US Army to train Ukrainian fascist militias

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1 April 2015

The US Army will begin training Ukraine National Guard battalions on April 20 at a site in western Ukraine, near the Polish border, according to an announcement made Sunday by the country's interior minister, Arsen Avakov.

"American commandos, numbering 290, will come to Yavoriv training ground, Lviv region, on April 20," Avakov wrote on Facebook. "This is where a long-term military exercise of 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team of the US Army and combat units of the National Guard will be held."

Pentagon spokeswoman Eileen Lainez confirmed the deployment earlier this month, without giving the exact date of its commencement. "This assistance is part of our ongoing efforts to help sustain Ukraine's defense and internal security operations," she said. "In particular, the training will help the Ukraine government develop its National Guard to conduct internal defense operations."

This suggests that the paramilitary units, most of them created by billionaire oligarchs who financed and recruited fascist and neo-Nazi volunteers, may be used for suppression of popular protests within the government-controlled portion of Ukraine, in addition to joining the battle lines in eastern Ukraine if fighting breaks out again with pro-Russian separatists.

The US role in training and equipping paramilitary forces that openly venerate Ukrainian nationalists and fascists who collaborated with the Nazi occupation forces and facilitated the Holocaust during World War II, and who sport swastika-like insignias, exposes as filthy lies the US claims to be championing democracy and human rights in Ukraine.

The training program will include Washington's first direct and open provision of lethal weaponry to Ukrainian military units. Pentagon officials said that uniforms, body armor, night vision devices and tactical radios would be supplied—all classified as "non-lethal"—but Avakov revealed that "our American partners" will present "special ammunition" to the Ukrainian National Guard troops at the conclusion of their training.

Before the end of 2015, Ukrainian forces could be killing pro-Russian separatist troops—or Russian soldiers—with American-supplied bullets, grenades and other "special ammunition." This increases the danger of the conflict over eastern Ukraine and Crimea escalating into a direct military clash between nuclear-armed Russia and US-NATO forces.

A total of 1,500 US troops, 600 soldiers from other NATO-member countries, and 2,200 Ukrainian soldiers will take part in a series of exercises. The first, dubbed Fearless Guardian 2015, will extend over a seven-month period, from April through November. The second, Saber Guardian/Rapid Trident 2015, begins in July and extends through October.

The US troops will be drawn from the 173rd Combat Brigade, the spearhead of US forces in southern Europe, based in Vicenza, Italy. It specializes in offensive and air assault operations, making a mockery of the claim that the Pentagon is training Ukrainian troops for defense against supposed Russian aggression in eastern Ukraine.

Avakov said that agreement on the military exercises was reached in talks between Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and US Vice President Joseph Biden during Biden's recent visit to Kiev. He paid special tribute to the role played by Victoria Nuland, assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian Affairs, and officials at the US embassy in Kiev, saying, "Without their vigor, the important and complicated preparation of training would have been impossible."

On March 17, the Ukrainian parliament approved a bill submitted by Poroshenko permitting foreign troops to participate in multinational exercises in Ukraine this year. The operations in Ukraine coincide with similar

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drills being carried out in nearby countries that are NATO members, including Romania, Bulgaria, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

A total of 1,200 Ukrainian regular army soldiers and as many as 1,000 from the National Guard will take part in the training. Many of the 50 battalions that comprise the National Guard will send troops. Avakov listed the Azov, Jaguar and Omega battalions, as well as battalions drawn from the cities of Kiev, Kharkiv, Zaporizhia, Odessa, Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk and Vinnytsia.

The inclusion of the Azov battalion has the most ominous implications. This is a military force of more than 1,000 soldiers founded and led by the neo-Nazi Andriy Biletsky. It carries banners bearing a modified swastika insignia drawn directly from World War II German SS units.

This battalion has played the leading role in fighting in Mariupol, the second largest city in the Donetsk region and the largest still held by the Ukrainian government. It is a center of steel manufacture and the main port on the Sea of Azov, a branch of the Black Sea.

Biletsky has publicly denounced the February 15 ceasefire agreed upon by Ukraine, Russia, the European Union and the pro-Russian separatists, and has threatened to march on Kiev and install a pro-war government. His battalion is equipped with artillery and tanks, as well as other heavy weapons.

According to a report by Reuters last week, published in *Time* magazine, "The Azov battalion originated from Biletsky's paramilitary national socialist group called 'Patriot of Ukraine,' which propagated slogans of white supremacy, racial purity, the need for authoritarian power and a centralized national economy. 'Patriot of Ukraine' opposed giving up Ukraine's sovereignty by joining international blocs, called for rolling back of liberal economy and political democracy, including free media."

A March 22 article in *USA Today* describes a visit by a reporter to the Azov Battalion in Mariupol. It carries the headline, "Nazis Among Kiev's National Guard." The article includes an interview with a drill sergeant who openly praises Nazi ideology, while quoting a spokesman for the battalion who says, "It's his personal ideology. It has nothing to do with the official ideology of the Azov."

The spokesman, Andrey Dyachenko, adds that "Only 10 percent to 20 percent of the group's members are Nazis," meaning that at least 100 to 200 Nazis may be about to receive intensive military training from US commandos.

The same article quotes a member of the Armed Forces of Ukraine general staff in Kiev, Col. Oleksy Nozdrachov, who "defended the Azov fighters as patriots."

A report by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights covering a single month, November 2014, found that Ukraine's Office of the Military Prosecutor had done nothing to investigate a "considerable" number of human rights allegations, "including looting, arbitrary detention and ill-treatment by members of certain voluntary battalions such as Aidar, Azov, Slobozhanshchina and Shakhtarsk."

An earlier report by Amnesty International described members of the Aidar battalion engaging in "ISIS-style" war crimes, including beheading several pro-Russian separatists and sending the head of at least one victim by mail to his mother. Ukrainian nationalist militants "have been involved in widespread abuses, including abductions, unlawful detention, ill-treatment, theft, extortion, and possible executions," the group said.

But during a recent visit to New York, the first deputy speaker of the Ukrainian parliament, Andriy Parubiy, said the National Guard battalions consisted of "disciplined Ukrainian warriors about whom films will be made and books will be written."

These reports underscore the utterly reactionary character of the US-NATO intervention in Ukraine, which has unleashed ferociously anti-democratic and fascistic forces against the Ukrainian people, both in the eastern region and throughout the country.

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