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Azov fighters give military training to children, foster patriotism at Kyiv summer camp

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Kids stand in line during rollcall in Azovets patriotic camp on Aug. 19.
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The kids are arguing about who gets which wooden gun.

"That's my gun," says one young boy loudly. He likes it because it fits nicely into his small hands.

"That's a new American version of the rifle," says an older boy, knowledgeably. "I like it better as well."

Once the argument is settled, the kids run off to play at being soldiers.

It's a scene that one could see on playgrounds and at summer camps for kids all over the world.

But this particular camp is run by the Azov Battalion founded by lawmaker Andriy Biletsky, its former commander. Located in the wooded area of Kyiv's Pushcha Vodytsya district, kids at this summer camp aren't just playing soldiers – they're getting actual military training from soldiers who have fought on the front line in Russia's war against Ukraine.

Named Azovets, the camp has been the subject of negative coverage in the Russian media, pro-Russia websites and even U.K. tabloid The Daily Mail.

"Neo-Nazi summer camp: Ukrainian kids taught to shoot AKs by Azov battalion members (PHOTOS)," reads Kremlin-controlled RT's headline for its story about the camp.

"Shocking pictures from inside neo-Nazi military camp reveal recruits as young as SIX are being taught how to fire weapons (even though there's a ceasefire)," reads the headline in the Daily Mail's sensationalized and inaccurate article.

The Azovets summer camp accepts children of Azov Battalion members, as well as kids from Kyiv's nearby Obolon district and further afield. It opened on June 22, runs weeklong programs of activities for groups of 30 to 40 kids. Officially, it is for children aged from nine to 18, but there are kids as young as seven there. A few of the kids had already attended it for several weeks in a row.

What makes the camp most controversial is that it's run by Azov fighters,

some of whom have been labeled as far-right supporters and neo-Nazis. Critics say the battalion's symbol is an inverted Wolfsangel that has oblique but uncomfortable associations with Nazism.

In previous interviews with Ukrainian media, Biletsky says the symbolism is misunderstood. The letters "N" and "I" make up Azov's insignia, which he says stand for "national idea."

Biletsky founded a neo-Nazi group in Ukraine called the Social-National Assembly, and there certainly are neo-Nazis among the battalion's ranks, some sporting Nazi tattoos. Some media have reported that up to 20 percent of Azov's fighters are neo-Nazis, though the battalion's press officers are always at pains to emphasize that Azov, as a military formation, does not share the ideology of its founder Biletsky, or indeed have any ideology other than fervent patriotism.

One of its most famous foreign members, a Swedish sniper called Mikael Skillt, has admitted his past far-right leanings, although he says he has since rejected neo-Nazi ideology. But others in the battalion haven't.

When the Kyiv Post visited the Azovets camp on Aug. 19 the kids were busy with a range of activities, including stripping down and assembling AK-47 assault rifles, target practice (with air guns), tackling assault courses, and practicing combat poses and patrolling. They also take part in various sports and games, do rappelling and climbing, and practice other more traditional scouting and woodcraft skills like tying knots.

"I've been here only for three days, but I've realized that it's not a camp where you just play games. We're getting military training here," one of the kids at the camp told the Kyiv Post.

Out in the forest next to the camp, a group of kids was getting some weapons safety advice from an Azov trainer.

"Do you know what would happen if you kept your fingers on the trigger? If it were a real gun, you could kill your comrades. So, don't do it!" the trainer barks.

"Yes sir!" the kids answer.

The children then practice medically evacuating wounded soldiers from the battlefield.

The militaristic atmosphere at the camp, including strict discipline, has plainly influenced some of the children.

"I got my hair cut really short yesterday," says one boy. "Just because I want it. I look more like a soldier now."

Two older kids, who, like many of the children at the camp, have taken noms de guerre (Medic and Physicist) in imitation of Ukraine's real soldiers, said they now wanted to join the Azov Battalion.

"I want to defend my homeland. There are comrades who support my idea. I think that if it's necessary, I will fight," 17-year old Physicist told the Kyiv Post.

The children at the camp are organized into four groups, depending on their age, with each group overseen by a trainer and caregiver. The camp's day starts early, at 7 a.m. sharp, and ends at 11 p.m. The children sleep in tents.

Access to Azov's own website and supporting websites was closed off to the public last September when the battalion was integrated into the National Guard of Ukraine, but the camp has a page on the Russian social network Vkontakte (<https://vk.com/tabir.azovec>) where it is promoted, and where people can apply to become volunteers, or contact the camp to send their children there.

"The Mission of the Camp: To form the Ukrainian of a new era – a patriot, who is ready to actively participate in building and defending Ukraine," the page's description reads.

It then goes on to describe the range of activities at the camp, which include "interactive lectures and films on historical and military-patriotic themes, which explain to children in simple terms the importance of the homeland and its place in the system of human values."

Some of children stay at Azovets for two or more weeks. Sofia, who has taken the nickname "Tarakan," is one of the kids who have attended the camp since it opened. Her parents are members of the Azov Battalion, stationed in Mariupol.

"I could just stay in Kyiv for the summer, but it's more interesting for me here," Sofia, who's in her mid-teens, tells the Kyiv Post. "A lot of things have changed in my life. Previously, for example, I only listened to foreign music, but now I enjoy Ukrainian patriotic songs."

Sofia's grandfather, Oleksandr Yemets, has regularly visited Sofia at the camp over the last nine weeks, bringing her fresh clothes and food.

"Sofia's parents are patriots. They've raised their daughter with dignity. She wants to be tough, (and) she wants to defend Ukraine," Yemets told the Kyiv Post.

He said that schools pay little attention to the patriotic training of children, and the Azovets camp helps make up for that. He said he believes the camp will be a good influence on his granddaughter.

The military-patriotic songs that the children sing every day as a part of the camp's program do seem to be one of the more popular activities for the kids. Late at night, sitting around a blazing campfire, they belt out their favorites – patriotic songs dating back to Ukraine's previous struggles for independence in the early- to mid-20th century.

The Kyiv Post listened to the words of one of the songs. Its lyrics were about Ukrainian soldiers defeating their enemies. Today that enemy is Russia. A boy who sits on a log softly whispers: "I want that this war will end and we will kill all the Russians."

Azov spokesman Stepan Badai said that the children are not taught songs that call for the killing of Russians or anybody else. "The children sometimes change lyrics when they sing, but they are taught traditional folk or patriotic songs," Badai said by phone.

The evening singalongs are one of Sofia's favorite activities too.

"Many of the songs are about the invincibility of the Ukrainian people. I like those that have words about people who fight to the death – these are the real patriots of their homeland," she said.

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