

The ADL issues statement declaring Ukraine's Azov Battalion no longer 'far-right'

By Alexander Rubinstein
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The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) has emailed The Grayzone a defense of the Azov Battalion and refused to condemn the Pentagon for honoring a veteran of the group who sports Nazi-inspired tattoos.

A November 9 email from the Anti-Defamation League to The Grayzone provided a twisted defense of Ukraine's Azov Battalion. Despite its self-proclaimed "anti-hate" mission, the ADL insisted in the email it "does not" consider Azov as the "far right group it once was."

The Azov Battalion is a neo-Nazi unit formally integrated into the US government-backed Ukrainian military. Founded by Andriy Biletsky, who has infamously vowed to "lead the white races of the world in a final crusade...against Semite-led untermenschen," Azov was once widely condemned by Western corporate media and the human rights industry for its association with Nazism. Then came the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

In the months that immediately followed, Azov led the Ukrainian military's defense of Mariupol, the group's longtime stronghold. As the militia assumed a frontline role in the war against Russia, Western media led a campaign to rebrand Azov as misunderstood freedom fighters while accusing its critics of echoing Kremlin talking points. The New York Times has even referred to the unit as the "[celebrated Azov Battalion](#)."

Like the Washington Post and other mainstream outlets, the ADL ignored Azov's atrocities this April in Mariupol, where locals [accused](#) the group of using civilians as human shields and executing those who attempted to flee. One [video](#) out of Mariupol showed Azov fighters proudly declaring the Nazi collaborator and mass murderer of Jews, Stepan Bandera, to be their "father."

The Azov Battalion has long served as a magnet for the international white nationalist movement, attracting recruits from the [terrorist](#) Atomwaffen Division to a US Army Specialist arrested on charges of distributing bomb-making instructions.

Back in March 2022, just a month before the battle of Mariupol, the ADL itself [issued a report](#) acknowledging that white nationalists see Azov "as a pathway to the creation of a National Socialist state in Ukraine."

Eight months later, however, the ADL has changed its tune, asserting to this outlet that Azov has rooted the fascists from its ranks. So did Azov change its Nazi ways, or did the ADL simply shift its messaging to conform to the imperatives of a Biden administration still intent on sending billions in military aid to Ukraine?

The ADL responds to Grayzone report with defense of Azov

The ADL's defense of the Azov Battalion was triggered by an incident this September, when this journalist filed a "hate incident" report through the ADL's website which detailed the contents of a Grayzone [exposé](#) on a Pentagon-sponsored sports competition. Held at Disney World, the weeklong

competition hosted and honored Ihor Halushka, a Ukrainian Azov veteran branded with a Nazi Sonnenrad tattoo — a hate symbol, [according to](#) none other than the ADL.

The Grayzone provided a brief summary of these facts and events to the ADL, furnished supporting photographs, and included a link to the entire report. Asked what the ADL could do to help, this reporter requested they condemn the Pentagon for hosting a neo-Nazi. Upon filing the report, I was immediately given an automated case number and put on the organization's mass mailing list.

Report an Incident

1. DETAILS

2. LOCATION

3. CONTACT

*What happened? *

I want to report a hate crime or hate incident.

Date of Incident *

09/28/2021 

Incident Description *

At the closing ceremony of the Department of Defense's Warrior Games at Disney World in Orlando, Florida, comedian Jon Stewart honored a member of the Ukrainian team, [Ihor Halushka](#), for his "personal example." [Halushka](#) is a former member of the neo-Nazi Azov Battalion and has a Nazi Sonnenrad tattoo on his left elbow. Other members of the Ukrainian team

How can we help?

Please condemn the Department of Defense's invitation of [Halushka](#) and other former members of neo-Nazi organizations to Disney World.

Some 60 days later, the ADL responded, apologizing for the delay yet refraining from acknowledging any of The Grayzone's reporting. Instead, the ADL offered a two paragraph defense of the Azov Battalion. There was, of course, no condemnation of the Warrior Games' hosting of Halushka, and the event has not been included in the ADL's public directory of hate incidents.

"When it was created in 2014, the Azov Brigade was a private military group fighting the then annexation of Crimea," the ADL wrote to The Grayzone. "During this period, it was a group that had a clear far-right influence. In late 2014, the group was brought in as a part of the Ukrainian National Guard and renamed the Azov Regiment. When this happened, the Ukrainian government investigated the group and claims to have expelled it of these far-right members. It was also during this time that its founder Andriy Biletsky left AZOV and has since worked in the greater Azov movement, including founding a far-right political party, the National Corps. In essence, there was a split between the military unit AZOV and the political goals of its founding members. Of course, this is not to say that they have

successfully removed all far-right elements from their ranks, but our Center on Extremism also does not see Azov Regime as the far-right group it once was.”



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“While changes have been made to the group, that does not mean that extremism does not exist within Azov Regiment, and we continue to monitor their developments. Thank you for reporting this to ADL and our COE, we appreciate you bringing this information to us.”

The ADL’s stunning defense of Azov as a largely depoliticized fighting unit is undermined most strongly by the ADL’s own research material.

The ADL harshly condemned Azov before it legitimized it

In 2019, the organization published a [report](#) on “The Internalization of White Supremacy,” which name-dropped Azov 18 times and branded it “a far-right group and militia,” “the far-right organization and militia,” and “a Ukrainian extremist group and militia.”

The report also stated that Azov “has ties to neo-Nazis in Ukraine,” “has reached out to like-minded American extremists,” and “reportedly has connections to Atomwaffen (AWD), an American neo-Nazi group allegedly tied to five murders.”

Later that year, the ADL [noted](#) that an neo-Nazi US Army Specialist that pled guilty to unlawfully distributing bomb-making instructions had “expressed desire to find more ‘radicals’ and travel to Ukraine to fight with paramilitary group the Azov Battalion.”

A more recent ADL report paints Azov in a similarly unflattering light. This March, seven days after Russia launched its military operation in Ukraine, the ADL ran a [blog post](#) entitled, “White Supremacists, Other Extremists Respond to Russian Invasion of Ukraine.” The article referred to Azov as “the

Ukrainian national guard unit with explicit neo-Nazi ties,” and noted that white supremacists “see Azov as a pathway to the creation of a National Socialist state in Ukraine.”

In November, however, the ADL declared that it “does not see Azov Regiment as the far-right group it once was.” To justify its sudden turnabout, the supposed anti-extremism organization pointed to a supposed split between the radical rightist Andriy Biletsky and the Azov rank-and-file.

Biletsky and Azov’s “split” amounts to a literal office divider

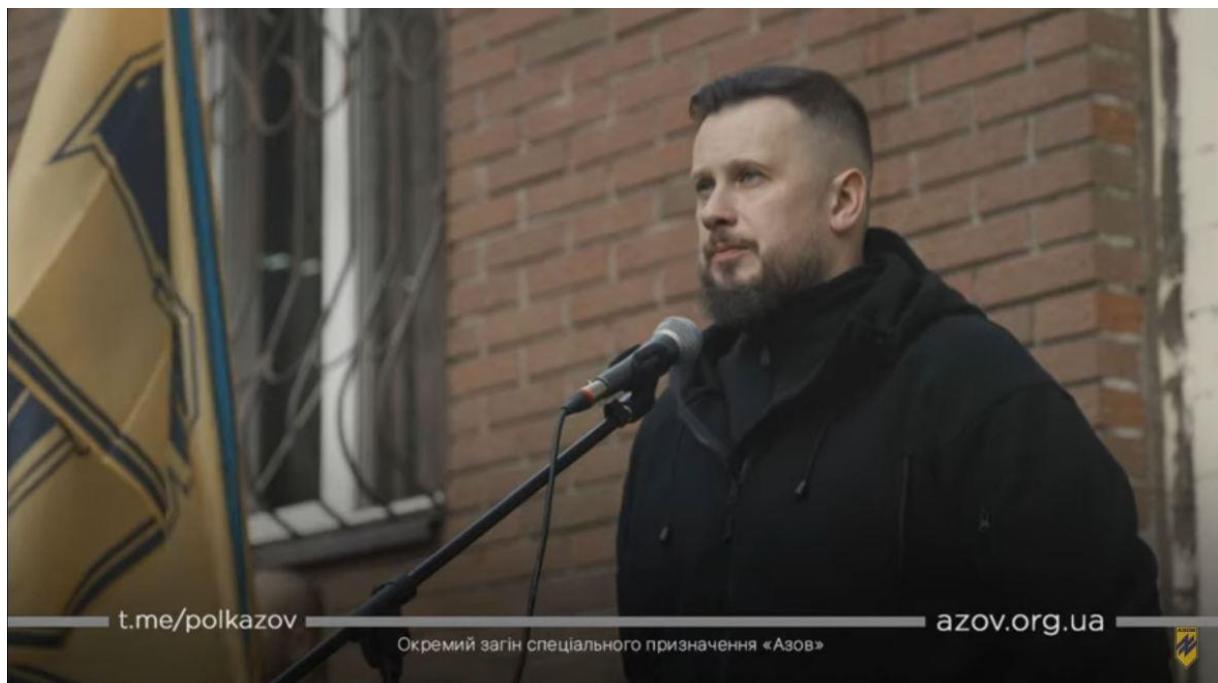
In its email to The Grayzone, the ADL claimed that “the military unit AZOV and the political goals of its founding members” were “split” in 2014, insisting that Biletsky “left Azov and has since worked in the great Azov movement, including founding a far-right political party, the National Corps.”

The ADL noted no such “split” in 2019 when they characterized the National Corps simply as the “political wing of Azov.”

In fact, the close association of Azov with the National Corps was widely acknowledged in both **media outlets** and **think tanks** funded by the United States government.

“Azov’s Kyiv recruitment center and military academy share a location with the offices of the National Corps,” a researcher for the US government-sponsored Bellingcat outlet explained in the NATO-affiliated Atlantic Council in 2020. The researcher added that Azov “routinely hosts Biletsky (and other former commanders) at its bases and welcomes his participation in ceremonies, greeting him as a leader.”

In fact, on October 26, 2022 – a mere two weeks before the ADL asserted a “split” between the Azov Battalion and the “political goals” of its founder – Biletsky delivered a **speech** at a ceremony in Kiev celebrating the renaming of a street after Azov in commemoration of their fight in Mariupol this April.



Azov Battalion founder Andriy Biletsky honoring the “heroes of Azov” on October 26, 2022

“There is a ton of liberal white washing when it comes to fascists in Ukraine”

While the ADL claimed to The Grayzone that Ukraine's government presided over a purge of neo-Nazis from Azov's ranks, the media appearances of Azov members this year tell a decidedly different story.

As The Grayzone [reported](#), Italian authorities issued a warrant this November for the arrest of Anton Radomsky, an Azov fighter, for planning to attack a shopping mall near Naples.

Also in November, an Azov photographer's public relations tour of the Eastern United States was interrupted by [protests](#) after his history of [posting](#) Nazi imagery on social media came to light.

And contrary to the ADL's spin, interviews with foreign fighters embedded with Azov paint a picture of a fighting group that is still honeycombed with hardcore neo-Nazis.

"Azov Battalion still has a lot of its neo-Nazi presence," an American named Justin, who fought with Azov in Mariupol, claimed in an [interview](#) published on October 8. According to the former volunteer, his battalion commander was a "fucking Nazi" who kept a photograph of Adolf Hitler as his desktop background on his computer. The American explained that he and his fellow soldiers would greet each other with sieg heil salutes.

An equally revealing [interview](#) which appeared on November 12 featured comments from an American volunteer for the Azov Battalion named Kent "Boneface" McLellan.



Kent "Boneface" McLellan

"Boneface" boasts a [lengthy](#) arrest record in the US, including an incident in which he was filmed by an undercover government informant participating in paramilitary training with the American Front neo-Nazi organization. According to prosecutors, the group was planning "to kill Jews, immigrants and other minorities."

In the November interview, Boneface admitted to taking photographs of Ukrainian fighters "posing with the corpses of a lynched pregnant woman and a man they said was her husband" for a video entitled "Kikes get the rope." He also claimed to have appeared in a video depicting a botched crucifixion.

But Boneface's comments on the prevalence of neo-Nazis within the ranks of Azov offer the clearest refutation of the ADL's assertion that the battalion is "no longer the far-right group it once was."

"There is a ton of liberal white washing when it comes to Fascists in Ukraine," McLellan said, rattling off popular talking points: "Nazis don't exist"; "Azov battalion and Azov regiment are different"; "They took all the Nazis out of Azov."

"I speak out against the white washing of Nationalists by the media," he added. "I use Twitter to mainly troll the (western) left, as they believe Ukraine[s] military isn't full of nationalist ideals."

Is the ADL as credulous as the rest of Ukraine flag-waving liberal America when it asserts that Azov has been de-radicalized? Or are they just trolling us too?