

## AFFAIRS OF THE NATION



## RTÉ: FIRST CASUALTY

MISSING IN action, presumed dead, the fate of Dubliner Alex Ryzhuk, a member of the Ukrainian Army's 3rd Assault Brigade, hit the headlines in late August. Much of the coverage was based on an RTÉ *Prime Time* interview with Ryzhuk, with other media reports following his disappearance quoting extensively from that programme.

These reports detailed Ryzhuk's family background and his motivation for fighting in Ukraine. But no consideration was given to the controversial unit he was serving with. Since its inception in 2022, the 3rd Assault Brigade has been linked to the Ukraine's Azov Brigade.

Formed from a group of ultras associated with football club Metalist Kharkiv who joined volunteer militias at the outbreak of the conflict with Russia in 2014, the then Azov battalion recruited many members from neo-Nazi groups. With a logo incorporating a Wolfsangel, which was an SS symbol in Nazi Germany, and a Black Sun widely used by neo-Nazis as a symbol, the Azov Brigade did little to hide its members' extreme politics.

Extreme right-wing organisations from across the US and Europe, including Atomwaffen Division and National Action – both proscribed as terrorist organisations in Britain – flocked to Ukraine to join the Azov Brigade and its affiliates. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has reported on Azov battalion involvement in rapes, mass looting, unlawful detention and torture during the conflict in 2014.

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, most of what was now the Azov Brigade's units found themselves on the frontline of the fighting in Mariupol and within months they were besieged and then captured by Russian forces. In the meantime the founder of the Azov Brigade, Andriy Biletsky, along with other Azov veterans, had begun to recruit for new units. Initially organised as the Azov Special Operations Forces,

these units were integrated into the Ukrainian Army in November 2022 but still under Biletsky's command.

The 3rd Assault Brigade has proved every bit as controversial as the Azov Brigade. Involved in extreme-right politics since the early noughties, Biletsky was leader of the fascist Patriots of Ukraine (PU) from 2005. He and other PU members were released from prison after President Yanukovich's government was overthrown in 2014. After founding the Azov battalion, Biletsky was interviewed in October 2014: "We have not changed. Azov's heart is based on its right-wing ideology". As leader of PU, Biletsky wrote in a 2013 book of the need to "cleanse"

Ukraine of all foreigners, while in an earlier speech he claimed it was Ukraine's destiny to "lead the white races of the world in a final crusade... against Semite-led subhumans".

A May 2024 report for French online newspaper *Mediapart* detailed how many members of the 3rd Assault Brigade training at the La Courtine camp in France had neo-Nazi symbols openly on display, with one even having an SS tattoo on his face.

There was outrage too when in

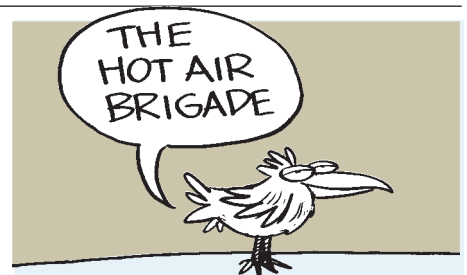
July 2024 the brigade launched a recruitment tour around Europe. In conjunction with an NGO, Promote Ukraine, they planned to host information evenings encouraging Ukrainians to join the 3rd Assault Brigade. After protests centred on the politics of the leadership and membership of the brigade, meetings were cancelled in Berlin, Hamburg, Rotterdam and Brussels.

RTÉ has repeatedly turned a blind eye to the far-right politics of Ukrainian Army units such as the Azov and 3rd Assault Brigades. In March 2022 the station broadcast drone footage of destruction in Mariupol that had been supplied to RTÉ by the Azov Brigade (see *The Phoenix* 25/3/22). The station has also given prominence to Ukrainian 'human rights activist' Nadia Dobrianska in multiple interviews since 2022. In the same week as Ryzhuk was reported missing in action, Dobrianska was posting on X about the plight of "Azov POW fighters" in Russian courts (see *The Phoenix* 6/5/2022).

If the Irish media is unwilling to report the complexity of the situation in Ukraine, we should not be surprised when young men such as Ryzhuk end up in units like the 3rd Assault Brigade.



Nadia Dobrianska



In Lozère, Sophie felt oxygenated, freed from the claustrophobic city. This untamed place, and the wild creatures that inhabited it, spoke to her soul. She painted rocks, hills and sky, the stone farmhouses and spilling streams,



Senan Molony

wondering at the openness of the idyll that is the least populated department in France. **Senan Molony in his new book, *Sophie The Final Verdict*, submitted by reader**

My ambition is to be as popular as Vogue Williams and Joanne McNally. **Matt Cooper throws down the gauntlet, *Irish Examiner*, submitted by reader**

It's what he does best. "Ah yeah, livin' the dream", he laughs again, leaning his chair back into a beam of sunlight, his blonde head lit like a halo, spreading his arms to welcome the unaccustomed peace and quiet, the air and the space, the opportunity and the anticipation. **John Maguire on Patrick Kielty, *Business Post***

A spectacular adaptation of Jane Austen's *Emma*, boldly reimagined for the *Bridgerton* and *Brat* era. **The Abbey Theatre's description of Kate Hamill's adaptation of *Emma*, *Business Post***

To the cream cracker, the rasher and the cheese-and-onion crisp, we should add another great Irish invention: the cataract bus. For if you want to get the full flavour of this mad island, chew on this strange fruit of carelessness and clientelism.

**Fintan O'Toole, *Irish Times***

I imagined a woman sitting outside Café de Flore, drinking her coffee, waiting for her boyfriend, looking very French. **Paul Costelloe talks about being inspired by the Left Bank in Paris, *Irish Independent***

A friend of mine said to me after they had seen me on the first one: 'If this is democracy show me the alternative.' It's vicious. That's all I'll say. **Former chair of the RTÉ board Siún Ní Raghallaigh on the Oireachtas committee hearings, *Irish Times***

I went through a Gabriel García Márquez phase. Interestingly, about a year ago, I went on holiday with mates and one of the wives looked at me and she goes, "You're actually reading *Love in the Time of Cholera* again." **David McWilliams literary tendencies, *Irish Examiner***

It feels like only yesterday I got teary-eyed while presenting my credentials at Áras an Uachtaráin, as the Army Band played the Israeli National Anthem. **Israeli Ambassador Dana Erlich, *Irish Independent***

Marty Morrissey – GAA broadcaster extraordinaire and one of the hardest-working people in show business. **Preface to an extract from the mighty man's memoir, RTÉ.ie**

Please send suitable contributions to: The Hot Air Brigade, The Phoenix, 44 Lr Baggot St, Dublin 2 or email: hotair@thephoenix.ie

