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Ukraine Could Become a Training Ground for Neo-Nazi Groups

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In the wake of Russian president Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Ukraine on 24 February, neo-Nazi movements in the West are eyeing Ukraine as a training ground to gain combat experience for future race wars they believe are coming to their home countries. One such group, which began in Texas in 2015, is [Atomwaffen Division](#) (AWD), aims for a collapse of civilization so that a whites-only society may rise up. The group, whose name is German for "nuclear weapons", has also been linked to [five murders](#) across three states in the United States. AWD was believed to be dead last year when its leader, 24-year-old Cameron Shea, pled [guilty to terror related crimes](#).



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But the AWD is not dead yet. According to a [report](#) by the Combating Terrorism Center, a German affiliate of AWD emailed death threats to Green Party politicians in 2019. "The German news magazine *Der Spiegel* reported that an email to one of them, Claudia Roth, read: 'You are currently the second name on our hit list' and was signed 'Sincerely, Atomwaffen Division Deutschland'." In addition to Germany, AWD has branches in the United Kingdom, Canada, the Baltics, Russia, Italy, Finland, and France. Last September, a 20-year-old in Germany was arrested on suspicion of planning a terrorist attack and was found with [600 home-made explosives](#). Investigators stated he was in contact with the AWD. In December 2021, five men who were members of AWD were [arrested for a terror plot](#) with a significant number of weapons and tens of kilos of explosives.

Since 2015, over [17,000 foreign fighters](#) have gone to Ukraine from fifty countries. While the majority of these fighters are not radical ideologues, security consultant and former FBI agent Ali Soufan finds similarities between the current situation in Ukraine and the power vacuum left by the US after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989. "Pretty soon the extremists took over. The Taliban was in charge. And we did not wake up until 9/11. This is the parallel now with Ukraine."

Hate is a Global Network

What is particularly alarming in this crisis is that Ukraine has its own neo-Nazi militias. The Azov Regiment has a network that [extends from California to New Zealand](#): "It has its own political party; two

publishing houses; summer camps for children; and a vigilante force known as the National Militia, which patrols the streets of Ukrainian cities alongside the police. Unlike its ideological peers in the U.S. and Europe, it also has a military wing with at least two training bases and a vast arsenal of weapons, from drones and armored vehicles to artillery pieces.”

In 2020, [two members of AWD](#) attempted to join the Azov Regiment in order to gain combat experience and were deported by the Ukrainian government. The recruitment center for Azov is a building called Cossack House in the center of Kyiv, right in the middle of the action. Olena Semenyak, the head of international outreach for Azov, [told Time in 2019](#) that “Azov’s mission was to form a coalition of far-Right groups across the Western world, with the ultimate aim of taking power throughout Europe.” The narrative of Right-wing “lone wolf” attackers no longer matches reality. Neo-Nazi movements are a part of a global network with the aligned goal of inciting a race war. With a militia like Azov already well-established in Ukraine, groups like AWD will gain the knowledge and experience they seek to bring back home.

Recently, the *Counter Extremism Project* released an [notice](#) that: “Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has sparked online activity from far-Right white nationalists and neo-Nazi groups, supplementing the existing movement of extremists emboldened by Russia’s 2014 invasion of Ukraine.” Groups like AWD and Azov exploit calamities in order to “[maximize their impact on domestic politics](#).” There is a need for perspective with this. As David Malet, a professor in the School of Public Affairs at American University, has pointed out, while Russian propaganda has pushed the message that Ukraine’s foreign fighters are all Nazis, the reality is that such radicals are joining *both* sides of the conflict—and the [Russian state has instrumentalized the far-Right](#) in a more systematic way, with its Russian Imperial Movement (RIM) acting as the fountainhead for white supremacist groups across the West.

Radical Atrocities Impact International Mindset

Even if those who travel to Ukraine are not neo-Nazis, there is a risk that foreign fighters will be radicalized in-theatre after arrival. It has been widely known among extremism experts that Ukraine has “emerged as an [important hub](#) in the transnational white supremacy extremism network.” The evidence for the risks of radicalization and recruitment have been indisputable for some time.

In late February 2022, days after Russia began its effort to destroy Ukraine, the Ukrainian National Guard tweeted a video of Azov members covering their [bullets in pig fat](#), intended as an insult targeting the “Kadyrovtsy”, the Muslim Chechen units within Russia’s army that are controlled by Chechnya’s Putin-appointed ruler, Ramzan Kadyrov. According to a [report](#) produced by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) from 2016, “A man with a mental disability was subject to cruel treatment, rape, and other forms of sexual violence by eight to ten members of the

‘Azov’ and ‘Donbas’ battalions in [...] 2014.” In 2015, a man was tortured by electrocution, waterboarding, and having his genitals beaten in order to gain information about government checkpoints.

The efforts of groups like AWD should be of high concern to various nations of the West. Approximately [one-third](#) of the terror plots that have been foiled in the UK since 2017 have been by Right-wing extremists. In the US, far-Right radicals perpetrated [two-thirds](#) of terrorist attacks and plots in 2019 alone.

AWD also has a [history of threatening journalists](#). Their presence in Ukraine is concerning in terms of what effect it may have on media coverage, especially in cases of human rights abuses. The world has yet to see a war of this magnitude presented to them so continuously via social media and such a massive media presence. Radicalized local and foreign fighter groups will continue to capitalize on social media networks and easily promote their disinformation campaigns. The manipulation of messaging and minds will not be limited to only those inside Ukraine. Right-wing extremist groups have proven their capability in distorting the truth and altering perceptions throughout the West. The tumultuous combination of groups like AWD and Azov joining forces is incredibly alarming for countries who may have returnees, but primarily for military forces, aid workers, journalists, and civilians in Ukraine at this time.

With the current state of chaos in Ukraine and porous borders near Poland, members of Atomwaffen Division and other neo-Nazis will be welcomed with open arms and plentiful resources provided by the Azov Regiment. Several [European leaders](#) have supported their citizens going to Ukraine to fight, referencing—often ahistorically—past struggles like the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War. The unfortunate irony of this sentiment is that it may end up creating the fascist side that they once faced and are now in fear of.

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