



Ukraine's neo-Nazi Azov battalion has built a 'state within a state,' and it despises both Russia and the liberal West

Description

UKRAINE: The Ukrainian regiment adheres to its own brand of 'National Idea,' loosely modelled on Mussolini's Italy



Volunteers take an oath of allegiance to Ukraine, before being sent to the eastern part of Ukraine to join the ranks of special battalion "Azov" in Kiev, Ukraine, Monday, June 23, 2014. © AP Photo/Sergei Chuzavkov

UKRAINE: Despite the surrender of the Azov regiment at the Azovstal Iron and Steel Works during the fighting in Mariupol last month, the legend of this unit has turned out to be enduring. The Ukrainian command has already announced that new Azov special operations forces will be created in Kharkov and Kiev.

At the same time, a partial rebranding has been carried out. A medieval heraldic symbol – a trident (the coat of arms of Ukraine) consisting of three swords – is now depicted on the chevron of the 'new' Azov in place of the stylized Wolfsangel ('wolf's hook') that has attracted so much criticism from not only Russia, but also the West and fellow Ukrainians. This condemnation is for good reason, as the symbol was used on the lapels of the SS's Das Reich and Landstorm Nederland divisions, as well as the logo of the Dutch Nazi Party.

The Azovites have rejected all such accusations, claiming their regimental symbol was not a Wolfsangel, but rather the first letters of the phrase 'National Idea', allegedly written in the old Ukrainian alphabet, which was a mix of Cyrillic and Latin letters. And this is not Azov's first rebranding – at one time, the 'wolf's hook' on their chevrons replaced the occult 'black sun' symbol, which was

used in SS rituals and decorated the floor of the order's castle in Wewelsburg. However, back then, the Azovites didn't bother trying to explain how the 'black sun' had notional Ukrainian roots.

The rejection of the Wolfsangel is clearly intended to make it possible to say, *"Yes, there used to be ultra-right elements in Azov, but that is all in the past now. The regiment is moving forward with new symbols and new ideas."*

However, this is not the case. On the contrary, the rebranding shows Azov has only strengthened its ideology, becoming more mature and discarding youthful outrage along with its Nazi symbolism, which alludes to an ideology that the regiment, as an organization, never really shared. To understand this, it is enough to look at Azov not only as a military movement, but also a political project.

Azov was founded by radicals crossing over from Patriot of Ukraine. This organization was based in Kharkov, a city in the northeast of the country, which has always had a predominantly Russian-speaking population. Therefore, Azov's brand of nationalism was different. Unlike Ukrainian nationalists, they did not focus on issues pertaining to Ukraine's language, ethnicity, or religion. They perceived the nation as a statist project in the spirit of Italian fascism. Actually, Patriot of Ukraine's main ideologist, the 20th-century Ukrainian publicist Dmitry Dontsov (whose ideas were also a major influence on the Nazi collaborators of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists), called his ideology of 'integral nationalism' the Ukrainian version of nationalism developed in the 1920s, while repeatedly referring to the works of Benito Mussolini and Giovanni Gentile, the main authors of fascism.

At the same time, Dontsov equated the concepts of nation and race. The latter he divided into master and slave races. According to Dontsov, Ukrainians are a race of masters, while Russians are a race of slaves seeking to enslave Ukrainians. The clash between Ukrainians and Russians is of an absolute, existential nature and can only end with the destruction of one of the parties, Dontsov believed. Romanticism plays a key role in this struggle, which he defines as the will to sacrifice, the coherence of multiple individuals' will to attain power, and directing all efforts towards one goal – the building of a Ukrainian nation. It is this romanticism that ensures that the individual belongs to the collective whole and directs the nation on the path of expansion.

Dontsov's romanticism is based on the myth of the 'final battle' from German-Scandinavian paganism. In this scenario, the destruction of the world and its subsequent rebirth will come. The worship of the idea espoused in this myth must take the form of religious fanaticism. This is the only way an idea can penetrate into the inner sanctum of a person's character and bring about what Dontsov calls a radical revolution in the human psyche.

Aggression towards bearers of other views should be engendered in adherents to this idea, allowing them to reject universal morality and ideas about good and evil. The new morality should be anti-humanist, based only on the will to take power. Personal interests must submit to the common good, anything that makes the nation stronger should be considered ethical, and everything that prevents this should be declared immoral.

Dontsov's concept is completely elitist. To him, the people are just an inert mass with no independent will. The masses are deprived of the ability to develop their own ideas; they can only passively absorb them. The main role is reserved for the active minority, that is, a group capable of formulating an idea for the unconscious masses that is easy to understand and motivates them to engage in the struggle. The active minority should always be at the head of the nation, according to Dontsov.

What the Azovites took from the German Nazis was their strategy of attaining power. They tried to create a shadow 'state within a state' that was supposed to take control of all government institutions at a time of acute political crisis. A huge network of civil organizations has grown up around the Azov regiment over the eight years of its existence. These include book publishers, educational projects, scouting clubs, gyms, and other associations. It even has its own political party, the National Corps, with a paramilitary wing dubbed the National Militia. The regiment's veterans play a key role here.

With the help of these organizations, recruits have been enlisted for both the regiment itself and Azov's civil movement. Azov veterans have also actively joined Ukraine's Armed Forces and law enforcement agencies, including its police, Army, and Security Service, where they continued to spread Azov's ideology of integral nationalism.

A serious ritual component permeates all aspects of life within the Azov regiment itself and its civil movement. The three swords now depicted on the chevrons of the 'new' Azov are actually a reflection of a quite tangible symbol. A ceremonial complex with three wooden swords was built at Azov's main base in the city of Urzuf near Mariupol, where almost all of the regiment's rituals were carried out. The most significant of these is the commemoration of fallen comrades. During the ritual, the Azovites stand holding wooden shields and torches. The shields bear the regiment's main symbols – the 'black sun' and Wolfsangel, as well as the names of fallen members. The master of the ceremony calls out each of their names, after which a soldier with the corresponding shield lights a memorial light and says "*We remember!*" to which the others answer, "*We will take revenge!*" This ritual is not an original invention. The Azovites borrowed it from the Italian fascists of the 1920s, who called it *Presente!* This and other rituals were developed by a special ideological unit within Azov, the 'Standard-Bearer' service.

In fact, the choice of the three swords as a new symbol is telling. A new generation is coming into Azov's top positions. These are no longer the rowdy football fans who once created the battalion and for whom sporting SS symbols and spouting Nazi ideology was a form of protest. Now, the show is being run by people who were brought up within the Azov system with Azov's ideology of integral nationalism. Ties with the European ultra-right, the so-called 'white nationalist' movement, are no longer as important to them. The center of their worldview is Ukrainian statehood and the Ukrainian nation, doomed to fight against both Russia and the liberal values of the West. Of course, for the Azovites, the best part of the Ukrainian nation is themselves.

The surrender of the main part of the regiment at Azovstal has only crystallized the Azov ideology. For the Azovites, the current Russian-Ukrainian conflict has become the very eschatological 'final battle' depicted in Wagner's opera. It is to be waged against the Russians and the liberal West, which does not want to provide enough military assistance or enter into an open clash with Moscow. If necessary, it will even be waged against its own government, which promised to evacuate the defenders of Azovstal but did not keep its word. The last battle must be fought to the end, and the Azovites could not care less how many Ukrainian citizens will burn in its fire in the name of imposing their 'National Idea.'

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