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Ukraine's neo-Nazi Azov Battalion attempts rebranding

Following the surrender of hundreds of its members to Russian forces in the city of Mariupol, Ukraine's Azov Battalion has undertaken a PR rebranding effort to distance itself from its neo-Nazi background by introducing a new chevron which Azov refers to as "Three Swords," or a golden trident. The symbol will be used by the newly created Azov Special Forces Unit based in Kharkov.

The "Three Swords" refers specifically to a monument installed at the Azov Regiment's base in Mariupol. Oleksyi Reins, a member of the Azov Battalion described it as a "symbol of military glory and promise of revenge on its enemies."

Previously, Azov forces used a Nazi-linked Wolfsangel symbol that Azov claims represents the "idea of the nation," and which unites the letters "I" and "N" in old cyrillic script. In reality, the insignia is a blatant copy of the Wolfsangel symbol, which was widely used by various Nazi military formations, including several SS divisions that committed massacres during World War II.



Azov Battalion fighters with Nazi flag (WikiCommons)

While Mariupol was the main headquarters of the original Azov Battalion, various forces operating under the Azov umbrella exist in several other major Ukrainian cities, namely Kharkov and Kiev.

The logo swap was first reported widely in English by *The Times* in an article entitled “Azov Battalion drops neo-Nazi symbol exploited by Russian propagandists,” suggesting the use of neo-Nazi imagery by a Western-backed military organization is only of note due to ubiquitous “Russian disinformation.”

The article tried to deny that the Ukrainian government is attempting any conspicuous rebranding effort by pointing out that the new logo was unveiled for the Azov Special Forces Kharkov and is supposedly separate from the Azov Battalion formerly based in Mariupol.

However, in reality, as Azov member Oleksyi Reins acknowledged, Azov Special Forces Kharkov was “founded by veterans of the Azov Battalion.”

Furthermore, during the unveiling of the new “Three Swords” logo in Kharkov, the commander of the new unit, Maksym Zhorin, stated, “On the same principles and ideological basis as the legendary Azov Battalion, we form new divisions. Every day they become more numerous and professional.”

According to the Ukrainian government, the supposedly new “Azov” was formed as part of the Territorial Defense Forces on February 24, 2022—the day of the Russian invasion of Ukraine—and is now part of the Ukrainian Special Forces.

The various shifts in Azov’s naming, logos and official status within the Ukrainian state are an obvious attempt to obfuscate its neo-Nazi ties.

These efforts are no doubt coordinated with Washington as part of an attempt at “damage control” amid growing suspicion and wariness about Western propaganda on the war in Ukraine and the “democratic” pretenses of the imperialist powers, in particular. The imperialist powers, with the US taking the lead, have been funding these neo-Nazi militias with billions of dollars as COVID-relief measures have been scrapped and inflation at home is tearing away at basic living standards.

As for Azov’s history and ideology, it is clearly a fascist organization that traces its heritage back both to Nazism and far-right Ukrainian nationalist organizations such as Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN-B) and the Ukrainian Insurgency Army (UPA), which were responsible for the massacres of tens of thousands of Jews, Poles as well as Ukrainians during World War II.

Its founder Andriy Biletsky, previously the leader of the fascist paramilitary Patriot of Ukraine organization, is an outright white supremacist who in 2010 stated that the mission of Ukraine is to “lead the white races of the world in a final crusade ... against Semite-led *Untermenschen*[subhumans].”

In 2014, far-right thugs, including many future members of Azov, helped carry out a US-backed coup against the elected, pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich. The Azov Battalion was formed right after the coup. Following the outbreak of civil war in the eastern Donbass region, it was systematically built up and supported with military aid and training primarily coming from the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom.

In November of 2014, with the official Ukrainian Army in shambles and plagued by mass desertions, Azov was incorporated into the newly created National Guard of Ukraine. In the following years, Ukraine received billions in funding and training from Western

military officers and played an essential role in carrying out the war against pro-Russian separatists in the east, often with notoriously brutal tactics.

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

Despite its minimal electoral support within Ukraine, Azov became so powerful within the Ukrainian state that in October 2019 Azov effectively shut down the recently elected President Volodymyr Zelensky's initial attempts to withdraw Ukrainian forces from the frontlines in the Donbass and implement the 2015 Minsk peace accords.

During a visit to the demarcation line near the village of Zolotoye, Zelensky was confronted by Azov veterans who warned him against withdrawing troops and continuing the peace process as outlined by the Minsk accords. Azov's leader, Biletsky ominously threatened at the time, "If the President and the Government do not fulfill their direct duty to protect every inch of the Ukrainian land, then we, the volunteer veterans, will do it again."

Zelensky, originally elected in 2019 due to widespread disillusionment with the war and widespread poverty, would subsequently go on to adopt increasingly pro-war nationalist policies in agreement with Washington and the far-right, helping create the conditions that led to the current disastrous war that has already killed tens of thousands and ruined the lives of millions.

Following the initial Russian invasion of Ukraine in February, Azov soldiers were shown carrying out war crimes using cruel tactics in line with their neo-Nazi ideology and history.

Despite a massive propaganda campaign aimed at legitimizing the Azov Battalion in the Western media, more and more reports have surfaced, including in the bourgeois media, that clearly show Azov's fascist orientation, and explode the "democratic" pretenses of imperialist propaganda over the war.

In Mariupol, civilians have accused Azov forces of deliberately shooting at fleeing cars and kidnapping residents in order to have them serve as human shields while they bunkered within the Azovstal plant and hid from Russian forces.

According to the French newspaper *Le Monde*, in a video recently shared on social media, Azov members can be identified shooting the knees of defenseless Russian soldiers. Former French soldier Adrien Bocquet, who traveled to Ukraine to serve as a volunteer medic with the Azov Battalion in Kiev and then Lviv, has said that he witnessed Azov troops shelling civilian areas in Bucha, where Russian forces have been accused of killing ordinary people.

Kiev's half-hearted efforts to rebrand Azov make clear that the Ukrainian government will continue to heavily rely on these fascist forces as it functions as a proxy for an ever more direct war by the imperialist powers with Russia.

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