

US troops arrive at western Ukraine training camp

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After a convoy across Eastern Europe from their base in Vicenza, Italy, nearly 300 soldiers from the US 173rd Airborne Brigade arrived in Ukraine Monday, to begin training members of the Ukrainian National Guard. They took up positions at a camp in Yavoriv, a few miles outside of the city of Lviv, the main center of western Ukraine.

The Ukrainian troops working with the Americans include members of the Azov Battalion and other units notorious for their links to neo-Nazi groups. They have marched with modified swastikas and other insignia modeled on the Waffen SS forces that fought alongside Ukrainian nationalists against the Soviet Red Army during World War II.

Operation Fearless Guardian, as the six-month US-Ukraine exercise is called, began with welcoming speeches in the pouring rain delivered by Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, US Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt and other officials. The US is paying the \$19 million cost of the exercise as part of a billion-dollar commitment to building up the Ukrainian military against Russia.

More than 180 journalists attended the opening ceremony—a propaganda contingent nearly the size of the American military force—indicating the political context of the training mission, which pits US imperialism and NATO against Russia in an increasingly tense military-diplomatic confrontation.

Poroshenko claimed that the conflict with pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine was “not only a battle for independent Ukraine, it is also a battle for freedom and democracy in Europe and worldwide.” He hailed Fearless Guardian as the largest joint US-Ukrainian military exercises ever held on Ukrainian soil, declaring, “I am sure the exercises we are launching here today will be effective in reinforcing

and stabilizing the situation.”

The Ukrainian president pointed to the other NATO countries participating in the exercises, including 75 British troops who are already there, 200 Canadians scheduled to arrive this summer, as well as hundreds more soldiers from neighboring Poland.

Interior Minister Arsen Avakov said that American soldiers would share the lessons of their military operations fighting insurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq, which could be put to use against pro-Russian separatists. “The US special task force has experience received in operations worldwide, and we want to use this experience,” he said.

US and Ukrainian officials briefed the press about the training program, which will involve three Ukrainian battalions, each working for two months with their American trainers, bringing the total number of Ukrainian troops engaged in the exercise to 900.

US brigade operations officer Major Jose Mendez said, “We will be conducting classes on war-fighting functions, as well as training to sustain and increase the professionalism and proficiency of military staffs.”

A spokesman for Ukrainian’s anti-terrorist operations command (ATO), Andriy Lysenko, said that the US troops would transfer a large quantity of military equipment in the course of the exercise, including uniforms, bullet-proof jackets, helmets, night-vision devices and communications gear.

He indicated that in addition to artillery and small-unit tactics, the training would include “tactical reconnaissance and information warfare, which includes contacts with civilians in the conflict zone and measures to counter the enemy’s information aggression.” This suggests that the US side will discuss how to deal with a hostile local population, such as that encountered by US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan and

by Ukrainian troops in the eastern districts of Donetsk and Luhansk.

A detailed account of the training mission, published Tuesday in the *Wall Street Journal*, claimed that the US side would push for decision-making during military operations at the small-unit level, as opposed to what the newspaper described as “a top-down command structure” in place in Ukraine because of Soviet-era military training.

This suggests that the US trainers will favor the more aggressive methods of the Azov battalion and other fascist-led units. There have been repeated conflicts during the fighting in the east, because the fascist units opposed any negotiated settlement with the pro-Russian separatists, while the Poroshenko government was concerned over possible international backlash against a too-blatant display of neo-Nazi regalia.

A spokesman for Russian President Vladimir Putin warned that the entry of NATO forces into Ukraine could destabilize the precarious ceasefire.

The role of the neo-Nazis has become a subject of public discussion in Canada, even before Canadian troops arrive in Ukraine for training. Some 200 soldiers from the Petawawa Garrison in Ottawa Valley will be sent to Ukraine during the summer.

At a briefing last week, Defense Minister Jason Kenney admitted that there had been discussion in the military staff about how to avoid training extremists during the exercise in Ukraine. “We’re not going to be in the business of training ad hoc militias,” he claimed. “We will only be training units of the Ukrainian National Guard and army recognized by the government of Ukraine.”

Since the neo-Nazi outfits like the Azov Battalion have been incorporated into the National Guard and are recognized by the Poroshenko regime, this assurance means nothing. A former Canadian diplomat, James Bissett, told the Canadian media, “These militias are being merged with Ukraine’s military so we won’t be able to determine who we are training.” He went on to describe the fascists as “unsavory groups that Canadian soldiers should not be associated with.”

Far from disavowing the fascist militias, Poroshenko is completely dependent on them, not merely to fight the pro-Russian forces in the east, but to serve as the shock troops for his government as it imposes right-wing austerity policies on the Ukrainian working class

as a whole, as demanded by the European Union and the International Monetary Fund.

Ukraine’s defense ministry has named Dmitri Yarosh, head of the fascist Right Sector party, as an adviser to the military chiefs.

Meanwhile, the head of the Central Investigation Department of Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), Vasily Vovk, told Ukraine’s ICTV channel that there were no fascist or ultra-right parties in Ukraine at all, only individuals. “We have no information available about any kind of radical far-right parties, organizations or groups,” he claimed. “Ultra-radical groups and organizations are neither registered, nor identified.”

Vovk was attempting to walk back a statement he made April 18, noting that a group calling itself the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) had taken responsibility for the murders of pro-Russian journalist Oles Buzyna and pro-Russian former member of parliament Oleg Kalashnikov, who were both assassinated last week in Kiev.



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