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# Azov Battalion: Extreme Right-Wing Militarization and Hybrid Warfare

FEDERICO BORGONOVO

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## Abstract

This article analyzes the origins and features of the Azov Battalion. A hybrid weapon, which fight inside a multivariate hybrid conflict composed by a combination of urban warfare, propaganda, and politics. The Azov Battalion represent one of the clearest examples of the increasing complexity of warfare. Complexity and hybridization are due to the growing number and diversity of actors involved. The Russo-Ukrainian conflicts no longer remain local; instead, from 2014 to 2022 has increasingly attracted external actors, as right-wing extremists and extend to the Internet. This analysis, try to explain how Azov Battalion became such an effective weapon and what could be its outcome after the war. This aim was achieved by reconstructing the fundamental historical steps and then theorising the so-called Azov system. The latter is a model that synthesises Azov’s hybrid capabilities acquired through its diversification and attempts to illustrate the high degree of complexity of military systems fighting in hybrid contexts.

## Keywords

Azov, Hybrid, Ideology, Ukraine, Army, War, Extremist

## 1. The Unit's hybrid origin

The military unit known as Azov Battalion has its roots in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, even before it turned into open warfare. Already from its foundation, the Azov Battalion highlights a new dimension of armed mobilisation, with two distinct drivers contributing to its creation. The first driver is of an ideological nature, it is the sub-culture of the Ukrainian extreme right (also

distinguished by different sub-drivers) with anti-Russian ideology. The second is of a strategic nature and consists of the practice adopted by the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence since 2014 of organising its territorial defence through volunteer units, to fill the gaps in the regular army.<sup>1</sup> Both factors must then be considered within a hybrid warfare context that acts as an accelerator.

The ideological-cultural driver is the factor that contributed to the creation of a common cultural substratum on which the “**Azov subculture**” was formed. The initial cultural substratum, according to grey literature sources, seems to come from the convergence of two different extremist environments:<sup>2</sup> the ultras corner of the **Football Club Metalist Kharkiv** known as **Sect 82**, and members of the three ultranationalist parties **Patriot of Ukraine**, **Social National Assembly and Right Sector**.<sup>3</sup> The latter is the most important component as it will transmit, to what will be a fighting unit, its future leadership as well as much of the ideological and symbolic imprinting. The element that links the two components was the presence of members of both macro-groups at the **Euromaidan** protests in 2014. Although even before the anti-Russian protests the two communities were united by a strong nationalist spirit, the guerrilla experience laid the foundations for further convergence.<sup>4</sup> The neo-Nazi and supremacist component well rooted in the three mentioned parties merged with the esprit de corps and camaraderie of the *ultras* community.

The institutional driver, on the other hand, was found by analysing the operational shortcomings of the Ukrainian army and the government’s response to them. In March 2014, the first battalions of volunteers began to be formed to support the regular Ukrainian Army. On 13 April 2014, Interior Minister **Arsen Avakov** issued a decree authorising the creation of new paramilitary forces of up to 12,000 people, after which **Andriy Yevhenovych Biletsky** officially founded the Azov Battalion on 5 May. Returning to the April 2014 decree, we observe that the rationale behind this law is of fundamental importance. Indeed, at the beginning of the armed conflict in the Donbass, the Ukrainian army was suffering from several problems including demoralisation, lack of professionalism, corruption, lack of logistical support and endemic mutiny. The combination of these factors led the Ukrainian government, in particular

<sup>1</sup> Tetyana Malyarenko e David J. Galbreath, «Paramilitary Motivation in Ukraine: Beyond Integration and Abolition», *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16, n. 1 (2 gennaio 2016): 113-138, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2016.1148414>.

<sup>2</sup> Stanford University, Stanford, e California 94305, «MMP: Azov Battalion», consultato 13 aprile 2022, <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/azov-battalion>.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Clapp, «The Maidan Irregulars», 2022, 9.

<sup>4</sup> Rosaria Puglisi, «Heroes or Villains? Volunteer Battalions in Post-Maidan Ukraine», 2015, 20.

the Ministries of Defence and Interior, to increasingly rely on paramilitary units to conduct operations against Russian-backed rebels.

In the spring, Azov shifted its focus to eastern Ukraine, where pro-Russian protesters were beginning to seize government buildings and police stations. In May, when the pro-Russian protests turned into a full-scale Russian-backed insurgency, Azov was granted official status as a volunteer battalion and on May 6 took delivery of its first shipment of weapons. It also began to acquire foreign instructors: former soldiers from Sweden, France, Slovakia and Italy with experience in conflict zones. Azov's main target was Mariupol, a large industrial port on the Azov Sea that came under separatist control in May. On June 13, Azov stormed the rebel barricades and took control of the city centre after a six-hour battle.<sup>5</sup> Since then, its main role has been to protect Mariupol and patrol the Azov coast, helping to counter arms smuggling from Russia. Between August and September 2014, the battalion takes part in the defence of Mariupol victoriously opposing the militia of the separatist forces in Donetsk. In September, Azov is formally integrated into the Ukrainian Armed Forces of the National Guard and acquires the status of a regiment (Polk Azov, literally in Ukrainian "Regiment Azov"), increasing its numbers accordingly.<sup>6</sup> Finally, it participated in several US-led exercises between 2015 and 2017, further implementing its operational capabilities.

## 2. The Azov System

One of the most important aspects in understanding the hybrid capabilities of the Azov unit is the close connection between symbolism, ideology, and operational activity. Starting from these three elements, we can observe how the strong hybrid connotation of Azov has materialized in a mix of military operations and socio-political activities. These aspects later laid the foundations for a real mythification.

The symbolism of Azov combines various neo-Nazi elements related to the Waffen SS, acquired from the original nucleus of the Patriot of Ukraine, with the classical symbols tied to Ukrainian nationalism.<sup>7</sup> In particular, the official symbol contains the colours gold and blue, the Ukrainian Trident, the waves representing the Azov Sea, the **Wolfsangel** rune used by the "Das

<sup>5</sup> Iaroslav Tynchenko, *Ukrains'ki Zbroïni Syly: Berezen' 1917 r.–Lystopad 1918 r. (Orhanizatsiia, Chysel'nist', Boïovi Diï)* (Kyïv: Tempora, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Teemu Saressalo e Aki-Mauri Huhtinen, «The Information Blitzkrieg – "Hybrid" Operations Azov Style», *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 31, n. 4 (2 ottobre 2018): 423-443, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2018.1521358>.

<sup>7</sup> Saressalo e Huhtinen.



Reich” Waffen SS Panzer Division and finally the **Black Sun**, an icon found on the floor of Wewelsburg Castle, the ideological and spiritual centre of the SS since 1934. We note how the ideological spectrum depicted in the Azov Battalion symbol is specific but, at the same time, broad enough to reach different communicative targets. In this spectrum we find: Ukrainian nationalists, anti-Russians, neo-Nazis, neo-fascists, white supremacists, and accelerationists. In short, it is a military unit ideologically aligned with the violent extreme right that serves the Ukrainian government in the ranks of the National Guard but only formally. It is emphasised that the Ukrainian extreme right differs from most European extreme right in the fact that it is not universally hostile to the European Union and the United States. Azov’s operational history in fact confirms its close ties with US trainer partners. The extremist and veiled anti-democratic ideology, in fact, did not remain dormant for long among speeches of Azov’s founding members. In 2016 it took on greater political substance when an initial group of veterans returning from the 2015 Mariupol battles, including Andriy Biletsky himself, founded the National Corps party, initially known as Patriots of Ukraine (not to be confused with Patriot of Ukraine).<sup>8</sup> The ideological core of the party revolves around neo-fascism, anti-Russian nationalism, economic nationalism, and militarism. A combination strongly reminiscent of Hitler’s National Socialism.

The indissoluble link between Azov and its political counterpart has given rise to a two-tier political-military entity capable of conducting a variety of secondary activities. We can therefore define an Azov System as consisting of a military and a political component. Both components have distinct identities and modus operandi but are part of a single system that incorporates the same subculture, the same ideological purpose and to some extent the same leadership. On one hand, the ‘**Military Azov**’ has built an impressive online propaganda apparatus that has further expanded the recruitment pool by tapping into international European far-right circuits. The network of far-right and alt-right actors in Europe, especially in France, Germany, Italy, and Sweden, thanks to music festivals such as **Asgardsrei**<sup>9</sup> and mixed martial arts tournaments, including **Denis Nikitin’s White Rex**<sup>10</sup> was linked to the recruitment apparatus of the Azov Battalion.

Among the actors in this network, we find Ouest Casual, a French group involved in both concerts and fighting tournaments, which in April 2021 reported photo-reportages of a training camp held in Ukraine by paramilitary

<sup>8</sup> Clapp, «The Maidan Irregulars».

<sup>9</sup> «At Ukraine’s Asgardsrei, A French Connection», *bellingcat*, 1 maggio 2020, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2020/05/01/at-ukraines-asgardsrei-a-french-connection/>.

<sup>10</sup> «At Ukraine’s Asgardsrei, A French Connection».

militias close to Azov, including the **Freikorps of Ukraine**. What this informal network of supporters reveals is a **spontaneous system of European far-right militarisation**. In other words, a soft propaganda and training operation that opened the doors of Azov to the world of the European extreme right and to all those supporters willing to fight against Russia by virtue of ethnonationalist ideology. The functioning of the network was observed in the days immediately following the Russian invasion in February 2022. Following the Russian attack, the actors organised themselves as a **spontaneous infrastructure to support operations in Ukraine**. The network of groups and organisations, being already well structured, became active in a short time and immediately provided support for the recruitment, propaganda, and financing of Azov. Finally, regarding the socio-cultural sphere, despite it pertained more to the political section/side, the Military Azov as well penetrated the Ukrainian social fabric mainly through its civil/paramilitary section, the **Azov Civil Corps**<sup>11</sup> the civil/paramilitary section of Azov. This section dealt with training and education also for minors. Obviously, this section interfaced very often with the National Corps.

On the other hand, the **'Political Azov'** supported the political and ideological reasons for the anti-Russian struggle, but over time strategically distanced itself from the supremacist and neo-Nazi connotations typical of the military Azov. This was because the extremist's name was making it increasingly difficult to maintain good relations with the EU and the US. Given the fact that these alliances guaranteed the supply of funds, training, and armaments, it was vital to preserve them. The party therefore contributed to the reputation-cleansing of Azov by securing the necessary international support. National Corps' political activities include the **Intermarium project**.<sup>12</sup> The term originated from the idea of a security and military alliance based on the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. National Corps members expanded this concept by proposing a politico-military alliance of Central and Eastern European countries located between the Black, Baltic and Adriatic Seas that would protect common foreign policy interests. The ideology underlying the Intermarium concept invokes a strong anti-Russian and alternative European spirit to the alliance with the US and EU. At the moment it is not yet at an early stage but could in the future be a force of attraction toward Ukraine and Azov.

<sup>11</sup> Saressalo e Huhtinen, «The Information Blitzkrieg — “Hybrid” Operations Azov Style».

<sup>12</sup> «Intermarium», Intermarium, consultato 13 aprile 2022, <https://intermarium.org.ua/en/>.

Figure 1 - *From left to right: Azov Badge, National Corps logo and Intermarium symbol*



### 3. Conclusions

As stated above Azov's ideology, symbolism and history have contributed to the creation of a myth. Prior to the Russo-Ukrainian War, the Azov Special Operations Regiment was certainly known for its radicalisation and anti-Russian activism but had not yet fought an open war. With the outbreak of hostilities in February 2022 and especially with the stoic defence of the city of Mariupol Azov reached a new evolutionary stage, ultimately the last one a military unit can achieve: mythologisation. The Azov special regiment is fighting in the city of Mariupol, in all probability a large part of the unit will perish in its defence, and this will contribute to a further martyrdom of the fighters. The unit's official Telegram channel itself has been renamed А3ОВ – Мариуполь, literally Azov – Mariupol. Although **mythologisation** and **martyrdom** may seem unnecessary in the short term from a military point of view, they could have serious repercussions in the long run. It is likely that Azov's wartime exploits will be imprinted in the collective imagination to such an extent that they will serve to offset the war crimes allegations made earlier and partly clear the reputation. At the same time, Azov could become a model of inspiration and emulation for other Ukrainian militias or even for other paramilitary groups in other countries. The ideological factors that have attracted far-right militiamen from all over Europe will now receive an additional emotional boost by gaining communicative power and attractiveness. Related to this is the issue of foreign fighters. It is indeed possible that the violent far right will try to use the conflict with Russia to obtain weapons and training, as well as to connect with other extremists. The members of this strand are anti-liberal, accelerationist, radical

ethnonationalists who favour the fight against the invader, be it military like Russia or migratory. They have renounced the political process as a means of influencing political change. The ideology of these extremists is centred on the claim that only through a bloody revolt can they save ‘Western civilisation’, understood through a racist and religious paradigm. The dangerousness of such ideologies is evident when one observes the almost perfect overlap with the ideological model proposed within the work “The Great Replacement” compiled by **Brenton Tarrant** and published after the attack in Christchurch in March 2019. The attack and the bomber underwent a process of mythologisation (in this specific case, the far right itself defines him as a **Saint**, consequently we talk about **Sanctification**) which led to a massive diffusion of his ideas and thought within the far-right digital ecosystem. Therefore, if the same paradigm is applied to the Azov Battalion, also because the ideological compartment is very similar to that of Brenton Tarrant, it is possible to hypothesize an impact on the extreme right-wing ecosystem (online and offline) even more pervasive and with probable effects on the terrorist-extremist threat.

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