

# "HURRAH FOR THE AZOV!"- The curious case of the BBC whitewashing of Nazism in Ukraine

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on

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On 15 January 1934, as Europe stood on the precipice of war, British newspaper the *Daily Mail* printed perhaps its most infamous headline when it declared: "Hurrah for the Blackshirts!"

Proprietor Viscount Rothermere boldly swung his support behind Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists (BUF) as both Hitler and Mussolini rose to power in Germany and Italy respectively.

He saw the nascent fascist movement as a bulwark against the threat of communism both at home and abroad, urging the British public to study closely the Nazi regime in Germany as he accused its opponents of deliberately misrepresenting it.

Rothermere took aim at those who denounced "Nazi atrocities" which he said, "consists of merely a few isolated acts of violence...which have been generalized, multiplied, and exaggerated to give the impression that Nazi rule is a bloodthirsty tyranny."

Fascism never took hold in Britain in the same way it did elsewhere. There are a number of reasons for this, but it was in no small part due to the role of the Communist Party and the organized working class.

Everywhere Mosley and his thugs raised their heads, they were met with mass opposition, with the Battle of Cable Street in London's East End a defining moment in breaking the back of the BUF.

*The Mail* was far from the only media organization to support fascism, which traditionally draws its main source of support from the wealthy elites - including in Britain elements of the Royal Family.

According to Tom Mills, author of *The BBC - Myth Of a Public Service* - the corporation itself has a less than chequered history, supporting a position of appeasement with Hitler as the war clouds loomed ominously.

This, he says, reflected the dominant opinion among the British elite, with speakers hostile to fascism barred from broadcasting including future Prime Minister Winston Churchill who complained about being "muzzled" by the state broadcaster.

Fast forward some eighty years from Viscount Rothermere's efforts to downplay the atrocities committed by the Nazis in Germany and we can see the exact same arguments deployed by the *BBC*, and others, against those decrying the fascist influence in Ukraine.

Last month it broadcast a shocking nine-minute episode of its *Outside Source* program, which was slated by the conservative *Mail on Sunday* journalist Peter Hitchens as "bilge... minimizing the importance of neo-Nazis in Ukraine."

In what can only be described as the *BBC*'s "Hurrah for the Azov!" moment - a modern-day twist on Rothermere's infamous headline - presenter Ros Atkins opens by telling us that "multiple false claims" have been made about Nazis in Ukraine.

The nine minutes that followed were a masterclass in fascism denial, a dangerous move that will surely come back to haunt the corporation and leave its already dubious claims of impartiality and objectivity in tatters.

Those that continue to point out that the Azov Battalion - which became so powerful that it was integrated into the Ukrainian armed forces in a bid to tame it in 2015 - are fascists were dismissed by the *BBC* as Russian propagandists.

Atkins continued his piece to camera insisting that Russia has used Azov as propaganda for years, casually ignoring the countless reports by the *BBC* itself warning of the serious threat posed by far-right forces in Ukraine in the past eight years.



But the *BBC* seems incredibly adept at finding neo-Nazis for its news reports, in which they keep popping up in. Around the same time, the Atkins fascism-denial report was broadcast, *BBC*'s Jeremy Bowen appeared surrounded by soldiers bearing neo-nazi insignia on the flagship Six O'Clock News.

This matters not for Atkins, as he went on to reassure viewers that while a *BuzzFeed* journalist found nazi and white supremacist insignia and ideas among Azov soldiers he met in January, there was very little evidence such views were prevalent among Azov supporters, explaining how the organization had changed since 2014.

Former Azov leader Andriy Biletsky's promise to "lead the white races of the world in a final crusade...against Semite-led Untermenschen" was seemingly not enough for the *BBC*, which conveniently omitted this chilling proclamation from its report.

It did explain that he had left Azov. although the *BBC* did not say that the only reason he did so was that he was elected to the Ukrainian parliament as an MP for the far-right National Corps and that lawmakers are barred from military service.

On his election, Biletsky - known by Azov as Bely Vozhd, or White Ruler - promised however to maintain his career in the armed forces "without titles," something the *BBC* also decided not to include in its disingenuous report.

The state broadcaster went on to wheel out another of its so-called "experts," Vitaliy Shevchenko, as it continued to downplay the far-right ideology of Azov. He claimed to have trawled the battalion's social media accounts and couldn't find anything espousing messages that would indicate neo-Nazi beliefs. This claim was left unchallenged. But it was not true.

Shevchenko clearly didn't look too hard for evidence. Just weeks before his claim, the official Twitter account of the Ukrainian National Guard posted video footage of Azov soldiers dipping bullets in pig fat.

"Azov fighters of the National Guard greased the bullets with lard against the Kadyrov orcs███," the post stated. Orcs is a derogatory term for Muslims for whom pork is forbidden. It was deemed by Twitter to have violated its rules about hateful conduct, although the post remained accessible as the platform deemed in the public interest.

"Neo-nazis and the far-right do not play the role in Ukraine that Russia falsely claims. It didn't in 2014 and it doesn't now," Atkins asserted as the *BBC* fascism-denial piece continued. This conveniently ignores the role such forces played in the post-Maidan coup government, including Svoboda MPs holding the posts of vice prime minister, defense minister, and agricultural minister.

Perhaps he truly believes that the neo-Nazi group has now rebranded itself as New Azov. Perhaps it wasn't the fascists that were responsible for the mass slaughter of 14,000 mainly Russian speakers in the Donbass in 2014 after all, with the United Nations among those who are part of "Putin's propaganda machine"?

For a force that according to the *BBC* doesn't play the role that Russia - and others - claim it does, then why has Azov Battalion's leader Major Prokopenko Denys Hennadiyovych been awarded the country's highest honor, Hero of Ukraine, for the defense of Mariupol?

Another of the oft-repeated claims made by the fascism deniers - and again repeated in the *BBC* piece - is that the lack of electoral support for the far-right is conclusive evidence that proves they have a lack of support or influence in Ukraine. It highlights a fall in support for the far-right Svoboda party, to prove its point.

Of course, this is duplicitous. The electoral prospects or otherwise of the far-right is not a serious or credible measure of its influence. It is the inability - or unwillingness - of the state to control them that is of concern.



The fact that Azov and other neo-Nazi forces have been integrated into the state should be indication enough. The deployment of the C14 onto the streets of Kiev where they have allegedly taken part in anti-Romanian pogroms alongside the Ukrainian police should also be a cause for alarm.

More worryingly though, despite a personal visit to the area, Zelensky's call for the fascists to lay down their arms in eastern Ukraine was simply ignored, as seen in video footage showing an exchange between the Ukrainian President and Azov leaders in the country's east.

Azov fighters - responsible for mass slaughter in the Donbass region - have continued to launch attacks on pro-Russian separatists and civilians in the self-declared republics of Donetsk and Lugansk ever since.

In October 2019, then prime minister, and now member of Zelensky's Servant of the People party, Oleksiy Honcharuk attended a concert organized by neo-Nazi and Holocaust-denying band Sokyra Peruna just months after coming to power.

He was pictured speaking on stage in front of neo-Nazi insignia, the event organized by Andriy Medvedko, chair of a group linked to another far-right group C14, and a suspect in the murder of journalist Oles Buzina who was shot dead in Kiev in 2015.

If the far-right really holds no sway or influence and is not deemed to be significant by the Kiev government, then why address their supporters and appear with them in public? Would it be acceptable for Boris Johnson to address National Front supporters at a Skrewdriver concert?

Of course not. It would be political suicide, and the *BBC* would be among the first to condemn it amid calls for his immediate resignation.

## **AZOV'S INTERNATIONAL EXTREMIST LINKS**

Sanitizing neo-Nazis can of course have dangerous and far-reaching consequences. Despite the *BBC*s protestations, the influence of Azov extends far beyond Ukraine. It has a network of far-right supporters across the world, many of whom are responsible for the most heinous atrocities.

Fascism denial serves to legitimize organizations like Azov. Its integration into the Ukrainian armed forces in 2015 gave it the two things it craved the most, power and access to more sophisticated weapons, a dangerous combination.

This was in part acknowledged by the US Congress which in 2018, under the Trump administration, publicly denounced the Azov Battalion, banning the government from providing any "arms, training, or other assistance" to its fighters because of its white supremacist ideology.

Such a move was a blow to the Azov movement which, according to its head of international outreach Olena Semenyaka, aims to form a coalition of far-right groups across the Western world, with the ultimate aim of taking power throughout Europe.

In Britain, support was built via its wing of the Misanthropic Division (MD), Azov's front around the world for recruitment and propaganda. It forged links with far-right organizations including National Action, now a proscribed terrorist organization.

It is known the Ukrainian far-right organization also has links to US Nazis. The leader of the Rise Above Movement (RAM), which played a leading role in the Charlottesville Unite the Right demonstration during which counter-protester Heather Heyer was killed after being rammed by a car, described Azov as an inspiration.

It is known that a number of those arrested in connection with violence there had traveled to Ukraine to meet with Azov leaders in 2018.

But by far the most deadly of the attacks carried out by alleged Azov supporters was that on the two

Christchurch mosques in New Zealand in March 2019 in which 51 were killed by white supremacist Brenton Harrison Tarrant.

The self-styled Ethno-nationalist spent time in Ukraine in 2015 and planned to move there permanently according to New Zealand's security services, with the country becoming a haven for the global far-right.

During the attack, the shooter donned a flak jacket bearing the sonnenrad (sunwheel) or black sun: a symbol commonly used by the Azov movement, originally adapted from a mosaic on the floor of the SS Generals' Hall.

It is known that the sickening manifesto written by Tarrant and posted on social media to justify his killing spree has been translated into Ukrainian and shared among far-right groups there. Men in military fatigues have been pictured holding copies of the Ukrainian translation of the manifesto while giving Hitler salutes.

Azov leaders have previously described Russian intervention in Ukraine as "a window of opportunity" to further its own far-right global agenda with the deputy leader of the National Corps Mykola Kravchenko urging it "not to waste this unique historical chance" in 2018.

But in case the threat is not clear enough, the target of Azov is not just Russia, but also what it describes as the liberal West.

"We say that we want to return something, reconquer it. We talk about Eastern Europe. Ukraine is now undergoing a revolution and can become the vanguard of this Reconquista.

"From this space, it will expand to Western Europe, and then of course the whole world. We can also speak about the World Conservative Revolution," Semenyaka explained in 2015.

Worryingly, former FBI agent Ali Soufan, who studies Azov, claimed in January 2021 that more than 17,000 foreign fighters had traveled to Ukraine over the previous six years from 50 countries.

The threat Azov poses should not be underestimated.

Last year a *Time* Magazine report found that "apart from offering a place for foreign radicals to study the tricks and tools of war, the Azov movement, through its online propaganda, has fueled a global ideology of hate that now inspires more terrorist attacks in the US than Islamic extremism does and is a growing threat throughout the Western world."

Neo-nazis across the world glorify Azov, and whitewashing them in the way the BBC and other mainstream media organizations have should not be taken lightly.

Just this week German police launched a major operation against neo-Nazi groups across the country, some with links to Azov, while in France there is a very real threat that Marine Le Pen could be elected president having polished her public image.

## **SS WAFFEN AND BANDERA CELEBRATIONS**

Another of the arguments of the Nazi deniers -and again deployed by the *BBC* - is that Zelensky is Jewish. As the *BBC* dutifully tells us, the Ukrainian president lost members of his own family in the Holocaust. A tragedy undoubtedly, but cynically wielded as a PR shield as unquestionable proof that fascism doesn't exist in Ukraine.

Yet annual marches honoring the Waffen SS take place in Lviv and a similar march by 300 Waffen SS supporters took place in Kiev in April 2020. It is also now illegal to criticize former wartime fascist leader Stepan Bandera, who sent thousands of Ukrainian Jews to their deaths in the Holocaust.

An official state celebration is held to mark his birthday on January 1 each year, with fascists and neo-



Nazis taking to the streets in chilling torchlit processions while in 2016 a major road in Kiev was renamed after the Nazi collaborator.

Bandera's Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists portrayed Russians, Poles, Hungarians, and Jews — most of the minorities in western Ukraine — as aliens and encouraged locals to “destroy” Poles and Jews. Yet Mayor Vitaly Klitschko led the city's appeal against a 2019 ruling overturning the name change.

Last year Jewish groups warned of “open anti-semitism” in Ukraine after a high-ranking police official demanded a list of all Jews in the western city of Kolomyia as part of investigations into organized crime.

“Please provide us the following information regarding the Orthodox Jewish religious community of Kolomyia, namely: The organization's charter; list of members of the Jewish religious community, with the indication of data, mobile phones and their places of residence,” a letter signed by police chief Myhaylo Bank stated.

A 23-page document published by the United Jewish Community of Ukraine detailed a shocking rise in anti-semitic attacks led by far-right nationalist groups and politicians on Jewish people in the country in 2021.

## **AZOV - THE NEW “MODERATE REBELS”**

Efforts to rebrand Azov as “misunderstood nationalists” have reached a fever pitch, with the *BBC* fascism-denial report followed soon after by articles in *The Times* - Britain's newspaper of record - *The Financial Times*, *CNN*, and others who were seemingly only yesterday saying the opposite.

Azov has in effect become the new moderate rebel. Yet while the attempts to muster public support for the myriad of jihadist groups fighting to overthrow the government of Bashar al-Assad in Syria failed, it seems to have been more successful in the case of Ukraine.

While arms and cash were provided surreptitiously to the Islamists via what journalist Seymour Hersh described as ratlines, the flow of weapons into the arms of Ukrainian neo-Nazis has been carried out much more openly.

British forces are known to have trained Azov fighters and it was recently revealed that the government has been sending arms to the fascist militia too. This was confirmed in a recent parliamentary question answered by defense minister James Heappey who said it had sent Starstreak anti-aircraft weapons to the Ukrainian military.

“Under the current circumstances, the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense is likely to have operational command of the National Guard, which also includes the Azov battalion,” Heappey said in a statement.

## **CONCLUSION**

What the *BBC* says matters. It has a global audience of around 308 million and is used by most people in Britain for one reason or another. This year it celebrates its 100th birthday and faces many new challenges.

According to Mills around four out of five people in Britain rely on the corporation for news. It plays a major role in shaping public opinion. This is why the state and its intelligence services pay careful attention to the *BBC* and have historically manipulated its output.

The *BBC* helped in no small part to boost fascism-denial in Ukraine among the British public. The Atkins report should go down in history alongside Rothermere's Hurrah for the Blackshirts as one of the most shameful pieces of journalism in British history.



The *modus operandi* of the *BBC* echoes that of the British Establishment, which has no qualms in supporting fascist and authoritarian regimes across the world when they act in its interests.

While Rothermere saw the BUF and Hitler's Germany as a bulwark against Communism, the *BBC* and British Establishment sees Azov as its proxies on the frontline against Russia and China in defense of a US-dominated unipolar world.

The *BBC* position has also been embraced by liberals to the point where any slight deviation from the accepted narrative, including calling for an end to persecution and the release of jailed Ukrainian communists, is branded "pro-Putin propaganda."

Shrill denunciations are accompanied by a refusal to countenance any criticism of Nato - doing so can lead to expulsion from the Labour Party - while some of the left organizations that once-upon-a-time used to fight fascism are now appeasing it.

Those that dare to go against the manufactured consensus find themselves treated as pariahs.

Former Labour and Respect MP George Galloway has been subjected to calls for him to be interred in the Tower of London as a traitor while his Twitter account has been erroneously labeled "Russian state-affiliated media." Scott Ritter, a former UN weapons inspector, has been blocked by the social media giant for questioning the narrative on the massacre in Bucha.

Our job as journalists is however to question everything, especially in a time of war, not to simply act as stenographers for power. We shine a light into dark places in our quest for the truth.

The shutting down of discussion or any attempt to analyze or understand how the conflict in Ukraine started is dangerous and a major barrier to peace. If you don't know how a war started, then you have no hope whatsoever of ending it.

Calling out the *BBC* is not the same as saying every Ukrainian is a fascist, as the detractors and deniers will undoubtedly suggest, as they have before. It is to highlight the obvious dangers of legitimizing a dangerous movement that by its own admission seeks world domination. The *BBC* should play no role in whitewashing fascism and must be held to account by the government and those that fund it, the British public.