

THE AZOV REGIMENT



Lt. Col. Stephen R. Bowers, USA Ret., is Director of East West Open Roads and served in the U.S. Special Operations Command. He is retired from James Madison University, Va., where he was a professor of political science

Introduction

The turbulence of the post-communist era in Eastern Europe has brought numerous disruptions and violence conflicts. At the same time, there have been political disappointments such as the failed promise of **Petro Poroshenko**'s election as Ukrainian president in 2014. The Ukrainian turbulence of recent years is a reminder of the disappointments of the post-Soviet era.

Post-Cold War Era

The end of the Cold War, rather than bringing a “peace dividend” that would reduce America’s international obligations, created an era of new responsibilities for the US military. As the Soviet Union disintegrated and the Kremlin became a less imposing and singular military threat, the numerous components of what had been the world’s last great empire morphed into smaller but nonetheless vexing challenges. The Partnership for Peace program created opportunities for US National Guard units to play important advisory roles in many of the former Communist Party states. U.S. active-duty military personnel were stationed in other East European states as well as

former Soviet republics such as Uzbekistan where they supported combat units in Afghanistan. Consequently, American soldiers faced demands for more overseas deployments and further education in subjects such as cross cultural communications and language training.

When newly independent nations were created out of former Soviet republics, their leaderships often sought closer relations with the United States and perhaps eventual membership in NATO. The friendly embrace of these states carried new challenges for the United States that threatened to bring US forces into confrontations with Russian troops. Our military relationship with the Baltic republics was relatively benign but when Russia invaded the Georgian Republic in 2008, several hundred American soldiers in Tbilisi became a final barrier keeping the Russians from occupation of Georgia's capitol. US support for the pro-Western Ukraine represented an even greater challenge for the American military. With the annexation of Crimea and the clashes with Russian forces and Russian "volunteers", there were questions not simply about our providing logistical support – socks, for example – but weapons to aid Ukrainian forces in their combat operations. When Russian forces took three Ukrainian ships and two dozen sailors in November, 2018, the Ukrainian crisis threatened to escalate and engulf Western states sympathetic to Kiev.

Throughout most of the Cold War, few Soviet specialists gave much thought to what might follow the collapse of communism. It was not for lack of interest but because of a belief among Western scholars that the system was unlikely to fail. Should it do so, the casual assumption among academics was that communism would be replaced by something like Western democracies. There was limited consideration of the possibility that the collapse of the communist system would unleash the bitter nationalist sentiments that had been suppressed by communist dictatorships. The years since the fall of the USSR have brought violent clashes that run counter to the Marxist belief that societies would be defined by their relationship to the means of production rather than to ethnic heritage. Events in post-Soviet Ukraine are a vivid illustration of the failure of the Marxist predictions. Ukraine has long struggled for its independence enduring tensions with Poland and Russia since the Middle Ages. This tension was particularly noticeable during the inter-war years as both Poland and Russia sought control over Ukraine.

This regional conflict contributes to the often aggressive nationalism that Ukrainians exhibit, a nationalism that contrasts sharply with Western nationalism. "Nationalism in the West arose in an effort to build a nation in the political reality and the struggles of the present without too much sentimental regard for the past; nationalists in Central and Eastern Europe created often ... an ideal fatherland, closely linked with the past, devoid of any immediate connection with the present". (Serii M. Ploky, *"The History of a "Non-Historical" Nation: Notes on the Nature and Current Problems of Ukrainian Historiography"*, www.jstor.org/stable/2501745?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents)

Ukrainian nationalism gave birth to Stepan Bandera, whom Russia labeled as a criminal and Ukrainians worship as a national hero. As a member of the Union of Ukrainian Nationalist Youth, Bandera vowed to fight until Ukraine was independent or die trying. Today there are many Ukrainians who have similar beliefs and are ready to join militia or quasi-vigilante groups to secure Ukraine's independence. From the Russian perspective, Ukraine has been a part of the Russian empire's historical heartland and was something the Russian state could never surrender to the West.

When the USSR collapsed, Ukraine's desire for independence grew with that of other Soviet republics. When offered EU membership, Ukrainians hoped for change and security. Vladimir Putin saw the EU overture toward Ukraine as a threat to Russia's economic interests and as an EU effort to expand its "sphere of influence". Moreover, it undermined Putin's apparent effort to restore the Soviet Union.

The power vacuum created by President Victor Yanukovich's removal from office in February of 2014 created an opportunity for Russia to annex Crimea. Russia's occupation of Crimea cut the Crimean population off from Ukraine. When authorities in Kiev protested, they were branded as fascists or neo-Nazis bent on an ethnic cleansing of Russians living in Ukraine.

In the subsequent referendum, Russian speaking Ukrainians or Crimeans voted in favor of secession from Ukraine. The Ukrainian government, backed by many EU and NATO members, disputed the legality of the referendum. When Crimea declared its independence, there was an intensification of the conflict between ethnic Ukrainians and Russian-secessionists.

The creation of what became known as the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) in eastern [Ukraine](#) exacerbated nationalistic tensions. The DPR is a non-recognized state which is a Russian client dependent on Moscow for humanitarian and military support. Ukraine branded the DPR a terrorist group and supported the Azov Regiment as an organization that would destroy such terrorist threats.

Reactions to Russian Military Success in the East

Formed in May 2014 when Ukrainian military was being overwhelmed by Russian backed separatist forces, the *Azov Battalion*, as it was then, was a volunteer militia of 1,000 members and a response to Russian military activities Ukraine's eastern regions. When the Ukrainian National Guard incorporated Azov, its status changed to a regiment – the Azov Special Operations Regiment – and it was transformed into a regular military unit. Azov was only one of more than twenty volunteer units which joined the fight against Russian separatists in Ukraine's eastern regions.

As a regular unit, Azov undergoes the rigorous training associated with more conventional military organizations. In one of the many ironies of this conflict, the lavish family dacha of former Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovich now serves as the has been transformed into a

training camp for the Azov Regiment. There is also an Azov training facility in Kiev where members are taught basic combat skills.

The Azov Regiment has a complicated reputation. Russia denounces it as a terrorist, fascist group bent on the elimination of peaceful Russians living in the Donetsk region. According to a 2015 Russian report, the organization “is one of the most infamous units of the Ukrainian National Guard”. Russian accounts maintain that these Ukrainian nationalists have committed numerous atrocities and war crimes. An ISIS-style video, allegedly produced by the Azov Regiment, shows a Novorossia fighter being tied to a cross which was then set on fire.

Critics of the Azov Regiment argue that the organization is a haven for Nazis. While there is no way to evaluate the extent to which the unit is pro-Nazi, even Azov defenders admit that there are some Nazis in the Regiment. They argue, however, that the number is small, perhaps no more than 50 out of what may be a total of 2,500 members. Moreover, supporters argue that while there are a few Nazis, they are motivated by their opposition of Putin and Russian aggression and are not working to advance what might be seen as Nazi ideology. In fact, in as much as one can determine what an Azov ideology might be, there is little evidence that the group espouses what can be thought of as a Nazi ideology.

Much has been made of the symbols used by the Azov Regiment. Critics charge that these symbols are evocative of the Nazi past and indicate the group’s neo-Nazi orientation. Some Azov images include the pagan Sunwheel which was adopted by the Nazis but has existed for several thousand years as part of pagan worship. In late 19th century Ukraine there was a blending of pagan and Christian beliefs into what is described as Slavic folk religion. Having been missed by the Age of Enlightenment, pagan beliefs persist in Russia and Ukraine. After the collapse of the USSR, many Ukrainians embraced the US-based international organization Native Ukrainian National Faith, also known as *Rodnovery*. Devastated by large scale unemployment, there was a resurgence of cultural nationalism which encouraged nostalgia for the distant past and its symbols. This was associated with the growth of *Rodnovery* and the effort to regain national pride. The Azov movement, with its utilization of ancient pagan symbols, is a reflection of this post-Soviet development.

It is important to recognize that Azov is only one of many volunteer military organizations involved in the conflict in eastern Ukraine. However, they enjoy a more secure official status within the institutions of Ukrainian government, both military and political. Moreover, their image seems better than that of other organizations, such as the Right Sector movement, which is has thousands of armed members. While it cooperates with the Ukrainian Army in military operations, Right Sector is not inclined to support the Kiev government and many fear that once the war ends, Right Sector elements would turn their guns against the Ukrainian government. Russia’s media is able to use Right Sector for propaganda purposes suggesting that it is the true face of “Ukrainian fascism”. (www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/ukraine-turns-a-blind-

eye-to-ultrarightist-militia/2017/02/12/dbf9ea3c-ecab-11e6-b4ff-ac2cf509efe5_story.html?noredirect=on)

Youth Camps and Ukrainian National Identity

There is a century old tradition of political activism associated with Ukrainian youth. For example, the Group of Ukrainian Nationalist Youth was founded in Prague in 1922. In this period, the complexion of the camps has varied greatly with some dedicated to violence and ethnic hatred while others have been motivated by a desire to protect themselves and their families.

At a minimum, the current camps, which are supervised and often funded by the Ministry of Youth and Sports, are dedicated in a broader sense to develop a sense of national identity and patriotism. According to a Ministry spokesperson, each camp is evaluated by a Ministry panel which works to exclude funding for any which show “signs of xenophobia and discrimination.” (www.apnews.com/94fe1c68205a43ca96fcc89c88a7cc9f)

Azov is not the only Ukrainian military organization associated with nationalist conceptions. It is, however, condemned for its “biological racism”, an imprecise term which is difficult to define. The term is employed in connection with the Azov Regiment’s determination to destroy all Russian influence in the region. The notion is clouded by the fact that Ukrainians and Russians have intermarried with such frequency that it is often difficult to determine who is Ukrainian and how is Russian. In the early years of the unit’s existence, at least twenty Russians who were motivated by their opposition to Vladimir Putin came from the Russian Republic to join Azov in its struggle to defend Ukraine. In interviews, many of those Russians declare that it was their opposition to the Putin regime that prompted their decision to go to Ukraine. In so doing, they often say, they are not simply defending Ukraine but also a Europe which is likely to be directly threatened by Putin’s expansionist objectives. Some Russian speakers, such as Yuriy Yermenko, have even assumed leadership positions. (“Azov: Russians Join Ukraine’s Azov Regiment”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uWYFWyq4C2U&t=58s>, 14 October 2014)

By contrast, some former US and UK military veterans praise Azov and argue that it is simply resisting Russian territorial expansion into the rest of Ukraine. When founded in 2014 as the Azov Battalion, as noted above, the unit took over a seaside villa that belonged to Ukraine’s pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich and thus cemented the unit’s reputation as a repudiation of the old political order. A 2017 report by Nolan Peterson, a US veteran of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, insists the Azov Regiment has no overall ideological orientation beyond its commitment to defend Ukraine. While visiting with members of the Regiment, Peterson observed a variety of motives but its most frequent motivation was simply the desire to establish control of the Ukrainian border and reclaim secessionist dominated Luhansk and Donetsk. In its more ambitious statements, Azov leadership expresses a desire to reclaim Crimea.

While some observers maintain that the Regiment is untrained and undisciplined, Peterson noted that what started as a civilian volunteer paramilitary unit has, since 2015, benefitted from sophisticated training programs. Among the most notable is a specialized course for noncommissioned officers. Only 5% of the personnel of the Azov Regiment have actually attended a Ukrainian academy, a situation that makes it easier for Azov soldiers to embrace training that is completely different from Soviet concepts that are still part of formal post-Soviet military education. The new goal, Azov spokesmen maintain, is to train soldiers more like American troops who are taught to think for themselves in a tactical environment.

The unit now enjoys a positive reputation among Ukrainian forces that recognize its skill set which includes an ability to cross through minefields, safely defuse booby traps, and handle explosive ordnance threats. New recruits go through several months of training before deployment in combat operations. The Azov Regiment consists of two infantry battalions and uses a military uniform that looks a lot like those worn by US troops. There is also an artillery battalion, a drone reconnaissance team, a sniper platoon, a canine team, and a combat service support unit.

The Ukrainian government provides financial and military support for the Azov Regiment and the unit falls under the command of the Ukrainian Ministry of Interior. The Ukrainian National Guard has given the unit several modified T-64 tanks and provides Regiment members with their basic pay of approximately \$400 per month.

Yet, there have been questions about the degree of official Ukrainian as well as American support for Azov. While this may be no more than disinformation, officials of Ministry of Defense of the Donetsk People's Republic claimed that during the 2015 ceasefire Ukrainian officials had contacted them and requested them to direct mortar fire against elements of the Azov Regiment. According to DPR spokesman Eduard Basurin, Ukrainians authorities had complained about the regiment's "insubordination" and "aggression toward the civilian population" and wanted DPR forces to restrain the Azov fighters. Basurin maintained that this request was simply an effort to trick DPR forces into violating the ceasefire so it ignored the request.

American funding for Azov became a controversial subject as speculation arose about alleged human rights violations by the unit's personnel. The 2016 U.S. defense appropriations bill was to have banned US military aid for Azov but when the budget was finalized, aid was restored. In December 2017, the State Department announced the U.S. would provide enhanced defensive capabilities for Ukraine and, in January 2018, there were reports that U.S.-made weapons were being used by the Azov Regiment. There was further controversy about US military aid to Ukraine in 2019. However, in September, the Trump administration announced that it was going to provide \$250,000 in military aid to Kiev during its ongoing war in the east.

(www.defensenews.com/congress/2019/09/12/white-house-releases-250-million-in-ukraine-military-aid)

For several years, the Azov regiment suffered from an apparent decline in official support and confidence. For three years the unit did not participate in combat operations but was essentially confined to barracks. Most of its time was devoted to training and lobbying for more equipment. In February, 2019, its status changed as it was attached to the 30th Mechanized Brigade of the Armed Forces and resumed combat operations. (tsarizm.com/news/eastern-europe/2019/02/03/ukrainian-azov-regiment-returning-to-front-lines-in-donbass)

During these years, the Ukrainian-Russian conflict has threatened to further destabilize the region. However, the upset election of Volodymyr Zelenskiy, the 41 year old comic who defeated the Ukrainian incumbent Petro Poroshenko to become President of Ukraine, set the stage for what might become a rapprochement between these two former Soviet republics. (www.rferl.org/a/zelenskiy-putin-discuss-east-ukraine-conflict-in-first-phone-call/30050156.html) Zelenskiy's broad reform agenda, which included dissolution of the Ukrainian parliament, created improved prospects for ending the long war between Ukraine and Russia. The prisoner exchange on 7 September 2019, an event widely seen as a political victory for both Zelenskiy and Putin, inspired optimism about prospects for an end to the long conflict in eastern Ukraine. (www.rferl.org/a/after-ukraine-russia-prisoner-swap-can-zelenskiy-capitalize-on-momentum-/30151851.html)

Prospects for the Azov Regiment

The Azov Regiment's future is difficult to predict. It is reminiscent of the region's past with its rekindling of Ukrainian nationalism and its utilization of ancient symbols. It also builds on memories of the turbulent Ukrainian-Russian relationship. However, with its military skill set, Azov can influence the region's future development as it combats further Russian incursions and draws Ukraine toward the West. Given improvements in the Ukrainian economy as well as improved prospects for an end to the combat, it is increasingly likely that Azov will enjoy political benefits from its participation in the turbulent events since its formation in 2014.

STEPHEN R BOWERS

Key Qualifications:

Professor Bowers has over forty years of teaching at the college and university level. In addition to his teaching experience, Bowers has had governmental assignments relevant to International Relations and East European Politics. From 1982 through 1987, Bowers worked as an Intelligence Analyst for the US Department of the Army. Over the years, he developed an extensive multi-disciplinary program of study of the political transition of communist societies in Eastern Europe. In 1998, Dr. Bowers founded an institute to support teaching, research, and service in this area. Since 2006, this institute has functioned as the Center for Security and Science. Since 1998, Bowers has directed contracts for the Defense Intelligence Agency, the National Intelligence Council, and the USMC Intelligence Activity. In February, 2000, Bowers

opened an office in Moldova to support work in the former USSR. While he retired from Liberty University in 2018, he continued residential teaching at the Romanian American University in Bucharest and created *West East Open Roads*, an organization to study strategic issues in Eastern Europe and the former USSR.

Education:

University of Tennessee, 1971-75, PhD, Political Science

University of Tennessee, 1969-71, MA, Political Science

Foreign Service Institute, Area Studies Certificate for orientation course, Washington, DC, 1986

Experience:

Professor of Government, Helms School of Government, Liberty University, Lynchburg, Virginia, 2006-2018 and instructor in online program in government from 2012-2015

Professor of Political Science, James Madison University, 1987 - 2006

Annual Visiting Professor, Romanian American University, Bucharest, from 2010 until present

Lectured for the Romanian Intelligence Service, Bucharest, March, 2019

Lieutenant Colonel, US Army Reserves (Retired), various assignments in Civil Affairs, 1967-1994, with emphasis refugee problems, community development programs, cross cultural communication, and low intensity conflict

Graduate Faculty, Campbell University, Buies Creek, NC, 1984-1987

Senior Intelligence Analyst, East European Affairs, 1st Special Operations Command, Fort Bragg, NC 1984-87 2

Visiting Professor, Special Warfare Center, School of International Studies, Fort Bragg, NC, 1982-84

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Sociology, and Political Science, Berry College, Rome, Georgia, 1976-82

Assistant Professor, Floyd Junior College, Rome, Georgia, 1975-76

Instructor, Tennessee Wesleyan College, Athens, Tennessee, 1972-75

Recent publications

“Impact of OPEC + Meeting on Romanian Energy”, Institute for World Economy of the Romanian Academy, 11 December 2019, <https://iem.ro/en/impact-of-opec-meeting-on-romanian-energy/>

“Gazprom as Policy Instrument”, Market for Ideas, No. 20, November-December, 2019, www.themarketforideas.com/gazprom-as-policy-instrument-a513/

“The Azov Regiment”, accepted for publication by GeoPolitica (Bucharest)

Issues of the Post-Communist Transition, Editor (with Marion T. Doss, Jr), The Council for Social and Economic Studies (Washington, DC), 2001

Technology and Terrorism, (monograph, with Kimberly Keyes), Institute for the Study of Conflict and Terrorism, London, 1998

Tibet: Endurance of the National Idea, Council for Social and Economic Studies (Washington, DC), 1995

Selected Articles

“Russian Petroleum: Partnerships and Influence”, SFPPR News and Analysis, March 20, 2018

“Civic Values and the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Post-Communist Romania”, SFPPR News & Analysis, 13 January 2015

“Humor as a Political Weapon”, SFPPR News & Analysis, 8 July 2014

“Ramzan Kadyrov and the Chechen Political Landscape”, SFPPR News & Analysis, 30 October 2013

“Chechens: Sochi or Syria?” SFPPR News & Analysis, 17 September 2013

“False Dawn and High Stalinism”, SFPPR News & Analysis, 22 August 2013 3

“The Islamic Threat to Eastern Central Asia”, (with Steven Samson), Journal of Social, Political and Economic Studies, Washington, DC, Winter, 2006

“The Politics of Perceptions”, Armed Forces Journal, July, 2005

“Suicide Terrorism in the former USSR”, (with Ashley Derrick and Mousafar Olimov) Journal of Social, Political and Economic Studies, Washington, DC, Fall, 2004

“Identification of Transnational Threats”, Critical Infrastructure Protection Project, George Mason University/ James Madison University, 2003

“Problems of Post-Communist Education: The Romanian Example”, Journal of Social, Political and Economic Studies, Washington, DC, Fall, 2002

“Criminal Justice in a Post-Communist Society: The Romanian Criminal Justice System” (with Marion T. Doss, Jr., and Cristina Hanganu, International Journal of Police Science & Management. (Spring, 2001)

“Low Intensity Conflict in the Balkans”, (with Marion T. Doss, Jr), Armed Forces Journal International, May, 1999

“Ethnic Politics in East Europe”, Beyond the Soviet Union: The Fragmentation of Power, edited by Max Beloff, (United Kingdom: Ashgate Publishing, 1997)

“Information Warfare”, Armed Forces Journal International, February 1998, pp. 30-31.

“Dimensions of Transnational Conflict” with Stuart Kaufman, Nationalities Studies, Vol. 26, No. 1, Spring, 1998.

“The Tibetan Resistance Movement”, Jane's Intelligence Review (June, 1994) pp. 283-285

“The 'Dniester Republic': Further Insights”, Jane's Intelligence Review (Great Britain), Vol. 6, No. 12, December, 1994

“The Ossetian Conflict,” Jane's Intelligence Review, Vol 6, No. 1, 1994

“The Partition of Moldova”, Jane's Intelligence Review (Great Britain), Vol. 5, No. 10, October, 1993

“The Crisis in Moldova”, Jane's Intelligence Review (November, 1992), pp. 483–64

Ethnic Politics in Eastern Europe, Conflict Study No. 248, Research Institute for the Study of Conflict and Terrorism, London, February, 1992

"The East European Revolutions", East European Quarterly (University of Colorado), June, 1991

Presentations and Briefings

On 27 March 2017 Hosted a conference on Moldovan affairs at Liberty University. Former Moldovan diplomat Veaceslav Pituscan, Dr. Vlalda Licenco, and representatives Embassy of Moldovan and the US Department of State participated in the conference.

Hosted one day conference on Moldovan affairs, primary guests were present and former Moldovan Ambassadors to the US, Helms School of Government, March, 2013

Hosted one day conference on Russian affairs, primary guest was Cultural Attaché of the Russian Embassy, Dr. Slava Moshkalo, Helms School of Government, April 2012

Co-hosted one day conference on Russian affairs at the Russian Embassy in Washington, DC, October, 2011

Co-hosted conference on Estonian affairs at Embassy of Estonia in Washington, DC, April, 2010

Co-hosted conference on Albanian affairs at the Embassy of Albania, Washington, DC, in April, 2009

Hosted one day conference on North Caucasus (emphasis on Adygea) for CIA Office of Eurasian Affairs, June 2006

Lecture on Georgian Affairs for CIA Office of Eurasian Affairs, March, 2007

Occasional briefings for Department of State officials assigned to Moldova and for CIA analysts with responsibilities for Moldova from 1997 through 2002

Contact Information:

Cellular 540/421-7174

Business 804 299-2978

E-mail: Dr.stephen.bowers@gmail.com

