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Ukraine crisis: the neo-Nazi brigade fighting pro-Russian separatists

Kiev throws paramilitaries – some openly neo-Nazi - into the front of the battle with rebels

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/ukraine/11025137/Ukraine-crisis-the-neo-Nazi-brigade-fighting-pro-Russian-separatists.html>

By Tom Parfitt, Urzuf

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The fighters of the Azov battalion lined up in single file to say farewell to their fallen comrade. His pallid corpse lay under the sun in an open casket trimmed with blue velvet.

Some of the men placed carnations by the body, others roses. Many struck their chests with a closed fist before touching their dead friend's arm. One fighter had an SS tattoo on his neck.

Sergiy Grek, 22, lost a leg and died from massive blood loss after a radio-controlled anti-tank mine exploded near to him.

As Ukraine's armed forces tighten the noose around pro-Russian separatists in the east of the country, the western-backed government in Kiev is throwing militia groups – some openly neo-Nazi - into the front of the battle.

The Azov battalion has the most chilling reputation of all. Last week, it came to the fore as it mounted a bold attack on the rebel redoubt of Donetsk, striking deep into the suburbs of a city under siege.



Andriy Biletsky, in black T-shirt, commander of Ukraine's Azov battalion

In Marinka, on the western outskirts, the battalion was sent forward ahead of tanks and armoured vehicles of the Ukrainian army's 51st Mechanised Brigade. A ferocious close-quarters fight ensued as they got caught in an ambush laid by well-trained separatists, who shot from 30 yards away. The Azov irregulars replied with a squall of fire, fending off the attack and seizing a rebel checkpoint.

Mr Grek, also known as "Balagan", died in the battle and 14 others were wounded. Speaking after the ceremony Andriy Biletsky, the battalion's commander, told the Telegraph the operation had been a "100% success". "The battalion is a family and every death is painful to us but these were minimal losses," he said. "Most important of all, we established a bridgehead for the attack on Donetsk. And when that comes we will be leading the way."

The military achievement is hard to dispute. By securing Marinka the battalion "widened the front and tightened the circle", around the rebels' capital, as another fighter put it. While

Vladimir Putin, Russia's president, prevaricates about sending an invasion force into Ukraine, the rebels he backs are losing ground fast.

But Kiev's use of volunteer paramilitaries to stamp out the Russian-backed Donetsk and Luhansk "people's republics", proclaimed in eastern Ukraine in March, should send a shiver down Europe's spine. Recently formed battalions such as Donbas, Dnipro and Azov, with several thousand men under their command, are officially under the control of the interior ministry but their financing is murky, their training inadequate and their ideology often alarming.

The Azov men use the neo-Nazi Wolfsangel (Wolf's Hook) symbol on their banner and members of the battalion are openly white supremacists, or anti-Semites.



The Azov battalion uses the neo-Nazi Wolfsangel (Wolf's Hook) symbol on its banner

"Personally, I'm a Nazi," said "Phantom", a 23-year-old former lawyer at the ceremony wearing camouflage and holding a Kalashnikov. "I don't hate any other nationalities but I believe each nation should have its own country." He added: "We have one idea: to liberate our land from terrorists."

The Telegraph was invited to see some 300 Azov fighters pay respects to Mr Grek, their first comrade to die since the battalion was formed in May. An honour guard fired volleys into the air at the battalion's headquarters on the edge of Urzuf, a small beach resort on Ukraine's Azov Sea coast. Two more militiamen died on Sunday fighting north of Donetsk <<Aug 10>>. Petro Poroshenko, Ukraine's president, called one of them a hero.

Each new recruit receives only a couple of weeks of training before joining the battalion. The interior ministry and private donors provide weapons.

The HQ is a seaside dacha compound dotted with pines that once belonged to the ousted president of Ukraine, Vladimir Yanukovich, when he was governor of this region. Families in swimsuits with towels and inflatable rings walk past gate-guards toting automatic rifles.

Parked inside among wooden gazebos overlooking the sea are the tools of Azov's trade – two armoured personnel carriers, a converted truck with retractable steel shutters to cover its windows, and several Nissan pick-ups fitted with machine-gun mounts.



A converted truck with steel shutters used by the Azov battalion and known to the fighters as 'the Lump of Iron'

Mr Biletsky, a muscular man in a black T-shirt and camouflage trousers, said the battalion was a light infantry unit, ideal for the urban warfare needed to take cities like Donetsk.

The 35-year old commander began creating the battalion after he was released from pre-trial detention in February in the wake of pro-western protests in Kiev. He had denied a charge of attempted murder, claiming it was politically motivated.

A former history student and amateur boxer, Mr Biletsky is also head of an extremist Ukrainian group called the Social National Assembly. “The historic mission of our nation in this critical moment is to lead the White Races of the world in a final crusade for their survival,” he wrote in a recent commentary. “A crusade against the Semite-led Untermenschen.”

The battalion itself is founded on right wing views, the commander said in Urzuf, and no Nazi convictions could exclude a recruit. “The most important thing is being a good fighter and a good brother so that we can trust each other,” he said.

Interestingly, many of the men in the battalion are Russians from eastern Ukraine who wear masks because they fear their relatives in rebel-controlled areas could be persecuted if their identities are revealed.

Phantom said he was such a Russian but that he was opposed to Moscow supporting “terrorists” in his homeland: “I volunteered and all I demanded was a gun and the possibility to defend my country.”

Asked about his Nazi sympathies, he said: “After the First World World War, Germany was a total mess and Hitler rebuilt it: he built houses and roads, put in telephone lines, and created jobs. I respect that.” Homosexuality is a mental illness and the scale of the Holocaust “is a big question”, he added.



Fighters of the Azov battalion say farewell to their first comrade to die in the war against Russia-backed rebels

Stepan, 23, another fighter, said that if leaders of the pro-Russian separatists were captured they should be executed after a military tribunal.

Such notions seem a far cry from the spirit of the “Maidan” protests that peaked in Kiev in February with the ousting of Mr Yanukovich, who had refused to sign a trade agreement with the European Union. Young liberals led the way but the uprising, which ended with the president fleeing to Russia, provoked a huge patriotic awakening that sucked in hardline groups.

Azov’s extremist profile and slick English–language pages on social media have even attracted foreign fighters. Mr Biletsky says he has men from Ireland, Italy, Greece and Scandinavia. At the base in Urzuf, Mikael Skillt, 37, a former sniper with the Swedish Army and National Guard, leads and trains a reconnaissance unit.

“When I saw the Maidan protests I recognised bravery and suffering,” he told the Telegraph. “A warrior soul was awakened. But you can only do so much, going against the enemy with sticks and stones. I had some experience and I thought maybe I could help.”

Mr Skillt says he called himself a National Socialist as a young man and more recently he was active in the extreme right wing Party of the Swedes. “Now I’m fighting for the freedom of Ukraine against Putin’s imperialist front,” he said.

His unit is improving fast under his tutelage. “What they lack in experience, they make up in balls,” he said. Once he is done with Azov –where he claimed he receives a nominal GBP100 a

month – Mr Skillt plans to go to Syria to fight for President Bashar al-Assad as a hired gun earning “very good money”.

Such characters under Kiev’s control play straight into the hands of Russian and separatist propaganda that portrays Ukraine’s government as a “fascist junta” manipulated by the West.

“These battalions are made up of mercenaries, not volunteers,” said Sergei Kavtaradze, a representative of the rebel authorities in Donetsk. “They are real fascists who kill and rape civilians.” Mr Kavtaradze could not cite evidence of his claim and the battalion says it has not harmed a single civilian.

Ukraine’s government is unrepentant about using the neo-Nazis. “The most important thing is their spirit and their desire to make Ukraine free and independent,” said Anton Gerashchenko, an adviser to Arsen Avakov, the interior minister. “A person who takes a weapon in his hands and goes to defend his motherland is a hero. And his political views are his own affair.”

Mark Galeotti, an expert on Russian and Ukrainian security affairs at New York University, fears battalions like Azov are becoming “magnets to attract violent fringe elements from across Ukraine and beyond”. “The danger is that this is part of the building up of a toxic legacy for when the war ends,” he said.

Extremist paramilitary groups who have built up “their own little Freikorps” and who are fundamentally opposed to finding consensus may demand a part in public life as victors in the conflict, Mr Galeotti added. “And what do you do when the war is over and you get veterans from Azov swaggering down your high street, and in your own lives?”