

# Why Bellingcat's founder promoted a Ukrainian hoax

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The Mariupol theatre was destroyed during the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which began in February 2022. Throughout the conflict it had been used as a civilian shelter, with up to 500 Mariupol citizens reportedly taking refuge there on any given night. At 4:38pm on 16 March 2022 (Eastern European Time; GMT+2), news of the attack on the theatre was announced in a social media post by Mariupol City Council.<sup>1</sup> This was soon picked up by Ukrainian media, who added their own reportage to the emerging information.<sup>2</sup> Soon after that, the bombing of the theatre became international news. Within hours of the incident, US President Joe Biden called Russian President Vladimir Putin 'a war criminal' for the first time.<sup>3</sup> Ukraine has consistently blamed the destruction on a Russian airstrike,<sup>4</sup> while Russia has consistently accused Ukrainian forces of destroying the theatre in a 'false flag'.<sup>5</sup>

On the morning after the bombing, imagery of the ruined theatre was circulated on social media, most notably Twitter and Telegram. Some of this material was recirculated when it was picked up by international media. Figure 1 (top of page 2, below) shows three frames from Ukrainian photos and video of the wreckage, which were broadcast in the UK by Channel 4 News on 18 March 2022.<sup>6</sup> The roof of the theatre had almost completely collapsed, and the building itself was barely identifiable. There is no doubt that these images showed the bombed theatre, as the surrounding area was recognisable and accorded well with photographs taken before the bombing.

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<sup>1</sup> All URLs cited in this essay are preserved in the Internet Archive, and can be retrieved by searching archive.org. The social media platform referred to here was Telegram, which is archive-resistant. A screenshot of the City Council's post can be seen at <<https://imgur.com/gallery/rg9G9Xo>>.

<sup>2</sup> <<https://bykvu.com/eng/bukvy/mariupol-theater-bombed-by-russian-troops/>>

<sup>3</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/CNN16Mar2022>> or <<https://edition.cnn.com/2022/03/16/politics/biden-calls-putin-a-war-criminal/index.html>>

<sup>4</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/Reuters16Mar2022>> or <<https://www.reuters.com/world/russian-bombing-hits-theatre-mariupol-sheltering-residents-city-council-2022-03-16/>>

<sup>5</sup> <<https://www.reuters.com/article/ukraine-crisis-mariupol-theatre-russia-idINL2N2VK0SL>>

<sup>6</sup> The relevant clip of the Channel 4 News report lasts 15 seconds, and is permanently available at <<https://archive.org/details/channel-4-news-mariupol-theatre-report>>.



Figure 1: Frames from Channel 4 News (18 March 2022), showing the Mariupol theatre in ruins.

So, there is no question that the theatre was destroyed. However, the Ukrainian government's claims that people were sheltering in the theatre at the time have never been substantiated. If anything, those claims have grown vaguer with the passage of time. The Ukrainian word ДІТИ (meaning 'kids', i.e. children) had been painted in large letters on the theatre's car parks, supposedly to tell Russian pilots not to bomb the building. The natural assumption, therefore, was that Russia had wantonly and knowingly chosen to bomb a civilian shelter full of children. Numbers were hard to come by, and fluctuated wildly. After a few days of this uncertainty, Ukrainian officials suggested 300 people had died in the theatre.<sup>7</sup> At one point, it was alleged that 1,300 people had survived in a basement bomb-shelter, but were trapped by the fallen building above.<sup>8</sup> Despite this, there were no distraught townspeople trying to dig into the rubble to rescue their families. Nor was there any sign of any kind of rescue operation in progress. No victims' names were released, no terrified friends or relatives ever spoke to the media, and no-one identifiable was ever treated for any injuries.

The only bit of the story that it would seem might ever be objectively confirmed was the claim, made by Ukrainian president Vladimir Zelensky himself,<sup>9</sup> that 130 survivors had emerged from the ruins. 130 living, breathing witnesses and near-victims would be hard to ignore. But again, the 130

<sup>7</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/Reuters25March2022>> or <<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/mariupol-cites-witnesses-suggesting-300-may-have-been-killed-theatre-bombing-2022-03-25/>>

<sup>8</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/Reuters18March2022>> or <<https://www.reuters.com/world/ukraine-says-130-people-have-been-rescued-so-far-bombed-mariupol-theatre-2022-03-18/>>

<sup>9</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/CNN18March2022>> or <<https://edition.cnn.com/europe/live-news/ukraine-russia-putin-news-03-18-22/index.html>>

survivors seemed to be severely camera-shy, totally anonymous, and without living friends or relatives. The fog of war is one thing, but the absence of any kind of verification at all is quite another. If an accusation of a war crime is made, it requires solid evidence. On 25 March 2022, a video emerged online that was claimed to depict the survivors of the Mariupol theatre bombing. It was soon promoted by Eliot Higgins, who is an investigator of considerable repute and founder of Bellingcat.

Bellingcat is an investigative organisation that specialises in Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) in general, and 'geolocation' in particular. Geolocation is the art of identifying places seen in photographs and videos, using environmental clues and information captured incidentally in the same recordings. An incorporated non-profit organisation registered in the Netherlands,<sup>10</sup> Bellingcat receives substantial funding from the US organisation the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and from the billionaire philanthropist George Soros, in the form of the Open Society Foundations. Connections such as these have caused scepticism and controversy about Bellingcat's work. Notably, western intelligence officials have praised Bellingcat, since it provides public cover for debating subjects that might otherwise need to be withheld from the public. On the other hand, Russia has declared Bellingcat to constitute an enemy intelligence body.<sup>11</sup> Western critics, mostly in the Anglosphere, claim that Bellingcat does not operate even-handedly, and only concentrates on exposing the misdeeds of non-western nations. In particular, Bellingcat's tendency to employ figures connected to western intelligence agencies has drawn considerable attention.<sup>12</sup>

The video in question, purportedly showing survivors in the immediate aftermath of the 16 March attack on the Mariupol theatre, was originally published by an account on the social media platform Telegram at 4:35am on 25 March 2022 (Eastern European Time).<sup>13</sup> The Telegram publisher was an account called TPYXA ('TRUHA'), based in the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv. TRUHA has over a million followers on Telegram, and by 31 March 2022 the video had been viewed more than 470,000 times. Accompanying the Telegram video was a short text in Ukrainian, which translates into English as follows:

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<sup>10</sup> <<https://opencorporates.com/companies/nl/72136030>>

<sup>11</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/Reuters8Oct2021>> or <<https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/russia-names-bellingcat-investigative-outlet-foreign-agent-2021-10-08/>>

<sup>12</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/yckj3uzz>> or <<https://www.mintpressnews.com/bellingcat-intelligence-agencies-launders-talking-points-media/276603/>>

<sup>13</sup> The video is now permanently available at <<https://archive.org/details/mariupol-theater-interior>>.

'TRUHA received exclusive footage immediately after the bomb hit the Mariupol Drama Theatre. An eyewitness video shows hundreds of people trying to get out of the building.

It will be recalled that the theatre came under fire on March 16. There is still no exact information on how many people were saved and injured after the incident.<sup>14</sup>

TRUHA offered no explanation for its supposed decision to withhold this footage for nine days, and it is far from clear why video from Mariupol was sent to a Telegram channel based in Kharkiv anyway, the two cities being over 200 miles apart. In all, the video's provenance itself seemed somewhat questionable.

Eliot Higgins endorsed the TRUHA video in a Twitter post made at 7:18am on 25 March 2022 (Greenwich Mean Time). Addressing his 218,000 followers, Mr Higgins described it as 'The first footage from inside Mariupol Theatre after the March 16th airstrike.' He invited the public to 'Compare this to the fictions Russia has been spreading about the attack.' By 31 March 2022, Mr Higgins's republished TRUHA video had been viewed approximately 232,900 times.<sup>15</sup>

The activity seen in the TRUHA video is slow and cautious, not to mention very quiet. No-one seems panicked or agitated in any way. Lively conversation can be heard, but it is the normal level of noise and hubbub you might expect in any crowded public area. There is no screaming or crying, and no ambient background noise of any kind. This seems an unlikely way for survivors to behave as they escape from a bombed-out building. More to the point, there is no indication that this is a bombed-out building at all. There is dust and debris visible, but no more so than might be dislodged by bombings in the theatre's general neighbourhood. The stairs are visibly intact, pictures on the walls are hanging straight, and there is no smoke damage to be seen anywhere.

The combination of a peaceful assembly and an apparently undamaged building does not seem to support the dramatic claims made about what the video depicts. For example, the leading British tabloid the *Daily Mail* described the video as 'horrifying' and told readers that it showed 'injured civilians' who were 'fleeing [the] bomb-ravaged building moments after [the] Russian missile blast.'<sup>16</sup> So we must first make sure that the video really does depict the interior of the Mariupol theatre, and not somewhere else. From this point

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<sup>14</sup> A screenshot of the full Telegram post is at <<https://imgur.com/gallery/bsjfLPx>>.

<sup>15</sup> <<https://twitter.com/EliotHiggins/status/1507255497291878408>>

<sup>16</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/DailyMail25Mar2022>> or <<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10651503/Ukraine-war-video-shows-inside-Mariupol-theatre.html>>

onward, the TRUHA video republished by Mr Higgins will be referred to as 'the questioned video'.

The only point at which it could be possible to match the questioned video with known external features of the Mariupol theatre is a one-second-long glimpse at the very end of the clip (i.e. commencing at 19 seconds into the video). Here, we are presented with a deep shot showing some kind of large hallway, positioned on a lower storey, with people moving about in it. In Figure 2, (below) three frames from the video (labelled A, B, and C) are presented in their natural order (respectively: 19 seconds; 19.5 seconds; and 20 seconds into the video).



Figure 2: Sequential frames from questioned video, showing illumination of lower storey

To the viewer's right in all three frames (A, B, and C), there is a wall with three large vertical oblong apertures. Brilliant and diffuse near-white light is shining through all three apertures. Two of the apertures are clearly visible. The third aperture (nearest to the camera) is obscured from the viewer, but its light can be seen falling separately on the chest of a child wearing a grey hooded anorak (frame A). The child is facing away from the other two apertures, so this light is not coming from either of them.

In frames B and C, indistinct shadows cast by the people in the hallway can be seen on the pillars at the left of each image. These shadows are only slightly shorter than the people casting them. The pillars themselves are somewhat reflective, perhaps marble. In frame C the pillar furthest from the camera is illuminated almost to its full height. This tells us that the light from the three large apertures is coming in at a very low angle, perhaps 10 degrees above the horizontal. The light-source does not vary in intensity or show any

sign of movement.

The natural reading of this scene is that the large oblong apertures are doors or windows and the light-source is the sun, meaning this video was recorded either early in the morning or toward the onset of evening. On 16 March 2022, the sun rose on Mariupol at 5:41am (Eastern European Time) and twilight in the city began at 5:36pm.

Since the three doors or windows letting in the sunlight are clearly of a considerable size, it should be possible to identify them from the exterior of the theatre. There are three of these oblong apertures, and so there should be three corresponding doors or windows in a neat row, visible from the outside of the building. They are not hard to find, as Figure 3 shows

Independent photographs of the undamaged Mariupol theatre were made by Google Street View in September 2019, over two years before Russia invaded Ukraine. These photographs show that the building's easternmost façade had three large entrance doors, spaced symmetrically at ground level. The size of the doors can be estimated by comparing them to nearby vehicles (not shown here). Each door is roughly the same size as the 'footprint' of a decent-sized family car. This agrees with the size of the rectangular apertures seen in the questioned video.



Figure 3: Correspondences between questioned video and external doors of the Mariupol theatre.

Due to the position of the camera-operator who made the questioned video, it is not possible to tell much about the upstairs area from which the civilians are seen descending at the start of the video. In Figure 4 (below) we can see that they are coming from a separate floor, above the ground level (frames A, B,

and C). It has an open, balcony-like quality to it, and the video gives a brief glimpse of its interior balustrades (frame B). Whereas the ground-level hallway is dark and gloomy, with rectangular shafts of natural light pouring in through the three doorways, the level from which the civilians are descending is lit at a level very near to full daylight (frames A and C). This illumination reaches a considerable distance into the building (frame B). The strong light evident on this upper floor agrees with the three huge arched windows visible on the easternmost façade of the Mariupol theatre, which as we have already seen are directly above the three ground-level entrances.



Figure 4: Sequential frames from questioned video, showing illumination of upper storey.

The upper floor, then, is indicated in the diagram below (Figure 5).

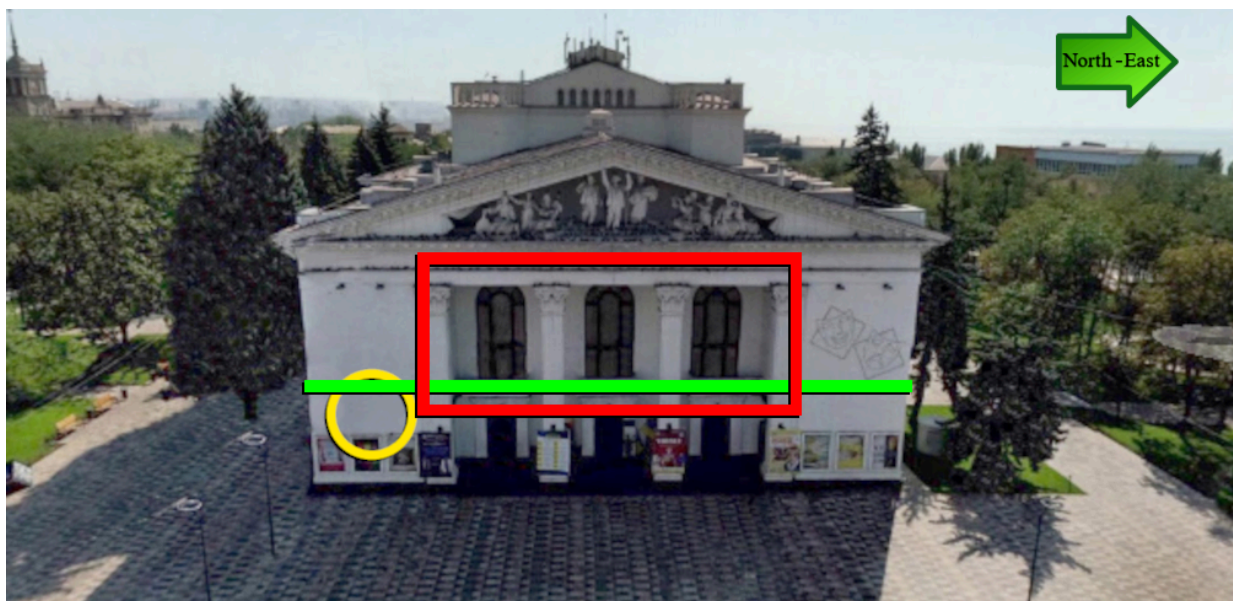


Figure 5: Theatre facade, with inferred details of interior upper storey seen in the questioned video.

If the three large arched windows are the presumed entry points for natural light, then the inferred height of the upper floor is represented by the horizontal green line. The daylight on that upper floor shines in from the right-hand side of the video. The video camera inside the theatre was therefore pointing roughly north-east, which agrees with observations already made about the lower level of the building. The inferred position of the staircase used by the civilians in the video is therefore indicated by the yellow circle.

At this point, there is obviously a good match between the structure of the theatre and the rooms seen in the questioned video. It only remains to be seen whether low sunlight could shine so brilliantly through the theatre's doors and windows, and if so then at what time of day.

The theatre's easternmost façade looked directly down a stretch of a roadway called Myru Avenue. This section of the avenue stretches approximately 600 metres in a straight line,  $105^\circ$  from true North (roughly East-by-South) providing ample clearance for low-angle sunlight.<sup>17</sup> Looking straight down Myru Avenue from the Mariupol theatre's easternmost facade allows us to estimate when the video was recorded.



Figure 6: Myru Avenue, Mariupol, as seen looking East-by-South of the Mariupol theatre.

The sun would have risen at precisely  $105^\circ$  on 21 February 2022 – the day before Russia's military operation began. Due to the Earth's axial tilt,

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<sup>17</sup> The apparent reason for this astronomical alignment is that Myru Avenue (in English: 'Peace Avenue') was originally Catherine II Avenue. It was constructed to honour Catherine the Great, the Russian Empress who conquered Ukraine in 1783. Today, the Sun rises directly above Catherine's avenue on February 21<sup>st</sup> each year. This corresponds to the anniversary of the birth of Catherine's husband, Peter III, who was born on 10 February 1728 judged by the old Julian calendar in use at that time.



sunrise would have drifted slowly northward over subsequent days until it occurred at 100° on 2 March 2022. This seven-day interval would fit very well with the direct shadows seen inside the theatre in the questioned video, which prove that the sunlight shone almost square-on to the theatre's easternmost facade.<sup>18</sup>

This last detail provides us with an approximate natural 'timestamp' for the questioned video. It was recorded at some point during the first hour or so of daylight, on an unidentified morning. Therefore, the natural reading of the activities seen in the questioned video is that people who have spent the night on an upper floor of the theatre, are slowly preparing to leave their shelter and go about their daily lives as best they can in a war zone.

In all, we can be satisfied that this basic geolocation exercise has produced a match. The contents of the video correspond well to the identifiable features of the theatre's easternmost façade. What negates the dramatic claims made about the video is the time of day. The direct, low sunlight pouring into the theatre means that the video was recorded early in the morning. Clocks only confirm what the sun dictates, and it is not possible for the sun to tell the wrong time. This accounts for the slow, calm activities of the people seen in the video, none of whom are visibly injured. Since the video was recorded soon after sunrise, it cannot depict the aftermath of the bombing, which occurred in the late afternoon. People do not sit calmly in burning buildings for any length of time, let alone overnight.

Questioning of the video has determined that it was recorded before the bombing of 16 March 2022 had occurred. The video promoted by Mr Higgins is therefore an example of what misinformation researcher Dr Claire Wardle of First Draft News has named 'False context': meaning 'content that is genuine but has been reframed in dangerous ways'.<sup>19</sup>

Bellingcat declined to comment on the findings made in this essay.

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## **Appendix: the Azov issue**

**T**he questioned video has now been debunked. What remains unknown is why it was ever circulated in the first place. Someone went to a great deal of effort

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<sup>18</sup> By 16 March 2022, the day the theatre was destroyed, the sunrise would have drifted even further north and occurred at 92°. This is almost due East. Sunlight from that direction would have produced unmissable glare and backlighting in the recording, as the sunlight fell obliquely across the facade in the general direction of the camera-operator's eyes.

<sup>19</sup> <<https://firstdraftnews.org/long-form-article/understanding-information-disorder/>>

to craft and propagate this hoax, even using video-editing software to dub the footage with a panicky voice-over to link the video to the bombing. At some stage, the hoaxers ensured that their handiwork came to media attention by sending it to a social media account with a million followers. The video became public over a week after the bombing, at precisely the time when doubts were arising about the claims of mass civilian casualties at the theatre. It is hard to resist the inference that the misleading video was actively intended to be taken as evidence for those claims about casualties. It was eagerly accepted as exactly that. Mr Higgins was far from being the only person who was fooled by this deception.

Two of the Channel 4 News video frames seen in Figure 1 (main essay, above) carry a credit to 'Azov'. The other frame has an embedded credit reading 'Polkazov', this being the name of an account on social media platform Telegram.<sup>20</sup> It was from this Telegram channel that Channel 4 News obtained its video,<sup>21</sup> although Channel 4 News did not explain the nature of the source.<sup>22</sup> Polkazov is a contraction of the Ukrainian words 'Polk Azov', and translates into English as 'Azov Regiment'.

Ukraine's Azov regiment is headquartered in Mariupol, the Ukrainian city where the bombed theatre stood. A branch of Ukraine's National Guard, Azov held Mariupol against a Russian encirclement, while using the city's population as human shields by refusing to let them leave.<sup>23</sup> Azov is a neo-Nazi unit, which employs Nazi symbols in its regimental emblem, and includes a large number of self-identified neo-Nazis in its ranks. The presumption has to be that most of its other soldiers are non-identifying neo-Nazis. Azov's first commander was the far-right ethnonationalist Andriy Biletsky, who was also a member of Ukraine's parliament at the time. Biletsky has never made any secret of his Nazi identity, and is notorious for claiming that it is Ukraine's historic mission to 'lead the white races of the world in a final crusade [. . .] against Semite-led subhumans'.<sup>24</sup>

The relationship between these neo-Nazis and Ukraine's Jewish president, Vladimir Zelensky, is complex. It can perhaps be best summarised by saying

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<sup>20</sup> Screenshot of Polkazov's Telegram profile at <<https://imgur.com/gallery/H2ly700>>.

<sup>21</sup> Screenshot of Polkazov's Telegram post, publishing the footage used by Channel 4 News is at <<https://imgur.com/gallery/n3cyDUx>>.

<sup>22</sup> The original Polkazov video published on Telegram is permanently available at <<https://archive.org/details/polkazov-telegram-video-16-march-2022>>.

<sup>23</sup> <<https://www.dw.com/en/the-azov-battalion-extremists-defending-mariupol/a-61151151>>

<sup>24</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/TimesUaNazis21Mar2022>> or <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/fighting-russia-takes-focus-off-azov-battalions-nazi-roots-x07lkjl7r>>

that, for the time being at least, Ukrainian Nazis hate Russians even more than they hate Jews. Zelensky himself is cynically aware of Azov's usefulness to the war effort, and has even bestowed the title 'Hero of Ukraine' on Azov commander Denys Prokopenko.<sup>25</sup> Azov has been, and may still be, funded by Zelensky's mentor, Ukrainian oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky, who is himself Jewish.<sup>26</sup>

The historical background to this pro-Nazi sentiment is also complex. Ukraine was captured from the Soviet Union during the Second World War, and Stepan Bandera – a Ukrainian nationalist who collaborated with Nazi Germany to repel the Red Army – is still widely held as a popular hero.<sup>27</sup> This brief outline is not the whole story, but it goes some way to explaining current Ukrainian pro-Nazi and anti-Russian sentiments. Azov is not the only far-right paramilitary organisation to have existed in modern Ukraine, but is the only one to have been formally adopted by the Ukrainian state.

Russia has claimed that the Mariupol theatre was destroyed by the Azov regiment, as a false flag to be blamed on Russia.<sup>28</sup> At the time of writing, there is no proof or disproof of Russia's accusation. However, if anyone had a motive to capitalise on the bombing and fake a war crime that could be blamed on Russia, it was the Azov regiment. Azov did control Mariupol at the time when the theatre was destroyed. It may yet emerge that there really were human casualties in the bombing of the theatre, but at the time of publication, it has been a month since the bombing and there is still no evidence of any such thing.

In any event, the proven fraud of the questioned video is of a piece with Azov's careful documenting of the bombing of the theatre, and its surreptitious cross-platform promotion of this propaganda via social media. From social media accounts such as TRUHA (based, as we have seen, 200 miles from Mariupol), these misleading videos made their way into mainstream western media. Channel 4 News was not the only news organisation to rebroadcast Azov-originated material.

In the case of the questioned video discussed in this essay, this process of

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<sup>25</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/ZelenskyAddress19Mar2022>> or <<https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/zmistovni-peregovori-pro-mir-i-bezpeku-dlya-ukrayini-yedinij-73661>>

<sup>26</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/ReutersUaNazis5May2015>> or <<https://www.reuters.com/article/idUS60927080220150505>>

<sup>27</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/StepanBanderaBiography>> or <<http://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?linkpath=pages%5CB%5CA%5CBanderaStepan.htm>>

<sup>28</sup> <<https://tinyurl.com/ReutersRuAzov17March2022>> or <<https://www.reuters.com/article/ukraine-crisis-mariupol-theatre-russia-idINL2N2VK0SL>>

media acceptance was facilitated by the misguided endorsement of prominent observers such as Bellingcat's Eliot Higgins. More generally, western news media are quietly whitewashing the Azov regiment, bringing it into line with the accepted narrative of innocent Ukraine versus evil Russia. On 24 March 2022, the day before Mr Higgins fell for the hoax video, the BBC's Ros Atkins presented a report about 'Putin's false "Nazi" claims'. This remarkable piece of journalism<sup>29</sup> included the assertion that it was unimportant that Azov's regimental insignia included a Mediaeval device that was notorious for having been worn by Nazi SS officers. The *Wolfsangel* (which Mr Atkins pronounced as 'Wolf's Angel') is, according to Mr Atkins, not regarded as a fascist symbol in Ukraine. The image below accompanied Mr Atkins' assertion (seen at two minutes and 44 seconds into the report).



As supporting evidence, Mr Atkins showed a clip (commencing at two minutes and 23 seconds into the report) of Azov founder Andriy Biletsky himself, who solemnly declared that the *Wolfsangel* was in fact a logo comprising the letters 'N' and 'I' and stood for 'Idea of the Nation'. This lie alone was far-fetched enough. But no-one at the BBC seems to have noticed the white *Sonnenrad* glyph in the Azov emblem, a motif that was designed specifically for SS *Reichsführer* Heinrich Himmler and which is explicitly used as an alternative swastika by modern neo-Nazis. Elsewhere in the same BBC report (commencing at five minutes and 45 seconds), Azov was acquitted of holding Nazi views on the basis that such politics were not being openly

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<sup>29</sup> This BBC report is permanently available at <https://archive.org/details/ros-atkins-24-march-2022>.

discussed by the regiment's public social media accounts. Viewers were also told that even if there were Nazis in the Ukrainian army, there weren't many of them. The BBC said Azov consisted of about a thousand soldiers (commencing at four minutes and 22 seconds into the report). This is at the low end of a range of estimates made by other observers. On balance, Mr Atkins told viewers, Russian claims that Ukraine was over-run with Nazis were false.

It is hard to believe that western television audiences are being presented with apologias for neo-Nazism and simultaneous efforts to downplay the influence of Ukraine's far-right terrorists in general. Nevertheless, this is a logical outcome of the West's unrelenting propaganda war in support of Ukraine during the Russian invasion. It seems likely that this protracted exercise in doublethink was a significant factor in the media's unquestioning acceptance of the Ukrainian video that has been questioned and debunked in this essay.