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Azov Battalion

Azov Special Operations Detachment (Ukrainian: Окремий загін спеціального призначення «Азов», romanized: *Okremyi zahin spetsialnoho pryznachennia "Azov"*), often known as **Azov Detachment**, **Azov Regiment** (Ukrainian: Полк Азов, romanized: *Polk Azov*), or **Azov Battalion** (until September 2014), is a right-wing extremist^[1] and neo-Nazi^{[2][3][4]} unit of the National Guard of Ukraine^{[5][6][7]} based in Mariupol, in the Azov Sea coastal region.^[8] It has been fighting Russian separatist forces in the Donbas War. Azov initially formed as a volunteer militia in May 2014.^[9] It saw its first combat experience recapturing Mariupol from pro-Russian separatists in June 2014.^[5] On 12 November 2014, Azov was incorporated into the National Guard of Ukraine, and since then all members are contract soldiers serving in the National Guard.^[10]

In 2014, the regiment gained notoriety after allegations emerged of torture and war crimes, as well as neo-Nazi sympathies and usage of associated symbols by the regiment, as seen in their logo featuring the Wolfsangel, one of the original symbols used by the 2nd SS Panzer Division Das Reich. Representatives of the Azov Battalion say the symbol is an abbreviation for the slogan Ідея Нації (Ukrainian for "National Idea") and deny connection with Nazism.^[11] In 2014, a spokesman for the regiment said around 10–20% of the unit were neo-Nazis.^[12] In 2018, a provision in an appropriations bill passed by the United States Congress blocked military aid to Azov on the grounds of its white supremacist ideology; in 2015, a similar ban on aid to the group had been overturned by Congress.^{[2][3]} Members of the regiment come from 22 countries and are of various backgrounds.^{[13][14]}

In 2017, the size of the regiment was estimated at more than 2,500 members.^[15] The unit's first commander was far-right nationalist Andriy Biletsky, who led the neo-Nazi Social-National Assembly and Patriot of Ukraine.^{[16][17]} In its early days, Azov was a special police company of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, led by Volodymyr Shpara, the leader of the Vasylkiv, Kyiv, branch of Patriot of Ukraine and Right Sector.^{[18][19][20]}

In 2016, veterans of the regiment and members of a non-governmental organization named "Azov Civil Corps" created the political party National Corps.^[21]

Azov Special Operations Unit

Підрозділ спеціального призначення
«Азов»



Logo of the Azov Battalion

Active	5 May 2014 – present
Country	 Ukraine
Branch	 National Guard of Ukraine
Type	Infantry
Role	Gendarmerie , national security.
Size	Regiment
Garrison/HQ	Urzuf, Donetsk Oblast , Ukraine. Other HQs and detachments in Kyiv , Berdiansk and Mariupol
Colours	Blue and gold
Anniversaries	5 May
Engagements	War in Donbas <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Battle of Mariupol Battle in Shakhtarsk Raion Battle of Ilovaisk Battle of Novoazovsk Offensive on Mariupol

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Commanders

Current commander [Denys Prokopenko](#)

Current Chief of Staff [Ihor Klymenko](#)

Notable commanders **Former commanders**

- [Maksym Zhorin](#) (Aug 2016 – March 2017)
- [Ihor Mykhailenko](#) (October 2014 – August 2016)
- [Andriy Biletsky](#) (May–October 2014)

Others

[Dmytro Linko](#), [Ihor Mosiychuk](#), [Igor Tcherkass](#), [Vadym Troyan](#)



Azov volunteers

History

Special Tasks Patrol Police

The Azov Battalion has its roots in a group of [ultras](#) of [FC Metalist Kharkiv](#) named "Sect 82" (1982 is the year of the founding of the group).^[22] "Sect 82" was (at least until September 2013) allied with [FC Spartak Moscow Ultras](#).^[22] Late February 2014, during the 2014 Ukrainian crisis when a [separatist movement](#) was active in Kharkiv, "Sect 82" occupied the [Kharkiv Oblast regional administration building](#) in [Kharkiv](#) and served as a local "self-defense"-force.^[22] Soon, on the basis of "Sect 82" there was formed a [Special Tasks Patrol Police](#) company called "Eastern Corps".^[22]

On 13 April 2014 Minister of Internal Affairs [Arsen Avakov](#) issued a decree authorizing the creation of new paramilitary forces of up to 12,000 people.^[23] The Azov Battalion, using "Eastern Corps" as its backbone,^[22] was formed on 5 May 2014 in [Berdiansk](#)^[24] by a [white nationalist](#).^[25] Azov started as a unit of the Special Tasks Patrol Police (volunteer battalions regulated by the Interior Ministry).

Many members of [Patriot of Ukraine](#) joined the battalion.^[22] Among the early patrons of the battalion were a member of the [Verkhovna Rada](#) [Oleh Lyashko](#), and an ultra-nationalist [Dmytro Korchynsky](#) and businessman [Serhiy Taruta](#) and [Avakov](#).^{[26][22]} The battalion then received

training near Kyiv by instructors with experience in the Georgian Armed Forces.^[22] The battalion started in Mariupol where it was involved in combat,^[5] and was briefly relocated to Berdiansk.^[27]

On 10 June, the battalion dismissed deputy commander Yaroslav Honchar and distanced themselves from him after Honchar made criticizing statements about looting and debauchery in Azov battalion.^[28] Igor Mosiychuk became deputy commander.^[29]

In June 2014, Anton Herashchenko (an advisor to the Minister of Internal Affairs) said that it was planned that the Azov battalion would have a strength of 400 people, and the salary for volunteers would be 4,300 hryvnia (\$360)^[30] per month.^[29] Contract soldiers were paid 1,505 hryvnia per month.^[29]

On 11 August, Azov battalion, backed by Ukrainian paratroopers, captured Marinka from pro-Russian rebels and entered the suburbs of Donetsk clashing with Donetsk People's Republic fighters.^[31]

In early September 2014, the Azov battalion was engaged in the Second Battle of Mariupol.^[32] Regarding the ceasefire agreed on 5 September, Biletskiy stated: "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."^[33]

National Guard

In September 2014, the Azov battalion was expanded from a battalion to a regiment and enrolled into the National Guard of Ukraine.^{[24][34]} At this time, the unit worked to de-politicize itself: its far-right leadership left and founded the National Corps political party,^[35] which works with its associated activist organization, Azov Civil Corps.

At about this time it started receiving increased supplies of heavy arms.^[34] The Azov battalion received funding from the Minister of Internal Affairs of Ukraine and other sources (believed to be Ukrainian oligarchs).^[34] So whilst its volunteers were officially paid 6,000 hryvnia (\$316) per month, they really received around 10,000 hryvnia (\$526) per month.^[34] The national socialist "Patriot of Ukraine" websites were shut down or put under restricted access.^[34]

On 14 October, Azov Battalion servicemen took part in a march to commemorate the 72nd anniversary of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) in Kyiv organised by the Right Sector.^[36]

In the 26 October 2014 Ukrainian parliamentary election Biletsky, the battalion's commander, won a constituency seat (as an independent candidate) in Kyiv's Obolon Raion (Biletsky hails from Kharkiv) in the Ukrainian parliament.^{[37][38][39]} In his constituency Biletsky won with 33.75% of the votes; runner up Vadym Stoylar followed with 17.17%.^{[40][41]} In parliament Biletsky did not join any faction.^[42] Member of the battalion Oleh Petrenko is also an MP for Petro Poroshenko Bloc after winning a constituency seat in Cherkasy in the same election.^[43] In his constituency Petrenko won with 41.15% of the votes; runner up Valentyna Zhukovska followed with 23.65%.^{[40][44]}

On 31 October 2014, deputy commander of the Azov Battalion Vadym Troyan was appointed head of Kyiv Oblast (province) police (this police force has no jurisdiction over the city of Kyiv).^[45]

On 11 November 2014 the Azov Battalion was officially incorporated into the National Guard of Ukraine.^[24]

As of late March 2015, despite a second ceasefire agreement (Minsk II), the Azov Battalion continued to prepare for war, with the group's leader seeing the ceasefire as "appeasement".^[34] In March 2015 Interior Minister Arsen Avakov announced that the Azov Regiment would be among the first units to be trained by United States Army troops in their Operation Fearless Guardian training mission.^{[46][47]} US training however was withdrawn on 12 June 2015, as US House of Representatives passed an amendment blocking any aid (including arms and training) to the battalion due to its neo-Nazi background.^[48] After the vote Congressman John Conyers thanked the House, saying: "I am grateful that the House of Representatives unanimously passed my amendments last night to ensure that our military does not train members of the repulsive neo-Nazi Azov Battalion, along with my measures to keep the dangerous and easily trafficked MANPADs out of these unstable regions."^[47]

However, the amendment was later removed in November 2015, with *The Nation* reporting that the "House Defense Appropriations Committee came under pressure from the Pentagon to remove the Conyers-Yoho amendment from the text of the bill."^[49]

In August 2015, the Ukrainian government pulled all volunteer battalions, including the Azov Regiment, off the front lines around Mariupol, replacing them with regular military units.^[50] The Azov Regiment was moved to a base in Urzuf, in the former seaside villa of deposed Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, about 40 kilometers (25 miles) to the southwest of Mariupol.

Beginning in 2015, Azov has organised summer camps where children and teenagers receive combat training mixed with lectures on Ukrainian nationalism.^{[51][22]}

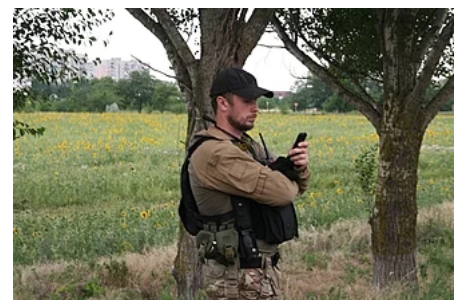
On 27 April 2016, 300 troops and light-armored vehicles from the regiment were assigned to Odessa to safeguard public order after Mikheil Saakashvili wrote in social media about a rash of pro-Russian "titushki" attacks on civilians.^[52]

Azov published a media release on its website on 20 November 2017 noting that, on 16 November, it had met with a foreign delegation of officers from the United States Armed Forces and Canadian Armed Forces.^[53]

In October 2019, members of the US House of Representatives from the Democratic Party requested that the Azov Battalion and two other far-right groups be classified as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the US State Department, citing recent acts of right-wing violence such as the Christchurch mosque shootings earlier that year. The request spurred protests by Azov's supporters in Ukraine.^{[54][55][56]}

Leadership and organisation

The regiment's first commander was Andriy Biletsky. Biletsky stayed out of the public spotlight working on expanding Azov to battalion size. In summer 2014, he took command of the unit. In August 2014, he was awarded a military decoration, "Order For Courage", by Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko, and promoted to lieutenant colonel of in the Interior Ministry's police forces.^[57] Because Biletsky was elected into the Ukrainian parliament in the 2014 Ukrainian parliamentary election he left the battalion in October 2016 (Ukrainian elected officials can not be in the military, nor the police).^{[16][17]}



Andriy Biletsky leads units of the battalion on a patrol near Mariupol in July 2014.

A 16 July 2014 report placed the Azov Battalion's strength at 300.^[6] An earlier report stated that on June 23 almost 600 volunteers, including women, took oaths to join the "Donbass" and "Azov" battalions.^[58] The unit included 900 volunteers as of March 2015.^[59]

The battalion was originally nicknamed the "Men in Black" or "Black Corps" (ukr.: "*Chorny Korpus*"), a counter to Russia's Little Green Men due to their use of all-black fatigues and masks when raiding pro-Russian checkpoints. The group was funded from its origin by Ihor Kolomoyskyi, Cypriot-Ukrainian billionaire business oligarch.^[60]

Current status

Ukraine decided to turn all volunteer battalions—both the Territorial Defence Battalions associated with the armed forces, and the Special Tasks Patrol Police of the interior ministry—into regular units of the Ukrainian Armed Forces and the National Guard, respectively. Azov is one of the latter. The Ukrainian government also opted to deploy only volunteer units to the Donbas front,^[61] pledging that conscripts would not be sent into combat.

In January 2015 Azov Battalion was officially upgraded to regiment and its structures took a definite shape. A mobilization center and a training facility was established in Kyiv, in former industrial complex "ATEK" for selection and examination; and the personnel, composed by volunteers from all over Ukraine, has to pass through a screening and vetting process, quite similar to army's mobilization procedures.^[62]

Recruits are then assigned to the combat units of the regiments, or to support and supply units, where they undertake intensive combat drills training. Reconnaissance and EOD units are considered the élite of "Azov" and are manned by most experienced personnel (typically, former Ukrainian Army special forces or similar).^[62]

Since 2015 the Battalion has been upgraded to regimental status and "Azov" is now officially called "Special Operations Detachment", with combat duties focused on reconnaissance, counter-reconnaissance, EOD disposal, interdiction and special weapons operations. The regiment, the only territorial defense unit of its size in the NGU, is organized into:

- Regimental HQ
- 1st Commando Battalion
- 2nd Commando Battalion (in formation stage)
- 5th Tank Battalion
- Field Artillery Battery
- Reconnaissance Company
- Security Company
- Engineer Company
- Maintenance Company
- Logistic Company
- Signal Platoon
- CBRN-defense Platoon
- 4th (Training) Battalion
 - Regimental Depot Kyiv
 - Regimental Depot Mariupol
 - Regimental Depot Berdiansk

Foreign membership

According to *The Daily Telegraph*, the Azov Battalion's extremist politics and professional English social media pages have attracted foreign fighters,^[31] including people from Brazil, Italy, the United Kingdom, France, the United States, Greece, Scandinavia,^{[6][31]} Spain, Slovakia, Czech Republic and Russia.^{[6][63][64]} About 50 Russian nationals are members of the Azov regiment.^[65] The group has used Facebook to recruit far-right individuals from other countries within Europe.^[66] In 2019, under Facebook's Dangerous Individuals and Organizations policy, support for the group was not allowed,^[67] although this was temporarily relaxed during the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine.^[68]

Around 20 Croatians joined the Azov Battalion in January 2015, ranging in age from 20 to 45.^{[69][70]} After Croatia's foreign minister Vesna Pusić confirmed that there are Croatian volunteers in Ukraine, the Russian Foreign Ministry called Croatia to withdraw its citizens from armed conflict. Pusić replied that Croatia opposes any involvement of Croatian citizens in the war, and stated that they went on their private initiative and that Croatia is working on bringing them home.^[71] Interior minister Ranko Ostojić said that Croatian volunteers are fighting on the side of the legitimate Ukrainian government and are not committing any kind of crime according to Croatian law.^[72]

In late 2016, Brazilian investigators uncovered an alleged plot to recruit Brazilian far-right activists for the Azov Battalion.^{[73][74]}

Members of the American neo-nazi terrorist group Atomwaffen Division have also joined the Azov Battalion.^{[75][76][77]}

According to Minsk Ceasefire Agreements, foreign fighters are not allowed to serve in Ukraine's military.^[78] Despite the Minsk Ceasefire Agreements, the regiment still has foreign fighters,^[79] including an ex-British army serviceman Chris Garrett and a 33-year-old former soldier of the Greek army and French Foreign Legion known by the *nom-de-guerre* of "The Greek".^[79]



Swedish Azov volunteers Mikael Skillt and "Mikola"

Human rights violations and war crimes

Reports published by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) have connected the Azov Battalion to war crimes such as mass looting, unlawful detention, and torture.^{[80][81]} An OHCHR report from March 2016 stated that the organisation had "collected detailed information about the conduct of hostilities by Ukrainian armed forces and the Azov regiment in and around Shyrokyne (31km east of Mariupol), from the summer of 2014 to date. Mass looting of civilian homes was documented, as well as targeting of civilian areas between September 2014 and February 2015."^[80]

Another OHCHR report documented an instance of rape and torture, writing: "A man with a mental disability was subject to cruel treatment, rape and other forms of sexual violence by 8 to 10 members of the 'Azov' and 'Donbas' (another Ukrainian battalion) battalions in August–September 2014. The victim's health subsequently deteriorated and he was hospitalized in a psychiatric hospital."^[81] A report from January 2015 stated that a Donetsk Republic supporter was detained and tortured with electricity and waterboarding, which resulted in his confessing spying for pro-Russian militants.^[81]

Ideology

Neo-Nazism

The Azov Battalion has been described as a far-right militia^[32] with connections to neo-Nazism, with members wearing neo-Nazi and SS symbols and regalia and expressing neo-Nazi views.^{[82][83]} The group's insignia features the Wolfsangel^{[51][84][83][85][86]} and the Black Sun,^{[84][87][88]} two neo-Nazi symbols.

Azov soldiers have been observed wearing Nazi-associated symbols on their uniforms.^[89] In 2014, the German ZDF television network showed images of Azov fighters wearing helmets with swastika symbols and "the SS runes of Hitler's infamous black-uniformed elite corps".^[90] In 2015, Marcin Ogdowski, a Polish war correspondent, gained access to one of Azov's bases located in the former holiday resort *Majak*; Azov fighters showed to him Nazi tattoos as well as Nazi emblems on their uniforms.^[91]

Shaun Walker writes in *The Guardian* that "many of [Azov's] members have links with neo-Nazi groups, and even those who laughed off the idea that they are neo-Nazis did not give the most convincing denials", citing swastika tattoos among the fighters and one who claimed to be a "national socialist".^[83] According to *The Daily Beast*, some of the group's members are "neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and avowed anti-Semites",^[55] and "numerous swastika tattoos of different members and their tendency to go into battle with swastikas or SS insignias drawn on their helmets make it very difficult for other members of the group to plausibly deny any neo-Nazi affiliations."^[92]

Lev Golinkin writes in *The Nation* that "Post-Maidan Ukraine is the world's only nation to have a neo-Nazi formation in its armed forces."^[93] Michael Colborne of *Foreign Policy* has called it "a dangerous neo-Nazi-friendly extremist movement" with "global ambitions", citing similarities between the group's ideology and symbolism and that of the 2019 Christchurch mosque shooter, along with efforts by the group to recruit American right-wing extremists.^[56]

A spokesman for the unit has said "only 10–20%" of its recruits are neo-Nazis, with one commander attributing neo-Nazi ideology to misguided youth.^[59] Members of the unit have stated that the inverted *Wolfsangel*, rather than connected to Nazism, represents the Ukrainian words for "united nation"^{[83][45]} or "national idea" (Ukrainian: *Ідея Нації*, *Ideya Natsii*).^{[83][86][a]}

British political scientist Richard Sakwa writes that Azov's founding member Andriy Biletsky, leader of the neo-Nazi Social-National Assembly (SNA) made statements about a "historic mission" to lead the "white races of the world in a final crusade for their survival ... a crusade against the Semite-led *Untermenschen*", an ideology he traces to the National Integralism of 1920s and 1930s.^[94] Political scientist Ivan Katchanovski has compared the group's ideology to that of Patriot of Ukraine, saying: "The SNA/PU [Patriot of Ukraine] advocates a neo-Nazi ideology along with ultranationalism and racism. The same applies to ... members of the Azov battalion and many football ultras and others who serve in this formation."^[95]



Emblem featuring a *Wolfsangel* and *Black Sun*, two symbols associated with Nazism

In June 2015, the Canadian defence minister declared that Canadian forces would not provide training or support to Azov Battalion.^[96] In 2018, the U.S. House of Representatives also passed a provision blocking any training of Azov members by American forces, citing its neo-Nazi connections. The House had previously passed amendments banning support of Azov between 2014 and 2017, but due to pressure from The Pentagon, the amendments were quietly lifted.^{[3][97][98]} This was protested by the Simon Wiesenthal Center which stated that lifting the ban highlighted the danger of Holocaust distortion in Ukraine.^[98]

Connection to antisemitism

More than 40 Israeli human rights activists signed a petition to stop arms sales to Ukraine arguing that Israel is selling military-style Tavor and Negev automatic weapons to the Ukrainian government knowing that some of these arms end up in the hands of the right-wing Azov militia.^[99]

Despite accusations that the group is antisemitic, some members of the Jewish community in Ukraine support and serve in the Azov Battalion. One of its most prominent members is Nathan Khazin, leader of the "Jewish hundreds" during the 2013 Euromaidan protests in Kyiv.^[100] In an interview, Andriy Biletsky explained that he regards Israel and Japan as role models for the development of Ukraine.^[101]

Slavic paganism

Most soldiers of Azov are followers of a Ukrainian nationalist type of Rodnovery (Slavic Native Faith), wherefrom they derive some of their symbolism (such as a variation of the swastika symbol *kolovrat*). They have also established Rodnover shrines for their religious rites, including one in Mariupol dedicated to Perun.^[102]

Azov movement

Azov Civil Corps

In spring of 2015, veterans of the Azov volunteer battalion created the core of a non-military non-governmental organization Azov Civil Corps (*Tsyvilnyi Korpus "Azov"*), for the purpose of "political and social struggle",^{[103][21]} associated with the National Corps political party. In 2016, members of Civil Corps Azov founded a social center "Cossack House" in Kyiv.

National Corps political party

In September 2016, founder and former commander of the Azov Battalion Andriy Biletsky said that he would be leading a new political party.^[24] In early October 2016, Biletsky stated that the new party would use neither names nor symbols of the Azov Battalion.^[104] On 14 October 2016, this political party called National Corps (*Natsionalnyi Korpus*) held its first congress.^{[21][105]} There delegates elected Biletsky to head the party for the next four years.^[21] National Corps is based on the national social organization "Patriot of Ukraine" (*Patriot Ukrainy*, before 2015 named "Civic Movement Honest Business", *Chesni Spravy*),^{[106][21]} which was already registered by the Ministry of Justice.^[21]

The party advocates expanding the powers of the President of Ukraine by granting him authority to be the Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine as well as the head of government.^[21] National Corps favors restoring Ukraine's nuclear power status and nationalizing enterprises which were government owned when Ukraine became independent in 1991.^[21] The party wants Ukraine to break all ties with Russia (diplomatic, trade and culture ties).^[21] It is against Ukraine joining the European Union and against Ukraine joining NATO.^[22] It wants to create the "Intermarium Union" with Baltic and Black Sea nations to include, among others, Ukraine, Belarus, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Czech Republic, and Slovakia.^{[21][22]} The party advocates expanding the right to bear arms and initiate public discussion about restoring capital punishment in Ukraine for treason and the embezzlement of government funds by officials in excessive amounts.^[21]

National Militia

In 2017, a paramilitary group called the National Militia (*Natsionalni Druzhyny*), closely linked to the Azov movement, was formed. Its stated aim is to assist law enforcement agencies, which is allowed under Ukrainian law, and it has conducted street patrols.^{[107][108]} In March 2019, its membership was reportedly "in the low thousands".^[109]

Notes

- a. The Ukrainian historic letter "N" was replaced with the Russian letter "H" for phoneme "n" with adopting of Civil script by Peter the Great in the beginning of 18th century.

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- 2017 TV report (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=meWM4lChqy4>) by Deutsche Welle
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