



Forging the Body of the New Ukrainian Nation: Sport as a Gramscist Tool for the Ukrainian Far Right

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Abstract

Since Greco-Roman antiquity, the convergence of sports and politics has been a constitutive feature of political cultures. More recently, the blending of sports and politics has been revived with racist understanding by twentieth century totalitarian regimes and has remained a central promotion tool for far-right movements across the world. Due to the multiple fractures that have erupted in Ukrainian society since the Maidan Revolution and the war in Donbas, sport has become instrumental for Ukrainian ultranationalist movements. Through their direct involvement in youth sports education, Azov's National Corps Party and the Sokil movement seek to foster a mythified Ukrainian national revival exalting physical virtue and patriotic spirit. This article discusses how sport is used by the Ukrainian far right as a Gramscist strategy to channel dialogue with authorities, to indoctrinate youth with militaristic nationalism, and to spread a fascist-minded cult of the masculine body.

Keywords: Ukraine, Far Right, Azov, Sport, Martial Arts, Masculinity

In the twentieth century, the paradigm of sport was transformed with the generalization of its practice to the masses. As a collective ritual of competition, transcending both bodies and minds through its spectacular staging and its search for excellence, sport has become the favorite terrain of nationalism.¹ Competition, obedience, discipline,

¹ Alan Bairner, "National sports and national landscapes: In defense of primordialism," *National Identities* 11, no. 3 (2009): 223-239, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14608940903081101>.

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heroism, and body worship are values worthy of political investment to mobilize the masses.² From this perspective, sport has been seen by nationalists around the world as propaganda to spread their ideology, to create cultural hegemony, and to promote idealized archetypes of national identity.³

Ukraine is no exception. Sports groups promoting patriotic and paramilitary activism can be found with the first Sokol (Eagles), established in Galicia from 1894 to 1939, and then again in the Plast, the National Scout Organisation of Ukraine, founded in 1922 by poet Ivan Franko's brother, Petro. While celebrated by anti-Soviet nationalist organizations, such as the OUN (Organizaciã Ukraïns'kih Nacionalistiv, Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists), these various initiatives disappeared from the Ukrainian landscape in favor of Soviet youth organizations such as the Komsomols. Soviet sports culture (fizkultura) was characterized by a Marxist-Leninist principle to build new socio-cultural realities for the nascent Soviet nations, but opposed the idea of defending "bourgeois nationalist" ideas.

The fall of the USSR marked a progressive rejection of Soviet symbols in favor of a return to a more classical praise of the Ukrainian nation. If sports education was seen during the presidencies of Leonid Kuchma (1994–2005) and Viktor Yushchenko (2005–2010) as a means to building a Ukrainian civic nation with ethnic particularism, in Viktor Yanukovych's (2010–2014) regime, sports education became a tool for disarming any nationalist impulses that would oppose his rapprochement policy with Russia.⁴ Since 2014 and the Maidan Revolution, nationalism has gained new momentum, and sport has become one of the pillars of ultranationalist movements' political action, even more as the war is still raging in eastern Ukraine, deepening the precariousness of the country's sovereignty. The Nacional'nij korpus (National Corps), created in 2016 on the basis of the Ukrainian National Guard and the main Ukrainian far-right movement, Azov, very quickly saw the value of sport promotion as an "organizational hybridity,"⁵ a strategy that uses social initiatives such as sport to promote political activism.

This article analyzes sport as a catalyst for Ukrainian ultranationalism and its revolutionary dynamics. As Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning have argued, sports and radicalism are closely linked through their shared processes of interiorizing affects and building new norms.⁶ Ukrainian ultranationalists see themselves as new social actors capable of transforming society⁷ and sport as the matrix of a "New Man"⁸ philosophy shaped by ethnic nationalism. They interpret the Maidan revolution and

² Patrizia Dogliani, "Sport and Fascism," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 5, no. 3 (2000): 326–348, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2000.9728258>.

³ Lincoln Allison, "Sport and Nationalism," in *Handbook of Sports Studies*, eds. Jay Coakley and Eric Dunning (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2000): 344–355. See also Jean-Marie Brohm, *Sociologie politique du sport* [Sport political sociology] (Nancy, France: Presses Universitaires de Nancy, 1992), <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781848608382.n22>.

⁴ Katya Myachia, "Conflicts and Militarization of Education: Totalitarian Institutions in Secondary Schools and in the System of Extracurricular Education in Ukraine," *Journal of Conflict Transformation* 4, no. 1 (2019): 18–83, <http://caucasusedition.net/conflict-and-militarization-of-non-formal-education-in-ukraine-part-3/>.

⁵ Sarah Harrison and Michael Bruter, eds., *Mapping Extreme Right Ideology: An Empirical Geography of the European Extreme-Right* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230336834>.

⁶ Norbert Élias and Eric Dunning, *Sport et Civilisation: la violence maîtrisée* (Paris: Fayard, 1994).

⁷ Anton Shekhovtsov, "The Ukrainian Far Right and the Ukrainian Revolution," *New Europe College Black Sea Link Program Yearbook 2014-2015*, (2016): 215–237, http://82.76.146.20/data/pdfs/publications/bsl/2014-2015/Anuar_BSL_2014-2015.pdf.

⁸ Marie Anne Tard-Bonucci and Pierre Milza, eds., *L'homme nouveau dans l'Europe fasciste (1922–1945)* (Paris: Fayard, 2004).

the military engagement on the Donbas front against Russia as the advent of a new “Ukrainian order”⁹ that will defend and rebuild the “real Europe.”¹⁰

This research is based on observations made in March 2019 in the capital city of Kyiv during sports competitions organized by the Azov movement and its militia branch, *Nacional'ni družini*.¹¹ Observations were complemented by interviews carried out with various leaders and participants to integrate the representations, the practices, and the perception of self-identity into an overall analysis of the sporting phenomenon. Although these camps are perfectly legal, organizers do not hide their mistrust of all external observers. The Azov movement has been targeted for several years by Russian and Western media, comparing its camps to Hitlerjugend or the use of child soldiers.¹² This means that my requests for interviews and observations were often rejected. I supplemented my fieldwork with research of different primary sources, such as brochures advertising the movement's sporting activities, publications on various digital platforms through which the *Nacional'ni družini* communicate, and a series of promotional videos put forward by the Azov association's *Sportivnij Korpus* (Sports Corps) on YouTube. In order for my research to cover the complete range of trends in contemporary Ukrainian nationalism, I have also included the youth organization *Sokol*, which is mainly based in Western Ukraine and is attached to All-Ukrainian Union “*Svoboda*” (“Freedom”) Party.

“Sport Gramscism”

Politically long-marginalized, the Ukrainian far right gradually wove its way into all sectors of civil society after the Maidan revolution. The ease of this penetration is mainly due to the Azov movement's active participation in the demonstrations that ousted former President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014, and even more to its voluntary and die-hard commitment to the defense of the eastern border of Ukraine against the separatist incursions supported by Russia in the Donbas region.¹³ For a majority of citizens, these ultranationalist movements and their battalion of volunteers are elite forces that have acquired full legitimacy thanks to their victories, whatever their ideology may be.¹⁴ In a recent survey from March 2021, the Razumkov Center estimates

9 Adrien Nonjon, *L'Ukraine d'Azov: représentations géopolitiques et stratégie de propagande d'un régiment ultranationaliste ukrainien*, Master's thesis: Institut Français de Géopolitique, 2017), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318278308_L'Ukraine_d'Azov_representations_geopolitiques_et_strategie_de_propagande_d'un_regiment_ultranationaliste_ukrainien/stats.

10 Ibid.

11 The *Nacional'ni družini*, or “National Squads/Militias” were officially founded on January 28, 2018 and are a paramilitary militia that was born out of the Azov movement, itself an emanation of the National Guard regiment of the same name. Their name refers to the Kyivian Ru's prince guard *Družina*.

12 Louise Couvelaire, “Au camp d'entraînement des petits soldats d'Ukraine,” *Le Monde*, August 19, 2016, https://www.lemonde.fr/m-actu/article/2016/08/19/au-camp-d-entrainement-des-petits-soldats-d-ukraine_4984763_4497186.html.

13 Tetiana Bezruk and Andreas Umland, “Der Fall Azov Freiwilligenbataillone in der Ukraine” [The case of the Azov volunteer battalions in Ukraine], *Osteuropa* 65, no. 1–2 (2015): 33–41, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/275213676_Der_Fall_Azov_Freiwilligenbataillone_in_der_Ukraine; Viatcheslav Likhachev, “The Far-Right in the Conflict between Russia and Ukraine,” *Notes de l'Ifri: Russie.Nei.Vision* No. 95 (July 2016): 28, <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/notes-de-lifri/russievisions/far-right-conflict-between-russia-and-ukraine>

14 Andreas Umland, “Irregular Militias and Radical Nationalism in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine: The Prehistory and Emergence of the ‘Azov’ Battalion in 2014,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31, no.1 (2019): 105–131, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2018.1555974>.

that 65% of Ukrainian citizens trust the Azov Volunteer Battalion, a higher percentage of citizens than those who report trusting the National Guard of Ukraine (56%).¹⁵

This normalization of the Azov ultranationalist movement goes hand in hand with the renewed politicization of society after the Maidan revolution and in the context of an ongoing war in Donbas. Both of these events have raised the question of a new Ukrainian identity to be built against Russia, offering fertile groundwork for a new national(ist) project. While the Ukrainian far right remains politically marginal,¹⁶ it has been able to penetrate both state institutions and civil society. As Ivan Gomza and Johann Zajackowski skillfully showed, the rise of Azov is part of a present-day strategy to calculate immediate costbenefits.¹⁷ While its involvement on the Donbas front may have won it the goodwill of the population, the Azov movement has also worked to appear publicly as a political organization like any other nationalist parties. Deliberately choosing a formal integration into the National Guard, the regiment's main objective has been "to further develop its organizational structure and reinvigorate both its media outreach and mobilizational potential."¹⁸

Like many of its European counterparts, such as the Identitarians,¹⁹ Azov follows the Italian communist Antonio Gramsci's theory that the conquest of the cultural field is a necessary step before the conquest of political power. Building cultural hegemony takes time and requires revolutionary ideas be presented as socially acceptable. In such a context, sports education posits itself as a priority. For a movement born out of war and revolutionary violence, there is no better way to achieve the ideal of a healthy national body than to diffuse a nationalist spirit through sport. Sport also spreads an image of integrity and usefulness to the society that alleviates existing doubts regarding Azov's commitment to democracy. National Corps leader Andriy Biletskyi explained for instance on television that his movement sponsored a new Nat'sgym gymnasium to compensate for the difficulty of access to sport faced by an impoverished segment of the population.²⁰ This was a way to frame the movement's action as charity and not politics. Sport thus allows for the combination

15 "Ocinka situacii v kraïni, dovira do institutiv suspil'stva ta politikiv, elektoral'ni oriëntacii gromadân (berezen' 2021r.)" [Assessment of the situation in the country, trust in the institutions of society and politicians, electoral orientations of citizens (March 2021)] Razumkov Center, accessed March 2021, https://razumkov.org.ua/napiamky/sotsiologichni-doslidzhennia/otsinka-sytuatsii-v-kraïni-dovira-do-institutiv-suspil'stva-ta-politikiv-ekonomichni-oriëntacii-gromadian-berezen-2021r?fbclid=IwAR3u10uRjrmkRv_V4_g5d27DnA1Q4oKMw16PbF5EEzVdplWQckv9Vhy_WoU.

16 Andreas Umland, "The Far Right in Pre- and Post-Euromaidan Ukraine: From Ultra-Nationalist Party Politics to Ethno-Centric Uncivil Society," *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 28, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 247–268.

17 Ivan Gomza and Johann Zajackowski, "Black Sun Rising: Political Opportunity Structure Perceptions and Institutionalization of the Azov Movement in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine," *Nationalities Papers* 47, no. 5 (2019): 774–800, <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2019.30>.

18 *Ibid.* 791.

19 Samuel Bouron, "Un militantisme à deux faces: Stratégie de communication et politique de formation des Jeunesses identitaires" [A two-faced activism: communication strategy and training policy of the Jeunesses identitaires], *Agone* 2, no. 54 (February 2014): 45–72, <https://doi.org/10.3917/agone.054.0045>.

20 "Lider partii Nackorpus Andrii Bilec'kij na vidkritti social'nogo sportzalu" [National Corps party leader Andriy Biletskyi and the gymnasium's inauguration], National Corps YouTube Channel, December 19, 2018, accessed June 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JAWAA1vNYIE>.

of paramilitary training for ultranationalist elite and broader patriotic training for young people, often financially supported by state authorities themselves.²¹

The premise of this blending of sport and nationalism has its roots in Sokil, a youth organization founded in 2006 in Lviv under the aegis of the far-right party, All-Ukrainian Union Svoboda (Freedom), which at that time was the main far-right party in Ukraine.²² Sokil presented itself as a contemporary incarnation of the 1894 “Ukrainian Youth Military Sports Society”. This movement of physical education for the masses, which first appeared at the very end of the nineteenth century in Czechia, played a notable role in the assertiveness of Slavic peoples against the dominant Germanic, Habsburg, and Russian Empires.²³ In this sense, Sokil’s goals were analogous to the 1811 German gymnastics movement, which was developed under the French occupation by Johann Christoph Friedrich GutsMuths to promote national unity, self-confidence, and dignity through physical education. As custodians of Ukrainian nationalism, Sokily saw themselves as the ultimate vector of “the traditions of previous centuries’ nationalist movement’s struggles”²⁴ and its “new society”²⁵ project. Although it was disbanded in 1939 by the Soviet regime, the Ukrainian Youth Military Sports Society offered a vivid recruiting pool for the OUN, the Ukrainian radical nationalist organization that fought against Soviet domination during the Second World War.²⁶

While borrowing from OUN and the early twentieth-century Ukrainian scout organization Plasts, Azov’s sporting tradition has a more personal and subversive background. Azov’s founder, Andriy Biletskiy, came from a family of Russian-speaking intellectuals from the east of the country; and he grew up and studied in Kharkiv. As a hooligan teen, Biletskiy participated in violent nationalist organizations such as Trizub (Trident), before taking the lead of the local Patriot Ukraïni (Patriot of Ukraine)²⁷ branch that would later become the heart of the Azov regiment. This rebellious component is essential to understanding Azov’s nationalist sport. A large number of today’s Ukrainian nationalists come from the eastern, industrial part of the country,²⁸ and rely on a hypermasculine brand to generate solidarity and sacrifice. This virile socialization is reminiscent of the concept developed by Benedict Anderson

21 Ukrainian Ministry of Youth, “Rišennâ N°1, Konkirсноï komisii z rozgladu proëktiv nacional’no-patriotičnogo vihovannâ rozroblenih institutami gromadâns’kogo suspil’stva, dlâ realizacii âkih nadaêt sâ finansova pidtrimka u 2020 roci” [Decision N°1 of the competition commission for the examination of the national-patriotic education projects developed by civil institutions, the implementation of which will be financially supported in 2020], December 26, 2019; Oleksiy Kuzmenko and Michael Colborne, “Ukrainian Far-Right Extremists Receive State Funds to Teach ‘Patriotism,’” *Bellingcat*, July 16, 2019, accessed May 2020 <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2019/07/16/ukrainian-far-right-extremists-receive-state-funds-to-teach-patriotism/>.

22 Anton Shekhovstov, “The Creeping Resurgence of the Ukrainian Radical Right? The Case of the Freedom Party,” *Europe Asia Studies* 63, no. 2 (2011): 203–228; Per Anders Rudling, “The return of the Ukrainian Far Right: The Case of VO Svoboda,” in *Analyzing Fascist Discourse*, eds. Ruth Wodak and John E. Richardson (London: Routledge, 2013), 228–225, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2011.547696>.

23 “Sokil,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, accessed June 2020, <http://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?linkpath=pages%5CS%5CO%5CSokil.htm>.

24 “Naša ĭdeâ” [Our Idea], Sokil website, accessed in February 2019, <http://vgo-sokil.org.ua/nasha-ideya/>.

25 *Ibid.*

26 “Oleksiy”, Head of Sokil’s Kyiv branch, Interview by Adrien Nonjon, Kyiv, March 25, 2019.

27 Vyacheslav Likhachev, “Chto NAM v NIKH ne nraivitsya—I: Andrei Biletskii” [What we don’t like about them-I: Andriy Biletskiy], *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie* 5 (November 2014), <https://corneliu.livejournal.com/227914.html>.

28 Olga Ruzhelnik, “Ukraine: Quand les fans de foot font de la politique” [When football fans do politics], *Espri* 7–8, (2016): 22–26, <https://doi.org/10.3917/espri.1607.0022>.

in his *Imagined Communities* (1983), where he presents most nationalist forces as an imagined political community, a “fraternity,” built on a “heterosexual male” idea.²⁹

The few studies devoted to nationalist cultures in contemporary Ukraine show that the intensive practice of sport is more than a leisure activity. While physical preparation for combat against the Russian enemy has become a militant act or a way of life, it is also a vector of new norms based on a heroic and militaristic ideal.³⁰ Furthermore, sport also works as a means for recruiting youth and mobilizing subcultures that might be active on the fringes of conventional politics, such as hooligans. To take up the conclusions made by Alina Polyakova in her study on All-Ukrainian Union Svoboda (Freedom), sport allows Ukrainian nationalist movements to broaden their support base and build new militant methods.³¹

It is also worth considering hygienic and sport not as simple social practices, but as fields for political and ideological experimentations, noticeable also in neighboring countries such as Russia.³² This obsession with sport must be read through the lens of fascism’s attraction for perfect bodies. As defined by Roger Griffin, fascism is “a revolutionary species of political modernism originating in the early twentieth century whose mission is to combat the allegedly degenerative forces of contemporary history (decadence) by bringing about an alternative modernity and temporality (a ‘new order’ and a ‘new era’) based on the rebirth, or palingenesis, of the nation.”³³ The integral nationalism of the 1920s and the “Natiocracy”³⁴ projects of OUN fighter Mykola Stsiborskyi (1897–1941) are the most open manifestations of this attraction for fascist aesthetics, an attraction that still inspires movements like Azov.

Today’s Ukrainian far right uses sport to curb what it sees as the risk of identity fragmentation by uniting the entire Ukrainian nation around a “body society.” We define the body society as the application of a biological scheme reproducing the functions, hierarchies, and structures of the human body to society in the sense that the philosopher George Canguilhem described in his writings on medicine: “The characteristic of an organism is to live as a whole and to be able to live only as a whole. This is made possible by the existence in the organism of a set of devices or regulatory mechanisms, the effect of which consists precisely in maintaining this

29 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso: London, 2006): 5–7, https://is.muni.cz/el/1423/podzim2013/SOC571E/um/Anderson_B_-_Imagined_Communities.pdf.

30 Tetyana Bureychak and Olena Petrenko, “Heroic Masculinity in Post-Soviet Ukraine: Cossacks, UPA and ‘Svoboda,’” *East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 2, no. 2 (2015): 3–28, <https://doi.org/10.21226/T2988X>.

31 Alina Polyakova, “Parties and subcultures in the process of mobilization: The internal dynamics of the radical right in Ukraine” in *Transforming the Transformation?: The East European radical right in the political process*, ed. Michael Minkerberg (London: Routledge, 2015), 319–347.

32 Marlene Laruelle, “Les milices russes et leur utilisation à l’intérieur et à l’étranger” [Russian militias and their use at home and abroad], *Notes de l’Ifri: Russie.Nei.Visions*, 113 (April 2019), https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/laruelle_milices_russes_2019.pdf; Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 181, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230596122>.

33 Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 181, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230596122>.

34 With a distant fascist inspiration, this state would be authoritarian and corporatist (where society and the economy are organized into groups defending their interests), driven by an elitist and technical vision—the only one capable of favoring national independence—but also paradoxically by a vision ensuring the primacy of the people over elites deemed corrupt and nepotistic. It is therefore a question of recomposing the state around the principle of: organized and united cooperation of all social strata, united in accordance with their social functions in representative bodies of state governance, based on the rejection of classes and parties, and based on the affirmation of the individual, a member of the nation who will occupy a predefined place within society, according to his or her real value. This value is measured by his struggles, his physical and intellectual abilities, and his capacity to relate to others.

integrity, in the persistence of the organism as a whole”.³⁵ Rather than destroying a democratic system deemed responsible for the loss of national greatness, the Ukrainian far right wants to reshape the system through sport around three virtues: functionality, efficiency, and unity.

A Recreational Approach to War: Training the Fighters of Tomorrow

Like any other aspiring-totalitarian movement, Ukrainian ultranationalist organizations see sport as the most alluring way to gather support from youth. As the embodiment of a “strong, intelligent, and talented”³⁶ youth, the “children of Greater Ukraine”³⁷ are supposedly eager to build a new country, cleansed from the Soviet period. Point 17 of the Azov Civil Corps’ program calls for mobilizing youth through a “policy in favor of youths and their education, based on principles of national dignity and honor against the cult of consumerism.”³⁸ This youth mobilization reflects the main theme of regeneration that is common in far-right ideologies. Sport is presented as a social enterprise to “take children out of the street and give them the means for an all-round development.”³⁹

This “political hygienist”⁴⁰ aspect, which intends to reintegrate lazy children into society, goes hand in hand with the moral entrepreneur status that far-right groups have adopted upon returning from the Donbas front. They replace Ukrainian authorities in societal segments, where the latter are little involved or simply absent, using sport as a normative tool for societal regulation and homogenization.

The sporting activities proposed by Sportivnij Korpus and Sokily are primarily aimed at boys and girls aged 12–16 years old and are held outdoors or in gymnasiums that are built and equipped by the Azov movement, particularly in working-class neighborhoods. While these free training sessions are open to all and completely resemble those provided by other sport movements, they are nevertheless arranged around various ceremonies, such as the now well-established “Glory to Ukraine, glory to the heroes!” patriotic salute and speeches evoking the need for devotion to the nation. Despite their radical ideology, ultranationalist youth movements benefit from major promotional campaigns, even in schools.⁴¹ In its early days, circa 2015, these events would only recruit about 15 children per camp; today, the current ones

35 Georges Canguilhem, *La connaissance de la vie [The Knowledge of Life]* (Paris: Vrin, 2006), 122.

36 *Ibid.*

37 Fil'm 'Azovec': Diti Velikoi Ukraïni [Film “Azovets”: The Children of Greater Ukraine], Youth Corps YouTube Channel, September 14, 2017, accessed March 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tR1-mOxD72g&list=Wl&index=170&t=10s>; Youth Corps brochure, “Šo take Ūnac'kij Korpus?” [What is the Youth Corps?], Kyiv, 2019.

38 Nacional'nij korespondent, “Manifest Civil'nogo Korpusu” [Civil Corps Manifesto], accessed December 2016, <https://nackor.org/ukr/manifest-civil-nogo-korpusu>.

39 “Social'nij proekt: Sportivne Majbutne” [Social project: an athletic future], National Corps brochure, Kyiv, 2019.

40 Brohm, *Sociologie politique du sport*.

41 Michiel Driebergen, “Ukraine: enfants de la patrie” [Ukraine: children of fatherland], *L'actualité*, October 13, 2017, <https://lactualite.com/monde/enfants-de-la-patrie/>.

now exceed more than 90 participants per two-week session.⁴² They are approved by parents,⁴³ who are glad to see their teens kept busy during the long summer months.

The youth sport promotion narrowly tied to a national ideal, fits with what Hobsbawm calls “nationbuilding from the bottom.”⁴⁴ Education based on the transmission of hygiene, discipline, and patriotic references aspires to create a general consensus around the nation.⁴⁵ The norms and behaviors that ultranationalist groups promote are built around a rejection of today’s Ukrainian educational system, which is considered unpatriotic and still too Sovietized. Oleksandr, an active member of the National Corps, whose daily job is to work with youths, describes his role in the transmission of a national heritage:

Youth is a pillar of nationalism. . . . They are the future of our country and our chance. . . . Some say you can recognize the greatness of a civilization or a people by the way it treats its elders. I personally think this also applies to the younger generations. When we are no longer here, it will be up to them to defend Ukraine and its traditions. We may as well prepare them for this great task as early as possible.⁴⁶

Ultrnationalist movements not only call for a renewal of the patriotic spirit through sports, but their activities also contribute to training youth for combat. In the context of the war in eastern Ukraine, the idea of a “nation in arms” is something that Azov takes verbatim. This was already articulated by OUN Colonel Mykhailo Kolodzynsky in his *Military Doctrine of Ukrainian Nationalists*. First published shortly after his death in 1940, the book was a success among nationalist organizations in exile. Republished in 1957 in Canada by Society of Former Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) Soldiers and then again in 2015 by the Azov movement’s publishing house *Orientyr*,⁴⁷ Kolodzynsky is explicit about the military dimension of Ukrainian nationalism: “A healthy nation must fight with a feeling of joyous fatalism for anything that whispers the call of blood to its ear and to which its historical destiny leads. You must fight or you will die.”⁴⁸

The desire to instill such military knowledge is made easier by the fact that it is delivered in a “playful” way. For the Sokily, activities are mostly role-playing games and take place in a spirit of innocent improvisation. The basics of combat are taught through classic training in marksmanship, first aid, and stealth.⁴⁹ They

42 Sevil Huseynova, Jafar Akhundov, Eviya Hovhannisyan, Ksenia Babich, and Katya Myachina, “Totalitarian institutions in secondary schools and in the system of extracurricular education in Azerbaijan and Armenia, Ukraine, and Russia,” *Journal of Conflict Transformation* 4, no. 1 (2019):54-66, <https://caucasusedition.net/conflicts-and-militarization-of-education-totalitarian-institutions-in-secondary-schools-and-in-the-system-of-extracurricular-education-in-azerbaijan-part-1/>.

43 “Fil’ m ‘Azovec’”; “Tabir ‘Azovec’: Šo dumaït’ bat’ki?” [Azovets Camp: What do parents think?], Youth Corps YouTube Channel, December 11, 2020, accessed June 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W-ivvKB_xwM.

44 Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations et nationalism depuis 1780: Programme, mythe, réalité* [Nations and nationalism since 1780: program, myth, reality] (Gallimard: Paris, 1992): 29, <https://doi.org/10.7202/015285ar>.

45 “Zdorova naciâ—zdrova deržava” [Healthy Nation, Healthy State], Civil Corps brochure, Kyiv, 2016.

46 “Oleksandr”, Interview by Adrien Nonkon, Kyiv, March 20, 2019.

47 Mykhailo Kolodzynsky, *Voënna doktrina Ukraïns’kikh nacionalistiv* [The Military Doctrine of Ukrainian Nationalists] (Orientyr: Kyiv, 2016).

48 *Ibid* 30.

49 “Na Volini Vidbudet’sâ Vseukraïns’kij Viškil’nij Tabir ‘Vovčak’ Sic.Licari Licu” [PanUkrainian school camp Vovchak—knights of the forest will take place in Volyn in January], accessed May 2020, <http://vgo-sokil.org.ua/na-volini-vidbudet’sya-vseukraïns’ki/>.

are put into practice through games such as catch-the-flag and paintball.⁵⁰ Games and sports competitions offer an accessible environment for children to integrate a fighter's behaviors and movements. This playful dimension is enhanced by the fact that participants are awarded a diploma or a participation certificate, as well as a commemorative medal.⁵¹

Azovets summer camps, held by the Ūnac'kij Korpus (Youth Corps),⁵² the Azov youth movement, follow the same principles as the Sokily, but have better financial resources to make the experience more immersive. First established in Pushcha-Vodytsya in 2015⁵³ for Azov's member children, the camps now take place over the course of a dozen days,⁵⁴ with courses that can start at the young age of nine years old.⁵⁵ Every year, at least 700 children attend. Each session brings together approximately 40–50 children, and their organization is highly codified. Upon arrival, children are given a small manual in the form of a holiday workbook, which they must fill out by choosing a fighter name.⁵⁶ In addition to being a "little patriot's" passport, the manual sets out the physical and intellectual activities as well as the goals for their time at camp. It is a manual for the ideal patriotic fighter and details the entire training program. Appearance is not neglected, either. Children are given a uniform of beige shorts, a T-shirt, a yellow baseball cap in Azovets colors, as well as a combat uniform, and a tactical bag for hiking.⁵⁷

Participants' accommodation is intended to be more comfortable than at Sokily camps, which favor bivouacking in the middle of the countryside. Children are dispatched into wooden barracks and have virtually no access to any means of communication with the outside world, other than 20 minutes per day to talk to their parents on the phone.⁵⁸ It is far from a restful holiday, and apart from a few cultural excursions, constant effort is what matters most. Children must only concentrate on what is essential and ignore everything that is superfluous. Self-effacement for the benefit of the group is exalted by the military discipline to which they are subjected. Hence, children are woken every morning at dawn to attend the flagraising and renew their commitment to the nation by taking an oath,⁵⁹ the Prayer of the Ukrainian nationalist written by OUN's member Josef Mashchak (1908–1976). While activities are intended to be adapted to younger children, they are first and foremost militaristic. Throughout the day, kids practice obstacle courses,⁶⁰ climbing, dismantling, or even assembling an assault rifle. It is not rare for someone to shout

50 "Fil'm Viškil 17.04.2016 Sokil–Ternopil'la" [Film training on 17 April 2016, Sokil–Ternopil], National Corps YouTube Channel, April 21, 2016, accessed May 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Po_zYow3nko&list=WL&index=159&t=3s.

51 Ibid.

52 "Karantin ne zipsuê litô: ditâci tabori Ūnac'kogo Korpusu gotovi do sezonu2020" [Quarantine will not ruin the summer: Youth Corps children's camps are ready for the 2020 season], Youth Corps YouTube Channel, May 14, 2020, accessed May 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2FLMOibiGsw&list=WL&index=166&t=0s>.

53 "Reportaž 'Livogo beregu' pro tabir Azovec" [Left Bank report on the Azovets camp], December 21 2017, <https://nationalcorps.org/reportažh-34lvogo-beregu34-pro-tabir-azovec/>.

54 *National Corps Newsletter* n. 2, January 2017; Guillaume Herbaut, Interview by Adrien Nonjon, Paris, November 2016.

55 Ibid.

56 "Fil'm 'Azovec'".

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 "Sil'na Naciâ. Ūnac'ka Liga: âk u Kiêvi zmagalisâ diti z riznih kutočkiv kraïni" ["Strong Nation. Youth League": How children from various parts of the country competed in Kyiv], National Corps YouTube Channel, September 17, 2017, accessed May 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b3lJRyS5wZ4>.

60 "Ukraine's far-right children's camp: 'I want to bring up a warrior,'" The Guardian YouTube Channel, September 5, 2017, accessed May 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jiBXmbkwiSw>.

“grenade!”⁶¹ in the middle of an activity, compelling young children to lie down, simulate evacuation, and treat the injured, in order to remind them that war is an integral part of everyday life.

The ceremony that marks the end of each camp follows the same logic: each child is given a series of badges according to his feats and specialties (marksmanship, nursing, scouting, etc.).⁶² Such gratification is meaningful to participants. As he/she swears his/her final oath and is given a “Roman handshake,” a symbol of loyalty during antiquity, the child understands that he/she has been recognized and now belongs to the core of Ukrainian nationalism and its project for society.

Through the combination of militarism and group spirit, the training camps provided by the Ukrainian far right are structured according to what sociologist Erving Goffman calls “total institutions.” In addition to the fact that the instruction dispensed there is homogenous insofar as all participants are “placed in the same situation, cut off from the outside world for a relatively long time,”⁶³ the camps qualify as totalitarian because they enable direct control over the children by high-level members of the movement’s hierarchy. By means of these political and military rites, the individual completely surrenders to the movement, both physically and spiritually.⁶⁴ The repercussions of this kind of sporting and paramilitary training are still difficult to quantify by researchers and to assess by child psychologists, as it is arduous to make direct contact with the children. It should nevertheless be assumed that Ukrainian far-right movements hope that this training will lead to much more political involvement by participants.

The Nationalist Cult of Hard Masculinity

Since the revolutionary events of 2014, it has become more challenging to strictly separate protest movements and violent action in Ukraine.⁶⁵ Frustration towards passive authorities has resulted in some groups turning to radical action when they feel they have exhausted conventional methods. As Ioulia Shukan and Gilles Favarel-Garrigues have shown, it often gives way to selforganized vigilante movements seeking to take justice into their own hands.⁶⁶

Whereas in the early 1990s, many ultranationalist militants celebrated a form of underground masculinity, this concept has since spread to the masses. As marginal as they may be the skinhead and hooligan cultures that emphasize aggressive masculinity and violence have regained visibility in the Ukrainian political chaos by both participating in political riots and the war in Donbas.⁶⁷ The playful promotion of

61 Couvelaire, “Au camp d’entraînement”.

62 “Fl’im ‘Azovec”.

63 Erving Goffman, *Asiles: Études sur la condition sociale des malades mentaux et autres reclus* [Asylums: Essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates] (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 179), 41.

64 Samuel Bouron, “Un militantisme à deux faces: Stratégie de communication et politique de formation des Jeunesses identitaires” [A two-faced activism: communication strategy and training policy of the Identitarian Youths], *Agone* 2, no. 54 (February, 2014): 45–72, <https://doi.org/10.3917/agone.054.0045>.

65 Alexandra Goujon and Ioulia Shukan, “Sortir de l’anonymat en situation révolutionnaire: Maïdan et le citoyen ordinaire en Ukraine (hiver 2013-2014)” [Coming out of anonymity in a revolutionary situation. Maidan and the ordinary citizen in Ukraine (winter 2013-2014)], *Politix* 4, no. 112 (2015): 33–57, <https://doi.org/10.3917/pox.112.0033>.

66 Gilles Favarel-Garrigues and Ioulia Shukan, “Perspectives on Post-Soviet Vigilantism. Introduction,” *Laboratorium* 11, no. 9 (2019): 4–15, <https://doi.org/10.25285/2078-1938-2019-11-3-4-15>.

67 Volodymyr Ishchenko, “Nationalist Radicalization Trends in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine,” *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, no. 529 (May 2018): 8, https://www.ponarseurasia.org/wp-content/uploads/attachments/Pepm529_Ishchenko_May2018_0-6.pdf.

a society at war is persistent in Ukrainian politics, but farright movements specifically stress a hard male identity based on physical feats. This hardness is constructed as a distinction from the rest of society, presented as weak and feminized, and is viewed as an essential element of their nationalist identity. Several militants in Kyiv told us, “It is normal for any person who claims to be a nationalist to be strong and virile. It is a fundamental requirement for the movement.”⁶⁸

Unlike other Ukrainian political movements where physical virtue is secondary, the far right idealizes the chiseled body, as it signifies the ability to fight and resist. This cult of the body is a part of an aesthetics of dominant masculinity that refers to the promotion of an idealized historical heritage. Within nationalist circles, the cult of violent action and the purity of the body are intrinsically linked.⁶⁹

This explains why the Azov movement acts as an ambassador for extreme combat sports such as MMA and knife-fighting. A large number of videos published online showcase tough training sessions in the Azov gymnasiums⁷⁰ with a techno-music soundtrack. However, this promotion is often institutionalized. For instance, by sponsoring the Mixed Martial Arts League *Idu na Vi* (I come to you),⁷¹ Azov presents the archetypal fighter through its own theatrically staged tournaments. In the dim lighting of the Reconquista Club’s boxing ring—an Identitarian bar in Kyiv—twenty or so contenders fight, most of them young and from the Azov movement.⁷² In the ring adorned with the Azov movement’s symbol, a Ukrainian trident in Nordic styling, the fighters do not hold back their punches when the bell rings.⁷³ Amidst sweat and blood, violence is celebrated and the most muscular and athletic body, a symbol of Ukrainian men’s virility and prowess, is glorified.

This reasoning is conspicuous in activities that are offered to Donbas veterans.⁷⁴ On March 10, 2019, the Nacional’ni družini militia organized a knife-fighting tournament in their Nat’s gymnasium in honor of the heroes that died in the Donbas conflict. This event had twofold psycho-social objectives. The first purpose was to come to terms with the various traumas that result from war. In an interview after the tournament, the President of the FrateriaFortis Combat Melee Weapon Association, Konstantin Ulyanov, affirmed that thanks to the adrenaline and the agility required to touch the opponent, this sport is effective against stress, helps improve coordination, and thus erases anxiety of war veterans.⁷⁵ The knife fight is practiced in groups and often in contact with younger individuals, who have not been mobilized. These veterans find a listening ear, an admiring audience, and a welcoming environment. Through the tournament, they are able to progressively reintegrate social norms without suddenly disrupting their warrior habitus. Commendable at a first glance,

68 Anonymous National Corps militant, Informal Interview by Adrien Nonjon, Kyiv, March 2019.

69 Philippe Braud, “La violence politique: repères et problèmes” [Political violence: benchmarks and problems], *Cultures & Conflicts* 09-10 (May 15, 1993). <https://doi.org/10.4000/conflicts.406>.

70 “Otkrytaâ trenirovka Sportivnogo korpusa” [Opening training session of the Sports Corps], Marioupol National Corps YouTube Channel, May 28, 2018, accessed May 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NcWR_q75Bvo.

71 “Vše s’ogodni u Lvovi—grandioznij turnir z realističnijh bojiv ‘Idu na Vi!’” [Today in Lviv—a grand tournament of realistic *Idu na Vi* fighting] Nacional’nij korespondent., accessed December 2016, <https://nackor.org/ukr/vzhe-s-ogodni-u-lvovi-grandioznij-turnir-z-realističnijh-bojiv-idu-na-vi>.

72 Michael Colborne, “Friday Night Fights with Ukraine’s Far Right.” *The New Republic*, July 9, 2019, accessed May 2020, <https://newrepublic.com/article/154434/friday-night-fights-ukraines-far-right>.

73 “Prâmaâ translaciâ boev v Reconquista Club 23 fevralâ 2018” [Live-streaming of fights at the Reconquista Club on February 23, 2018], Reconquista Club YouTube Channel, February 23, 2018, accessed March 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e7k88HhkyCY>.

74 “Kiivs’ke Veterans’ke Bratsvo” [Brotherhood of Kyiv’s veteran fighters], Brochure, Kyiv, March 2019.

75 Konstantin Oulianov, Interview by Adrien Nonjon, Kyiv, March 16, 2019.

this “return therapy” has a second implicit purpose—to prepare for the possibility of a second war and the sacrifice required by a nation in danger.

Far-right militants’ hypermasculine identities are inextricably linked to the body as an ideological construction. Indeed, as Jean-Marie Brohm has shown, the different masculinities associated with sports often arise out of practices that reflect both bodily resources and ideologies.⁷⁶ This continues James Messerschmidt’s assertion that the “body blocks or facilitates social action, and therefore mediates and influences social practices.”⁷⁷ For some militants, the body is just a reflection of ultranationalist ideology. Militants’ reputation and effectiveness in carrying out their political struggle strongly depends on their physical abilities and their readiness to put themselves in dangerous situations.

Sport is thus interpreted as an indirect way to accept death—death of the individual body to help the survival of the collective body of the nation. This fascist-inspired regeneration makes the cult of the body a revolutionary act for Ukrainian ultranationalists.⁷⁸ As a communal practice, the cult of the body is seen as a preliminary, initiatory experience, and is described as a way of life that can mobilize its practitioners’ inner energy and meet their need for identity.⁷⁹ Sport is thus perceived as a worldview, a lifestyle guided by the perfection of a body that is capable of dominating death in order to accept it.⁸⁰ Within Ukrainian nationalist movements, total devotion to political struggle is seen as a positive value where death and violence are intimately linked and are a part of everyday life.⁸¹ A straight-edge⁸² type of abstinence is also practiced by some militants who defend it as a way to distinguish “real men” from those who are “non-masculine.”⁸³

Sport as the Matrix of a Racialized Historical Narrative

The sports culture of far-right militants is also inspired by a distant historical heritage.⁸⁴ As Raewyn Connel rightly points out, there is no such thing as a unique model of masculinity. The masculinities that they claim are in no way built on new norms—they are constantly reinvented according to very specific models.⁸⁵ In 2020, under the patronage of Rada, the State Sports Commission announced that it would finance initiatives allowing “the establishment of a national patriotic conscience of

76 Brohm, *Sociologie politique du sport*.

77 James W. Messerschmidt, *Masculinities and Crime: A Quarter Century of Theory and Research* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 246.

78 Cammelli, “Fascism,” 89–101.

79 *Ibid.*

80 Maddalena Gretel Cammelli, “Fascism as a style of life: Community life and violence in a neofascist movement in Italy,” *Focaal—Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 79 (2017): 89–101, <https://doi.org/10.3167/fcl.2017.790108>.

81 Roger Griffin, *International Fascism: Theories, Causes and the New Consensus* (London: Arnold, 1998).

82 *Straight-edge* culture was born within the hardcore punk scene in the 1980s on the East Coast of the United States. It advocates abstaining from tobacco, drugs, and alcohol. While this is still mainly practiced on the left of the political spectrum in western Europe, it is also extremely popular with far-right groups in post-Soviet countries.

83 Jim McKay and Suzanne Laberge, “Sport et masculinités” [Sport and masculinity], *Clio. Histoire, femmes et sociétés* 23 (2006): 33–49, <https://doi.org/10.4000/clio.1908>.

84 Bureychak and Petrenko, “Heroic Masculinity”.

85 Cammelli, “Fascism,” 89–101.

children and youths, the popularization of national spiritual and cultural heritage, and the improvement of knowledge of Ukraine's remarkable personalities.⁸⁶

This new, de-Sovietized and de-Russified national pantheon makes room for historical heroes with strong masculinity such as Cossacks, and OUN and UPA fighters. The Ukrainian far right fosters its image as direct successor of these national heroes. In events organized by the Sokily for instance, it is not uncommon to observe tributes to movements such as OUN and UPA.⁸⁷ In addition to bearing the name of tutelary figures of these movements, such as Roman Shukhevych,⁸⁸ sport competitions are sometimes punctuated with parades in full dress uniform and concluded with a solemn tribute.⁸⁹ Survival exercises also perpetuate this lineage. Deep in the wild countryside, militants learn guerrilla tactics inherited from the OUN by day, and by night sing nationalist songs and tell stories of the time when Ukraine was fighting the Red Army. Those who do not listen or who are not interested in these activities, beware. Their superior could force them to perform a series of painful push-ups while reciting, "I will study history!"⁹⁰

Cossack sports and codes of conduct are also springboards for the Ukrainian far right. Indeed, Cossack imagery permeates the ultranationalist imagination deeply, identifying themselves with a "caste of combatants," a driving force in the formation and the structuring of an independent Ukraine.⁹¹ At the core of this reinvention of tradition is *Bojovij gopak* (Combat Hopak), a traditional wrestling sport that was practiced at the time of the Zaporizhian Sich—the prefiguration of the Ukrainian state—between the 16th and 18th centuries. It is slightly similar to the traditional *Kozachok* dance by virtue of the agility it requires and its technical nature.⁹² The sport was banned after the Cossack Sich was dismantled by Empress Catherine II, but endured through the centuries within a few isolated rural communities.

In 1985, at the beginning of Perestroika, Volodymyr Pylat (b. 1955) founded his first school in Volhynia.⁹³ A high-level gymnast from a Ukrainian aristocratic family, who had specialized in martial arts in the 1970s, Pylat reintroduced this forgotten sport, simultaneously codifying it and giving it a patriotic ethic in *Kodeks licars'koï česti gopakivcâ* (The Chivalrous Honor Code of hopak). Indeed, while hopak is a nonviolent sport that emphasizes friendship, brotherhood, and cooperation,⁹⁴ it

86 Halyna Studyenykova, "Val'kiria' i 'Banderštat' proslavât Banderu i UPA. Komu Minmolodežî vydelilo iz bûdžeta 9 mln na 'patriotičeskoe vospitanie'" [Valkyrie and Banderstadt will glorify Bandera and the UPA, to whom the Ministry of Youth has allocated 9 million of their budget for "patriotic education"], *Strana*, January 12, 2020, accessed May 2020. <https://strana.news/articles/analysis/243831-minmolodezhi-i-sporta-vydelit-9-millionov-hriven-na-proekty-natsionalno-patrioticheskoho-vospitanija.-html>.

87 "Vidrodimo Duh Nacii?" [Changing the Nation's mind? Sokil website, accessed June 2020, <http://vgo-sokil.org.ua/ВІПРОДИМО-ДУХ-НАЦІЇ/>].

88 "Škola Liderstva im Romana Šuhevicia/ Den' Ī-Ī" [Roman Choukhevych school for leaders' days 12], Sokil website, accessed June 2020, <http://vgo-sokil.org.ua/школа-лідерства-ім-романа-шухевича-де/>.

89 "Terebovlâ MARŠ SOKOLU" [Sokily March in Terebovlia], Sokil YouTube Channel, July 8, 2016, accessed May 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rqY6hgjAD3E>.

90 "Â Obicâh Vĕti Istorii!!!" [I promise to study History!!!], Sokil YouTube Channel, July 5, 2016, accessed June 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0I3lJP4ZyJs>.

91 Bertrand Belhomme de Franqueville, *Le phénomène milicien en Ukraine: le cas du bataillon Azov* [The militia phenomenon in Ukraine: the case of the Azov battalion], Master's thesis: Université Paris-I Panthéon Sorbonne, 2016.

92 Artem Morozov, "Vzaemodiâ mistectva i sportu âk činnik rozvitku virtuoznih ruhiv v ukraïns'komu narodno-sceničnomu tanci" [Interaction of art and sports as a factor in the development of virtuoso movements in Ukrainian folk stage dance], *Mistectvoznavčî zapiski*, 33 (2018): 338–345.

93 Volodymyr Pylat, *Bojovij Gopak i osnovi zahistu vitčzni* [The Hopak fighter and the basics of defending the territory] (Kyiv:Ukraine, 2016).

94 Ibid 24–25.

is first and foremost a martial art that exalts national spirit. As in other forms of patriotic education, hopak masters strive to transmit the love of their country, the love of their language, the importance of defending both, and the stories of the great Cossack era. The International Federation of Combat Hopak was recognized in 2001 and now has over 10,000 members across the country.⁹⁵

In light of this massive enthusiasm for a national sport, the far right has sought to support its development early on. The former Deputy of the Social Nationalist Party of Ukraine, Leontiy Martinuk, published several texts in Azov's journal *Orientyr*, where he argued for the practice of hopak as a traditional and historical sport,⁹⁶ while Andriy Parubiy, Former Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada (Ukrainian Parliament), organized hopak training camps in the Carpathians within the nationalist organization *Spadshina* (Heritage) also known for the creation of SNPU.⁹⁷ Now the Azov movement's *Druzhina* sponsored and hosted the first national hopak championship in its Kyiv gymnasium.⁹⁸ Thus, the Azov movement sets itself up as the natural guarantor of mythologized Cossack traditions and contributes to their popularization amongst the Ukrainian youth.

These Ukrainian references are often mixed with more European ones like the ancient Spartans, which some far-right militants see as superior fighters with a mutual solidarity model to emulate.⁹⁹ Another model of fighters in the Ukrainian that the far right like to refer to in its sport promotion is the Rus' Varangians, i.e., the Nordic, Scandinavian tribes which conquered the Slavs in the eighth and ninth centuries and then merged with them to found the first Eastern Slavic state of Kievan Rus'. Varangians are idealized as a racial category equated to brute "physicality," and to the supreme embodiment of male power and white race.

Indeed, despite a number of changes over time, Ukrainian ultranationalism has not escaped the questions of racialism and eugenics. Dmytro Dontsov (1883–1973), an integralist theorist of the midtwentieth century, published *The Spirit of Our Antiquity* (*Dukh nashoi davnyiny*) in 1944, in which he established a typology of European races. He was largely influenced by Völkischen Alfred Rosenberg and Hans F. K. Günther, whose work he translated, and developed a fascination for the so-called spirit of the Nordic race. According to him, this race had the best chance of realizing its "biological potential" between the Danube and the Caspian Sea.¹⁰⁰ For Dontsov, the Ukrainian ethnos is the legitimate race to occupy this region. Although he focuses much less on this question, the geographer and UPA intellectual Yury Lypa (1900–1944) considered with interest Dontsov's theories on Ukrainian ethnonationalism. He promoted the idea of Ukraine's unique geopolitical destiny as due to its blending of Nordic contributions from the Goths and the Meridional contribution from the Byzantines.¹⁰¹ Although little is known in the public sphere today, Lypa's work remains an important reference for the Azov movement.

95 Oleh Poulichyn, Head of a Hopak school in Kyiv, Interview, Kyiv, March 22, 2019.

96 Levko Martiniuk, "Ukrains'kij rukopas' 'Hopak'" [Ukrainian melee 'Hopak'], *Orientyry* 7, no. 4 (May 2001): 12.

97 Evhen Rudenko, Roman Kravets and El'dar Sarakhman "Mozok" Majdanu. Onovlenij Budinok profspilok očima Andrii Parubiia" ["Brain" of the Maidan. Renovated House of Trade Unions through the eyes of Andriy Parubiy], *Pravda*, October 2, 2018, accessed July 2021 <https://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2018/10/2/7193766/>.

98 "Ukrainian Cup of Martial Art Combat Hopak Holds in Kyiv," UATV YouTube Channel, February 24, 2019, accessed May 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Ed7tAJvBSY>.

99 "Oleh", a National Corps and *Druzhina* militant, Interview by Adrien Nonjon, Kyiv, March 22, 2019.

100 Per Anders Rudling, "Eugenics and racial anthropology in the Ukrainian radical nationalist tradition," *Science in Context* 32 (2019): 67–91, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0269889719000048>.

101 Yuri Lypa, *Vseukrains'ka Trilogiia* [Pan-Ukrainian Trilogy] 2 Vol. (Maup: Kyiv, 2007) 713.

For Ukrainian far-right culture, the figure of the assertive warrior who is capable of controlling the purity of his blood and territory is indeed held in high regard.¹⁰² Ukrainian nationalists claim that the Kievan Rus' gave rise to the first Ukrainian state, and that Ukraine is the major cradle of civilization in the Slavic world, with the obvious aim to break with the similar Russian nationalist rhetoric.¹⁰³ The more the ultranationalist militant approaches the Varangian, hence "Nordic", archetype, the more he is supposedly in contact with the original spiritual and corporeal purity of the nation.

Consequently, the aesthetics and imagination that surround the Rus' and its paganism are reactivated by the practice of sports. For example, Azov organizes strength tournaments that are based on the Scottish Highland games and punctuates its training sessions at the regiment's base camp in Mariupol with ceremonies in the shadow of idols or in the forest.¹⁰⁴ They also hold knife-fighting tournaments to pay tribute to those who died in the Anti-Terrorist Operation Zone and who have traveled to "Valhalla."¹⁰⁵ Many of these practices are inspired by a romantic neopaganism and the mythical images of Varangians which are conveyed in films, metal music, and the work of Ukrainian folklorists.

The desire to associate sports with the spiritual roots of the Rus' was notably evident in Ukraine in the summer of 2019, when the Young Flame festival took place. Organized by the National Corps in the Kyivska Rus Park, a theme park, whose architecture is in the manner of Varangian wooden fortifications,¹⁰⁶ the festival welcomed all kinds of events in a medieval spirit. While some were as classic as could be, such as rugby, others resonated with the past, such as strongman competitions, wrestling, archery, and even Stenka na Stenku (wall to wall)—a hand-to-hand combat that is popular in Eastern Slavic folklore.¹⁰⁷

Sport thus plays a key role in the Ukrainian far-right "ethnopolitics," which historian Stéphane François has analyzed as the process of building a political system that strives to protect the biological roots of the nation, structured around the idea that a people is first and foremost an ethnos before being a demos.¹⁰⁸ Through this, what I call "pagan sports ethics," the Azov movement ultimately hopes to recreate a community based on blood, in which sport is reduced to its elitist function for the so-called superior race.

102 Mattias Gardell, *Gods of the Blood: The Pagan Revival and White Separatism* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2003), <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822384502>.

103 Nonjon, *L'Ukraine d'Azov*.

104 "Zdorova naciâ—zdorova deržava" [Healthy Nation—Healthy State], Civil Corps brochure, 2016.

105 Field observation in Kyiv, March 2019.

106 "Young Flame Fest: nacionalisti proveli pid Kiëvom masštabnij festival" [Young Flame Fest :nationalists organize a large-scale festival near Kiev], National Corps YouTube Channel, September 2, 2019, accessed May 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fjorlj_GcoC&feature=youtu.be.

107 "Festival Young Flame" [Young Flame Festival], Poltava National Corps YouTube Channel, September 2, 2019, accessed May 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R3sBwlGF12o>.

108 Stéphane François, "Notre plus longue mémoire: Les paganismes antiques européens comme fondement de l'ethnopolitique des groupes identitaires français" ["Our longest memory": Ancient European paganism as a foundation for the ethnopolitics of French identity groups], in *Réactivations et reconstructions des religions anciennes et courants politico-identitaires*, eds. Samin Akgönül, Bariş Ozdemir, and Anne-Laure Zwilling, (Strasbourg: Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 2021).

Conclusion

The Ukrainian far right is driven by the representations of a nation in arms fighting to preserve its cultural, ethnic, and even racial heritage. In this representation, sport occupies a central place because it guarantees the continuity of the national spirit, embodied literally, by body training. Sport is seen as a central tool to promote a Darwinian conception of the nation, as well as a Gramscist strategy to penetrate mass culture and state institutions. Like the hooligan subcultures from which they originate, through sport, far-right formations find an attractive and primary way to maintain a permanent competition element that feeds their political strategy. If the current war in Donetsk and Luhansk gives this sports theme a topical character, it is by no means something improvised in the urgency of the geopolitical context, but a structural and long-term tendency of the Ukrainian far right, which sees the revival of the nation through a purified body, ready to be sacrificed. Sport embodies the need to socialize youth in a patriotic collectivist spirit against what is perceived as a Soviet colonial past and a corrupt modern society. Young people, because they are vigorous and more susceptible to nationalist ideals, are the core target of the “New Ukraine” project. Sport exorcises and distills the essence of the Ukrainian nation after the fall of the USSR by offering it a set of values that would be the foundation of an extended and recognized sovereignty, but at the cost of a fascist-inspired cult of the body.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ I am grateful for the financial support provided for the translation from French to English by the Centre de Recherches Europe-Eurasie (CREE) at the National Institute for Oriental Languages and Cultures (INALCO) in Paris.