

The critical task for the international working class is to consciously reject the propaganda of its governments and take an independent political stand. It can do so by adopting the internationalist, socialist programme opposed to the imperialist powers war plans and the right-wing nationalist governments of Ukraine and Russia outlined every day by the *World Socialist Web Site*.

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