

Was Bombing of Mariupol Theater Staged by Ukrainian Azov Extremists to Trigger NATO Intervention?

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Testimony by evacuated Mariupol residents and warnings of a false flag attack undermine the Ukrainian government’s claims about a Russian bombing of a local theater sheltering civilians.

Western media have reported that Russia’s military deliberately attacked the Donetsk Academic Regional Drama theater in Mariupol, Ukraine, claiming that it was filled with civilians and marked with signs reading “children” on its grounds.

The supposed bombing took place just as Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky appealed to US Congress for a no fly zone, fueling the chorus for direct military confrontation with Russia and apparently inspiring President Joseph Biden to brand Vladimir Putin, the Russian president, as a “war criminal.”

A closer look reveals that local residents in Mariupol had warned three days before the March 16 incident that the theater would be the site of a false flag attack launched by the openly neo-Nazi Azov Battalion, which controlled the building and the territory around it.

Civilians that escaped the city through humanitarian corridors have testified that they were held by Azov as human shields in area, and that Azov fighters detonated parts of the theater as they retreated. Despite claims of a massive Russian airstrike that reduced the building to ashes, all civilians appear to have escaped with their lives.

Video of the attack on the theater remains unavailable at the time of publication; only photographs of the damaged structure can be viewed. The Russian Ministry of Defense has [denied](#) conducting an airstrike on the theater, asserting that the site had no military value and that no sorties were flown in the area on March 16.

While the Russian military operation in Ukraine has triggered a humanitarian crisis in Mariupol, it is clear that Russia gained nothing by targeting the theater, and virtually guaranteed itself another public relations blow by targeting a building filled with civilians – including ethnic Russians.

Azov, on the other hand, stood to benefit from a dramatic and grisly attack blamed on Russia. In full retreat all around Mariupol and facing the possibility of brutal treatment at the hands of a Russian military hellbent on “de-Nazification,” its fighters’ only hope seemed to lie in triggering direct NATO intervention.

The same sense of desperation informed Zelensky’s carefully scripted address to Congress, in which he invoked Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have A Dream” speech and played a heavily produced video depicting civilian suffering to make the case for a no fly zone.

By instigating Western public outrage over grisly Russian war crimes, Ukraine’s government is clearly aiming to generate enough pressure to overcome the Biden administration’s reluctance to directly confront Russia’s military.

But Kiev’s most emotionally potent allegation so far – that Russia deliberately bombed innocent children cowering inside a theater – has been undercut by testimonies from Mariupol residents and a widely viewed Telegram message explicitly foreshadowing a false flag attack on the building.



Children undergo military training at a summer camp run by the Azov Battalion in 2015

Azov Battalion fighters grow desperate in Mariupol, plea for Western military intervention

The strategic southeastern port city of Mariupol has been held by the Azov Battalion since 2014. Since its seizure, it has served as a political and military base for the ultra-nationalist paramilitary as it launched assaults on pro-Russian separatists in the breakaway republic of Donetsk.

Gathered from the ranks of extreme right activists that provided protesters with street muscle during the 2013-14 Euromaidan coup, the Azov Battalion has been formally

incorporated into the Ukrainian National Guard by the country's Interior Ministry. It was founded by the openly fascist organizer Andriy Biletsky, who has [vowed](#) to "lead the white races of the world in a final crusade ... against Semite-led Untermenschen."

With the Nazi-inspired Wolfsangel symbol emblazoned on their uniforms and flags, Azov fighters make no secret of their ideological goals. Despite having been identified by the [FBI](#), [US Congress](#), and its own fighters as a neo-Nazi unit, and [implicated](#) in an array of sordid human rights violations, Azov has [collaborated openly](#) with US and Canadian military trainers.

Having accused Azov of seeking to exterminate the ethnic Russians of Donbas, Putin has marked its base in Mariupol as the front line of his stated campaign to "de-Nazify" Ukraine. Since Russia's February 24 invasion of Ukraine, the city became the site of ferocious urban fighting, with Russian special forces and Donetsk People's Republic People's Militia forces waging a block-by-block fight for control as artillery rained down on Azov positions.

On March 7, an Azov Battalion commander named Denis Prokopenko appeared on camera from Mariupol with an urgent message. Published [on Azov's official YouTube channel](#) and delivered in English over the sound of occasional artillery launches, Prokopenko declared that the Russian military was carrying out a "genocide" against the population of Mariupol, which happens to be 40 percent ethnic Russian.

Prokopenko then demanded that Western nations "create a no fly zone over Ukraine support[ed] with the modern weapons." It was clear from Prokopenko's plea that Azov's position was growing more dire by the day.

As Russia's military rapidly degraded Azov positions throughout the second week of March 2022, Azov soldiers apparently directed elderly civilians as well as women and children into the wardrobe hall of the Donetsk Academic Regional Drama Theater in Mariupol.

[A video](#) filmed inside the dimly lit building on March 11 featured a local man claiming that one thousand civilians were trapped inside and demanding a humanitarian corridor to allow them to escape. Only a small group of civilians could be seen in the video, however.

"I'm begging you to stop all this, give us the corridor to get people out, to get out women, kids, the wounded..." a bespectacled narrator (seen below) declared in the video.



Azov soldier (L) appears on March 11 with a local man outside the Mariupol theater

Since Russia launched its invasion, Azov Battalion soldiers have been filmed preventing civilians from leaving Mariupol – even forcing men out of their cars and [brutally assaulting them](#) while they attempted to break through the paramilitary’s checkpoints. If testimony from many Mariupol residents was to be believed, Azov had used many of them as human shields.

Ukrainian neo-Nazi in Mariupol tells girl about cancellation of evacuation, “say thank you for not being shot” Azov’s battalion hiding behind civilians
pic.twitter.com/2ypQwr4t9j

— ZOKA (@200_zoka) [March 5, 2022](#)

Days before Mariupol theater incident, chilling warnings of a false flag “provocation”

On March 12, a chilling message appeared on the [Telegram channel](#) of Dmitriy Steshen, a correspondent reporting from Mariupol for the Russian newspaper [Komsomolskaya Pravda](#).

According to Steshen, local residents told him an alleged Russian bombing of the Turkish-built Kanuni Sultan Suleyman mosque in Mariupol that day was a false flag intended to “drag Turkey into the war,” and warned that a false flag attack on the Mariupol Drama Theater was imminent.

The Telegram message read as follows:

“Look at what our readers from Mariupol sent us. If the information can be verified, it needs to be highlighted [for the media]:

'Zelensky prepares two [false flag] provocations in Mariupol!!! One of the [false flag] provocation is against the citizens of Turkey, who hid in the mosque built by Akhmetov, and this provocation has already begun by the Ukrainian artillery gunners shelling the grounds of the mosque, from their positions at [Zinsteva] Balka in Nizhniaya [Lower] Kirvoka. Zelensky was unable to drag the EU, USA and UK into the war against the Russian Federation. Now, Zelensky is trying to drag Turkey into the war, pinning his hopes on the explosive emotional character and the love the faithful feel for their sacred shrines.

The second [false flag] provocation Zelensky is preparing for use by Western media, after unsuccessful provocation with the [Mariupol] maternity hospital, Ukrainian soldiers, together with the administration of the Drama Theater, gathered women, children, and the elderly from Mariupol in the Drama Theater building, so as to - given a good opportunity - detonate the building and then scream around the world that this was by the Russian Federation air force and that there should be an immediate 'no fly zone' over Ukraine.'"

Steshin's message recounting the warnings from Mariupol residents has been seen by over 480,000 Telegram users. It is below and can also be viewed [here](#).



Русский тарантасъ



Смотрите, что прислали из Мариуполя читатели. Если сообщение соответствует фактам, его надо засветить.
" ЗЕЛЕНСКИЙ ГОТОВИТ ДВЕ ПРОВОКАЦИИ В МАРИУПОЛЕ!!! - ОДНА ПРОВОКАЦИЯ ПРОТИВ ГРАЖДАН ТУРЦИИ, КОТОРЫЕ СПРЯТАЛИСЬ В МЕЧЕТИ, ПОСТРОЕННОЙ АХМЕТОВЫМ, И ЭТА ПРОВОКАЦИЯ УЖЕ НАЧИНАЕТСЯ, ПУТЁМ ОБСТРЕЛА УКРАИНСКИМИ АРТИЛЛЕРИСТАМИ ТЕРРИТОРИИ МЕЧЕТИ, С ПОЗИЦИЙ В БАЛКЕ НА НИЖНЕЙ КИРОВКЕ , ЗЕЛЕНСКИЙ, НЕ СМОГ ВТЯНУТЬ ЕС , США И ВЕЛИКОБРИТАНИЮ В ВОЙНУ ПРОТИВ РФ. СЕЙЧАС ЗЛОБНЫЙ КАРЛИК ЗЕЛЕНСКИЙ, ПЫТАЕТСЯ ВТЯНУТЬ В ВОЙНУ ТУРЦИЮ, В НАДЕЖДЕ НА ВОСТОЧНУЮ ВЗРЫВНУЮ ЭМОЦИОНАЛЬНОСТЬ И ЛЮБОВЬ ВЕРУЮЩИХ К СВОИМ СВЯТЫНЯМ. - ВТОРУЮ ПРОВОКАЦИЮ ЗЕЛЕНСКИЙ ГОТОВИТ ДЛЯ КАРТИНКИ В ЗАПАДНЫЕ СМИ, ПОСЛЕ НЕУДАЧНОЙ ПРОВОКАЦИИ С РОДДОМОМ, УКРАИНСКИЕ ВОЯКИ СОВМЕСТНО С АДМИНИСТРАЦИЕЙ ДРАМТЕАТРА, СОБРАЛИ МАРИУПОЛЬСКИХ ЖЕНЩИН, ДЕТЕЙ И СТАРИКОВ В ЗДАНИЕ ДРАМТЕТРА, ЧТОБЫ ПРИ УДОБНОМ СЛУЧАЕ ПОДОРВАТЬ ЛЮДЕЙ И ВЫТЬ НА ВЕСЬ МИР, ЧТО ЭТО АВИАЦИЯ РФ И СРОЧНО НУЖНО ЗАКРЫТЬ УКРАИНСКОЕ НЕБО И Т.Д. И Т.П. НЕ МОЛЧИТЕ ! НУЖНО , ЧТОБЫ КАК МОЖНО БОЛЬШЕ ЛЮДЕЙ УЗНАЛО ОБ ЭТОМ ! "

t.me/DmitriySteshin/4246

489.2K 👁 Mar 12 at 09:23

On March 12, Western outlets like [the Associated Press](#) repeated Ukrainian government claims that the Turkish mosque in Mariupol had been shelled by Russia with 80 civilians inside, including children.

However, Turkish state media revealed that the Ukrainian government had misled Western reporters. The Kanuni Sultan Suleyman Mosque was not only fully intact, it had never been hit by Russian fire.

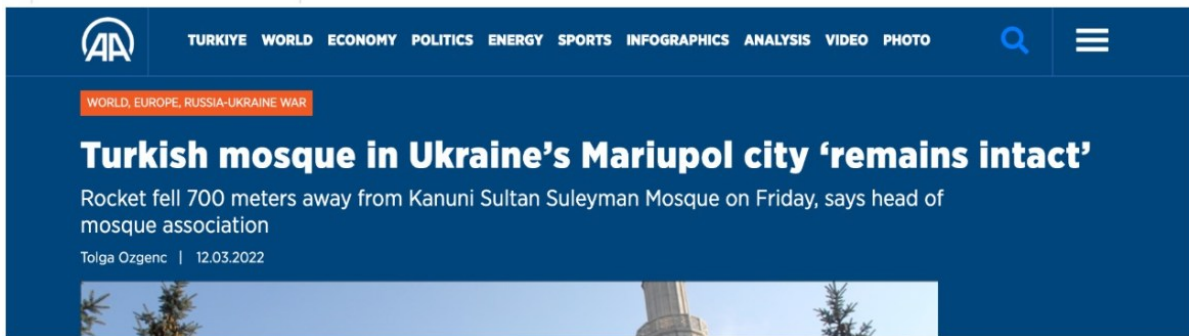
"Our mosque remained undamaged," Ismail Hacıoğlu, head of the mosque's association, [told Turkey's Andalou Agency on March 12.](#)

Still filled with civilians, the Mariupol theater was next on somebody's target list.

EUROPE

Russians shelled a mosque where 80 people were sheltering in Mariupol, Ukraine says

March 12, 2022 · 6:22 AM ET



The Associated Press (top) relied entirely on Ukrainian government claims about the mosque in Mariupol, while Turkish media (bottom) interviewed the head of mosque. The contrast in coverage is revealing.

As Zelensky begs Congress for military intervention, news of a theater attack

Less than 48 hours after the debunked claims of a Russian attack on the mosque in Mariupol were introduced, humanitarian corridors finally opened up around the city. The flight of thousands of civilians toward Russian military positions further weakened the Azov Battalion, which was using Mariupol's residents as collateral in its bid to compel a no fly zone.

On March 16, with his military collapsing under the Russian onslaught, the Ukrainian president and famed comedian-actor Zelensky appeared by video for a carefully scripted, elaborately produced presentation before an assembly of awestruck US members of Congress.

"I have a dream. These words are known to each of you today. I can say I have a need. I need to protect our sky," Zelensky [proclaimed](#). The Ukrainian president thus invoked the most famous words of America's most revered antiwar activist, Martin Luther King Jr., to appeal for a no fly zone that would bring the nuclear-armed militaries of the US and Russia into direct confrontation.

Just hours after Zelensky's address, news arrived directly from the Azov Battalion's press department that Russia had bombed the theater in Mariupol.

With a monopoly over information from the scene of the supposed attack, with no other news outlets present, Azov's press department [disseminated photos](#) of the destroyed building to media across the world.

The Azov Battalion's watermark can be seen clearly in the lower right hand corner of the image below. Azov's photo was republished by international outlets including [Sky News](#), but

with the paramilitary's brand cropped out. When [South China Morning Post ran the image](#), it removed the watermark and credited "Azov Battalion via AP."



One of the most widely published images of the Donetsk Regional Academic Drama Theater was provided to international media by the Azov Battalion

Among the first English language media figures to convey the Ukrainian government's narrative of the incident to a mass audience was Illia Ponomarenko, a Kiev-based, [US-trained](#) reporter who has managed to rack up over a million Twitter followers since Russia's invasion began.

The famous Drama Theater in Mariupol.
De-nazified by a Russian air-dropped bomb today, on March 16, 2022.
Fuck you Russia. You're going to pay for this. pic.twitter.com/ZQuGW6hL55

— Illia Ponomarenko 🇺🇦 (@IAPonomarenko) [March 16, 2022](#)

See this red roof?
It's a drama theater in Mariupol, we called it "the Dram."
See those little letters on the square? They read "KIDS" in Russian.
That was a message to Russian bomber crews.
But you know what - they bombed the building to ashes anyway.
Because they're animals. pic.twitter.com/xYOkC7CPm5

— Illia Ponomarenko 🇺🇦 (@IAPonomarenko) [March 16, 2022](#)

Ponomarenko happened to work for the Kyiv Independent, an outlet that has functioned as one of the most potent US information weapons in Ukraine. The paper had been [set up with assistance](#) from the National Endowment for Democracy, a US intelligence cut-out, and an "emergency grant" from its EU-funded cousin, the European Endowment for Democracy.

For his part, Ponomarenko has referred to the Azov Battalion as his "[brothers in arms](#)", and boasted of "[chilling out](#)" with its fighters near "enemy lines."

Seemingly swept up in the emotional maelstrom inspired by the news from Mariupol, President Joseph Biden [blasted](#) his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, as a "war criminal," a "murderous dictator," and a "pure thug."

Next, [Human Rights Watch](#) issued a hastily composed [press release](#) headlined, "Mariupol Theater Hit By Russian Attack Sheltered Hundreds." The billionaire-backed NGO acknowledged it had not interviewed any Mariupol residents after the attack, and provided no evidence to demonstrate Russian responsibility. Indeed, HRW's lone source fingering Russia as the culprit was the Ukrainian governor of Donetsk.

Was Russia's military so bloodthirsty - and politically self-destructive - that it had deliberately targeted a building that was known to be filled with children? Or had the Mariupol residents' prediction of a false flag from four days before come true?

Suspicious signs, holes in the Ukrainian government's narrative emerge

Though Azov boasts a sophisticated press unit which films its exploits in the field, and soldiers are publishing [even the most banal video](#) of themselves on social media, footage of the theater bombing was nowhere to be found.

Photos supplied by Azov to media in Ukraine and abroad invariably depict the bombed-out theater without any people in sight, living or dead.

One day before the bombing, on March 15, a group of military-aged men were photographed in front of the Mariupol theater. No women were visible anywhere in the image. The men can be seen placing pallets against the side of the building, ferrying large objects across the theater grounds, and cutting down a fir tree.

According to Human Rights Watch's report on the theater incident, which contained no local testimony gathered after the attack, the men were "cook[ing] food on an open fire and collect[ing] water in buckets."

As seen below, pallets and other objects were piled against the same area of the building hit by an explosive charge the following day.



While the theater appeared to have been heavily damaged – “they bombed the building to ashes,” claimed Ponomarenko – it turned out that not one person was killed by the blast.

“It’s a miracle,” the Kyiv Independent reporter chirped.

It’s a miracle – civilians that were hiding in a basement at the Drama Theater in Mariupol survived the air strike.
Now they are getting evacuated from underneath the ruins.

— Illia Ponomarenko 🇺🇦 (@IAPonomarenko) [March 17, 2022](#)

In a 7-minute-long [March 17 package](#) blending news and agitprop, ABC News claimed that all civilians had been saved from the theater, but that “hundreds were still missing.” Data on the modest-sized theater reproduced on its Ukrainian Wikipedia [page](#) puts its maximum seating capacity at 680, which raises questions about how “hundreds” could have fit in its basement.

Further, ABC claimed the theater had been hit by Russian artillery shelling, not an “air dropped Russian bomb” as Ponomarenko and many others have claimed.

Ukrainian media, meanwhile, has expressed confusion over the incident. The outlet [0629](#) has attempted to explain away the mysterious disappearance of the thousand civilians said to have been in the theater by claiming they were evacuated to the city of Zaporozhye a day before the supposed attack. “we are waiting for the official verified information and do not rush to conclusions,” the paper declared.

As Mariupol residents [poured out of the city](#) through the Russian military’s humanitarian corridors, testimonies began to emerge of ruthless Azov attacks on the fleeing civilians – and of a major deception at the local theater.

“When [Azov soldiers] were leaving, they destroyed the drama theater”

On March 17, a young woman delivered an eye-opening account of the situation inside Mariupol to ANNA, the Abkhazian Network News Agency.

“The Azov fighters were simply hiding behind us,” she told a reporter. “We were their human shields, that’s it. They were breaking everything, all around us, they were not letting us outside. We spent 15 days in a basement, with kids... They gave us no water, nothing.”

Describing how the Azov Battalion placed its tanks in front of local bomb shelters, the woman offered a revealing detail: “When they were leaving,” she said, referring to the Azov Battalion, “they destroyed the drama theatre. People with shrapnel were brought to us.”

Numerous evacuees echoed the woman’s testimony about Azov holding Mariupol civilians as hostages, and said they were targeted with gunfire as they escaped through humanitarian corridors.

“They burned everything,” an elderly woman recalled to Russian media. “They bombed [my] whole apartment.... They broke in and are sitting there, making Molotov cocktails. I wanted to come in, to take my things, but they told me: ‘No, you have no business here.’”

Asked by a reporter who attacked her and invaded her home, the woman replied, “Well, the Ukrainians, of course.”

[#MARIUPOL](#)—#2—Interviews with [#Ukraine](#)ian refugees evacuating to [#Russia](#)-controlled zones.
[Transcript in 2nd tweet] 1/2 [#UkraineRussia](#) [#RussiaUkraine](#)
[#UkraineRussiaWar](#) [#RussianUkrainianWar](#) [#MariupolDramaTheatre](#)
[#UkraineCrisis](#) [#UkraineWar](#) [#UkraineUnderAttack](#) [#UkraineRussie](#)
pic.twitter.com/9JE3c0wrCX

— Gleb Bazov (@gbazov) [March 17, 2022](#)

A man intercepted by an ANNA reporter after escaping Mariupol [fought back tears](#) as he pointed back to the Ukrainian military’s positions. “Azov, those bitches... people tried to evacuate... Azov... they executed the people... the monsters, scum... they shot them up, entire buses.”

“The Ukrainian army was shooting us, shooting at people,” said another man who fled Mariupol. “Right at our house.”

“Ukraine didn’t let us leave the city, we were blocked,” another evacuee stated. “The Ukrainian military arrived and said, under no circumstances are you to leave the city if the Russian Federation opens a humanitarian corridor for you. We want to continue to use you as a human shield.”

"We hate Ukraine! Thank you very much to the Russian army" Refugees from Mariupol tell how the Ukrainians refused to open humanitarian 'corridors' from the city and shot at civilians." pic.twitter.com/cYmpUBmKoX

— Drebonacci (@andre_mihaescu) [March 17, 2022](#)

The red line: lessons from Syria

Was the bombing of the Donetsk Academic Regional Drama Theater of Mariupol a false flag attack executed by Azov extremists to trigger NATO intervention, as some local residents claimed? If so, it was [hardly the first cynical deception](#) deployed by Ukraine’s government to draw the West into the conflict, and was unlikely to be the last.

On March 16, the day of the incident at the theater, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken [declared](#) that “we have real concerns that Russia could use a chemical weapon, another weapon of mass destruction.” In the next breath, Blinken pointed to Syria, where he claimed “we’ve seen them use or acquiesce to [chemical weapon] use.”

It was in Syria where the administration of President Barack Obama imposed its “red line” policy declaring that any chemical attack would automatically trigger a US military response. That policy set the stage for a series of incidents that appear to have been carried out by foreign backed Syrian opposition forces to compel the US to intervene against Damascus.

In the deadliest incident, hundreds of civilians were killed when sarin-filled rockets were fired - [apparently from insurgent-controlled territory](#) - at multiple sites in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta on August 21, 2013. After Obama blamed the Syrian government and prepared to launch strikes, dissenting administration officials leaked to the media that the intelligence blaming Damascus was in fact no “[slam dunk](#),” a clear reference to the CIA’s pre-Iraq war fabrications. Journalist Seymour Hersh [subsequently](#) reported that the US had [collected significant intelligence](#) pointing to [insurgent guilt](#) in Ghouta. It was this information, Hersh reported, that convinced Obama to abandon his so-called “red line.”

Under President Donald Trump, the US attempted to revive the “red line” by bombing Syria over chemical weapons allegations in 2017 and 2018. But significant evidence in both cases points to staged incidents carried out by insurgents. In the case of the April 2017 incident in Khan Sheikhoun, Trump [ignored intelligence](#) and launched airstrikes on the Syrian military. And in the Damascus suburb of Douma the following year, OPCW investigators found no evidence of a chemical attack, but [had their findings doctored and censored](#) as US officials worked to pressure and co-opt the organization.

As a former US ambassador in the Middle East [told](#) journalist Charles Glass, “The ‘red line’ was an open invitation to a false-flag operation.”

Dubious allegations of a Russian attack on the theater in Mariupol have failed to trigger the

Biden administration's red line. The question now is how far Ukraine's government is willing to go to trigger the no fly zone it needs to hold off the imminent defeat of its military forces.

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The editor-in-chief of The Grayzone, Max Blumenthal is an award-winning journalist and the author of several books, including best-selling [Republican Gomorrah](#), [Goliath](#), [The Fifty One Day War](#), and [The Management of Savagery](#). He has produced print articles for an array of publications, many video reports, and several documentaries, including [Killing Gaza](#). Blumenthal founded The Grayzone in 2015 to shine a journalistic light on America's state of perpetual war and its dangerous domestic repercussions.

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