

“Honorable Captivity” of Azov

The System of Propaganda, Violence, and Criminal Prosecution
of Servicemembers of the National Guard of Ukraine in the Russian Federation



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List of Abbreviations Used

CO — civic organization (Ukr./Eng. explanation for GO)	NGU — National Guard of Ukraine
“DNR” — self-proclaimed “Donetsk People’s Republic”	NTV — Russian federal television channel
FKU — federal state institution	NV — Ukrainian publication “Novoye Vremya” (nv.ua)
FSB — Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation	PTs — human rights center (in the combination “PTs ‘Memorial’ ”)
FSIN — Federal Penitentiary Service of the Russian Federation	RIA Novosti — Russian Information Agency “Novosti”
FZ — federal law (in combinations “No. 395-FZ,” etc.)	RO — Rostov Oblast
GO — civic (public) organization; Ukr. <i>hromadska orhanizatsiia</i>	SIZO — pre-trial detention facility
GUFSIN — Main Directorate of the Federal Penitentiary Service (RF)	SVO — “special military operation” (official Russian designation of the invasion of Ukraine)
ICRC (MKKK) — International Committee of the Red Cross	TA-57 — Soviet field telephone set, “ <i>tapik</i> ” (used in torture by electric shock)
INALCO — Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales (Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilisations, Paris)	TASS — Information Telegraph Agency of Russia
ISW — Institute for the Study of War	TRK — television and radio company
KHPG — Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group	TsK “Azov” — <i>Tsyvilnyi korpus “Azov”</i> , Ukr. “Civic Corps ‘Azov’ ”
KPP — checkpoint	UBOP — Directorate for Combating Organized Crime
LDPR — Liberal Democratic Party of Russia	UK — Criminal Code (in combinations “UK RF,” “UK ‘DNR’ ”)
“LNR” — self-proclaimed “Luhansk People’s Republic”	VGTRK — All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company
	VSU (ZSU) — Armed Forces of Ukraine

Executive Summary

This report analyses the fate of the servicemembers of the Ukrainian Azov regiment who ended up in Russian captivity, as well as the broader context — how Russian propaganda and the judicial system shape their image, use it to justify the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and affect the treatment of prisoners in detention.

The Azov regiment was created in 2014 as a volunteer unit after the Russian Federation annexed Crimea and unleashed a hybrid war in the east of the country. Initially, a significant number of its members held far-right views, and international organizations repeatedly documented cases of human rights violations by Azov fighters in the first years of the war. By the end of 2014, Azov was integrated into the National Guard of Ukraine, leading to its institutionalization, strengthened oversight, and gradual depoliticization. In subsequent years, international organizations did not document confirmed violations by the unit, and international inspections did not substantiate accusations of serious crimes. In 2024, the 2015 amendment adopted by the U.S. Congress prohibiting military aid to Azov was repealed, as Azov's involvement in human rights violations was considered unproven.

Nevertheless, Azov's image as a far-right formation became entrenched and proved persistent, particularly in the Russian information space.

After Russia's full-scale invasion began in 2022, the Azov regiment became one of the key symbols of Ukrainian resistance, especially during the defense of Mariupol and the Azovstal steelworks. The defense of the city lasted nearly three months under conditions of complete blockade and massive shelling. In May 2022, the garrison, following orders from the Ukrainian command, ceased resistance and left the plant's territory. The exit took place with the participation of the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross. In public communications, this step was frequently described as a transition into "honorable captivity," implying a subsequent prisoner exchange.

However, in practice, the subsequent fate of the prisoners proved far more severe, and in the context of Russian captivity, Azov servicemembers became the most vulnerable group. A significant portion of the prisoners was sent to a colony in Olenivka, where, according to numerous testimonies, they were held in harsh conditions: lack of food and water, unsanitary conditions, absence of medical care, as well as systematic beatings and torture. Men were subjected to particularly brutal treatment, while women faced more psychological pressure, threats, and degrading conditions of detention. Violence was also used during interrogations, where methods of physical and psychological coercion were employed to obtain "confessions" to crimes.

One of the most tragic episodes was the explosion in Olenivka on the night of 28–29 July 2022 in the barracks of the "Azov members," which, according to United Nations data, killed more than 50 people and wounded 151. The Russian side claimed that the cause was a strike by the U.S.-supplied HIMARS rocket system fired by the Ukrainian armed forces. Still, numerous testimonies and assessments by international organizations do

not confirm the version's consistency with the factual evidence. Ukrainian authorities, as well as several experts and human rights defenders, believe that the explosion was the result of a deliberate action by the Russian side. A full investigation proved impossible, as Russian authorities do not allow international experts to the site of the tragedy and are blocking the investigation.

After Olenivka, surviving prisoners were distributed to other detention facilities, including pre-trial detention centers in Taganrog and Donetsk, where conditions proved even harsher. Inmates reported systematic torture, prolonged beatings, humiliation, sexualised violence, as well as the absence of medical care even in severe cases. So-called "*priyomki*" — mass beatings — were practiced, along with methods of physical exhaustion and psychological pressure aimed at breaking the individual. The large number of testimonies collected by human rights organizations and their consistency with one another attest to the systemic nature of the described practices.

In parallel, a large-scale propaganda campaign unfolded in Russia in which Azov became a symbolic instrument upon which an entire information strategy is built — one that substantiates and justifies Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Through the image of Azov, Ukraine is presented as a "Nazi state," a war against which becomes not merely justified but morally necessary.

The criminal prosecution of "Azov members" became one element of this propaganda. This report analyses the system of show trials of Azov regiment servicemembers, formed after its designation as a "terrorist organization" in Russia. Despite the servicemembers' belonging to the regular armed forces of Ukraine and the fact that they are prisoners of war, "Azov members" are tried as "terrorists" — often solely for the very fact of their service, which contradicts the norms of international humanitarian law. Thus, in the "Case of the 24," the defendants included people with various roles, such as cooks and general laborers, while individual responsibility was effectively not established.

The criminal prosecution of "Azov members" is accompanied by systemic violations: the use of torture to obtain confessions, prolonged detention in isolation without contact with the outside world, and the absence of access to medical care. Defendants are often forced to sign documents without the opportunity to review the case materials, and their right to a defense is effectively ignored. The trials themselves are perfunctory: they proceed quickly, without a full examination of evidence, using boilerplate charges and pre-prepared testimony.

After the "Case of the 24," which proved a failure for Russian propaganda, the practice shifted to so-called "solo" cases. After torture, prisoners are compelled to admit guilt and agree to simplified and often remote judicial procedures, with promises of exchange. These cases are heard one at a time, in an accelerated manner, with minimal participation of the defense and a perfunctory evidentiary base. Human rights defenders have documented cases of the same individuals being convicted repeatedly on similar charges, violating the principle of the inadmissibility of double punishment. The charges are built on boilerplate formulations, and the evidence often appears ground-

less. Even under strict information control, many defendants openly state that they were tortured and that the cases were fabricated, undermining trust in the official prosecution narrative. In many cases, human rights organizations recognize the convicted individuals as political prisoners.

Thus, the report demonstrates that a comprehensive system has been formed around the Azov regiment, encompassing extremely brutal treatment in detention facilities, criminal prosecution, and propaganda. This system not only determines the fate of specific individuals but also serves a broader purpose — justifying war and constructing the image of an enemy who is stripped of human rights and may be subjected to any treatment.

This situation requires the consistent application of international legal mechanisms for the protection of prisoners of war, including ensuring full access by the International Red Cross, regular visits to prisoners, documentation of violations, and the use of existing procedures of international accountability. Under conditions of minimal possibilities for direct influence on the practices of POW detention in the Russian Federation, particular importance is assumed by the efforts of mediating countries in the negotiation processes aimed at intensifying prisoner-of-war exchanges as a key mechanism for ending brutal treatment, unlawful prosecution, and returning detained persons.

Introduction

In 2014, after the fall of Viktor Yanukovich's regime following the Euromaidan protests, Ukraine faced a serious crisis. The Russian Federation annexed Crimea and unleashed a hybrid war in the east of the country. Weakened state institutions, the disorganization of security forces, and limited resources forced the new authorities to seek rapid solutions in the sphere of defense.

One such solution was the creation of volunteer units. The Azov battalion was formed on 5 May 2014 and soon took part in combat operations in eastern Ukraine. As early as November of that year, the unit was incorporated into the National Guard of Ukraine.

In the early years of Azov's existence, international human rights organizations documented human rights violations and drew attention to the far-right views of some of its members. However, in subsequent years, no confirmed data on systemic violations appeared, and international inspections did not uncover evidence of gross violations by the unit in its current form.

After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Azov regiment became one of the most effective units of the Ukrainian army resisting the invasion. Simultaneously, it became a central symbol of Russian propaganda, through which the war against Ukraine is presented as a "fight against Nazism." This image is formed not by isolated claims but by a system of recurring narratives, reinforced by emotionally charged rhetoric and unverified facts.

This report is devoted to the fate of Azov servicemembers who found themselves in Russian “honorable” captivity with the participation of the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross, as well as the broader context — how propaganda and courts shape their image and how this affects their treatment in detention. The report examines the system of torture and other forms of extremely brutal treatment of this category of prisoners of war, the events in Olenivka that led to the mass death and wounding of “Azov members,” show trials, and prisoner exchanges.

The report is based on the analysis of court materials, monitoring of open sources, including Russian media and court sessions, interviews with human rights defenders, lawyers, and former prisoners of war who returned to Ukraine as a result of exchanges. For security purposes, some testimonies have been anonymized.

Azov: History of Formation

The decision to create volunteer battalions to defend Ukraine in 2014 was made by the Minister of Internal Affairs, Arsen Avakov, and the National Security and Defense Council, headed by acting President Oleksandr Turchynov. One of the initiators of the Azov battalion and its first commander was Andriy Biletsky, a politician known for his far-right nationalist views. The core of the battalion consisted of supporters of organizations led by Biletsky — “Patriot of Ukraine” and the Social-National Assembly — football fans, and people holding right-wing ideology.

However, already at an early stage, volunteers of various political convictions joined the formation — for example, a group of activists from the CO “Automaydan,” people of various nationalities and faiths who considered it their duty to defend Ukraine and its territorial integrity.

In June 2014, Azov played a key role in the operation to liberate Mariupol. Until the autumn of 2014, it was formally subordinate to the Special Patrol Police Service. On 17 September of that year, the battalion, having grown in personnel numbers, was reorganized into a regiment. In November, members of volunteer formations were offered the opportunity to join the security forces of Ukraine, including the National Guard of Ukraine (NGU), on the condition that they accept the Charter of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (ZSU). In effect, the Azov regiment ceased to exist as a volunteer, nationalist, paramilitary formation, and most of its members joined the NGU as part of Military Unit 3057, becoming part of the 12th Special Purpose Brigade of the National Guard of Ukraine “Azov.” Thus, Azov transformed from a volunteer formation into part of the regular Ukrainian army,¹ and one of its most professional and well-trained units at that. Hennadiy Kharchenko, a servicemember and former prisoner of war who served in 2014–2016 in another ZSU brigade and transferred to Azov in 2017, recalls:

¹ As it happened: Gun battles as Russian troops reach Mariupol city centre, says mayor / BBC, 16 March 2022. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/live/world-europe-60774819>

"...I wanted a more motivated, more modern, more combat-capable unit, because the old Soviet vestiges were very much in the way, and motivation was disappearing, and I understood that nothing depended on me, and I wanted to implement the combat experience I had acquired into some useful synergy, some useful application... And that environment was very dynamic, very mobile, and you yourself could, by your own example, your labor, your attitude, influence it and change it. That provided enormous motivation and great inspiration to be part of the unit and to build it... I was even willing to serve in Azov without pay, to go through basic training — at 45 years of age, with combat experience — on any terms. I truly wanted to get into this unit."²

After the parliamentary elections in 2014, Biletsky ceased to be the regiment's commander, although he claimed that for some time he continued to perform the functions of an "informal leader."³ In 2015–2018, Azov actively participated in Ukraine's defensive operations along the line of contact.

In the early years of the conflict in the Donbas, international organizations documented gross violations of human rights and international humanitarian law by all parties to the conflict, including Ukrainian volunteer formations, including Azov. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), in 2014–2015 in the conflict zone, unlawful detentions, torture, and ill-treatment of civilians by fighters of the Azov and "Donbas-1" battalions were recorded.⁴ Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International documented arbitrary detentions of civilians, secret detention sites, and torture. Amnesty International directly stated that it was necessary to "stop the violations and war crimes of volunteer battalions," which at that time were poorly institutionalized.⁵

Guardian journalist Shaun Walker, who worked in the Donbas conflict zone in 2014, spent several days with "Azov members" and, in his report, expressed serious concerns about Azov and its ideology at the time. He also wrote that "...much of what Azov

² Interview with Hennadiy Kharchenko, 15 March 2026, Kyiv.

³ Battalion Commanders Turned MPs: The Rada or War? / BBC News, 24 February 2015. URL: https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/ukraine_in_russian/2015/02/150224_ru_s_mps_in_army

⁴ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine: 16 February – 15 May 2016. United Nations, 2016. URL: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Countries/UA/Ukraine_14th_HRMMU_Report.pdf

⁵ Umland, Andreas. "Irregular Militias and Radical Nationalism in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine: The Prehistory and Emergence of the 'Azov' Battalion in 2014." *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2019, pp. 105–131. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2018.1555974>

members say about race and nationalism is strikingly similar to the views of more radical Russian nationalists fighting on the separatist side.”⁶

According to available information, the Ukrainian investigative authorities did not investigate reports of human rights violations by Azov fighters; there are no records of completed investigations or court decisions.

And yet, the U.S. House of Representatives adopted an amendment in 2015 prohibiting military assistance to Azov (under the Leahy Law, such a decision can be made concerning units found guilty of human rights violations). The decision was justified by the racist and xenophobic views of several servicemembers.⁷

The origins and early months of Azov’s history cemented its reputation as a far-right formation, and this perception proved quite resilient. It was also apparently influenced by the fact that Biletsky, having returned to politics, enjoyed the support of the socio-political movement Civic Corps “Azov” (*Tsyvilnyi korpus abo TsK “Azov”* — Ukr.), formed in the spring of 2015. The movement was created by activists based among supporters of the Azov regiment with a right-wing orientation. TsK Azov was not directly linked to the regiment but made the news due to actions targeting LGBTQ people and Roma.⁸

Within the Azov regiment itself, a centralized campaign against Nazi ideology and symbolism, which was encountered among individual fighters, had been underway since 2015. An order was given to cleanse barracks and social media of any symbolism, photographs, drawings, or books reflecting Nazi ideology. This is known from the recollections of several Azov fighters and officers:

“And this was a matter of principle. The command paid close attention to this and asked people to remove the book by Vasyl Shkliar, ‘Black Sun,’ so as not to provoke and not to give any pretext to say... Even publications on social networks, even personal accounts — the commanders would review them.”⁹

After Azov’s incorporation into the National Guard of Ukraine (from late 2014), the number of documented cases declined; after 2016, human rights defenders have practically stopped recording them. At the same time, the Ukrainian authorities sought to emphasize that the Azov regiment was no longer associated with far-right ideas. During the

⁶ Azov fighters are Ukraine’s greatest weapon and may be its greatest threat / The Guardian, 10 September 2014. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/10/azov-far-right-fighters-ukraine-neo-nazis>

⁷ The US House of Representatives has banned the training of the Azov battalion / BBC, 12 June 2015. URL: https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/politics/2015/06/150612_usa_ukraine_azov_ozh

⁸ Too Much Ado About Ukrainian Nationalists: the Azov Movement and the War in Ukraine/ Krytyka, April 2022. URL: <https://krytyka.com/en/articles/too-much-ado-about-ukrainian-nationalists-the-azov-movement-and-the-war-in-ukraine>

⁹ Interview with Hennadiy Kharchenko, 15 March 2026, Kyiv.

U.S. State Department's inspection under the Leahy Law, "no evidence of human rights violations was found."

As a result, at the beginning of the full-scale invasion in 2022, many Western media articles about Azov were built around the attempt to determine whether the formation was truly "ultranationalist."^{10, 11, 12} Publications highlighted the battalion's "controversial" past and the absence of proven systemic violations in recent years. President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky stated that the regiment had been reformed and was subject to the general military charter. The Azov command, in an interview with CNN, emphasized that it does not support Nazism and that people of various nationalities serve in the regiment.¹³

Clearly, there was a change in international perceptions of Azov. In 2024, the 2015 amendment adopted by Congress prohibiting military assistance to Azov was repealed, as Azov's involvement in human rights violations was considered unproven.

To this day, attitudes toward the Azov regiment vary significantly depending on context and audience. In Ukraine, "Azov members" are perceived as defenders of the country and as heroes who played an important role in its defense, especially during key periods of the conflict. In international analysis, assessments vary: researchers and observers point to both the unit's contribution to military operations and discussions of its ideological origins and evolution. In Russian official and media discourse, Azov is consistently characterized as a neo-Nazi formation.

¹⁰ Nonjon, Adrien. Qu'est-ce que le régiment Azov, ce bataillon ultra-nationaliste devenu symbole du martyr de Marioupol? / The Conversation, 24 May 2022. URL: <https://doi.org/10.64628/AAK.wtrddqrrt>

¹¹ Don't confuse patriotism and Nazism: Ukraine's Azov forces face scrutiny / Financial Times, 29 March 2022. URL: <https://www.ft.com/content/7191ec30-9677-423d-873c-e72b64725c2d>

¹² "Surrender is not an option": Azov battalion commander in plea for help to escape Mariupol / The Guardian, 8 May 2022. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/08/surrender-is-not-an-option-azov-battalion-commander-in-plea-for-help-to-escape-mariupol>

¹³ Last defenders of Mariupol: what is Ukraine's Azov Regiment? / Reuters, 17 May 2022. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/last-defenders-mariupol-what-is-ukraines-azov-regiment-2022-05-17/>

Azov in Russian Propaganda

In Russia, Azov's evolution is denied. In Russian propaganda, Azov is not simply a military unit but a symbolic instrument upon which an entire information strategy is built — one that substantiates and justifies Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Through the image of Azov, Ukraine is presented as a "Nazi state," a war against which becomes not merely justified but morally necessary. References to Azov by Russian state or state-controlled media and officials, public trials at which defendants are sometimes brought out in shackles, are not disparate actions but part of a propaganda policy in which narratives repeated over the years cement messages important for the regime in the public consciousness.

Propaganda uses several simple but effective methods. First, it labels "Azov members" as "fascists," "beasts," "Nazis," "punishers," "terrorists," "Banderite Nazi scum," "occultists," "cannibals," and a multitude of other epithets that strip Ukrainian servicemembers of any legitimacy while simultaneously dehumanizing them.

According to Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Maria Zakharova, the "most vivid example" of Ukrainian Nazism is the Azov battalion, "which looks like a fascist collaborationist battalion that has been transported from the past."¹⁴ The so-called head of the self-proclaimed "Donetsk People's Republic" ("DNR"), Denis Pushilin, in an interview with VGTRK journalist Andrey Rudenko, called Azov fighters "fiends."¹⁵ According to Margarita Simonyan, the battalion is "populated by either maniacs or stoned teenagers" who threaten her with reprisal.¹⁶ And LDNR leader Leonid Slutsky called "Azov members" "Nazi beasts in human form" and supported the initiative of the State Duma of the Russian Federation to introduce new laws aimed at "punishing Nazism."¹⁷

Propaganda has been working on Azov for a long time and extensively: books have been written about it, and videos and documentaries have been made.¹⁸ Numerous witnesses, refugees, and "former Azov members" recount the "atrocities" of the battalion. Channel One broadcasts and hosts on its website the film "Azov of the Brain" by

¹⁴ Post on the Telegram channel 'Maria Zakharova' / Telegram, 7 August 2025. URL: <https://t.me/MariaVladimirovnaZakharova/2077>

¹⁵ Post on the Telegram channel 'Reportyor Rudenko V' / Telegram, 31 August 2025. URL: <https://t.me/RtrDonetsk/31977>

¹⁶ Simonyan Responds to Threats from Azov / Rambler 29 August 2025. URL: [https://news.rambler.](https://news.rambler.ru/crime/49250842-simonyan-otreagirovala-na-ugrozy-azova-v-svoy-adres/)

[ru/crime/49250842-simonyan-otreagirovala-na-ugrozy-azova-v-svoy-adres/](https://news.rambler.ru/crime/49250842-simonyan-otreagirovala-na-ugrozy-azova-v-svoy-adres/)

¹⁷ Azov fighters could face death in Russia / Deutsche Welle, 21 May 2022. URL: <https://www.dw.com/en/prisoners-of-war-from-azov-do-the-fighters-face-the-death-penalty-in-russia/a-61883690>

¹⁸ Ukrainian Nationalist Battalions Are Pagan Orders—and They Do Not Even Consider Russians to Be Slavs / "Komsomolskaya Pravda", 27 April 2022. URL: <https://www.kp.ru/daily/27385/4579189/>; "Azov" of the Brain: A Documentary Film / Channel One URL: <https://www.1tv.ru/doc/pro-politiku/azov-golovnogo-mozga-dokumentalnyy-film>

State Duma deputy, Putin's confidant, and Channel One propagandist Maria Kim. Kim made two documentary films about Azov, in her own words, to "demonstrate to society that Azov is a terrorist, extremist, and nationalist organization." The second film is about "Azov members" in Russian captivity.¹⁹

Kim does not hide that the film is important for justifying Russia's invasion of Ukraine. "Now it is 2025 — the Year of the Defender of the Fatherland. And I very much want key points concerning the special military operation to be set precisely this year. And that is precisely why we have returned to the topic of the regiment banned in Russia, 'Azov.'" According to her, the main difference between the first and second films is that in the new film, the characters repent of their crimes. And she needs to show that they are now in prison.²⁰

The demonization of "Azov members" creates a fertile environment not only for the cruel treatment of them in captivity. In essence, such narratives create the preconditions for not taking them alive as prisoners. Official figures also speak to this.

"Members of Nazi formations like 'Azov' or 'Aidar' should not be taken prisoner; they must be destroyed on the spot, since their ideological convictions are no longer subject to change," stated Aleksey Zhuravlyov, First Deputy Chairman of the State Duma Committee on Defense, in an interview with the publication "Lenta.ru."

In September 2022, after the famous exchange of Azov fighters for Viktor Medvedchuk, the head of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, did not hide his outrage: "This is wrong. Our fighters crushed the fascists in Mariupol, drove them into Azovstal, smoked them out of the basements, were killed, were wounded, and were shell-shocked. The handover of even a single one of these 'Azov' terrorists should have been unacceptable. And therefore it is not surprising that the fighters who liberated Mariupol and are now at the front draw their own conclusion — not to take fascists prisoner."²¹

The second technique actively used by propaganda is the "transfer" of the possible views or actions of individual fighters to the entire unit, and from an individual unit to the Ukrainian army and all of Ukraine. The mixing of some elements of real facts with distortions and a mass of outright fabrications creates a simple and convincing picture that the Kremlin needs for the legitimization of war.

Moreover, in Russian state and state-controlled sources, Azov is portrayed as far more than a military unit.

¹⁹ Azov Battalion fighters became the heroes of a new documentary film in Russia / Ridus, 19 May 2025. URL: <https://www.ridus.ru/bojcy-batalona-azov-stali-geroyami-novogo-dokumentalnogo-filma-v-rossii-626115.html>

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ The head of Chechnya on yesterday's prisoner exchange: "It was carried out on Ukrainian terms; no one even consulted with the participants in the special operation" / Military Review, 22 September 2022. URL: <https://topwar.ru/202233-glava-chechni-o-vcherashnem-obmene-plennymi-on-byi-vypolnen-na-ukrainskih-uslovijah-s-uchastnikami-specoperacii-nikto-dazhe-ne-posovetovalsja.html>

"The founder of the organization banned in Russia as a terrorist, 'Azov,' and now commander of the 3rd Army Corps of the ZSU, Andriy Biletsky, is forming a personally loyal army of radicals for the post-war period," warns RIA Novosti.²² And the "Lenta.ru" media, in an extensive article about the regiment, asserts that Azov is a movement that "is building a state within a state" and is part of a larger structure whose goal is the political restructuring of all of Ukraine.²³

And finally, the third element of propaganda — direct accusations of "Azov members" of ideological orientation toward the leaders of Nazi Germany and the SS. It creates a powerful emotional association with the USSR's struggle against fascism during the Second World War. Thus, a war of conquest and occupation of a neighboring country's territory is transformed into a "liberating" war and a morally justified one.

"Already during the SVO, militants of 'Azov' held civilians in Mariupol, using them as 'human shields.' As experts note, this tactic was used by SS units in Hitler's Germany, and later by terrorists,"²⁴ writes the publication RIA Novosti.

Propaganda tirelessly repeats claims about the adherence of "Azov members" to Nazi ideology and their links with contemporary European neo-Nazis, citing the battalion's symbolism and showing the tattoos of captured fighters as proof.

In the opinion of the publication Deutsche Welle, Azov's symbolism "has been considered controversial from the very beginning. This is the so-called 'Wolfsangel' (wolf's hook). Azov claims that this is not a symbol from the era of Nazi Germany but stylized Latin letters N and I, standing for 'national idea.'" The publication cites the opinion of Andreas Umland, an expert at the Stockholm Center for Eastern European Studies: "The Wolfsangel has a radical-right connotation; it is a pagan symbol that the SS also used. But in Ukraine, the population does not perceive it as a fascist symbol."²⁵

Adrien Nonjon, an expert on Ukraine and post-Soviet far-right movements at the Paris institute INALCO, considers that "the Azov regiment is an entirely official force of the Ukrainian government"; it has been "depoliticized." In the expert's opinion, some fighters of the Azov regiment can be called "radical nationalists" but not neo-Nazis.²⁶

²² Biletsky is building a personally loyal army of radicals for the post-war period / RIA Novosti, 8 March 2023. URL: <https://ria.ru/20260308/armiya-2079305466.htm>

²³ "One Race! One Nation!" How Nationalists from the Azov Battalion Built Their Own State in Ukraine / Lenta.ru, 29 March 2023. URL: <https://lenta.exneighboringpert/articles/2023/03/29/azov/>

²⁴ Numerous Overt Nazis Discovered in Leaked Azov Database / RIA Novosti, 28 August 2024. URL: <https://ria.ru/20240828/azov-1969000173.html>

²⁵ The Azov Regiment in Mariupol: Myths and Truth/ Deutsche Welle, 21 March 2022. URL: <https://www.dw.com/ru/polk-azov-mify-i-pravda-ob-ultrapravyh-zashhitnikah-mariupolja/a-61205446>

²⁶ Ibid.

Full-Scale Invasion. "Honorable" Captivity. Olenivka

The defense of Mariupol became one of the key and most tragic chapters of the full-scale war of the Russian Federation against Ukraine. It began on 24 February 2022 and continued until 20 May 2022 — 86 days, 82 of which Russian forces encircled the city. The core of the Mariupol defense garrison consisted of the National Guard of Ukraine's Azov regiment, the 36th Separate Marine Brigade, units of the territorial defense, the State Border Guard Service, and the National Police.²⁷ Despite the significant numerical superiority of the enemy, constant aerial, artillery, and missile strikes, Ukrainian military personnel held the city for an extended period, containing the advance of Russian forces and inflicting significant losses on them.

Since the beginning of March 2022, Mariupol has been under a complete blockade. Russian forces systematically destroyed the city's civilian infrastructure and struck civilian objects, leading to mass casualties among the population.²⁸

The last line of defense for Mariupol became the Azovstal metallurgical plant, which, thanks to its extensive system of underground shelters, was transformed into a fortified stronghold. It was here that the Azov regiment concentrated. In April 2022, part of the marines carried out a breakout and linked up with forces at Azovstal, thereby enabling the defense to continue. Despite complete encirclement, constant bombardments, and the use of powerful munitions, the defenders of Azovstal continued their resistance, and the Ukrainian side carried out complex operations to evacuate the wounded and deliver necessary resources.^{29, 30}

²⁷ Battle for Mariupol. Heroic defenders of Azovstal / Ministry of Internal Affairs, 31 May 2022. URL: <https://mvs.gov.ua/news/bitva-za-mariupol-geroyi-zaxisniki-azovstali>

²⁸ The circumstances of the siege of Mariupol and the destruction of the civilian population bore the hallmarks of gross violations of international humanitarian law and are being examined as war crimes and crimes against humanity (Invaders killed about 100 thousand people in Mariupol - human rights activists / Ukrinform, 28 August 2023. URL: <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-ato/3754106-u-mariupoli-zagarbniki-vbili-blizko-100-tisac-ludej-pravozahisniki.html>; "Our City Was Gone". Russia's Devastation of Mariupol, Ukraine / Human Rights Watch. URL: <https://www.hrw.org/feature/russia-ukraine-war-mariupol/report>; "The Hope Left Us:" Russia's Siege, Starvation, and Capture of Mariupol City / Global Rights Compliance, July 2024. URL: <https://globalrightscpliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/20240612-Mariupol-ReportENG.pdf>

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ukrainians in Mariupol's steel mill are holding on, despite intensifying attacks, a commander tells The Times / N-T, 24 April 2022. URL: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/24/world/europe/ukrainian-forces-mariupol-steel-plant.html>

In May 2022, carrying out the order of the Ukrainian military command to cease defense and preserve the lives of personnel, the servicemembers of the garrison defending the Azovstal metallurgical plant in Mariupol left the territory of the plant and found themselves in Russian captivity.³¹ The operation was conducted with the participation of the International Committee of the Red Cross and the United Nations; the International Committee of the Red Cross registered departing servicemembers, thereby confirming their status as prisoners of war.³²

"We came out in groups with our small arms. By agreement, we were to surrender them. At the exit, we were met by, as I understand, a colonel of Ukrainian intelligence. He shook each person's hand and thanked them for the defense. Then we moved on and surrendered our weapons... When I came out, I was humming 'Chervona Kalyna.' Then — a search, then they put us on buses, after that a representative of the Red Cross with an interpreter came in, and we filled out basic forms..." recalls Azov officer and former prisoner of war Oleksiy Strebkov.³³

The Ukrainian side emphasized that this was not a voluntary capitulation but an organized garrison exit on orders from the command. In public communications, this step was frequently described as a transition into so-called "*pochesnyi polon*" ("honorable captivity"), implying a subsequent prisoner exchange.³⁴

In total, approximately 2,500 people from various formations that took part in the defense of Azovstal surrendered.³⁵

After the exit of the Azovstal garrison, a significant portion of the Ukrainian servicemembers taken prisoner, including fighters of the Azov regiment, were delivered to a colony in Olenivka on the occupied territory of Donetsk Oblast (the former Volnovakha Correctional Colony No. 120).

³¹ Ukraine Hopes Soldiers Evacuated From Mariupol Can Be Part Of Prisoner Exchange / RFE/RL, 17 May 2022. URL: <https://www.rferl.org/a/azovstal-evacuate-mariupol-ukraine/31854197.html>

³² Ukraine: ICRC registers hundreds of prisoners of war from Azovstal plant / ICRC, May 2022. URL: <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/ukraine-icrc-registers-hundreds-prisoners-war-azovstal-plant>

³³ Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance. Free in Spirit. Stories of Captivity. "Gnosis", 2025, pp. 257–258,.

³⁴ Russian army takes control of Mariupol's Azovstal steel plant / The Guardian, 20 May 2022. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/20/russian-army-takes-control-of-mariupols-azovstal-steel-plant>.

³⁵ "Sometime in mid-April, I realized that we wouldn't make it out of there": An Azov Regiment fighter on what unfolded at the plant and the deaths of prisoners in Olenivka. / Delfi, 1 December 2022. URL: <https://www.delfi.it/ru/news/live/gde-to-v-seredine-aprelya-ya-ponyal-ctomy-ne-vyydem-ottuda-boec-polka-azov-o-proishodivshem-na-zavode-i-gibeli-plennyh-v-elenovke-91894209>.

Testimonies of former prisoners of war and materials of human rights organizations point to severe conditions of detention in Olenivka.³⁶ Inmates reported a lack of food and water, unsanitary conditions, absence of adequate medical care, as well as systematic beatings, humiliation, torture, and other forms of cruel and degrading treatment by guards and investigators.

Female prisoners were held separately from men, together with other civilians and female POWs. The conditions of women's detention in Olenivka did not meet the minimum standards of treatment of detainees. According to the testimonies of prisoners we interviewed, a cell designed for six people held 34 women.

Sanitary conditions were extremely inadequate: the toilet was an open "hole" without any partition, which precluded privacy. The premises were overcrowded, stuffy, and with limited ventilation, causing constant physical and psychological discomfort:

"Thirty-four people in a space for six. And the toilet? The toilet is a hole... You step up onto this podium, and all those thirty-four people wait while you use this hole. And there is no draught, no ventilation — the doors are closed, and there are only two small windows. And what good are they? Especially when they moved us to the second cell, the one overlooking the exercise yard — there is no draught at all there. During the day, the heat is unbearable."³⁷

The prisoners we interviewed said that for a long time, they slept on the concrete floor without mattresses and bedding, despite the administration having such supplies. Food was extremely meager: the diet consisted predominantly of watery dishes with minimal food content and no protein sources; the bread was of low quality and issued in limited quantities. The drinking water showed signs of being unfit for consumption. Sewage problems, the lack of adequate hygiene supplies, and improper dishwashing led to the spread of infections and digestive disorders, including diarrhea.³⁸

A shortage of basic medications and bandages significantly limited access to medical care. According to witnesses, prisoners were forced to provide care to the wounded

³⁶ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. Report on Possible Violations and Abuses of International Humanitarian and Human Rights Law, War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity, Related to the Treatment of Ukrainian POWs by the Russian Federation. OSCE, 2025. URL: <https://cdn.osce.org/sites/default/files/f/documents/a/0/598042.pdf>; One Year Since Death of Ukrainian POWs in Explosion / HRW, 28 July 2023. URL: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/28/one-year-death-ukrainian-pows-explosion>

³⁷ Interview with female Azov servicemembers and former prisoners — Iryna Mohytych, Maryna Tekyn, and a former POW whom, for her safety, we identify by the call sign "Fox," 15 March 2026, Kyiv.

³⁸ Ibid.

themselves and to pass on their own belongings to those in need, which, however, often did not reach the intended recipients.³⁹

According to available testimonies, women were not subjected to systematic physical torture and beatings. Still, they were subjected to threats of execution, threats against family members — including the removal of children (in cases where they were in occupied territories) and their placement in orphanages — and constant psychological pressure.⁴⁰ The conditions of their detention and the failure to provide medical care constituted cruel and degrading treatment.

At the same time, systematic physical violence was practiced in Olenivka against detained Ukrainian men,⁴¹ of whom women received a direct impression, since they constantly heard what was happening. Before the so-called "priyomki,"⁴² the doors of cells were closed, inmates were forbidden to look out of windows, and after that, mass beatings began in the corridors, accompanied by screams and instructions from guards regarding ways to intensify physical pain. Testimonies also point to the use of degrading methods of treatment, including tying up in the bathhouse followed by beatings, as well as episodes of violence in the inner yard where inmates were placed against the wall and beaten.⁴³

According to victims' testimonies, in Olenivka, specifically with respect to Azov service-members, unlike other prisoners of war, "priyomki" were not applied:

*"I think there was an order to wait for now, not to beat us down. I think if they had wanted to, they would have beaten us down immediately, as they did with the marines who came from 'Ilyich.' It was rough with them at the beginning. They got a 'priyomka.' We didn't get a 'priyomka,'" recalls Ihor "Stok."*⁴⁴

Violence began at the interrogation stage and was directly linked to the conduct of interrogations. Testimonies indicate that representatives of investigative bodies were involved in interrogations, including employees of the "prosecutor's office" of the self-proclaimed "DNR," as well as representatives of the FSB of the Russian Federation and the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation. At the same time, according to

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ One Year Since Death of Ukrainian POWs in Explosion / HRW, 28 July 2023. URL: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/28/one-year-death-ukrainian-pows-explosion>.

⁴² "Priyomka" is a Russian prison practice whereby inmates, upon being delivered to a new place of detention after transfer, are subjected to beatings and torture at the point of admission for the purpose of completely breaking their will.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance. Free in Spirit. Stories of Captivity. "Gnosis", 2025, p. 197.

testimonies, interrogators from other detention facilities who had experience in the use of torture during investigative actions would come to the facility for interrogations.⁴⁵

During interrogations, systematic methods of physical and psychological pressure were applied, aimed at coercing confessions. For example, the so-called “*tapik*” torture (a field telephone of the TA-57 type used for torture by electric shock, in which wires are attached to sensitive parts of the body), blows to the genitals, and other painful applications to sensitive body parts. As Hennadiy Kharchenko told us, physical violence was accompanied by abrupt changes in the interrogators’ behavior — from demonstratively neutral communication to sudden beatings, which intensified psychological pressure and disoriented the detainees.⁴⁶

Additionally, methods aimed at causing prolonged physical pain and exhaustion were applied. Inmates were forced to assume deliberately unstable and painful positions (the so-called “star”) with legs spread wide and arms raised or extended; beatings with hands, feet, and objects accompanied any attempts to change position. Testimonies also point to the systematic use of violence by “official” persons participating in interrogations, which lent these actions an organized and systemic character and was aimed at coercing self-incrimination.⁴⁷

The Tragedy in Olenivka

The men from Azov were initially placed in two barracks on the colony’s territory. Then, approximately 200 “Azov” prisoners of war were transferred to a separate building in the colony’s industrial zone in Olenivka. According to eyewitnesses, this building had not previously been used to hold large numbers of people. It was hastily converted into a barracks, where bunk beds were installed so closely together.

On the night of 28–29 July 2022, an explosion occurred in this building, which, according to United Nations data, killed more than 50 people and wounded 151.⁴⁸ The authorities of the Russian Federation and the self-proclaimed “DNR” claimed that the incident was the result of a strike by the U.S.-supplied HIMARS system by Ukraine. Ukrainian authorities believe that Russia carried out the explosion to conceal evidence of torture and extrajudicial killings. The American Institute for the Study of War (ISW) noted that the available visual evidence was more consistent with the Ukrainian version than the Russian one. Specifically, the materials published by Russia demonstrate damage that does not correspond to the typical consequences of a HIMARS strike, as the Russian

⁴⁵ Interview with Hennadiy Kharchenko, 15 March 2026, Kyiv.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Olenivka: two years since the deadly strike that killed dozens of Ukrainian POWs, a continued call for accountability / OHCHR, 26 July 2024. URL: <https://ukraine.ohchr.org/en/Olenivka-two-years-since-the-deadly-strike>

side claimed.⁴⁹ To date, the testimonies of those freed from captivity, independent journalistic investigations, and data collected by human rights organizations and analytical centers indicate that what occurred may entail the responsibility of the Russian Federation for serious violations of international humanitarian law and, if all necessary elements are established, may qualify as a war crime.⁵⁰ However, conducting a comprehensive, objective investigation is impossible — Russian authorities do not allow international experts and are blocking the investigation.⁵¹

Two years after the tragedy in Olenivka, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights made the following statement:

“Prisoners of war are protected under international humanitarian law, which requires humane treatment and obliges the detaining country to ensure their safety. In the event of death or serious injury to prisoners of war, the detaining state is obliged to conduct an official and thorough investigation...”

Despite these obligations, the authorities of the Russian Federation took steps that obstructed independent attempts to establish the facts about the explosions in Olenivka. The scene was not preserved; on the contrary, it was contaminated, and physical evidence was compromised. The Russian Federation did not provide access to United Nations observers, and no other independent expert analyses were conducted. Instead, Russian authorities claimed that the strike was carried out by HIMARS rockets launched by the Ukrainian armed forces.

Based on interviews with more than 50 witnesses and survivors, as well as analysis of video and photographic materials, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights concluded last year that the explosions were not caused by HIMARS rockets launched by the armed forces of Ukraine. Although the exact type of weapon and the location of its launch could not be established, the nature of the building damage was consistent with the trajectory of a projectile flying from east to west.”⁵²

As a surviving witness from among the prisoners told us, the “Azov members” were transferred to the barracks in the industrial zone the day before the explosion, without

⁴⁹ Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment / ISW, 30 July 2022. URL: <https://understandingwar.org/research/russia-ukraine/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-28/>

⁵⁰ Olenivka: two years since the deadly strike that killed dozens of Ukrainian POWs, a continued call for accountability / OHCHR, 26 July 2024. URL: <https://ukraine.ohchr.org/en/Olenivka-two-years-since-the-deadlyBasedon-strike>

⁵¹ Halya Coynash. Admission of guilt: Russia blocks international investigation of Olenivka mass killing of Ukrainian POWs / KHPG, 7 September 2022. URL: <https://khpg.org/en/160881125>

⁵² Olenivka: two years since the deadly strike that killed dozens of Ukrainian POWs, a continued call for accountability / OHCHR, 26 July 2024. URL: <https://ukraine.ohchr.org/en/Olenivka-two-years-since-the-deadly-strike>

any explanation of the reasons for the move. On the night of the tragedy, prisoners were ordered to remain inside the building, although previously they had been allowed to be on the colony's territory in the evening.⁵³ According to his account, the explosion occurred late in the evening and was accompanied by a powerful flash. Many prisoners of war died instantly; others sustained severe burns and wounds. According to former prisoners, including artillerymen, the nature of the destruction did not correspond to the consequences of a rocket or artillery strike: there was no characteristic crater in the building, while a large hole formed in the ceiling, pushed outward, which may indicate an explosion inside the building. Witnesses also note that the pattern of casualties — a large number of people killed immediately, severe burns, and a powerful blast wave — is consistent with the effect of a thermobaric charge, which causes maximum damage in an enclosed space.⁵⁴

After the explosion, the wounded went for an extended period without receiving adequate medical care. According to witness Hennadiy Kharchenko, the Russian guards initially forbade leaving the area and fired warning shots, so the wounded were forced to wait for help for several hours. Only toward morning were Ukrainian paramedics from among the prisoners of war allowed to begin assisting and to conduct the initial triage of the wounded before evacuation. Some of the severely wounded were transported by ordinary trucks not adapted for medical evacuation, which led to additional deaths during transport.⁵⁵

On 10 December 2024, four Ukrainian and two foreign public organizations (French and Dutch) filed an intervention with the International Criminal Court, in which they laid out the results of their own investigation and research into the explosion in Olenivka on the night of 29 July 2022.

“In the course of our work, we closely interacted with the Office of the Prosecutor General and used, among other things, information obtained from it in accordance with established legal procedure to strengthen our evidentiary base and arguments. We managed to reconstruct the chronology of the events of 28 July and the morning of 29 July almost minute by minute,” said Roman Martynovsky, the lead expert of one of the organizations that filed the intervention — the Regional Center for Human Rights.⁵⁶

In the opinion of human rights defenders, the explosions occurred as a result of the detonation of explosives placed inside the barracks.⁵⁷

⁵³ Interview with Hennadiy Kharchenko, 15 March 2026, Kyiv.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ The colony management tried to increase the number of victims. Terrorist attack in Olenivka: new details of the Russian crime / “Social Donbas”, 28 January 2025. URL: <https://suspijne.media/donbas/935301-kerivnictvo-kolonii-namagalos-zbilsiti-kilkist-zertv-terakt-v-olenivci-novi-podrobici-rosijskogo-zlocinu/>

⁵⁷ Ibid.

In 2024, the former head of the Olenivka correctional colony and his first deputy were notified of suspicion of violating the laws and customs of war combined with premeditated murder, according to prosecutor Dmytro Martsyn. Their cases are being examined under Part 2 of Article 438 of the Criminal Code of Ukraine.⁵⁸

In total, the intervention to the International Criminal Court named ten persons who may have been involved in the explosion, including senior officials of the Russian Federation.⁵⁹

After the events in Olenivka, most surviving servicemembers of the Azov regiment were distributed to other detention facilities, primarily pre-trial detention centers and colonies in Donetsk and Taganrog, where they continued to be held in an *incommunicado* regime — that is, without any contact with the outside world, under the strict control of Russian security forces, including the FSB.⁶⁰ Former "Azov" POWs recall that, compared with subsequent places of detention, Olenivka was "a strict-regime resort"⁶¹ and "a summer camp."⁶²

Taganrog, SIZO No. 2

According to victims' testimonies, conditions of detention in Taganrog were characterized as extremely harsh and aimed at completely breaking the personality of the detainees. Inmates were held in overcrowded cells with limited access to drinking water and insufficient food. The diet was meager and monotonous, failing to meet basic physiological needs. Sanitary conditions were unsatisfactory: limited access to toilets and hygiene supplies, unsanitary conditions, and the spread of infectious diseases, including dysentery. Access to medical care was significantly limited or effectively absent, including for seriously ill inmates.^{63, 64}

Testimonies point to the systematic use of violence and torture as an integral part of the detention regime. A special place was occupied by so-called "*priyomki*," accompanied by mass beatings and humiliation. According to descriptions, after such a procedure, the corridors and cells were left with traces of blood and feces, testifying to the extreme degree of cruelty of the violence applied, including against those severely wounded after Olenivka. Inmates were systematically beaten with hands, feet, and improvised

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Russia's Sham Trial of Ukrainian Prisoners of War / Human Rights Watch, 6 July 2023. URL: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/06/russias-sham-trial-ukrainian-prisoners-war>

⁶¹ Hell in Taganrog. Azov soldiers in captivity. Interview Pako, Yuzhny, Rusty - Azov servicemen. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CLhLiSRI89o>

⁶² Український інститут національної пам'яті. Вільні духом. Історії полону. «Гнозіс», 2025, р. 197.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Interview with female Azov servicemembers and former prisoners..., 15 March 2026, Kyiv.

means, including on sensitive body parts; individual episodes of beatings lasted many hours — according to testimonies, up to 15 hours straight:

*"...It lasted a very long time. When they had already brought me in, it was dark, it was night, and they were still 'receiving' us. They were screaming. I don't know how the whole SIZO system is set up, but everything could be heard — right down to the lower floor... Dogs were barking, constantly barking. And there was this screaming. And the doors of cells were constantly slamming. At that moment, we were on the upper floor, and on the lower floor were the guys. As far as I know, according to their testimonies, two were beaten to death during the 'priyomka.'"*⁶⁵

Additionally, methods of physical exhaustion were applied, including being forced to stand for extended periods without the ability to sit or lean — from 6:00 a.m. until lights out at 10:00 p.m. Regular beatings accompanied such conditions for any attempts to change body position:

"You have to line up at the door, get into the 'pretzel' pose (humiliating stress position: bent forward, legs wide, arms raised — trans. note), looking at the door is not allowed, looking out the windows is not allowed, talking is not allowed, sitting is not allowed, walking — especially not allowed! Only standing is allowed. If you moved, made a noise, or anything — spreads your legs wider, even wider, bends you lower, and raises your arms higher — and off it goes! And you're standing in this 'pretzel' pose, and it is hitting you on the legs, and if you grab on or flinch — 'Oh!? You wanted to kill me!?' And absolute madness begins..." recalls a servicewoman with the call sign "Kim."⁶⁶

Twice a day, "inspections" with beatings were conducted:

*"Inspections... Once they drove a nail in. During an inspection, they found some nails and stuck one in everyone's hand in our cell, one by one. Supposedly, 'you wanted to attack us?' And the nail was rusty, with mould. He just took it and screwed this nail into your hand — you're standing face to the wall, and he screwed it into the hand of each of us in the cell... That, of course, was painful. And otherwise, they just constantly beat you. You go out for an inspection — they beat you, you run to the exercise yard — they beat you, you go to the shower — they also beat you..."*⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

The violence was extreme in nature and, according to testimonies, in several cases led to death; meanwhile, the victims did not receive medical care even when there was an obvious threat to life.⁶⁸

Cases of sexualised and degrading treatment of women are separately documented. According to testimonies, there was no basic privacy: women could be observed while using the toilet and visiting the bathhouse, which was accompanied by mockery and humiliation from the staff. Such practices were used as an additional instrument of psychological pressure and degradation of the dignity of the detainees. In the aggregate, the described conditions and treatment testify to the systemic nature of the violence, aimed at inflicting suffering and breaking the individual.^{69, 70}

Donetsk, SIZO No. 1

According to the testimonies of some victims, the conditions of detention in Donetsk SIZO were even worse than in Taganrog.⁷¹ Sanitary conditions contributed to the spread of diseases, including tuberculosis. Detainees also pointed to the risk of deliberate HIV infection under conditions of absent medical oversight and the application of violence. Medical care either was not provided or was significantly delayed, even in cases of severe injuries.

According to the testimonies of female prisoners, violence in the facility was constant. Beatings occurred virtually without interruption: screams, blows, and pleas for help were audible around the clock, including at night.

"The medics don't come, they don't give anything — die however you like, dogs..." recalls Maryna Tekyn. "And this abuse of the guys — they were simply beaten every day. I tore out my hair, I swear, I tore it out. Learning to sleep through this — is impossible."⁷²

Women also report cases in which detainees died from the consequences of beatings without receiving medical care:

"Across from us was a cell — two guys in there were beaten to death. Not immediately — they still suffered... They'd beat them — open the cell; it's the morning inspection, and they start beating. And they make them sing the Russian anthem every time; if you make even one mistake in that anthem, they beat you immediately... One of those guys who was there made such

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Hell in Taganrog. Azovites in captivity. Interview URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CLhLiSRl89o>

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Interview with female Azov servicemembers and former prisoners..., 15 March 2026, Kyiv.

a mistake. God, how they beat him. I don't know what with, because you couldn't see. He screamed so! And then he died over three days... And the second guy who was with us — they smashed his kidneys and beat him so that his sexual organ turned blue and, as he said, didn't fit in his trousers... Then the guys knocked on the cell door in the middle of the night, said he was dying, and the medics were sitting in the cell next door. They asked if they could give him medical help. And the guard said: No medical help is to be given to him; when he dies, then you knock. And he died... And another one was beaten to death — they dragged him to the medical unit, brought him back, and that's how he died," recalls Iryna Mohytych, Maryna Tekyn, and a former POW who, for security reasons, we identify by her call sign "Fox."⁷³

According to women's testimonies, in the Donetsk SIZO, they were also subjected to torture, beatings, and forms of extreme sexualised and degrading treatment. In particular, there are descriptions of the practice of forcing women to strip completely naked and moving them to the bathhouse through a line of men in a humiliating position, accompanied by mockery and demonstrative degradation. The use of hoods during transfers, which were stained with blood, urine, and feces of other detainees, is also documented.⁷⁴

Separately, women gave testimony about the deliberate infection of prisoners: "One person was infected with HIV in the SIZO in Donetsk. I am one thousand percent certain that he is not the only one to whom this was done. They would deliberately draw the blood of infected people and inject it into our guys..."⁷⁵

According to the testimony of Hennadiy Kharchenko, a significantly broader range of torture was applied in the Donetsk SIZO compared to Olenivka, and the violence was systemic and organized. Inmates were subjected to "*priyomki*," regular "inspections," and interrogations involving torture, physical violence, and the use of attack dogs.⁷⁶

Interrogations with torture, "*priyomki*," and "inspections" were also applied in other places of detention. Hennadiy Kharchenko describes a "*priyomka*" at the Horlivka disciplinary isolation unit:

"We arrived... they said: only 'Azov members' get off, face the bus... for transport — and the beatings started immediately... They put you in a position in which it is maximally uncomfortable to stand... the so-called 'litttle star'... hands above the head or to the sides... legs as wide apart as possible... It's very hard to keep your balance... any attempt to stand more

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid. The authors are aware of a case of HIV infection, confirmed by a diagnosis made by physicians of the Federal Penitentiary Service of the Russian Federation (FSIN).

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Interview with Hennadiy Kharchenko, 15 March 2026, Kyiv.

comfortably is treated as insubordination... And in this position they beat you — with feet, hands, with anything... and make you assume the same position again... The beating started immediately after the 'Azov members' left the column... everyone was involved — investigators, so-called 'screws' [guards], and operatives... people even came from the watchtower... they passed you from one to another — and each one struck blows... This continued for several hours... personally, they broke my ribs... no medical help was provided... then a doctor only recorded the fracture... but there was no treatment..."⁷⁷

Testimonies also point to the extreme degree of cruelty of the violence applied: beatings were prolonged, and in several cases led to the death of detainees. According to testimonies, severely beaten inmates did not receive medical care despite being in critical condition, leading to fatalities. In the assessment of human rights defenders, in the aggregate, the described practices — constant beatings, torture, sexualised violence, degrading treatment, deliberate infection, and denial of medical care — formed a sustained environment of fear and the complete suppression of the will of the detainees.^{78, 79}

Show Trials. "The Case of the 24"

Despite the assurances of Russian presidential spokesperson Dmitry Peskov that captured "Azov members" would be held in accordance with the norms of humanitarian law, many officials in Russia made statements to the opposite effect. In August 2022, photographs of prison cages installed inside the Mariupol Philharmonic spread in the media, and the head of the self-proclaimed "DNR," Denis Pushilin, confirmed that they were intended for conducting show trials of Azov.⁸⁰ LDNR leader Leonid Slutsky pro-

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Romanov, Mykhailo. Torture of Ukrainian Prisoners of War in Russian Federation Detention Places. Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group, 2025. URL: <https://library.khpg.org/1738165101>

⁷⁹ Amnesty International. A Deafening Silence: Ukrainians Held Incommunicado, Forcibly Disappeared and Tortured in Russian Captivity. Amnesty International, 2025. URL: <https://www.amnesty.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/eur-50.9046.2025-a-deafening-silence-5.pdf>

⁸⁰ Russia's sham trials of prisoners of war in Mariupol are "illegal and unacceptable." — Amnesty International/Amnesty International, 29 August 2022. URL: <https://www.amnesty.org/ru/latest/news/2022/08/rossijskie-fiktivnye-suda-nad-voennoplennymi-v-mariupole-nezakonny-i-nepriemly/reognized>,.

posed making an exception to the moratorium on the death penalty to punish Azov servicemembers for "crimes against humanity."⁸¹

However, in the end, an already existing mechanism came to be used for the prosecution of Azov: inclusion in the list of terrorist organizations, which allowed Russian courts to hold Ukrainian servicemembers of this formation accountable under the article on "Terrorism." On 2 August 2022, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation adopted the corresponding decision.⁸²

The position of the Russian side is to treat Azov as a terrorist organization and not to recognize its members' status as combatants. However, this contradicts the norms of international humanitarian law, including the Third Geneva Convention, which confers prisoner-of-war status on servicemembers of regular armed forces.

In May 2023, the Southern District Military Court began hearing the "Case of the 24" — a case involving prisoners who at various times served in Azov, including nine women. All defendants were captured under different circumstances: some laid down their weapons during hostilities, the command released some from Azovstal, and they were unable to pass Russian filtration, or were kidnapped from their homes. These people also had different functions within Azov. Among the defendants were female cooks, a general laborer, and a dog handler. The Russian authorities were not in the least troubled by the fact that the Azov battalion had been part of the regular forces of the National Guard of Ukraine since 2014, since, as stated in the criminal case materials of the accused, "the formal change of name and chain of command did not entail a change in the ideology, goals, and objectives of this terrorist community."

Nor was the Russian court troubled by the fact that it was trying servicemembers of the regular army of Ukraine, nor that in most cases the events to which the court was giving its assessment occurred before the formal recognition and "accession" of the occupied territories of Ukraine to the Russian Federation, when even Russia still recognized Ukrainian jurisdiction there. Nevertheless, to remove these unfortunate discrepancies, on 31 July, new provisions were adopted: clauses 1 and 3 of Article 2 of Federal Law No. 395-FZ "On the Application of the Provisions of the Criminal Code of the RF and the Criminal Procedure Code of the RF on the Territories of the Donetsk People's Republic, Luhansk People's Republic, Zaporizhzhia Oblast, and Kherson Oblast."⁸³ According to these provisions, the punishability of acts committed on the territory of the "DNR," "LNR," Zaporizhzhia and Kherson oblasts before 30 September 2022 is determined based on the criminal legislation of the Russian Federation. And "crimes" com-

⁸¹ Azov fighters could face death in Russia / Deutsche Welle, 21 May 2022. URL: <https://www.dw.com/en/prisoners-of-war-from-azov-do-the-fighters-face-the-death-penalty-in-russia/a-61883690>

⁸² Russia's Supreme Court has designated "Azov" as a terrorist organization. The decision was delayed for two and a half months. / BBC, 2 August 2022. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-62393748>

⁸³ Federal Law of 31 July 2023, No. 395-FZ. URL: <http://publicati.Still,Artemon.pravo.gov.ru/document/0001202307310011>

mitted before 30 September 2022 against the interests of the "DNR" and "LNR" are considered to have been committed against the interests of the Russian Federation.⁸⁴

Initially, all defendants in the case were charged under the criminal code of the self-proclaimed "DNR": under Articles 323 (seizure of power) and 234 (organization of the activities of a terrorist organization or participation therein). At the same time, eleven "Azov members" with military specialties were charged under Article 232 of the Criminal Code of the "DNR" (undergoing training in the framework of terrorist activity). Subsequently, the cases were re-qualified under the Russian Criminal Code. All defendants were charged under Articles 278 (violent seizure of power committed by a criminal organization) and 205.5 (organization of the activities of a terrorist organization or participation therein). People with military specialties were charged under Article 205.3 of the Criminal Code of the RF (undergoing training for terrorist activity).

The main feature of the trial (also evident in subsequent cases against servicemembers of Azov and Aidar) was the prosecution solely for having served in these formations. This in itself constitutes a violation of the Geneva Conventions, since the majority of those brought before the court were part of the Ukrainian armed forces and should have been held in prisoner-of-war status, which protects them from criminal prosecution for the fact of belonging to the armed forces of a party to the conflict and participating in hostilities. Moreover, the majority of Azov POWs left Azovstal with the participation of the ICRC and the United Nations: the ICRC registered them as POWs, and they already had that status.⁸⁵ As the organization Human Rights Watch noted, prisoners of war cannot be held accountable for actions committed before the moment of their capture, if at that time those actions were not criminalized.⁸⁶

Another feature was the formal presentation of charges relating to "organizing the activities" of a terrorist organization or "participating in a terrorist organization." Among the women who ended up in the dock, the "organizers" were designated as the head of the canteen and the warehouse manager. In the case of the men, the prosecution was evidently oriented mainly toward the presence of an officer's rank. Still, Artem Hrebeshkov, who served in Azov as an ammunition custodian, was found guilty under the article on organizing the activities of a terrorist organization. Although in the "Case of the 24" the women without military specialties ultimately received shorter sentences, people with entirely different functions within the formation — rifleman-grenade launcher operator Nikita Tymonin (sentenced to 22 years in a strict-regime colony) and cook Vladyslava Maiboroda (sentenced to 13 years in a general-regime colony, in absentia) — were ultimately convicted under the same articles.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ukraine: ICRC registers hundreds of prisoners of war from Azovstal plant / ICRC, May 2022. URL: <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/ukraine-icrc-registers-hundreds-prisoners-war-azovstal-plant>

⁸⁶ Russia's Sham Trial of Ukrainian Prisoners of War / HRW, 6 July 2023. URL: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/06/russias-sham-trial-ukrainian-prisoners-war>

As "Mediazona" noted, this largest trial of "Azov members" turned into a trial of Azov as such — the prosecution collected extensive materials from open sources about Azov's crimes dating back to 2014 and also questioned civilians of Mariupol. Although particular attention at the trial was paid to events connected with the siege of the city, among the defendants were people who had left the service before the start of the full-scale invasion: for example, Oleh Mizhhorodsky, who resigned from Azov in 2021; Artem Hrebeshkov was discharged from service a year and a half before the full-scale invasion; and Yaroslav Zhdamarov served from 2015 to September 2019. These people were not captured in combat but were essentially kidnapped outside the context of hostilities. Zhdamarov was detained at a checkpoint while riding in a taxi, and Artem Hrebeshkov was smoking outside his home's entrance.

During the trial, the defendants also pointed to the following violations:

Torture, cruel, and inhumane treatment. As the defendants stated, at all stages they were subjected to torture and ill-treatment. Oleksandr Ishchenko reported threats of execution; Nikita Tymonin and Oleh Tyshkul — torture by electric shock and beatings lasting many hours; Oleh Zharkov — being forced to stand barefoot in cold. Anatoliy Hrytsyk stated that the simulated execution of his wife was carried out before his eyes. Female defendants reported beatings, humiliation, and being forced to watch the torture of other people, as well as psychological pressure, being forced to sing the Russian anthem and shout slogans "Akhmat is power," "Glory to Russia," etc. Torture and inhumane treatment of "Azov members" in the Donetsk SIZO is described in detail above.

Prolonged detention in an "incommunicado" regime. Most "Azov members" were and continue to be held for extended periods without contact with relatives, without access to independent legal assistance, and without confirmed access by representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross. The relatives of many prisoners learn that they are alive only at the moment the trial begins in Rostov — and the prisoners, in turn, receive news from their loved ones' lives for the first time. As prisoner Nina Bondarenko stated, the administration of SIZO-1 Donetsk did not inform relatives of their whereabouts, and even when this became known, the SIZO still did not accept packages for people associated with Azov. The absence of contact with lawyers and family members contributed to the general atmosphere of impunity and the use of torture.

Indirect evidence of *incommunicado* detention, recognized even by Russian judicial bodies, is the significant period that elapses between capture and the initiation of the criminal case. For example, Azov servicemember Vitaliy Zaluzhny, accused under the terrorist article for serving in Azov, was captured in May 2022, and the case against him reached the court in October 2025.⁸⁷

Failure to provide medical care. "Azov members," like other POWs, virtually do not receive medical care, and this is a systematic practice. Thus, one of the women — now exchanged and in Ukraine — was told by a staff member of the medical unit at the

⁸⁷ Southern Military Court Sentences Ukrainian Serviceman to 6 Years in Penal Colony / Mediazona, November 14, 2025. URL: <https://zona.media/news/2025/11/14/zaluzhnii>

Donetsk SIZO in plain terms, when she asked to see a gynecologist: "In concentration camps, they don't treat people." Another prisoner broke her hip. For two days, medical personnel did not come to see her despite numerous requests for help. Azov fighters cannot obtain either the most basic pills to improve their condition or medications prescribed for life in connection with serious chronic diseases.

Impossibility of reviewing case materials. At the Prosecutor General's Office of the self-proclaimed "DNR," the defendants were held with bags over their heads and in handcuffs, removed only to sign documents acknowledging their review of the case materials. When one of the women, Natalya Holfiner, did manage to see that her testimony had been distorted in the record, she was told, "They can't fill all jails of Russia with cooks," and was ordered to sign. Olena Avramova reported that she could not read the interrogation record because she was not given her glasses.

Violation of the right to defense. At the Donetsk Directorate for Combating Organized Crime (UBOP), defendants were forced to refuse a lawyer, with claims that no one would defend Ukrainians and that any lawyer who dared to do so would put themselves in danger. According to Liliya Rudenko, when she was charged with organizing a terrorist community, the lawyer remarked that this was "to her benefit." Nikita Tymonin admitted that he saw his lawyer "for about a minute"—the lawyer gave his client a cigarette and then left the room. In the Russian Federation, access to a lawyer was generally ensured. Still, independent lawyers are regularly obstructed in accessing their clients, and at the SIZO in Taganrog, lawyers were not admitted for an extended period.

In September 2024, all female defendants were released as a result of a prisoner exchange between Russia and Ukraine. They were convicted in Russia in absentia.⁸⁸ Two more defendants in the case were exchanged before the start of the trial, and a reservist, 55-year-old Oleksandr Ishchenko, died in SIZO-5 in Rostov. Twelve "Azov members" received sentences ranging from 13 to 23 years in a strict-regime colony.

The group case against "Azov members" did not meet the objectives that Russian propaganda set for these trials. Being together, with the support of independent lawyers and in the presence of the media, the defendants consistently refused to admit guilt. They pointed to the groundlessness of the charges against them, revealing their contradictory nature and political motivation. They gave detailed accounts of the torture and inhumane treatment to which they had been subjected after detention. Even for media loyal to the state, it was difficult to present what was happening as justice. The defendants' testimony vividly demonstrated the gap between the charges and the actual circumstances of their lives and service.

"I have never in my life offended anyone, never shot at anyone. I went to a Russian-language school, I speak and think in Russian," declared cook Olena Avramova in court. She was widowed in 2014, raised two children

⁸⁸ The "Case of the 24" is described primarily in the drawing: Case of the 24. How captured Ukrainians from Azov were tortured, tried, and exchanged / Mediazona, 26 March 2025. URL: <https://zona.media/article/2025/03/26/azov-prigovor>

alone, and in December 2020 took a contract position at an Azov recreation facility, working in the canteen.

General laborer Zharkov, in his words, had never held a weapon in his hands. Dog handler Zhdamarov left the service before the start of the full-scale war.

The defendants' statements, including their final words, had the opposite effect to that intended by the propaganda. Instead of confirming the narrative about "terrorists," they demonstrated the experience of people who had defended their country and became victims of violence and arbitrary prosecution.

"Much has been said here about us being fascists, Nazis, terrorists... I want to draw a small analogy. On 22 June 1941, at four in the morning, Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union, and on 24 February 2022, all of Ukraine woke up to the explosions of Russian missiles. It was not Ukraine that attacked Russia; it was not we who came with weapons to a foreign country. We defended our land, our cities... and now we are being tried for overthrowing the government," stated Nikita Tymonin in his final word.

Iryna Mohytych vividly described her impression of the first hearing in the "Case of the 24" in an interview with "Mediazona":

"They herded in all the state channels — everyone was there. There was simply no room for an apple to fall. It was just a total shitstorm. TRK, 'Zvezda,' NTV, what's the other one? 'Rossiya-24,' 'Planeta' — in short, everyone. And when they came in, the men were all skinny, horrible, broken, destroyed, combed over, in these festering wounds... We women — grey-haired, aged. All our girls had withered, aged. The guys even more so — they were all beaten, all broken. Then this wave started about... Cooks, former service-members, civilian hires... What is this? Who, who are you trying, are you serious?"⁸⁹

According to one of the lawyers:

"They trapped themselves. Originally, they planned a big trial of the Azov commanders, Prokopenko and his comrades. That's what the cages in Mariupol were for. They stoked the passions that the trial of these terrible, horrifying 'Nazis' and 'beasts' was beginning. But the commanders were exchanged, and the cooks were left. The fervor of state media faded when they saw in the courtroom that this was not what they had been promised. They had been promised horrors and chaos, and in reality, there were tortured women and guys who looked as if they had just been taken down from a cross. They couldn't put together the picture they needed. Then they

⁸⁹ The Case of the 24: How Captured Ukrainian Azov Fighters Were Tortured, Tried, and Exchanged / Mediazona, <https://zona.media/article/2025/03/26/azov-prigovor>

started having difficulty even coming to the sessions... Some state media were also present for the defendants' final statements, and then they understood who these people really were. Still, they couldn't film or write about what was actually happening in the courtroom. And the prisoners were in shackles on their hands and feet... They weren't embarrassed to put those on them. In short, the state media got themselves into a mess, and then they deleted their articles about the 'trial of the century' and wrote some perfunctory reports."

Thus, even within the controlled information space, the "Case of the 24" was too obvious a fabrication. The Memorial Human Rights Center recognized all those convicted in the "Case of the 24" as political prisoners.⁹⁰

"Solo" Cases and the Case of Oleksandr Maksymchuk

The propaganda failure of the "Case of the 24" led to a new tactical step. After this, cases involving defendants accused of serving in Military Unit 3057 of the NGU Azov regiment were separated into individual proceedings and tried one at a time. The defendants were coerced into admitting their "guilt," while, according to available information, they were promised a quick exchange and return to their homeland after the trials. The shift from collective trials to "solo" cases indicates a tactical adaptation of judicial practice.

It happens roughly as follows: after torture, the prisoner signs pre-prepared records of confessions, both regarding themselves and regarding other "Azov members," and agrees to have the case heard via videoconference while being held, for example, in SIZO-2 in Taganrog.

In the rare cases where court proceedings were conducted directly at the Southern District Military Court in Rostov-on-Don, defendants managed to pass requests for help through cellmates, along with information about torture and abuse.

Trials are, as a rule, conducted in one or several sessions. Testimony of witnesses and defendants is read aloud without direct examination in court. Defendants often do not know what is written in the records of their own interrogations and become acquainted with them only when the state prosecution reads the charges in court. The text of the investigator's testimony is formulaic; all testimonies are similar, almost as if carbon-copied.

⁹⁰ We consider the prisoners of war from the Ukrainian Azov Regiment to be political prisoners. / Support for Political Prisoners. Memorial, 12 January 2024. URL: <https://memopzk.org/news/my-schitaem-politzaklyuchyonnyimi-voennoplennyh-iz-ukrainskogo-polka-azov/>

The cases themselves are structured identically; the same formulations and evidence are used. In essence, the investigator only changes the surnames and certain personal details in the case. The circumstances of the cases are often contradictory, the charges are baseless and unconvincing to an objective observer. According to the testimony of those convicted, Russian judges themselves sometimes could not bear the weakness of the indictment. Hennadiy Kharchenko recalls that during his trial, when the judge's attention was drawn to an obvious inconsistency in the prosecution's argumentation, "even the judge was surprised, threw down the 'case' and said — God, what nonsense they write!"⁹¹

Courts directly link Azov's ideology with Nazism, asserting that "the association is based on Nazi ideology, declared criminal in 1946 by decisions of the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg," and that its activity has "a pronounced anti-Russian character, posing a threat to the security and foundations of the constitutional order of the Russian Federation."

Analysis of the indictments and verdicts of already-exchanged Azov fighters indicates that this is done to form a body of judicial practice on "atrocities of Ukrainian nationalists" and the subsequent presentation of these materials to international organizations, as well as for propaganda purposes within Russia.

From a standard indictment:

"In May 2014, on the territory of Ukraine, the Ukrainian paramilitary nationalist association 'Azov' was created, which included members of various radical structures adhering to far-right neo-Nazi views ('Right Sector,' 'Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists,' 'White Hammer,' etc.). The basis of the ideology of said association was the idea of neo-Nazism, as well as a system of ideological tenets, norms, and values directed, among other things, at the commission of unlawful violent actions against specific groups of the population for the purpose of resolving political tasks."

As we wrote above, the link between Azov and "neo-Nazis" is needed by Russian propaganda to justify the invasion, while references to the Military Tribunal at Nuremberg draw parallels with the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945, lending legitimacy to the war against Ukraine. Thus, the court is one of the effective instruments of propaganda.

In many verdicts, there is an expert opinion by a specialist "V." who explains that the basis of Azov's ideology "is Russophobia and Ukrainian racial social-nationalism"; it "proceeds from the racial superiority of Ukrainians over other nations and peoples. Participants of 'Azov' categorically oppose the territorial and administrative independence of the DNR and LNR, and also do not recognize the referendums on their independence and accession to the Russian Federation." Thus, the court indirectly acknowledges that its primary grievance against Azov is its fight for Ukraine's territorial integrity.

Individual charges are built on the following postulates:

⁹¹ Interview with Hennadiy Kharchenko, 15 March 2026, Kyiv.

First: on proving the specific defendant's membership in the Azov regiment, as well as the fact of having undergone obligatory military training, weapons and explosives handling, and physical training. This allows investigators to bring charges on two serious counts simultaneously: participation in a terrorist organization and training for terrorist activity.

Evidence of a servicemember's service in the Azov regiment is often based on the testimony of the same witness — a captured assistant of the personnel department who served at the Azov base and is now, according to available information, held in one of the SIZOs. At the same time, said witness, in public testimony given freely, essentially repudiates the content of the records, speaks only of a superficial acquaintance with the defendants, says that he met some of the defendants after being captured, but then, in response to additional questions from the prosecutor and the presiding judge, participating in the proceedings via videoconference, confirms the previously given testimony, accompanying it with the phrase "yes sir, citizen commander," looking around fearfully.

Evidence of service also includes electronic copies of Azov Regiment personnel documents, such as personnel status reports, that were found by Russian security forces during the capture of one of the bases. In addition, some "Azov members" who surrendered had identification documents with them.

Court verdicts emphasize that each defendant voluntarily signed a contract with the Azov regiment, aware of the "terrorist nature" of its activities, "sharing the ideas of this organization, as well as wishing to improve their material situation..." At the same time, all of them allegedly adhered to "extreme radical views of Ukrainian nationalism and Russophobia," in connection with which they "spoke only in the Ukrainian language" and "expressed their hatred of Russians." In reality, many of the defendants speak Russian, and some are ethnic Russians.

Second: Having proved the defendant's contract with the Azov regiment, the Russian state prosecutor proceeds to enumerate crimes in his opinion ever committed by this association since 2014: "crimes of a general criminal nature were committed on a mass scale against the civilian population on linguistic grounds (against Russian-speaking residents)," "shelling of populated areas, destruction of civilian infrastructure to destabilise the activities of the authorities of the DNR, influencing their decisions on violating the territorial integrity of the DNR and returning it to Ukraine's control," "propaganda of the ideology of violence," "detonation of explosive devices in public places," "destruction of historical monuments and civilian infrastructure objects of populated areas," "the use of civilians as human shields." Thus, as in the "Case of the 24," trials of individual "Azov members" are turned into a trial of Azov.

Among the specific "evidence" of these crimes, references are made to previously handed down verdicts of other Azov fighters, references to "documents of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights from the period of March 2014 to December 2017," "data of the organisation 'Amnesty International'" (declared "undesirable" in the Russian Federation and prohibited by law). In some verdicts, inves-

tigators also refer to an inspection of an Azov deployment site, where "inscriptions and slogans aimed at promoting the ideology of Nazism and inciting hatred and enmity on racial and ethnic grounds, and symbolism of Nazi Germany" were found.

According to available information, in criminal cases, extremist symbolism is mainly considered to be certain tattoos on the prisoner's body (for example, the "Black Sun," "Kolovrat," "Symbol of the One God"), which the investigative authorities, in the case of Azov, consider a marker of neo-Nazi ideology. However, the case materials contain no expert opinion on the nature of these symbols and their actual relationship to ultra-radical ideologies; they are not listed among extremist symbols in the Russian Federation; moreover, T-shirts, chevrons, and merchandise with the same symbols are freely sold on popular Russian marketplaces such as OZON.

Thus, for each Azov fighter, including those who signed contracts shortly before capture, or women who served in the canteen or snack shop on the base, the Russian state prosecution lays the blame for everything it believes this unit ever committed. The verdict is handed down without establishing individual responsibility. As a result, a person who is not charged with any violent actions ends up sentenced to a very long term — 13, 19, 29 years of imprisonment in a strict-regime colony.

It is important to note that the "solo" defendants were initially sentenced to 7–8 years, but subsequently, new cases were opened against them, with additional terms added. For example, they are first convicted in Rostov-on-Don, then brought to Donetsk, and convicted again.⁹² Some are convicted three times — for example, Yehor Yakovenko. Apparently, this is connected with the presence on his body of numerous tattoos, which the Russian authorities associate with neo-Nazi ideology.

In October 2025, "Mediazona" reported at least 12 known cases in which former Azov servicemembers, already convicted on other charges, subsequently had another criminal prosecution opened against them for "membership in a terrorist community" or "terrorism training." "And these are not isolated cases but an established practice," the publication asserts. For example, Azov servicemember Bohdan Beznosko was convicted in 2023 to 25 years: the investigation believed that his mortar crew opened fire on a house in Mariupol. And on 29 September 2025, the military court sentenced Beznosko to 28 years under "terrorist" articles.⁹³

Sometimes additional terms are added for refusal to "cooperate" with the investigation: "They demanded that I acknowledge that the killings and causing of injuries were committed out of ideological hatred toward the civilian population. I refused to do so, and

⁹² "They are forming a picture." NV learned what war crimes Russian courts systematically commit against Ukrainian prisoners and why the Kremlin needs them / NV, 23 February 2026. URL: <https://nv.ua/ukr/ukraine/events/voyenni-zlochyni-rosiji-proti-ukrajini-yak-i-shchoblyat-v-sudah-z-polonenimi-ta-reakciya-u-sviti-50586314.html>

⁹³ Ukrainian Prisoners of War Convicted in Russia Are Being Put on Trial Again—for the Second, and Sometimes Even Third, Time. A Meduza Investigation / Meduza, 3 October 2025. URL: <https://zona.media/article/2025/10/03/1-2-3>

as a result, they added one year to my initially announced sentence. For me, this was a matter of principle — honestly, 24 or 25 years made no difference to me anymore."⁹⁴

In the opinion of "Mediazona" researchers, for the security forces, repeat cases are a convenient way to improve their statistics, and they are also needed for propaganda. At the same time, techniques from the first large Azov trial are used in the new criminal cases. Repeated conviction for the same episodes constitutes a violation of the principle of *non bis in idem* — the prohibition of double punishment for the same offense.

In recent months, the speed with which courts hear cases under "terrorist" articles has also increased. In the case already mentioned, Vitaliy Zaluzhny, which reached the court in October 2025, the verdict was handed down on 14 November. In February 2026, Judge Andrey Slepukhin of the Central District Military Court handed down verdicts for nine Ukrainian servicemembers accused under terrorist articles; presumably, eight of them served in Azov.⁹⁵

This well-oiled system allows the state's repressive machinery, with minimal effort and obstacles, to sentence servicemembers of the opposing army — those who repelled its invasion of their country's territory — to enormous terms. The Southern District Military Court does not even deny that it is trying "Azov members" for "crimes against the interests of the Russian Federation." Naturally, after horrific torture, in court proceedings, nearly all defendants "fully admitted their guilt" and, most often, "refused to give testimony."

However, the fabrication does not always proceed smoothly and without resistance. The most striking example is the case of NGU servicemember Oleksandr Maksymchuk, born in 1994. At the court session on 17 October 2024, conducted via video link from the SIZO in Taganrog, he, despite the presence of bruises around his left eye and forehead, in the presence of operative officers, refused the lawyer appointed to him by the Russian state. Oleksandr stated his desire to work with a defense lawyer chosen by his relatives and to participate directly in the hearing; he requested a recess to call an ambulance in connection with feeling unwell due to a "concussion." Maksymchuk refused to admit guilt and, despite torture not only during the preliminary investigation but also continuing during the trial, managed to secure an open court hearing. Confirmation of the stated circumstances came in the form of photo, video, and audio evidence, as well as his written explanations.

At the court session on 19 November 2024, Maksymchuk made a statement about continuing violence against him at FKU SIZO No. 2 of the Main Directorate of the Federal Penitentiary Service (GUFSIN) of the RF in Taganrog. Specifically, he stated that from 10 September 2024 to 12 November 2024 he was systematically subjected to torture involving the use of electric current and other sophisticated methods of abuse, during which it was demanded of him that he admit to the charges, agree to the trial being

⁹⁴ Interview with Hennadiy Kharchenko, 15 March 2026, Kyivdid not affect.

⁹⁵ In Saransk, Nine Ukrainian POWs Sentenced in One Week / Mediazona, 10 February 2026. URL: <https://zona.media/news/2026/02/10/saransk-9>.

conducted via video link, publicly repent, offer apologies to the residents of the “DNR,” and refuse the lawyer engaged by his relatives.

However, Maksymchuk’s courageous actions did not affect the outcome of his case — he was sentenced to 20 years in a strict-regime colony and has not been exchanged to this day.

Scale of Criminal Prosecution. Other National Battalions

According to official data, as of January 2026, Russian investigative authorities had opened approximately nine thousand criminal cases against Ukrainian POWs and their leadership.⁹⁶ In March 2025, in an interview with TASS, the head of the Investigative Committee of Russia, Aleksandr Bastrykin, stated that 145 servicemembers of the Azov brigade had been brought to criminal responsibility.⁹⁷ According to the public organization Association of Families of the Defenders of Azovstal, approximately 200 POWs from Azov have been convicted.⁹⁸

In second place by the number of cases opened are servicemembers of the Aidar regiment. Created in 2014 as a volunteer battalion, Aidar was also reorganized in 2015 and incorporated into the Ground Forces of the ZSU.⁹⁹ In the first months of its existence, the Aidar battalion also featured in publications for its alleged responsibility for human rights violations.¹⁰⁰ Aidar’s overall visibility, as well as the number of mentions in the media (including Russian propaganda outlets), is significantly lower than Azov’s. However, with the start of the full-scale invasion, Aidar began to feature more frequently in statements by Russian officials — for example, in Sergei Lavrov’s statement about the battalion’s active use of Nazi symbolism.¹⁰¹ It was also added to the list of terror-

⁹⁶ Russia Initiates Nearly 9,000 Cases Against AFU Militants / RIA Novosti, 30 January 2026. URL: <https://ria.ru/20260130/rossija-2071183150.html>

⁹⁷ Bastrykin: Ukraine Uses Nazism to Achieve Its Goals / TASS 3 March 2025. URL: <https://tass.ru/interviews/23274401>

⁹⁸ CO Association of Families of the Defenders of Azovstal. URL: <https://azovstalfamilies.com>

⁹⁹ Aidar Battalion Disbanded and Renamed / Current Time 2 March 2015. URL: <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/26877577.html>

¹⁰⁰ Ukraine: Abuses and war crimes by the Aidar Volunteer Battalion in the north Luhansk region / Amnesty International, 8 September 2014. URL: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/EUR50/040/2014/en/>

¹⁰¹ Russian Ambassador Summoned to Israeli Foreign Ministry Following Lavrov’s Remark That “the Most Ardent Antisemites Are, As a Rule, Jews” / Mediazona, 2 May 2022. URL: <https://zona.media/news/2022/05/02/jew>

ist and extremist organizations by the Southern District Military Court's decision of 25 September 2023.¹⁰²

Reports also mention two cases opened against servicemembers of the battalion named after Noman Çelebicihan, which was declared a terrorist organization in 2022.¹⁰³ The Donbas battalion has also been declared a terrorist organization (added to the list of terrorist and extremist organizations on 14 January 2025).¹⁰⁴ At least six cases have been opened against its fighters, according to media reports. Terrorist community status was assigned to the Dnipro-1 battalion by a decision of the Southern District Military Court on 14 December 2023.¹⁰⁵ A verdict has been handed down, at a minimum, against the former commander of the battalion, Volodymyr Shylov (in absentia).¹⁰⁶ The so-called national battalions "Freedom of Russia" and "Georgian National Legion" have also been declared terrorist organizations: criminal cases for real or alleged connections with them are opened against citizens of Russia and Georgia.

Retroactive criminalization is also applied in cases against other battalions. For example, in 2023, Mykola Martyniuk was sentenced to 5.5 years in a general-regime colony for serving in the Aidar battalion in 2014–2015. In 2026, 71-year-old Ivan Sykalo was sentenced to 5.5 years of imprisonment for serving in the battalion as a driver in 2014–2015, 11 years before the battalion was declared "terrorist."¹⁰⁷ Human rights defenders and lawyers also note the mass use of torture and cruel treatment against fighters of other battalions.¹⁰⁸

Despite the fragmentary nature of the data, it is evident that the practice of opening criminal cases on terrorism charges against servicemembers of national battalions is widespread. Thus, on the "Mediazona" website for 2023–2025, information is available on at least 98 people who became victims of such prosecution.¹⁰⁹ Probably, the

¹⁰² Ukrainian National Battalion "Aidar" Added to Russian List of Terrorist Organizations / TASS, 29 December 2023. URL: <https://tass.ru/proisshestiya/19651265>

¹⁰³ ПА Ukrainian national was sentenced to 20 years in prison for serving in a Crimean Tatar battalion / Mediazona, 3 September 2025. URL: <https://zona.media/news/2025/09/03/yatskov>

¹⁰⁴ AFU Donbas Battalion Added to List of Terrorist Organizations / TASS, 14 January 2025. URL: <https://tass.ru/proisshestiya/22877849>

¹⁰⁵ Ukraine's Dnepr-1 Battalion Designated as Terrorist Organization in Russia / Vedomosti, 3 September 2024. URL: <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2024/09/03/1059841-batalon-dnepr-1-priznali>

¹⁰⁶ Commander of "Dnepr" Battalion Sentenced in Absentia for Calls to Kill Russian Citizens / TASS, 14 November 2024. URL: <https://tass.ru/proisshestiya/22399299>

¹⁰⁷ A military court has sentenced Nikolai Martyniuk—who was accused of participating in the Ukrainian Aidar Battalion—to 5.5 years in a penal colony. / Mediazona, 6 December 2023. URL: <https://zona.media/news/2023/12/06/prigovor>; Elderly Ukrainian Sentenced to 5.5 Years in Penal Colony for Service in the Aidar Battalion; He Left the Unit Nearly 11 Years Ago / Mediazona, 11 February 2026. URL: <https://zona.media/news/2026/02/11/sikalo>

¹⁰⁸ Interview by the Apus project with lawyers, February–March 2026.

¹⁰⁹ Prisoners / Mediazona. URL: <https://zona.media/theme/pov#more>

number of cases opened against current and former Ukrainian servicemembers under terrorist articles is growing: the greatest number of “Mediazona” publications on this practice falls in 2025. This is also indicated by data from the “Memorial. Support for Political Prisoners” project, which reports that in December 2025 alone, more than 40 criminal cases on terrorism, opened against citizens of Ukraine (not all cases may have been opened against servicemembers), were received by the Southern District Military Court.¹¹⁰

In the report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, presented at the 61st session of the UN Human Rights Council (February–April 2026), systemic violations by the Russian Federation in the prosecution of Ukrainian POWs were established, including refusal to recognise their status, application of terrorism charges based on biased and ideologised narratives, handing down of verdicts without establishing individual responsibility, the use of illegitimate decisions of quasi-judicial bodies and retroactive law, as well as gross violations of the right to a fair trial, including closed proceedings, torture, ill-treatment, sexualised violence, pressure on defendants, and the absence of effective legal defence.¹¹¹

Exchanges

The largest-scale prisoner exchange involving Azov fighters took place on 22 September 2022. Ukraine succeeded in freeing approximately 215 servicemembers, among whom were more than 100 Azov fighters. In return, Russia received Vladimir Putin’s crony, politician Viktor Medvedchuk, who is accused of treason in Ukraine, and 55 Russian POWs.¹¹²

As part of this exchange, Russia handed over five senior officers — defenders of Azovstal, including the commander of the Azov regiment, Denys Prokopenko (“Radish”). Under the terms of the exchange, these officers were to remain in Turkey until the end of the war. According to available information, after the Russian Federation violated several grain-deal agreements with Ukraine and the Republic of Türkiye, all five commanders returned to Ukraine at the beginning of July 2023. Among them were Azov

¹¹⁰ Over 40 Criminal Cases Alleging “Terrorism” Against Ukrainians Were Received by the Southern District Military Court in December / Support for Political Prisoners: Memorial, 26 January 2026. URL: <https://memopzk.org/news/bolee-40-ugolovnyh-del-o-terrorizme-protiv-ukrainczev-postupilo-v-yuzhnyj-okruzhnoj-voennyj-sud-v-dekabre/>

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ukraine exchanged Medvedchuk and 55 Russians for 215 of its own prisoners, including five commanders from Azovstal. / BBC, 22 September 2022. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-62990303>

commanders: Denys Prokopenko, Sviatoslav Palamar, and Oleh Khomenko. Moscow accused Ankara and Kyiv of violating the terms of the exchange.¹¹³

According to a statement by Deputy Chairman of the Ukrainian Coordination Staff for the Treatment of Prisoners of War, Andrii Yusov, as of May 2025, 455 Azov fighters had been released as part of exchanges.¹¹⁴ According to the Association of Families of the Defenders of Azovstal, approximately 600 Azov Brigade servicemembers have been freed.¹¹⁵

A large number of Azov POWs remain held in Russia, and all of them continue to be victims of the most severe repression by Russian authorities. According to Azov Corps commander Denys Prokopenko: "For nearly four years, more than 700 Azov members have been in Russian captivity. We are working on bringing each one of them home!"¹¹⁶

Conclusion

The circumstances of the Ukrainian servicemembers' exit from the territory of Azovstal in May 2022 indicate that those who surrendered acquired prisoner-of-war status in accordance with the norms of international humanitarian law. The International Committee of the Red Cross conducted its registration after they exited Azovstal, which confirms that they were under the opposing side's control.

The subsequent actions of the Russian Federation, including prolonged unlawful detention in an *incommunicado* regime, the application of torture, inhumane treatment, denial of medical care, and politically motivated criminal prosecution, constitute serious violations of international humanitarian law, including the provisions of the Geneva Conventions.

Considering that the armed confrontation between the Russian Federation and Ukraine has the character of an international armed conflict, the provisions of the Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War (1949), regulating the status and protection of prisoners of war, apply in full, including:

¹¹³ Ukraine exchanged Medvedchuk and 55 Russians for 215 of its own prisoners, including five commanders from Azovstal. / BBC, 22 September 2022. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-62990303>

¹¹⁴ How Many Azov Fighters Have Been Returned from Russian Captivity During the War: The Coordination Headquarters Responds / "Focus", 29 May 2025. URL: <https://focus.ua/voennye-novosti/708205-obmen-plennymi-domoy-vernulis-bolee-poloviny-boycov-garnizona-azovstali-yusov>

¹¹⁵ CO Association of Families of the Defenders of Azovstal. URL: <https://azovstalfamilies.com>

¹¹⁶ Facebook page of Denys Prokopenko: post on March 5, 2026: https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid02nC6grzLVV7B47DxhDJUuqS6FqnAGk1nVWJysuTYU3dCPy36T7XYyZgpRE5PxXREcl&id=100092398602398

- Article 13 (obligation of humane treatment and protection from violence and intimidation);
- Article 17 (absolute prohibition of torture and any coercion during interrogations);
- Articles 21 and 22 (internment and prohibition of detention under conditions equated to penitentiary), as well as Articles 25 and 26 (adequate conditions of accommodation and nutrition);
- Articles 29–30 (sanitary requirements and medical care);
- Articles 70 and 71, as well as Articles 122–126 (the right of prisoners of war to notification of relatives, correspondence, transmission of information about them, and access by international humanitarian organizations, including the International Committee of the Red Cross);
- Articles 82–108 (guarantees in the sphere of disciplinary and criminal responsibility of prisoners of war, including the right to a fair trial and the inadmissibility of prosecution for the mere fact of participation in hostilities).

The totality of the data collected in this report makes it possible to establish the existence of a systemic and organized practice of torture and ill-treatment of Ukrainian prisoners of war, applied with particular zeal and cruelty to servicemembers of the 12th Special Purpose Brigade of the National Guard of Ukraine “Azov.” The events in Olenivka, which resulted in the mass death of “Azov” POWs, as well as the absence of an effective, independent investigation of this tragedy, raise serious concern for the fate of prisoners held in Russia and contradict Article 121 of the Third Geneva Convention, which obliges the state holding prisoners of war to conduct a prompt and thorough investigation of all cases of death or serious injury.

The report also analyses the criminal prosecution of a portion of Azov POWs in the Russian Federation, identifying signs of fabrication, political motivation, and procedural inadequacy. Charges are often based solely on the fact of service in the unit; retroactive criminal legislation is applied. Court proceedings are accompanied by gross violations of the right to a fair trial, including the use of evidence obtained under torture, the absence of effective defense, and references to decisions of illegitimate quasi-judicial bodies.

After the high-profile “Case of the 24,” “Azov members” are regularly tried individually, with court proceedings held in one or several sessions. Testimony from witnesses and defendants is read aloud in the courtroom without direct examination. Defendants often do not know what is written in the records of their own interrogations and become acquainted with them only when the state prosecution reads the charges in court. The investigator-prepared testimony is formulaic; all testimonies are similar. In a series of cases, after the first verdict, a new criminal case is opened, followed by a second conviction, thereby violating the principle of non bis in idem — the prohibition on double punishment for the same offense.

The criminal prosecution of prisoners of war for the mere fact of serving in the armed forces of Ukraine and participating in hostilities contradicts international humanitarian law. It undermines the legal regime of prisoners of war. In the conditions of an international armed conflict, combatants belonging to the armed forces of a party to the conflict have the right to participate in hostilities and, in the event of capture, receive prisoner-of-war status. Of key importance is the principle of *combatant immunity*, under which prisoners of war cannot be held accountable for mere participation in hostilities on behalf of their state.

The report also analyses the characteristics of the large-scale propaganda campaign promoting the narrative of the “Nazi character” of the Azov unit. In Russian propaganda, Azov is a symbolic instrument upon which an entire information strategy is built — one that substantiates and justifies Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Through the image of Azov, Ukraine is presented as a “Nazi state,” a war against which becomes justified and necessary. Despite the accusations of human rights violations and the far-right ideology of the unit at the initial stage of its history, today’s Russian narrative does not have an adequate internationally recognized evidentiary basis. This narrative is used for the legitimization of armed aggression against Ukraine, the justification of international crimes, and the construction of an “enemy” image both within Russia and at the international level. Its reproduction in court decisions, official statements, and media testifies to a purposeful state policy of manipulating facts, substituting legal categories with ideological clichés, and conducting politically motivated trials against prisoners of war.

The image of “Azov members” as “Nazis” and “terrorists” formed in the Russian public space has not only an ideological but also a practical function — it serves as an instrument of dehumanization, creating the conditions for the systematic application of torture, cruel treatment, and the deprivation of the basic rights guaranteed by international humanitarian law.

At the same time, according to Azov corps commander Denys Prokopenko, as of 2026, more than 700 servicemembers of this unit remain in Russian captivity.¹¹⁷ A significant portion continues to be held in conditions of isolation (*incommunicado*), without access to relatives, independent lawyers, or international organizations, which creates a situation of complete impunity and facilitates the further commission of gross human rights violations.

Under these conditions, the necessity of international oversight, independent investigation of documented violations, ensuring access to prisoners of war by humanitarian organizations, including the International Committee of the Red Cross and United Nations agencies, and holding the perpetrators accountable becomes critical.

¹¹⁷ They spent nearly four years in captivity. Four soldiers from the Azov Brigade have been returned to Ukraine from Russian captivity./ NV, 5 February 20 URL: <https://nv.ua/ukraine/events/obmen-plennymi-ukraina-vernula-chetyreh-boycov-azova-50581410.html>

The international community must take all possible measures to ensure the swiftest exchange of Ukrainian prisoners of war, in particular the most vulnerable group in the context of Russian captivity — the servicemembers of the 12th Special Purpose Brigade of the National Guard of Ukraine “Azov.”