

WORLD

# The Azov Battalion: How Putin built a false premise for a war against "Nazis" in Ukraine

March 22, 2022 / 1:02 PM EDT / CBS News



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line on February 24, his "special operation" to liberate Russia's men to "neo-Nazis." But the premise military is carefully avoiding ty on the ground in cities like

The southern port has been under siege by Russian forces for weeks, with officials and aid groups saying food, water, and electricity have all been cut to thousands of people still trapped there. Ukrainian authorities say at least 2,300 civilians have been killed in Mariupol alone, with some buried in mass graves amid the relentless shelling.

Still, Moscow sticks to its line: "Kyiv instructed the Nazi battalions in Mariupol to leave the city under the guise of civilians, including through humanitarian corridors," Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Igor Konashenkov said Monday.

"More than 130,000 people are still held by the nationalist battalions [in Mariupol]. People are being held hostage, they are simply not allowed out of the areas controlled by the Nazi battalions, threatened with executions and physical liquidation," Denis Pushilin, head of the Donetsk region, said a few hours

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**st to know**  
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ssian news reports about the war  
ative that Russia is "liberating"  
consistent focus on one extremist

AZOV Battalion.

Russian state TV anchors have worked around the clock to portray Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy – who is Jewish – as a leader of a neo-Nazi-leaning government infiltrated by the Azov group.



To Russian viewers with little or no access to alternative sources of information, it may indeed appear that Russia's soldiers are fighting hordes of Nazis who are using Ukrainians as "human shields" and committing atrocities against Ukraine's many Russian speakers.

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So how widespread are far-right sentiments in Ukraine, and how much influence does the Azov Battalion really have?

## What is the Azov Battalion?

"There are no Nazi battalions in Ukraine," said Ruslan Leviev, an analyst with the Conflict Intelligence Team, which tracks the Russian military in Ukraine.

"There is [the Azov] regiment... There are [estimated] several thousand people who are in this regiment. It is indeed a group where many members adhere to nationalist and far-right views," Leviev said. "But a lot of people also join it because it is one of the most prepared and fit-for-war units."

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part of the separatist insurgency in the time were woefully unprepared separatists started seizing swaths

Members of Ukraine's Azov regiment pray in Ukraine's second-biggest city of Kharkiv, March 11, 2022, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

SERGEY BOBOK/AFP/GETTY

The Azov Battalion stepped in. It was better-equipped and prepared to do much of the frontline fighting against the separatists. The unit has its roots in aggressive fan clubs that support regional soccer teams, known as "ultras," but as the fighting ramped up, they attracted various far-right activists, who often made no secret of their neo-Nazi sympathies.

The militia was founded by Andriy Biletsky, an ultra-nationalist political figure who

...ional-National Assembly (SNA),

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...rsial then-Minister of Interior ...nian oligarchs. The new

...n descent, who appeared to be ...n sovereignty in Donbas over its

In late 2014, Azov was expanded from a battalion into a regiment, and was officially embedded into the Ukrainian National Guard – an official law enforcement agency, but not part of Ukraine's national armed forces.

Civilian volunteers for a new group of Territorial Defense Units, set up by veterans of the Azov regiment, train with members of the regiment in a secret location in Dnipro, Ukraine, March 6, 2022.

ANDREA CARRUBBA/ANADOLU AGENCY/GETTY

On the wave of Azov's battlefield successes in Donbas, Biletsky won a seat in the Ukrainian parliament as an independent candidate in September 2014. That gave Moscow more ammunition to tar Ukraine's central government as sympathetic to Nazis. Biletsky was not

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...s, the United Nations human rights rights violations by both sides in the an buildings and locations... and Azov Battalion forces.

Off the battlefield, Azov became known for its presence on social media, where it regularly posted slickly produced videos of marches and other events.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it has pivoted to posting high-quality videos, often shot by drones and professional cameras, capturing both the devastation of Russia's aerial bombardment, and successful counterattacks on the invading Russian forces.

An aerial view shows an explosion and smoke rising from damaged residential buildings, amid Russia's invasion of Ukraine, in Mariupol, March 14, 2022, in a still image taken from drone video posted to social media by the "Azov Battalion."

AZOV REGIMENT PRESS SERVICE/REUTERS

The Kremlin has seized on the Azov origins of the content to push its narrative that Ukrainian forces are all neo-Nazi sympathizers.

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...e far in excess of the group's  
 ...ngton D.C.-based investigative  
 ...in a commentary for the Atlantic

...ave significantly damaged  
 ...ulnerable to hostile narratives  
 ...e concluded.

The Azov group's media presence, in particular, made it something of a magnet for far-right minded people abroad, Kuzmenko said, with foreign men seeking to join the militia to gain combat experience. In a [report for the investigative group Bellingcat](#), Kuzmenko and Ukrainian organizations found links between the Azov Battalion and white supremacist groups in the U.S.

Leviev said the militia's influence had declined in recent years, however, after its main backer Avakov was essentially forced to retire.

"Overall, the influence of various officials, including Avakov, outside of Azov, is very limited," Leviev said. "There were no Nazi battalions roaming around the streets and trying to embed into [the government] system, as the Kremlin is trying to portray."

"So if not for this war, this stage of the war, the far-right movement would have eventually vanished," he said.

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## War in Ukraine

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