

Jon Stewart honors Azov Battalion at Pentagon-funded Disney World event

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Comedian Jon Stewart honored a member of the notorious neo-Nazi Ukrainian Azov Battalion with a “Heart of the Team” award at the annual Pentagon-sponsored “Warrior Games” held at Disney World in Orlando, Florida, on August 19—28.

Throughout the event, US army veterans and delegations from the armed forces of allied countries compete in various athletic events intended to celebrate the US military. First held in 2010, the games are essentially a propaganda effort by the Department of Defense, intended to promote militarism and cover up the bloody consequences of the US military’s wars for global hegemony.

The presence of the Azov veteran, Ihor Halushka, was first reported by Alexander Rubinstein for the Grayzone, an outlet that has been backing the oligarchic Putin regime in the war. When questioned by the Grayzone on who funded the presence of a neo-Nazi Azov Battalion member at a Department of Defense-sponsored event, the Pentagon refused to disclose who was footing the bill.

Halushka was not the only Ukrainian far-right element present. Along with US veterans and a team from Canada, 40 veterans from the Ukrainian Armed Forces participated in the games. The Ukrainian team included Yulia Paievska, a prominent former member of another notorious neo-Nazi paramilitary organization in Ukraine, the Right Sector. The Right Sector was heavily involved in the US-orchestrated 2014 coup that toppled a pro-Russian government in Kiev. Since 2018, Paievska has been a member of the Ukrainian armed forces.

In March, Paievska was captured by Russian forces while helping to evacuate Azov members in Mariupol at the Azovstal plant. She was later released in a prisoner swap with Russia. Despite Paievska’s well-

known ties to the Ukrainian far-right, the *New York Times* did a lengthy feature story on her in mid-July, praising her as “a symbol of bravery and sacrifice.”

While accepting a gold medal for Indoor Rowing, Halushka prominently sported an Azov t-shirt. Later, as he was receiving the “Heart of the Team” award from Stewart, Halushka was conspicuously wearing a red-sleeve on his left arm. Photos uncovered by the Grayzone demonstrate that Halushka also possesses a Black Sun or “Sonnenrad” tattoo on his left-arm, which is popular among white supremacists and neo-Nazis worldwide. Either Halushka or his Pentagon hosts must have decided that the neo-Nazi tattoo might hurt the pro-war PR event.

Earlier in May, a white supremacist mass shooter killed 10 Black people at a Tops supermarket in Buffalo, NY while wearing the same Sonnenrad logo tattooed on Halushka’s elbow.

Stewart proclaimed that Ihor, “inspires his team with his personal example and his unique sense of humor. Sgt. First Class Ihor Halushka embodies the spirit and determination that is the heart of Team Ukraine.”

Whether Stewart was ignorant of or indifferent to Halushka’s ties to a violent neo-Nazi organization, his appearance at an event dedicated to promoting the bloody machinery of US militarism is indicative of the far-right shift of an entire layer of very well-paid, Democratic Party-aligned celebrities and pseudo-comedians.

Last year, Stewart appeared on Stephen Colbert’s Late Show where he ranted against science and endorsed the racist Wuhan lab lie that had first been concocted by fascists like Stephen Bannon. At the time, the WSWWS commented that Stewart, much like Glenn Greenwald and other former opponents of the Iraq War in the upper middle class, had been “swept up by

powerful right-wing currents in contemporary politics, unmoored by a vast social crisis all around them, which they do not understand and for which they are politically unprepared.”

Now, these same powerful right-wing currents have swept Stewart onto the same stage as a Ukrainian neo-Nazi.

Since the beginning of the NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine in February, the United States corporate media has undertaken a systematic campaign to whitewash the fascist Azov Battalion and similar forces in Ukraine. This campaign has been championed by the Democratic Party-aligned corporate media, first and foremost the *New York Times*, which now regularly features stories glorifying Ukrainian far-right elements, while omitting or downplaying their fascist orientation.

Just prior to the start of the war in February, NBC’s chief foreign policy correspondent Richard Engel led the way in whitewashing Azov when he showed the Azov Battalion training Mariupol residents in weapons and first aid. Despite the fact that Azov’s use of a Wolfsangel insignia used by Hitler’s SS in the Second World War was clearly identifiable, Engel failed to mention Azov at all.

There can be no doubt regarding the fascist character of the Azov Battalion. It stands in the tradition of the Nazi collaborationist Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN-B) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), which were responsible for the massacres of tens of thousands of Jews, Poles as well as Ukrainians during World War II.

Its founder Andriy Biletsky, previously leader of the fascist paramilitary Patriot of Ukraine organization, is an outright white supremacist who in 2010 stated that the mission of Ukraine is to “lead the white races of the world in a final crusade ... against Semite-led Untermenschen [subhumans].”

With the US-backed proxy war in Ukraine now in its sixth month and amidst rapid inflation, there are clearly concerns within the ruling class about growing opposition in the working class to the war. Militarist PR efforts like the “Warrior Games” and the use of a well-paid, right-wing celebrities like Jon Stewart to promote a Ukrainian neo-Nazi are intended to both conceal the true nature of the disastrous imperialist war in Ukraine and legitimize the fascist allies of imperialism in Eastern Europe.



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