Michael Colborne

From the Fires of War: Ukraine's Azov Movement and the Global Far Right

ANALYZING POLITICAL VIOLENCE

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ibidem Verlag

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über http://dnb.d-nb.de abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at http://dnb.d-nb.de.

Cover image: 174883328 © Nicktys | Dreamstime.com

ISBN-13: 978-3-8382-1508-2

Printed in the EU

"My mother is the war," declares Roger Mexico, leaning over to open the door.
—Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*

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Introduction

We were born in a great hour
From the fires of war and the flames of gunshots
We were nurtured by the pain of losing Ukraine
We were fed by anger and malice to our enemies.

—March of Ukrainian Nationalists

The March of Ukrainian Nationalists was written in 1929 and officially adopted as the anthem of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) in 1932. From its first lines about "losing Ukraine," the March's sombre yet serious melody quickly pulls you into a defiant ode to war. You're exhorted to defend the homeland "above all else," given that this is a nationalist anthem meant to be sung by fresh young soldiers who have just laced up their boots: "Payment for us is the luxury of fighting! /It is sweeter for us to die in battle, /Than to live in bondage, as mute slaves."

More than eighty years later, this brash call to arms isn't a thing of the past in Ukraine, and not just because an altered version of it was adopted as the Ukrainian army's official march in 2018. A bloody revolution in 2014 and Russia's annexation of the Crimean peninsula, an act not recognized by the vast majority of the international community, presaged the start of war by Russian-backed forces in eastern Ukraine. Despite tête-à-têtes between world leaders and several ceasefire agreements in the years since, the war remains less frozen than still simmering, flaring up every so often to take more lives. It's a war that as of 2021 has taken more than 14,000 lives, including the lives of almost 5,000 soldiers for the Ukrainian side as well as more than 3,000 civilians.

It's also a war that gave birth to one of the most ambitious far-right movements in the world. From its beginnings as a volunteer battalion in early 2014 when Ukraine's armed forces were largely in tatters, the Azov movement was not only born in a great hour, but from the fires of war. A relatively ragtag gang of men from the far right, including open neo-Nazis from Ukraine and abroad, took up arms with blessing of Ukraine's authorities, becoming a battalion,

then a Regiment and, eventually, growing into a broader far-right social movement without much parallel anywhere else in the world. Not many of the Azov movement's international allies can boast of, for example, having a political party (National Corps), an erstwhile street paramilitary (National Militia, rebranded as Centuria in 2020), a network of youth camps, multiple social centres, combat sports gyms, book clubs and publishing houses, dozens of affiliated initiatives and projects and, of course, a namesake military unit that's an official part of Ukraine's National Guard.

But the Azov movement's story is, in many ways, a story of all of post-communist Europe. The biggest thumbed nose to the Soviet and Russian legacy in this part of the world has been to (re)embrace nationalism and nationalist organizations of old, like the OUN, to reinterpret national identities to (re)assert power, and where the most admirable trait in a citizen is one's patriotism. The Azov movement, while it's certainly an extreme outgrowth from this soil, didn't sprout up out of nowhere.

My experience covering the far right in central and eastern Europe, in countries like Bulgaria, Serbia, Slovakia and others, led me to the conclusion that Azov is of course similar to other far-right movements. But despite the obvious issues with the far right that exist in these and other countries—including Canada, my home country—Ukraine functions on an entirely different level. The Azov movement is able to operate with a level of impunity their friends in other countries could only imagine: a literal "land of opportunity," as one Azov movement representative once admitted to me. Even as someone who was a latecomer to the proverbial party—I only started to closely follow and cover the movement in the autumn of 2018—it didn't take long for me to realize what I had been missing.

For me, it was the realization that peeling back the curtain of the frontstage—how the movement wanted to present itself—to see the more extreme, hardcore backstage was too easy, perhaps easier than any other far-right group I've encountered before or since. This was all in plain sight, on public social media profiles, in publicly written articles in Ukrainian, Russian and English. And yet, I quickly realized this movement wasn't getting the attention it

deserved, in Ukraine or internationally. By 2022, this situation has changed somewhat: there has been renewed international and particularly American media attention on the Azov movement, especially a focus on the movement's alleged role in facilitating international far-right extremism.

Despite this, Azov still doesn't get the attention or scrutiny it deserves. It's not because the information or insights aren't out there, as the many references in this book make clear. It's that these are often scattered around different corners of the internet, not always in English for an international audience, not always widely promoted and not always complete. At least part of this is because, even when journalists like myself from Ukraine or abroad write about the Azov movement, the amount and depth of our coverage and what we focus on varies at times due to resources, priorities and the interests of our editors and our audiences. In part, this book is my attempt to go past that and provide something that will be of benefit both to scholars of the far right and of Ukraine, but also to non-specialists and members of the broader general public who are interested in the issue of far-right extremism.

Ukraine's Azov movement[1] has exploited Ukraine's fractured social and political situation, least of all the still-hot war, to build a powerful and dangerous far-right movement. It has long been able to operate with a brazen level of openness, including with the alleged protection of powerful political figures and alleged involvement in criminal activities. It's a movement that has served and will continue to serve as a model and inspiration for other far-right movements around the world. Its two-faced embrace of violence and its ambitions to be part of an increasingly powerful transnational far right make it a threat beyond Ukraine's borders.

But Azov is not invincible. Their once lofty ambitions of transnational far-right dominance are on hold—for now. The movement's fortunes have clearly ebbed and flowed over time, with

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1 When speaking of the movement as a whole, I use "Azov" as a shorthand for the entire movement throughout this book, or more often "the movement." When speaking of the specific military unit that gave the broader movement its name, I refer to it as the "Azov Regiment" or "the Regiment."

periods of considerable public presence interspersed with moments of relative quiet. Their alleged patron in Ukraine's powerful interior ministry, Arsen Avakov, is no longer in the job as of July 2021; soon after, some Azov members with alleged involvement in criminal activity found themselves arrested as their leaders complained about a repression of their movement at the hands of Volodymyr Zelenskyy, president since 2019. The movement, however, is still going strong, with no evidence to suggest it's about to disappear anytime soon.

Most of the material for this book is drawn from several years of coverage, research and analysis of the Azov movement. I draw first on interviews with members and senior figures in the Azov movement I've conducted over the past several years, as well as interviews and discussions with numerous observers, experts, other journalists and sources with knowledge of and close to the Azov movement. Secondly, I have made ample use of open source information on the Azov movement, as I've done as part of my work with investigative journalism website Bellingcat, collecting and analyzing almost everything I have ever been able to find on Azov. The amount of publicly available information about and even from the Azov movement, from court records and obscure news articles to semi-private Telegram chat rooms, is simply massive; as is the case with the far right everywhere, it's also woefully underexplored and underutilized. What this book isn't, among other things, is some sort of 'insider' exposé, a dissertation-like account of every detail about the movement or a sort of ethnographic foray into what it means to be a rank-and-file member of a far-right group in Ukraine. These would no doubt be incredibly valuable contributions, but they are not what I've done here.

This book is written from the position that far-right extremism should have no place in our politics and in our societies, and that no amount of far-right extremist rhetoric or actions should ever be considered acceptable. The far right shouldn't be downplayed or outright denied for the perceived good of a country at war. A failure to confront, refuse and reject the far right is a failure to stand up for the values of liberal democracy and a failure to stand up for those in our societies whose lives stand to be harmed most by the

far right—among them women, LGBT+ individuals and members of racialized minority groups. No matter if propaganda forces from an aggressive foreign power will make light of it to make your country look bad. No matter if the country is (still) at war. No matter if there are other significant if not more pressing problems governments to also deal with. No matter if far-right extremism is a problem in other countries too.

I don't pretend to occupy some position of faux-objectivity in writing about the far right, whether the Azov movement or any other far-right movement, group or individuals. There is no objectivity or neutrality when it comes to writing about the far right or about anything, for that matter. Claiming otherwise itself serves "an ideological purpose, whether consciously or not" (Mondon, 2020); instead one should acknowledge and always be aware of one's own biases, ready to challenge them at every turn, though I will be first to admit this is not always the easiest thing to do.

I will conclude here by quickly outlining the structure of this book. In Chapter 1 I explore the roots of Azov, discussing Ukraine's past—or at least, how Azov interprets it—the context of the far right in contemporary Ukraine, as well as the revolution of 2014 and how the Azov movement came to be. I move to discuss Azov's ideological inspirations in Chapter 2, exploring the movement' various domestic and international ideological foundations before ending with a discussion of what I dub the core ideological sentiments that underpin the Azov movement.

Chapter 3 is where I discuss what could best be called Azov's politics in practice—how the movement is structured, what its various elements do and, importantly, how we can best understand how the various 'official' and 'unofficial' elements of the movement relate to each other. The murky world of Azov is what I explore in Chapter 4, a world of political connections and alleged criminality that has helped get the movement to where it is today.

In Chapter 5 I discuss how Azov has, with some success, managed to mainstream itself in Ukrainian politics and society despite being extreme to the core; in Chapter 6 I discuss Azov's international ambitions, including how these ambitions have been thwarted in recent years. The concluding chapter, Chapter 7, is

where I discuss the future of Azov and Ukraine, and make several arguments for how both Ukraine and the international community can deal with one of the most ambitious far-right movements in the world.