

The Mariupol Theater Bombing

We don't know for sure what happened to the theatre, but it wouldn't be the first time the Ukrainian government made false claims.

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On March 16, the Donetsk Regional Drama Theatre in Mariupol, Ukraine, was bombed. The building reportedly housed scores of civilians at the time. Maxar [satellite images](#) showed the word “CHILDREN” written in Russian in large letters on the pavement outside. The incident occurred within hours of President Volodymyr Zelensky’s virtual address to Congress, where he asked again for the United States to establish a no-fly zone over Ukraine.

Western and Ukrainian observers immediately assumed the worst. “Russian forces ‘purposefully destroyed’ theatre in Mariupol where civilians were taking shelter, Ukrainian officials say,” read a notification pushed out by Twitter. “Massive Russian attack on the Drama Theater where hundreds of innocent civilians were hiding,” [tweeted](#) Ukrainian politician Dmytro Kuleba. “Russians could not have not known this was a civilian shelter.” It seemed a clear-cut case of Muscovite barbarism in a savage war.

Another horrendous war crime in Mariupol. Massive Russian attack on the Drama Theater where hundreds of innocent civilians were hiding. The building is now fully ruined. Russians could not have not known this was a civilian shelter. Save Mariupol! Stop Russian war criminals! [pic.twitter.com/blQLxe7mli](#)

— Dmytro Kuleba (@DmytroKuleba) [March 16, 2022](#)

But days before the bombing, local reports warned that Ukrainian forces, specifically the Azov Battalion, were planning a false flag operation at the theater. Civilians would be endangered or even killed before the world’s watching eyes.

While it’s difficult to know what’s true in this conflict, numerous [accounts](#) paint the [same picture](#): civilians being endangered, even killed, by Ukrainian forces, including Azov, in Mariupol who won’t allow them to move through humanitarian corridors.

The simplest explanation for the Drama Theater bombing is that Russia is at fault here. But these allegations, in the context of a war that has been distorted by misinformation, merit examination precisely because the incident had the supposedly desired effect. American pundits and politicians like Republican Rep. [Adam Kinzinger](#) of Illinois cited the bombing as cause for a no-fly zone.

The official narrative seems wrong on its face. So far, more than [30,000 people](#) have been evacuated through humanitarian corridors from Mariupol, which is surrounded by Russian troops. If Moscow wanted to slaughter civilians, it could have easily targeted vehicles rolling in [bumper-to-bumper traffic](#) out of the city, heading in the direction of the [pro-Russian separatist-controlled north](#).

Why evacuate tens of thousands of civilians and observe protocols designed to reduce non-combatant casualties if you want to butcher them? This is not to say civilians have not been killed during the conflict—they have—but Russia is not deliberately targeting them as part of a genocidal campaign. These facts, coupled with what happened in the days before the bombing, raise questions no one in the mainstream is asking.

The earliest known report of imminent danger came on March 12. A message on a [Telegram channel](#) associated with Dmitriy Steshen, a correspondent from Mariupol for the Russian newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, warned that Zelensky's forces were planning two false flag operations: one at the Turkish-built [Sultan Suleiman Mosque](#), and the other at the Mariupol theater.

Both would appear as if the Russians had deliberately targeted civilians. The mosque would drag Turkey into the war, while the drama theater would supply a justification for closing the skies over Ukraine, ideally bringing a U.S.-led NATO into direct confrontation with Russia. The second half of the message about the theater reads:

Ukrainian soldiers with the drama theater's administration rounded up women, children, and elderly from Mariupol into the theatre building so that when the "right" moment happens they could blow the theatre up with the people. This is done so that they could scream to the whole world that Russia's aviation did this and that the Ukrainian sky needs to be closed immediately, etc. Do not be silent, we need as many people to know.

Later, investigative journalist Max Blumenthal noted that Western media repeated Ukrainian officials' claims about the mosque in Mariupol being shelled by Russia with scores of civilians, including children, inside. "However, Turkish state media revealed that the Ukrainian government had misled Western reporters," [Blumenthal wrote](#). "The Kanuni Sultan Suleyman Mosque was not only fully intact, it had never been hit by Russian fire." [Zelensky](#) and [his officials](#) had previously made similar misleading claims about the bombing of the memorial at Babi Yar, a ravine in Kiev that was also the site of massacres committed by the Nazis during World War II. But Israeli journalist Ron Ben Yisha [reported](#) after inspecting the site that the memorial had not been destroyed or damaged.

On [March 13](#), a Twitter user named Elena Evdokimova issued another warning. "Information allegedly came from Mariupol locals (reminder – they are mostly ethnic Russian) that neo-Nazi from Azov gathered Mariupol women, children & elderly into the building of Mariupol

drama theatre and are going to blow it up, blaming the victims on 'Russian shelling,'" Evdokimova wrote. One of the final known indicators popped up early on [March 16](#). A Telegram channel associated with Daniil Bezsonov, the DNR Deputy Minister of Information, claimed to have made contact with an Azov defector.

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— Elena Evdokimova (@elenaevdokimov7) [March 13, 2022](#)

"The militant of the Nazi regiment 'Azov' has just escaped from his family and joined our side. He asked for anonymity and we guaranteed it, as his family is in Ukrainian-controlled territory and he fears that his actions will be cut to pieces by other Ukrainian Nazis," the message began.

He told us a lot of interesting information, which is of operational importance and about the atrocities committed by the Ukrainian Nazis in Mariupol. But the most important thing is that the headquarters of the Ukrainian militants is located in the basement of the Mariupol Drama Theater, and the hall of the theater is completely filled with civilians, who are guarded by 12 militants of the Azov Regiment, so that they do not run away.

The theater was hit a little while later.

Russia's Defense Ministry immediately denied responsibility, saying that it had not flown bombing missions at that time in that area. "During daylight on March 16, Russian aviation carried out no missions involving strikes on ground targets within Mariupol limits. According to the verified information, militants of the Azov nationalist battalion carried out another bloody provocation by blowing up the rigged theater building," the [Ministry of Defense said](#). It added, "refugees that escaped Mariupol, informed that Nazis from the Azov battalion could have held civilians hostage in the theater building, using the upper floors as emplacements."

Statements from the Russian government are hardly trustworthy. However, the independent media outlet Readovka reported the same via Telegram on [March 16](#).

According to a source familiar with the operation to liberate Mariupol, no shelling or air strikes were carried out in the area of the city where the Drama Theater is located. Heavy street fighting is taking place in its vicinity, and it is impossible to strike such blows without risking one's own. For the same reason, artillery cannot be used in this area of the city.

The information itself was spread tonight through Ukrainian telegram channels, its provocative implication is obvious.

Considering that Russian authorities [raided Readovka's offices](#) and added it to the [register of banned websites](#) last year after it published an investigation on political corruption, the

outlet cannot be easily dismissed as state media.

By March 17, news surfaced that civilians had survived in a shelter within the theater. “More than a day after the airstrike, there were no reports of deaths,” the Associated Press [noted](#). As of March 21, that hasn’t changed. So far, 130 survivors have been rescued from the rubble, [according to Reuters](#) and local sources. Mariupol’s city council said more than 1,000 people were sheltering under the theatre at the time of the bombing, but Reuters could not independently verify the figures.

Apart from local officials, Azov was one of the [first sources](#) to report the bombing, according to the *Ukrayinska Pravda* newspaper. But would they be capable of organizing something so nefarious that it would involve endangering Ukrainians? Understanding Azov, and why its elimination is a central [stated aim](#) of Russia, sheds light on that question.

In 2014, after a U.S. State Department-backed [“color revolution”](#) led to regime change in Ukraine, pro-Russian separatists declared independence from Kiev in the eastern part of the country. Mariupol, which is predominantly Russian speaking, became a hub of resistance, and it has been the scene of clashes between [rebels and their allies and Ukrainian forces](#) ever since.

Azov, which is funded by oligarchs loyal to Kiev such as [Igor Kolomoisky](#), who is also a [key supporter](#) of Zelensky, emerged in eastern Ukraine to suppress pro-Russian sentiment there. “We are behind enemy lines here; everyone is against us: the police, the army, the people,” one Azov fighter said a [May 2014 interview](#) with the *Sunday Times*. By “behind enemy lines,” he meant Mariupol. The *Times* also noted that Azov was “deployed by Kiev because of its fears that its regular forces, heavily infiltrated by Russian sympathisers, are losing the battle with the separatists.”

The events of May 9, 2014, are illustrative. They were marked by bloodshed after pro-Russian militants took over a police station with the help of pro-Russian police officers. Azov was [deployed](#) alongside other units in response, but the rebels enjoyed support from hundreds of civilians.

Footage from [one incident](#) that day [showed](#) a crowd of Mariupolians fleeing as Ukrainian forces fired on them with automatic weapons. “They’re shooting down civilians!” one person yelled in the video. “Fascists! Killing your own people!” Bystanders ferried the wounded to safety while others shouted that ambulances were taking fire. The Ministry of Defense [confirmed](#) that “Ukrainian soldiers (an Azov fighter, or a soldier of the 20th territorial defence battalion) opened fire at the car” after civilians had loaded the ambulance with a wounded man.

Recent interviews with Mariupol evacuees have presented a similar view of Azov and other Ukrainian troops. One evacuee [described](#) through tears to the Analytical Network News Agency how Azov fights with no regard for civilians in Mariupol. Another woman gave an even [grimmer account](#). She said Azov used them as human shields and that Ukrainian forces placed armored vehicles in the immediate vicinity of bomb shelters, virtually guaranteeing harm to civilians and civilian infrastructure. They were sent “like a herd of animals” by Ukrainian security forces into basements for days without provisions and alleged that they blew up the theater while retreating from the area.

A [group](#) of Mariupol refugees evacuating to Russia also said they had been kept in the

theater by Ukrainian soldiers against their will who used them as “human shields.” Another [group](#) said Azov prevented them from evacuating through humanitarian corridors, keeping them in basements, and that they had seen them shoot civilians.

There is [now](#) ample [evidence](#) of [civilians](#) being [tortured](#), [abused](#), and [humiliated](#) by regular and irregular Ukrainian forces. Indeed, there appears to be a general deterioration in conduct. For example, [Gennadiy Druzenko](#), a [Ukrainian military field hospital commander](#), [bragged](#) that he “gave strict orders to castrate all the wounded” Russians “because they are cockroaches, not humans.” It’s not hard to see how this antipathy might turn inward on ethnic Russians, specifically in eastern Ukraine.

Western media has created an image of a city united against Russian aggression simply waiting for a U.S.-led NATO to enter the war. The reality is that Azov and its allies hate a large part of the civilian population and are not above using them as human shields. That does not absolve Russia of any civilians they kill or wound. But it should be a reminder that this conflict is more complex than the plot of a Hollywood production. The reality of this war is awful enough.

The facts around the drama theater bombing will likely remain shrouded in mystery for now. But what is certain is that Westerners should pause to consider the plight of civilians before celebrating the decision by forces within Mariupol to not effect a ceasefire and deliver the city.

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