

UK POWs sentenced to death by Donetsk court

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Death sentences handed down against two British nationals serving in the Ukrainian armed forces are being seized on by the press to deepen anti-Russia hysteria. The British government is using the incident to ramp up NATO's proxy-war against Russia in Ukraine.

On Thursday, the Supreme Court of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) found Aiden Aslin and Shaun Pinner guilty of being mercenaries, fighting for the violent seizure of power and training to carry out terrorist activities, according to Russian state media.

The charges are widely seen as an attempt to force a prisoner swap. Russian separatists are demanding the release of pro-Russian politician Victor Medvedchuk, reportedly a close friend of Putin, who was arrested by the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) on April 12. The pair have one month to appeal the verdict.

Britain's press was an orgy of jingoism today. Banner headlines included, "BRITS FACE DEATH BY FIRING SQUAD: PUTIN'S PAWNS" (*Metro*), "NEW UKRAINE WAR HORROR: UK OUTRAGE AS TWO BRITS FACE FIRING SQUAD" (*Daily Mail*), "CAPTURED BRITS HORROR: SENTENCED TO DEATH BY PUTIN" (*Mirror*). The broadsheets contributed with "'A Soviet-era show trial': Mariupol Britons sentenced to death" (*Guardian*) and "Donetsk 'Sham' trial stirs outrage" (*Financial Times*).

Aslin, 28, from Nottinghamshire, was captured by Russian forces in Mariupol on April 12. His unit surrendered after running out of ammunition. Shaun Pinner, 48, was also captured in Mariupol. The city in east Ukraine has seen intense fighting between Russian-backed separatists and Ukrainian military and far-right militias. It is the stronghold of the fascist Azov Battalion.

Aslin was a member of the 39th Battalion Ukrainian Marines, while Pinner fought in the 36th Brigade. British authorities, including Prime Minister Boris Johnson, have denied the pair are mercenaries. But any distinction

between Ukraine's armed forces and fascist and foreign mercenaries has long since been obliterated. The United States and Britain have poured billions of dollars in weapons and military and logistical support into Ukraine to defeat Russia in what amounts to a NATO proxy-war.

British guns-for-hire

After Russian television aired footage of Aslin when he was captured and charged last month, Johnson told parliament, "His situation is very different to that of a mercenary." Johnson and Tory MP for Newark Robert Jenrick portrayed him as a regular Ukrainian army soldier, with Johnson emphasising, "I understand he'd been serving in the Ukrainian forces for some time."

Aslin is no ordinary soldier. On February 14, more than one month prior to the outbreak of war, the pro-Tory *Telegraph* featured an interview with him dressed in full battle fatigues, "'What we signed up for': British soldier returns to Ukrainian Army unit to prepare for Russian invasion". The newspaper's sub-head explained, "Aiden Aslin, also known as Johnny, is joining other British and foreign volunteers who will be in the firing lines if an attack begins".

A similar piece appeared in the *Times* March 24, "British fighter Aiden Aslin survives raids in Mariupol". Aslin was a poster-boy for British efforts to cast the Ukrainian military, allied with fascist militias, as freedom fighters against Russia. UK Foreign Secretary Liz Truss even urged former British soldiers to travel to Ukraine, giving succour to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's call for a volunteer "legion" of international fighters.

Aslin was a foreign mercenary in Syria in 2015-16 and

was placed on Britain’s terrorist watch-list—a fact that today’s saturation news coverage conceals. He fought ISIS with US-backed Kurdish militia group the YPG and was twice arrested and questioned by British police under the Terrorism Act. Charges against him were dropped and he travelled unimpeded to Ukraine in 2018, enlisting in its military, joining the marines, and serving frontline duty in Donbas in quick succession. His Ukrainian citizenship is based on his engagement to Diane Aslin, who taught English in Ukraine’s Navy but has left the country.

After he was captured, Aslin appeared on Russian TV wearing the Azov Battalion’s fascist insignia. Ukraine’s armed forces have absorbed the Azov Battalion and other far-right militias into its ranks. It works directly with foreign mercenary forces, armed and equipped by NATO.

According to the *Telegraph*’s profile in February, Aslin’s introduction to Ukraine came during his time as a mercenary in Syria, “It was there he met a Ukrainian volunteer who had previously fought against Russian forces in the Donbas who persuaded him of the justice of the Ukrainian cause.”

More than three decades of US and British-led wars across the Middle East and Europe since the dissolution of the USSR have created a network of guns-for-hire. This is true of Shaun Pinner, captured alongside Aslin in Mariupol. Pinner, from Watford, England, is a former member of Britain’s Royal Anglia Regiment who fought in Bosnia and Northern Ireland. He reportedly served as a mercenary in Iraq and Syria. According to Russian news agency TASS, after his arrival in Ukraine he initially worked as an instructor for the Azov Battalion.

Downing Street and the Geneva Convention

On April 14, photographs of Aslin and Pinner were aired on Russian television, showing cuts and bruises to their face. Aslin was later interviewed by pro-Russian filmmaker Graham Phillips, a former RT correspondent who works with Russian separatist forces in Ukraine. Phillips’ interview elicited statements from Aslin made under duress, denouncing the Ukrainian military and fascist Azov Battalion for committing war crimes.

In video appeals since their capture, Aslin and Pinner have urged Zelensky to make a prisoner swap with Victor Medvedchuk. Aslin stated on April 14, “If Boris Johnson really does care like he says he does about British citizens

then he would help pressure Zelensky to do the right thing and return Victor to his family and us to our families.”

Russian separatists say their treatment of Aslin and Pinner, including Thursday’s death sentence, is justified because the Geneva Convention does not apply to foreign mercenaries. The separatists’ actions, like the Russian invasion itself, are aimed at securing a deal with the imperialist powers. They only hand NATO a pretext to escalate military aggression.

Both Aslin and Pinner are entitled to the protections of the Geneva Convention, including the right to a fair trial and protection from prosecution as enemy combatants if there is no evidence of war crimes. Yet the screech of Tory and Labour politicians and media commentators invoking the Geneva Convention for British nationals plying NATO war aims in Ukraine is rank hypocrisy.

Downing Street’s declarations that Russia must respect the Geneva Convention is a principle the British ruling class has systematically flouted during countless wars over more than three decades. Blair, Brown, Cameron, May, Starmer and Johnson have backed the use of torture and assassination as a legitimate tool of foreign policy, presided over the indiscriminate mass killing of civilians in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the routine torture of enemy combatants.

Yesterday, Jenrick declared that Aslin and Pinner had been subjected to a “disgusting Soviet-era show trial”. But when it comes to show trials, the British are long-standing experts. The Johnson government is currently set to rubberstamp the decade-long extra-judicial witch-hunt of WikiLeaks publisher Julian Assange, by ordering his extradition to the US. This vendetta, facilitated by the highest levels of the judiciary, included CIA plans to kidnap and assassinate Assange for exposing the war crimes of British and US imperialism.



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