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# The US Is Arming and Assisting Neo-Nazis in Ukraine, While Congress Debates Prohibition

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*Last November, an American military inspection team visited the Azov Battalion on the front lines of the Ukrainian civil war to discuss logistics and deepening cooperation. Images of the encounter showed American army officers poring over maps with their Ukrainian counterparts, palling around and ignoring the Nazi-inspired Wolfangel patches emblazoned on their sleeves.*

Azov is a militia that has been incorporated into the Ukrainian National Guard, and is considered one of the most effective units in the field against pro-Russian separatists. But it also widely known as a bastion of neo-Nazism within the ranks of the Ukrainian military that has been criticized by international human rights groups, tied to an international fascist network and even a major terror plot.

According to Lower Class Magazine, a leftist German publication, Azov maintains a semi-underground outfit called the "Misanthropic Division" that recruits heavily among the ranks of neo-Nazi youth in France, Germany and Scandinavia. Foreign fighters are promised training with heavy weapons, including tanks, at Ukrainian camps filled with fascist fellow travelers. They even include military veterans like Mikael Skillit, a Swedish former army sniper turned neo-Nazi volunteer for Azov.

> "After World War Two, the victors wrote their history," Skillit told the BBC. "They decided that it's always a bad thing to say I am white and I am proud."

Foreign Azov volunteers are driven by the call of the "Reconquista," or the mission to place eastern European nations under the control of a white supremacist dictatorship modeled after the Nazi Reichskommissariat dictatorship that ruled Ukraine during World War II. The mission is promoted effusively by Azov's chief ideologue, Andriy Biletsky, a veteran fascist organizer who leads the Social National Assembly in Ukraine's parliament. Biletsky's assembly has pledged to outlaw interracial contacts and vowed "to prepare Ukraine for further expansion and to struggle for the liberation of the entire White Race from the domination of the internationalist speculative capital."

Perhaps the most notorious of the racist European youth drawn to the military training camps of Ukraine was a 25-year-old French farm worker named Gregoire Montaux. In June 2016, Moutaux was arrested on Ukraine's border by the country's SBU security services with

a staggering arsenal of assault rifles, thousands of rounds of ammunition and 125kg of TNT explosives. He had even managed to gain possession of two anti-tank grenade launchers.

Driven by hardcore neo-Nazi ideology, Moutaux planned to blow up a "a Muslim mosque, a Jewish synagogue, tax collection organizations, police patrol units," and attack the Euro 2016 soccer championship. According to the SBU, the would-be terrorist had been in communication "with military units fighting in Donbas" — the eastern Ukrainian area where Azov maintains its training camps.

While mobilizing racist youth across Europe, Azov leadership has also managed to foster a warm relationship with the American military. In one photo posted to Azov's website last November, an American military officer can be seen shaking hands with an Azov officer whose uniform was emblazoned with the Nazi-inspired Wolfsangel patch that serves as the militia's symbol. The images highlighted a burgeoning relationship that has been largely conducted in secret, but whose disturbing details are slowly emerging.

Though Washington has not embarked on anything in Ukraine like the billion dollar train-and-equip program it implemented in Syria to promote regime change through a proxy force of so-called "moderate rebels," there are clear and disturbing similarities between the two projects. Just as heavy weapons ostensibly intended for the CIA-backed Free Syrian Army went straight into the hands of Salafi-jihadi insurgent forces, including ISIS, American weapons in Ukraine are flowing directly to the extremists of Azov. And once again, in its single minded determination to turn up the heat on Russia, Washington seems willing to ignore the unsettling political orientations of its front line proxies.

In recent months, a wide spectrum of observers of the Ukrainian civil war have documented the transfer of heavy weapons made in the USA to the Azov Battalion, and right under the nose of the US State Department.

Made in Texas, tested by Azov

The story of how American arms began flowing towards the Nazi-inspired militia began in October 2016, when the Texas-based AirTronic company announced a contract to deliver $5.5 million dollars worth of PSRL-1 rocket propelled grenade launchers to "an Allied European military customer." In June 2017, photos turned up on Azov's website showing its fighters testing PSRL-1 grenade launchers in the field. The images raised questions about whether Ukraine was AirTronic's unnamed "customer."

Two months later, the pro-Russian military analysis site Southfront published a leaked contract indicating that 100 PSRL-1 Launchers worth $554,575 — about 1/10th of the total deal — had been produced in partnership with a Ukrainian arms company for distribution to the country's fighting units.

In an interview last December with the US-backed Voice of America, AirTronic Chief Operating Officer Richard Vandiver emphasized that the sale of grenade launchers was authorized through "very close coordination with the U.S. Embassy, with the U.S. State Department, with the U.S. Pentagon and with the Ukrainian government."

Finally, this January, the transfer of the lethal weapons to Azov was confirmed by the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRL). Aric Toler, a DFRL researcher, asserted that

> "the US Embassy did absolutely help facilitate this transfer, and I'm not sure if they were aware that Azov would be the first to train with them."

As NATO's de facto lobbyist in Washington, and one of the most fervent advocates in Washington for arming the Ukrainian military, the Atlantic Council was an extremely unlikely source for such a disclosure. While the think tank's motives for exposing Azov's use of American arms remains unclear, its researchers wound up highlighting a truly scandalous episode of semi-covert American support for neo-Nazis.

A day after the Atlantic Council reported on Azov's acquisition of American arms, the Ukrainian National Guard insisted in an official statement that the grenade launchers were no longer in Azov's possession. Meanwhile, the heightened scrutiny prompted Azov to delete all photos of its soldiers testing the weapons.

When the House of Representatives passed its Defense Appropriations act last September, it included a provision ensuring that "none of the funds made available by this Act may be used to provide arms, training, or other assistance to the Azov Battalion." But the provision has yet to be authorized. Back in 2015, pressure from the Pentagon prompted Congress to strip out a similar restriction, and questions remain about whether it will ever be enforced.

In the meantime, Azov officers like Sgt. Ivan Kharkiv have revealed to American reporters that "U.S. trainers and U.S. volunteers" have been working closely with his battalion. And as the photographs posted in November on Azov's website indicated, US officers have met with Azov commanders two months to provide them with "training, or other assistance" that is explicitly forbidden by the congressional provision.

"Your struggle is our struggle"

The American government's collaboration with committed Nazi ideologues to undercut Russian geopolitical goals is not new, nor has it been a particularly well-kept secret. In his 1988 book length expose, "Blowback," investigative journalist Christopher Simpson lifted the cover off the CIA's program of rehabilitating former assets of Nazi Germany, including documented war criminals, and revealed how it employed them counter the spread of communism in Europe.

According to Simpson, the CIA recruited Mykola Lebed, a Gestapo-trained leader of the Ukrainian OUN militia who oversaw the torture and slaughter of Jews in Krakow, to help bolster West Germany's intelligence services in 1947. Two years later, the CIA smuggled Lebed into the US under a false name. He was promptly hired by the Pentagon and dispatched on widely promoted speaking tours that rallied support for Ukrainian guerillas. For the next several decades, Lebed advanced the anti-communist cause through the Prolog Research Corporation, a New York City-based publishing house that was eventually revealed as a CIA front.

In his 1991 book,

> "Old Nazis, the New Right, and the Republican Party, journalist Russ Bellant provided a new layer of disturbing detail to the history of US collaboration with former Ukrainian Nazis. Bellant documented how the Ukrainian OUN-B militia reconstituted under the banner of the Ukrainian Congress Committee of America (UCCA), an umbrella organization comprised of "complete OUN-B

fronts."

The Reagan administration was honeycombed with UCCA members, with the group's chairman Lev Dobriansky, serving as ambassador to the Bahamas, and his daughter, Paula, sitting on the National Security Council. Reagan even welcomed Jaroslav Stetsko, a Banderist leader who oversaw the massacre of 7000 Jews in Lviv, into the White House in 1983.

"Your struggle is our struggle," Reagan told the former Nazi collaborator. "Your dream is our dream."

The "imaginary Nazis" come to life

The relationship came full circle after the corrupt but democratically elected Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych was ousted in the 2014 coup known as Euro-Maidan. From the ranks of the neo-fascist street toughs that waged a pitched battle against national riot police in Kiev's Maidan Square, the Azov Battalion was formed to do battle with pro-Russian separatists in the country's east. The militia's commander, Andriy Biletsky, had earned his stripes as a leader of the fascist group, Patriot of Ukraine. And he made no secret of his Nazism, proclaiming that his mission was to "lead the White Races of the world in a final crusade for their survival… against the Semite-led Untermenschen."

At the time, supporters of the NATO-inspired coup painted any and all reports of the presence of neo-Nazis in post-Maidan Ukraine as Kremlin propaganda. Jamie Kirchick, a neoconservative operative, made the most obtuse attempt at spinning the fascist surge in Ukraine, erasing militias like Azov as "Putin's Imaginary Nazis." Liberal historian Timothy Snyder also dismissed the problem of neo-Nazism in Ukraine, defending the Maidan putsch as "a classic popular revolution."

But it was not long before the wave of Nazi nostalgia and anti-Semitism sweeping across the country became impossible to deny. In Ukraine's parliament, the veteran fascist Social-National Party founder Andriy Parubiy has risen to the role of Speaker. Vadym Troyan, a leader of Biletsky's neo-Nazi Patriot of Ukraine organization who served as a deputy commander of Azov, was appointed police chief of the province of Kiev.

Massive torchlit rallies pour out into the streets of Kiev on regular occasions, showcasing columns of Azov members marching beneath the Nazi-inspired Wolfsangel banner that serves as the militia's symbol. Author and columnist Lev Golinkin noted that the neo-Nazis who violently paraded through Charlottesville, Virginia last year bore flags emblazoned with the another symbol displayed by Azov: the Sonnengrad, or Nazi SS-inspired black sun.

Across Ukraine, Nazi collaborators like Stepan Bandera have been celebrated with memorials and rallies proclaiming them as national heroes. Bandera was the commander of the wartime militia the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN-B), which fought alongside Nazi Germany against the Soviet Union. Despite his OUN-B militia's role in the massacre of Jews and ethnic Poles during the war, including a pogrom that left 7,000 Jews dead in Lviv, a major boulevard in Kiev has been named for Bandera. In today's Ukraine, even mainstream nationalists revere Bandera as a freedom fighter.

Last May, Azov supporters held a torchlit rally in Lviv, in honor of General Roman Shukhevych, the late commander of the UPA insurgent militia that helped massacre

thousands of Jews in Lviv. (Ironically, the massacre has been documented in detail by Timothy Snyder, the historian-turned-apologist for Ukraine's government).

Two months later — on the anniversary of the pogrom — the city of Lviv held "Shukhevychfest," celebrating the blood stained general as a "successful musician, an athlete, a businessman." During the festival, neo-Nazis tossed a molotov cocktail into a local synagogue and vandalized the Jewish house of worship with graffiti reading, "Yids, remember July 1 [the date of the Lviv massacre]."

The explosion of pro-Nazi memorials across Ukraine has provoked harsh condemnation from the World Jewish Congress and prompted anti-Nazi activist Efraim Zuroff to openly lament that "Ukraine has more statues for killers of Jews than any other country." But even as Ukraine's Jewish community reels at the developments in horror, the US government has been mostly silent.

American reporters who visited Azov in the field have had a much harder time denying the uncomfortable reality of Nazi mobilization, however. When USA Today's Oren Dorell toured an Azov training camp, he met a drill sergeant named Alex who "admitted he is a Nazi and said with a laugh that no more than half his comrades are fellow Nazis." The Azov soldier also told Dorell he "supports strong leadership for Ukraine, like Germany during World War II."

> "[Alex] vowed that when the war ends, his comrades will march on the capital, Kiev, to oust a government they consider corrupt," Dorell reported.

Another Azov volunteer told the Guardian that Ukraine needs "a junta that will restrict civil rights for a while but help bring order and unite the country."

While the hapless liberal-oligarchic government in Kiev struggles for legitimacy, the neo-Nazis of Azov yearn for the "Reconquista." Until their dream is realized, however, the militia is likely to be bogged down in an intractable conflict with pro-Russian forces and hoping that an influx of American weapons can turn the tide.

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*Featured image: Left: Members of the Azov Battalion offer a sig heil salute. Right: US military advisors meet with Azov commanders in the field in November, 2017.*

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