

NZ media glorifies man who died fighting in Ukraine's fascist Azov Brigade

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On July 5 the *New Zealand Herald* revealed that Sam Haines, a 22-year-old man from Auckland, was killed last December while fighting in Ukraine as part of the fascist Azov Brigade's International Battalion.

The article and an accompanying 15-minute video report are pro-war propaganda. They exploit Haines' death to glorify the US-NATO imperialist proxy war against Russia. The *Herald* portrays Haines as a hero, effectively encouraging others to follow his example, and whitewashes the Azov Brigade, a neo-Nazi organisation that plays a major role in Ukraine's armed forces.

The Putin regime's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was reactionary, rooted in Great Russian nationalism and serving the interests of the Russian oligarchy—but it was provoked by three decades of NATO expansion and relentless US encirclement of Russia.

The European powers, led by Germany, Britain and France, are now committing vast sums to their own militaries in preparation for direct war against Russia. New Zealand and Australia are supporting this imperialist war with funding, equipment, and training for Ukrainian forces.

New Zealand's corporate media is seeking to condition the population to accept greater involvement in the war against Russia and deeper integration into US-led preparations for war against China.

The *Herald* highlights the ease with which foreign fighters are able to enter Ukraine and be deployed to the front lines. Sam Haines' mother Mary told the newspaper that he had no military training or combat experience, "but the doors just kept opening for him and he just kept progressing." Haines did not initially reveal to his parents that he was going to fight in Ukraine, telling them instead that he had an intelligence-related job in Poland.

Ukraine has suffered hundreds of thousands of casualties and the military is desperate for new cannon fodder. The Kyiv government says around 2 million Ukrainians are evading the draft and more than 200,000 soldiers have deserted their positions—a massive level of civil disobedience which points to widespread opposition to the war.

Thousands of foreign nationals are reportedly fighting in Ukraine's military. Haines is the sixth New Zealander

confirmed to have died in the war.

According to the *Herald*, as a teenager, "Sam became fascinated by the world of defence and private military contractors." He decided to go to Ukraine after he "met some Americans who worked in the private military industry" while playing Airsoft (an outdoor team-based shooting game) near Auckland. He had also enrolled in a Defence Studies degree at Massey University.

The *Herald* states that Haines enlisted in the Azov Brigade "within weeks" of arriving in Ukraine in January 2025. The newspaper mentions in passing that Azov was founded as a militia in 2014 and attracted "controversy because of its early far-right associations," before being integrated into the country's armed forces following Russia's invasion.

In reality the Brigade remains a neo-Nazi organisation. When Haines joined, its commander was Denys Prokopenko. Before joining Azov in 2014, Prokopenko was a member of the White Boys Club, a neo-Nazi fan club of the Dynamo Kyiv soccer team. Its Facebook posts have included photos of graffiti with their organization's name alongside the number "88," the neo-Nazi code for "Heil Hitler."

The Azov Brigade celebrates Ukraine's Nazi collaborators, including Stepan Bandera and Andriy Melnyk, leaders of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), and Roman Shukhevych, head of its armed wing, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA). These forces took part in the war of extermination against the Soviet Union, the genocide of Jews and the mass murder of at least 100,000 Poles.

The positions advanced by Azov and other far-right groups have been adopted by Volodymyr Zelensky's regime, whose glorification of the OUN and the UPA as national heroes recently provoked a diplomatic crisis with Poland.

Zelensky's corrupt, kleptocratic government has postponed elections and outlawed opposition parties. Anti-war activists have been imprisoned, including the socialist Bogdan Syrotyuk, whose organisation, the Young Guard of Bolshevik Leninists, called on workers in Russia and Ukraine to unite against both oligarchic regimes in order to end the war. These facts are buried by the New Zealand media.

The *Herald's* video report features an interview with an unnamed American soldier in Azov's International Brigade,

who praises Haines' combat skills and describes the unit as a "brotherhood" in which fighters develop "powerful" bonds. The video includes combat footage taken by members of Azov for propaganda purposes, which carries a watermark of the brigade's "National Idea" symbol—a variation of the Wolfsangel symbol used by the Nazi SS. We are also shown Haines' coffin emblazoned with the same symbol as he is buried in New Zealand.

Sam Haines' mother told the *Herald*: "He found his tribe. They loved him. They cared for him. I think he felt understood there." His father declared that after learning of his son's feats on the battlefield "I am in awe of him."

The Ukrainian military's foreign recruiting department could not have hoped for a more glowing endorsement of the Azov Brigade.

The death of Sam Haines raises many disturbing questions. Why was it only reported after an eight-month delay? How many other New Zealanders are fighting in Ukraine and are there more deaths that have not been reported?

Who exactly were the Americans who apparently encouraged Haines to go and fight in Ukraine? Are there recruiters for the Azov Brigade operating in New Zealand?

The *Herald's* brief mention of Haines' enrollment in Massey University's Defence Studies program also raises questions. What exactly did he study and how did it influence his decision?

Massey's Centre for Defence and Security Studies operates in partnership with the Police and Defence Force. According to its website, its lecturers have "experience in government, diplomacy, intelligence, security or defence," and its courses prepare students for jobs ranging "from the armed forces to intelligence agencies, businesses to government agencies."

The Centre's faculty members have appeared in the media calling for New Zealand to contribute more to the war against Russia.

On March 15, 2022, Dr John Batersby, Senior Teaching Fellow at the Centre and former Senior Sergeant in the NZ Police, wrote in the *Conversation* that "a deep vein of Ukrainian nationalism... has been unleashed" by Russia's invasion. Ordinary people, he stated approvingly, had "vowed to kill Russians in vengeance for their aggression, and promised to fight to the death."

He continued: "It is not necessarily a character flaw that causes people to advocate and perpetuate dreadful violence, to kill and maim, and go to their own deaths to achieve an outcome they will not survive to see." Ukrainians would have to "fight back in any way they can.... Terrorism may become a tactic they will ultimately see themselves having little choice but to adopt."

Batersby noted that "A foreign legion has been raised, and foreign fighters invited to join the cause." He called on Western governments to "supply and assist" Ukraine.

These are the kinds of views that students are being exposed

to: the promotion of Ukrainian nationalism and its "fight to the death" against Russia, using the most ruthless methods including terrorism, backed by the imperialist powers.

The shocking revelation that a young New Zealand man was able to join a fascist brigade in Ukraine and was killed in battle has not prompted any statements of concern from anyone in the media, academia or the political establishment. The National Party-led government and the opposition parties, Labour, the Greens and Te P?ti M?ori, are all silent.

This is because the entire political establishment supports the US-NATO proxy war. The last Labour government, backed by the Greens, sent military aid to Ukraine and deployed NZ troops to Britain to train Ukrainian conscripts. The pseudo-left International Socialist Organisation, which supports Labour and its allies, is openly aligned with US and European imperialism against Russia.

The state-owned and corporate media have effectively banned any criticism of the war. In 2023, when the journalist Mick Hall reported on the Ukrainian government's promotion of fascists, he was hounded out of his job at Radio NZ, smeared as a "Russian agent" and investigated by the intelligence agencies.

Nor is there any dissent among academics. When Victoria University of Wellington hosted a Ukrainian nationalist exhibition in 2022, which promoted the Azov Battalion, downplayed the Nazi Holocaust and glorified Bandera and the OUN, the event attracted zero criticism outside of the WSWS.

The *Herald's* war propaganda must be taken as a sharp warning by workers and young people. As the war in Ukraine continues to intensify, along with the US confrontation with China, New Zealand's ruling class is preparing to escalate its involvement. With Labour's agreement, the government is planning to double military spending and wants to rapidly increase recruitment into the armed forces. A minor imperialist power, Wellington is determined not to be excluded from the violent carve-up of the world's resources and markets.

The only way to stop this developing third world war is through the building of a socialist and internationalist anti-war movement that unites workers in Russia, Ukraine and across the world, who have no interest in slaughtering each other to increase the profits of their ruling classes.



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