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Winning 'hearts' and PR war, but Ukraine has a "Nazi" problem that NATO and USA do not talk about

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Jinit Jain



Ukraine's neo-Nazi group Azov Battalion (Image Source: The Intercept)

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After failing to stop Russia from invading Ukraine, the western countries and their media outlets have unleashed a propaganda war that involves sharing old pictures from past conflicts to demonise Russia and lavishing praises on Ukrainian leadership for standing its ground against the invasion, seemingly to paper over their own inadequacies.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine came amidst heightened tensions between Moscow and NATO countries, with the former concerned about their precarious security apparatus as the latter mulled over its expansion in eastern Europe. Even as NATO and the US mount a propaganda blitz to counter Russia's invasion, they have turned a blind eye to a festering problem that seemed to have played a pivotal role in Putin's calculus to wage an armed conflict in Ukraine.

And that is Ukraine's lingering "Nazi" problem. Over the years, neo-Nazism ideology has not only taken root in the Ukrainian conscience but has also gained the Ukrainian government's imprimatur. This has naturally raised concerns in Moscow that was evident in the speech made by Putin days before Russia's military offence in Ukraine.

In his address to the Russian people on February 24, Putin justified his country's aggression against Ukraine as a peacekeeping mission and couched the forthcoming military operation by Russian

forces as “denazification” of Ukraine. “We will seek to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine and put to justice those that committed numerous bloody crimes against peaceful people, including Russian nationals,” Putin said while justifying a military incursion in neighbouring Ukraine.

But, the west, in their eagerness to wash off their hands from the current crisis in Ukraine, have sought to understate these Russian concerns and pin the blame entirely on the authoritarian and revisionist impulses of President Vladimir Putin. They argue that Putin is driven by his desire to correct the “historical wrongs”, which they attribute to his refusal to accept the dismemberment of the USSR and the corresponding loss of Russian prestige and power.

Putin, they contend, is filled with a single-minded zeal to remedy what he considers as unjust and historical wrong wrought upon his country by the western powers. However, that is a one-dimensional and somewhat prejudiced take on the ongoing crisis. What the NATO and the United States fail to highlight, either wittingly or unwittingly, is the creeping emergence of the neo-Nazi supporters in Ukraine, who do not baulk at using intimidation and even violence to advance their agendas, and who often do so with the implicit approval of government agencies.

One such neo-Nazi group that enjoys Ukrainian state patronage is the Azov Movement, one of the 30-odd privately-funded “volunteer battalions”, that does much of the frontline fighting with Ukraine’s army against the pro-Russian separatists in the country’s restive eastern region. The Azov is not just known for their reputation of being ruthless on the battlefield but also for espousing a militant ideology that wreaked havoc in Germany in the second world war.

Ukraine’s dalliance with anti-semitic and bigoted forces

Azov Special Operations Department or Azov Battalion, as it is commonly known, is a right-wing extremist and neo-Nazi unit of the National Guard of Ukraine. Formed in 2014 as a volunteer militia during the Odesa clashes, the Azov Battalion was soon incorporated into the National Guard of Ukraine, serving in the state capacity despite having allegiance to and drawing inspiration from the supremacist Nazi beliefs.



In fact, the Azov Battalion is a source of inspiration for white supremacists around the world. At the time of its formation in 2014, Andriy Biletsky, a veteran fascist and the founder of the volunteer group, stated that the mission of the group is to empower Ukraine to “lead the White Races of the world in a final crusade for their survival ... against the Semite-led Untermenschen.”



Azov Battalion soldiers holding the flag of their neo-Nazi organisation (Source: Foreign Policy)

The logo of the Azov Battalion had Nazi undertones, comprising of two emblems — the **Wolfsangel** and the **Sonnenrad** — characterised as neo-Nazi symbols by the Anti-Defamation League. Both these symbols—Wolfsangel and Sonnebrad—have been used extensively by hate groups in different parts of the United States, signifying the Ukrainian group’s impact in motivating supremacist and bigoted organisations around the world.

The bigotry harboured by the neo-Nazi group was in full glory recently when the National Guard of Ukraine’s Twitter account **published** a video tweet claiming that its Azov fighters coated their bullets with pig fat to be used against Chechen forces fighting from the Russian side. The actual tweet read “Azov fighters of the National Guard greased the bullets with lard against the Kadyrov orcs.”

Chechnya is a Russian republic located north of Georgia. Chechen forces are the military force in charge of Chechnya’s defence. The republic is not an independent entity and is subject to Russian laws and regulations. However, the use of lard was deliberate, aimed at hurting the religious sentiments of the people of Chechnya, the majority of whom are Muslims. Pig is considered taboo in Islam and Muslims are religiously ordained to not touch swine in any form.

Azov Battalion and anti-semitic groups in Ukraine: A menace for European neighbours

While the Ukrainian government nurtures extremist organisations like Azov Battalion, it is their European neighbours who have to bear the brunt of this neo-Nazi ideology that is rapidly spreading its claws across the globe. According to **Lower Class Magazine**, a leftist German



publication, Azov has a semi-underground corps called the “Misanthropic Division” that draws fresh blood among the ranks of neo-Nazi youth in France, Germany and Scandinavia. The new recruits are promised training with heavy and modern weaponry, including tanks, at Ukrainian camps alongside fascist fellow inductees.



Volunteers of far-right group Azov Battalion (Source: The Diplomat)

Reportedly, foreign Azov volunteers are motivated by the call of the “Reconquista”—a pursuit to place the eastern European nations under the rule of a white supremacist dictatorship, drawing inspiration from the Nazi Reichskommissariat rule that controlled Ukraine at the time of World War II. A raft of Azov volunteers in Ukraine harbour this dream of reestablishing Ukraine as a white supremacist nation that has under its control large tracts of land from neighbouring European nations.

White supremacist organisations such as Azov Battalion blossomed under the aegis of the US, Canada military

Even so, the United States government is partly to be blamed for the ominous rise of the neo-Nazi groups in Ukraine. Over the years, the cooperation between the Azov Battalion and the American Military has only grown deeper. In 2018, it was **reported** that Azov Battalion had received teams of American military advisors and high powered US-made weapons. In November 2017, a US military inspection team had also visited the Azov Battalion on the frontlines to deliberate on strengthening cooperation and providing logistical support in their military operations.

Recently, Democrat Senate member in the United States, Bob Menendez, introduced legislation that sought to grant Ukraine \$500 million for the purchase of arms and impose what he called “mother of all sanctions” on Russia should it dare to attack. However, what was striking was the **absence** of any mechanism to oversee if the weapons bought from the US aid would be used by white supremacist organisations like the Azov Battalion. The US legislators had no qualms with the arms they donated to Kyiv going into the hands of anti-semitic outfits like the Azov Battalion so long as they helped them in discouraging Russia from launching an attack into eastern Ukraine.





Nazi Hakenkreuz flag waved by a team of Ukraine's Azov Battalion fighters(Image Source: Twitter)

Another North American country, Canada, is too being **accused** of fostering neo-Nazis and war criminals in Ukraine. Earlier last year, many Jewish groups raised concerns regarding the involvement of Canadian troops in training neo-Nazis and war criminals from Ukraine. They pointed to a video that highlighted Ukrainian paratroopers singing a song to praise Stepan Bandera, an anti-Semite and Nazi collaborator whose organisation was linked to the murder of more than 100,000 Jews and Poles during the second world war.

A litany of human rights abuses has been listed against Azov and other neo-Nazi groups in Ukraine. Even the United Nations and the Human Rights Watch have accused Azov and similar other groups of committing atrocities in the pursuit of fulfilling their bigoted objectives. They are also known for sympathising with the Nazi collaborators, regularly staging torchlight marches for Nazis who wrecked unspeakable atrocities against Jews during World War II. Many of these neo-Nazis are also Holocaust deniers, alleging that the Holocaust was a construct fabricated by the Jews to keep in check white supremacy.

Several Jewish groups, including the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Simon Wiesenthal Center, the National Coalition Supporting Eurasian Jewry, Yad Vashem, and the World Jewish Congress, are among prominent organisations that have condemned Kyiv for rehabilitating Nazi collaborators—a distinct characteristic of the far-right movements in Europe.

The US and NATO papers over Ukraine's 'Nazi' problem to hide their own moral decadence

But partisans from around the world, who fall over themselves to denounce countries that do not align with their ideology, conveniently choose to gloss over evil on their own side. The western nations, who are otherwise swift and prompt in condemning anti-Semitism, look the other way, nay, they openly arm and encourage such fascist groups with neo-Nazi leanings, whom they treat as a proxy force to fight the threat posed to their hegemony.

For the west, white supremacist and neo-Nazi groups such as Azov Battalion are noble outfits, currently involved in buttressing their efforts to keep Russia under check. They do not consider Azov Battalion and groups similar to them as a global threat to democracy, peace and racial equity. They instead treat them as a stick to beat their opponents with, without dragging themselves into the ugly quagmire.



The lofty moral principles that the west often lays claim to, in its sanctimonious bid to project themselves as morally superior to their opponents, are after all not sacrosanct. They are extremely malleable, contingent upon the current aims and objectives of the west as witnessed in the current case of their support to neo-Nazi forces. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, however, threatened to expose the west for its moral decadence. It is to avoid this predicament that the United States and NATO glossed over Ukraine's dalliance with the neo-Nazis while simultaneously rustling up a propaganda blitzkrieg, flooding the internet with poignant images of conflict and aggrandising Ukrainian leadership's response to the unfolding crisis. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, without a doubt, is worthy of strongest condemnation, but that doesn't absolve the west from nurturing and fostering an ideology that was responsible for plunging the world into a war over 8 decades ago.

