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Ukraine's Military Culture and Symbolism in the Post-Soviet Era

Piotr Wawrzeniuk

Introduction

In the first part of a self-biography published in 2024, the former commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, Valerii Zaluzhnyi, recalls the centenary of the Institute of the Land Forces in Odesa in 2001, which he witnessed as a young officer. He is rather contemptuous of the amalgamation of various historical symbols:

The jubilee of the institute passed quickly and almost indiscernibly. Except that, along with the unveiling of the monument to a member of the tsar's family [the Grand Prince Konstantin Konstantinovich, considered to be a founder], the institute was returned the Order of Lenin, which had been awarded to the artillery school that in 1993 was merged into the Institute of Ground Forces. From then on the institute was called nothing other than the Odesa Order of Lenin Institute of Ground Forces.

On the institute's shoulder patch, at the top, was placed the Small Coat of Arms of Ukraine. Beneath it, the main academic building with a church dedicated to Saints Cyril and Methodius, with a golden dome and Orthodox cross. And below that, an order ribbon with four Soviet decorations: the Order of Lenin, the Order of the Red Banner, the Order of the Patriotic War, and the Order of Friendship of Peoples. And even further down, as a tribute to the tsarist era, a one-headed bird with outstretched wings, holding a shield with the flag of independent Ukraine.

(Zaluzhnyi, 2024, p. 150)

In the account, one finds examples of intermixing of various symbols, including references to Tsarist and Soviet times. Describing events ten years into Ukrainian independence, Zaluzhnyi's description offers insights into a still ongoing transformative process within the Armed Forces of Ukraine. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 confronted Ukraine with the task of building its own armed forces and providing them with symbols and traditions promoting a new military identity worth an independent state. In this chapter, I explore how symbols such as flags and emblems, uniforms, honorary names of units,

and military holidays have been employed by the Ukrainian Armed Forces to shape and sustain military identity, history, and tradition. I argue that Ukrainian military culture and symbolism underwent a gradual but significant transformation from Soviet to hybrid Soviet-Ukrainian and then Ukrainian form with distinct national features. The strategic shocks of 2014 and 2022 accelerated this process. These changes reveal a creative process elaborating a new symbolic space that was at once rooted in historical tradition and increasingly oriented towards a new civic nationhood.

The argument develops in four steps. First, the chapter outlines the theoretical framework, drawing on concepts of military culture, symbols, and the uses of history and traditions. Second, it sketches the historical background of the Ukrainian armed forces and politics after 1991 along the broader turn towards decommunization in Ukrainian society, providing the context in which symbolic transformation unfolded. Third, it examines the evolution of military symbols by examining the redesign of emblems and insignia, the awarding of honorary unit names, and the changing calendar of military holidays. Finally, the discussion brings the case and the theoretical perspectives together, highlighting how formative events and strategic shocks shaped the creation of a new Ukrainian military identity.

Theoretical Introduction

Military Culture

Alastair Finlan (2013) defines military culture as “the human dimension of the armed forces”, an all-encompassing social environment, infused with a distinct martial orientation, in which material and non-material elements, including actions, discourses, practices, symbols, and technologies centre around sustaining specific identities, histories, and traditions (p. 1, 3). All military organizations are “intimately connected to their societies and adapt, wittingly or unwittingly”, depending on social pressures, but also new technologies and ideas about warfare (Finlan, 2013, pp. 13–14). The culture of the armed forces mirrors, is influenced by, and influences the culture of the society. The decisive factor when it comes to military culture is not “what people are taught, as what they absorb through socialisation in military organisations (Finlan, 2013, p. 14). Wong and Gerrass (2019, p. 19) conceptualize military culture as consisting of three key components: artefacts, beliefs and values, and underlying assumptions. Artefacts include tangible and visible elements such as uniforms, weapons, and routine interactions between soldiers and officers. Beliefs and values refer to the expressed organizational principles and creeds, while underlying assumptions represent the deeply embedded, often unspoken beliefs that shape the functioning of military organizations. Military institutions can undergo systemic transformation due to formative events. These shifts may stem from battlefield failures, the influence of visionary leaders, technological advancements, or evolving societal attitudes towards warfare and violence. Finlan

(2013, pp. 19–21) cites the American Civil War, World Wars I and II as formative for the US armed forces, a development from employing warfare on an industrial scale to deploying millions of men overseas, developing new systems, and becoming a military model for many states in the process.

In the case of Ukraine, one may add the concept of “strategic shock” as a factor influencing military culture, functioning as a momentous “formative event”. Reznikova (2024, pp. 59–103) has found that Ukraine’s strategic culture has undergone two transformative shocks. The first one was the Russian annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas in 2014, the second was the full-scale invasion in 2022. These experiences transformed Ukrainian strategic culture from a passive, diplomacy-oriented one to an assertive, resilience-centred, and preventive security culture. The process has been mirrored by official doctrines, constitutional amendments, and public sentiment. For the armed forces, 2014 and 2022 meant not merely higher public and political support, but also a sense of purpose.

Uniforms and Insignia as Symbols

A symbol’s relationship to what it represents is conventional, determined by social and political processes. Symbols “join interacting people in a shared understandings of meanings” while integrating internal experience with external material objects, joining “present signs and texts with absent but virtually re-presented meanings, thereby linking near and far as well as present and past” (Fornäs, 2012, pp. 44–45). One may argue that state and military symbols are consciously designed to avoid complexity and the risk of being ambiguous.

State and, consequently, military symbols, are important “identity markers” of a political, social or cultural community. The signifying process encompasses linking the symbol to its “primary” (what it is supposed to represent) and “secondary” meaning (what it represents “symbolically”, indirectly), and bounding those two together (Fornäs, 2012, p. 53). Needless to say, the degree to which various symbols are embraced would depend on the ability and willingness among various groups in the society to decode symbols as intended by those who have designed the symbols. Successful decoding depends on whether there is a cultural frame or a historical consciousness that can conceptually accommodate and accept the changes undertaken. Historical consciousness, on a collective level, links the past, present, and future through historical narration. Uses of history can only be built on how this historical consciousness is expressed in society (Wawrzeniuk, 2020, p. 90).

Uses of History and Making of Traditions

Swedish historian Klas-Göran Karlsson (1999, p. 23, 26) distinguishes between the needs for history, its uses, and its functions in society as analytical categories. Regarding the demand for, and consequently the need for, history, Karlsson finds that individuals, groups, and societies require history to create meaning,

identity, and orientation in the present by connecting to the past. The use of history entails the selection of narratives, interpretations, and symbols to meet that need. Finally, the function of history describes what the use of history aims to achieve. At the societal level of the uses of history, Karlsson argues, the concept of *history as consciousness* (on an individual level), “the history that we subjectively find relevant to our life situation and make use of”, is particularly important. Its form depends on our ability to think historically and to position our own era in relation not only to the past but also to the future. It is often retrospective, “searching for stable historical patterns and analogies” in times of uncertainty, such as the systemic, almost tectonic, shifts that occurred when the Soviet Union came to an end (Karlsson, 1999, p. 38). History as consciousness frequently builds on a simplified version of the past, enabling “an emotional and moral connection” to be easily established between the users and history. The appealingly natural and simple past stands in contrast to a present that appears confusing, insecure, and negative. In this process, historical patterns and contrasts are often rendered overly clear, creating a sense of coherence and distinction between past and present (Karlsson, 1999, p. 39). History is harnessed, so to speak, to accommodate the new circumstances.

A demand for history in a society may occur from a collective societal will to remember history, and thus imply *existential* use; navigating in the present by orienting in history. A *moral* use of history would be one where supposedly forgotten or forbidden history is rehabilitated and reinstated it. The *ideological* use of history, Karlsson maintains, is when intellectuals or political elites tailor narratives to rationalize and legitimize policy. It is self-understood that there are no clear delimitations between existential, moral, and ideological uses of history. Instead, they are likely to overlap (Karlsson, 1999, pp. 57–58).

According to Hobsbawm, an “invented tradition” refers to “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition”. Normally, he admits, the process happens with a reference to a “suitable historic past” (Hobsbawm, 1983, p. 1). The process of invention is likely to occur “when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys the social patterns for which ‘old’ traditions had been designed, producing new ones to which they are not applicable” (Hobsbawm, 1983, p. 4).

History as consciousness links past and present, while its overlapping uses – existential, moral, and ideological – contribute to the process of “inventing traditions”, creating symbolic practices anchored in a suitable historic past.

The Armed Forces as a Mirror of Society and Politics in Ukraine

Ukrainian take-over of control over the Soviet forces on its territory began after the failed coup d'état in Moscow in August 1991. On August 24, the *Rada* adopted the Resolution of State Independence, which included directives to bring all armed forces on Ukrainian territory under its jurisdiction, establish the Ministry of Defence, and mandate the government to begin forming the

Ukrainian armed forces. Transforming the 800,000-strong force into Ukrainian armed forces required a significant commitment (Scheda, Shevchuk & Pokotylo, 2021, pp. 97–98).

According to Wilk (2017, pp. 8–11), the legacy of the USSR shaped most aspects of the Ukrainian Armed Forces (ZSU), from its command culture and operational doctrine to its equipment stocks and institutional memory. Although the Soviet weapon stocks were divided in 1992, Ukraine officially abstained from being a nuclear power, and the Black Fleet was divided in 1997, Ukraine's armed forces remained materially and doctrinally reliant on Russia. In particular, logistics and training, spare parts, technical documentation, and high-level military education depended on Russian support. Ukraine also lacked the full domestic capability to support or modernize its Soviet-era equipment without Russian cooperation. The military organization also retained mental ties to the Soviet model. ZSU's only consistent reform prior to 2014 had been downsizing, Wilk finds. Reform attempts by modernization or professionalization were sparse and underfunded, with defence spending accounting for around one per cent of the GDP prior to 2014. For years, the structure of the ZSU remained as if the military forces in Ukraine still were constituting the second echelon of the Soviet forces attacking NATO. The Kyiv, Prykarpattia, and Odesa military districts functioned as the main administrative and command units, as if the main threat lay in the west. Troops were moved to where they were most needed only in the face of the first Russian invasion in 2014.

Under any circumstances, those in power in Ukraine would have to cut the military budget due to the financial problems of Ukraine during the first decade of independence. In the 1990s, Ukraine experienced a deep economic recession. GDP per capita (in PPP, at 2011 constant prices) declined from about 9,500 USD in 1991 to 4,500 USD in 1999 – over 47 per cent (Wisła et al., 2020, p. 41). There was also no unity as to the potential threat among the decision makers, and consequently, a tendency among politicians to downsize the force and sell off Soviet era materiel for quick gains. The financial challenges were exacerbated by systemic political disagreement as to the outlook, reforms, and the use of the armed forces. Political parties in Ukraine were divided over defence priorities. The national-democratic forces of the 1990s, such as Rukh and its political descendants, advocated a pro-Western security orientation, the need for cooperation with NATO, and a gradual departure from Soviet military structures. The left-wing and pro-Russian parties, including the Communist Party of Ukraine and the Socialist Party of Ukraine, opposed NATO integration and called for maintaining close military ties with Russia. Pro-European parties, such as Our Ukraine (led by Viktor Iushchenko, Ukraine's president in 2005–2010), increasingly promoted NATO integration, reflecting a broader national security shift. In 2008, the process resulted in Ukraine's NATO Membership Action Plan. During Viktor Ianukovych's presidency (2010–2014), the government took steps to downgrade NATO cooperation and strengthen military relations with Russia. The 2012 Military Doctrine reaffirmed non-alignment.

The 2014 Euromaidan Revolution and Russia's annexation of Crimea drastically altered political discourse on defence policy. Pro-European parties, including Petro Poroshenko's Bloc, pushed for rapid military modernization and revived Ukraine's NATO membership ambitions. The war in Donbas (2014–2022) forced Ukraine's leadership to rebuild its military, reversing years of underfunding. In 2015, Russia was officially recognized as the main threat in the National Security Strategy. The 2018 National Security Law formalized Ukraine's strategic course towards NATO and EU integration, a move backed by most pro-European parties and fiercely opposed by the remaining pro-Russian factions (Tkachuk, 2020, pp. 23–25).

Avtushenko (2019, p. 347) claims that underfunding of the Ukrainian Armed Forces during the first two decades of statehood brought about social tensions among soldiers, veterans, and their families, contributing to a considerable decline in the prestige of military service. In the mid-1990s, there was a wave of resignations among younger officers. Salaries were low – if paid at all. Valerii Zaluzhnyi (2024, p. 59), who would later command the Ukrainian Armed Forces during the first two years of Russia's full-scale invasion, recalls surviving on army food rations with his family, with virtually no pay in the late 1990s, relying on his wife's salary for cash. Most of the material and social protection structure eroded over time, such as health care for employees, veterans, military pensioners and their families, along with armed forces sanatoria, kindergartens and similar institutions. Material and moral incentives also weakened. The most pressing issue, housing, became a severe problem due to underfunding and, at times, corruption (Avtushenko, 2019, pp. 348–350).

Thus, the armed forces were subjected to significant cuts prior to 2014. The changes resulted in degrading fighting ability, social and moral unease in the ranks, and creeping status loss for servicemen and officers due to economic and social hardships due to their working and living conditions. The Russian occupation of Crimea and invasion of Donbas in 2014 brought about changes in the sphere of security thinking and changed policy when it came to the armed forces, whose upbuild now began, although from low levels. At the same time, similarly paradigmatic changes occurred within the sphere of memory and history policy.

The Soviet legacy has increasingly been seen as a problem in both society and the military. In recent years, however, issues linked to the totalitarian past have been more openly discussed and actively challenged. According to Ukrainian historian Oleksandr Hrytsenko (2017), during Kuchma's and Iushchenko's presidencies, Ukrainian memory politics began to diverge markedly from Russian narratives. At the same time, Presidents Kuchma and Ianukovich maintained ties to the Soviet past by attending Moscow's Great Patriotic War commemorations, resulting in a narrative that combined both national and Soviet elements. Under Ianukovich, there was an active push to integrate Soviet and Russian historical interpretations into Ukrainian narratives while simultaneously denouncing pro-Western Ukrainians. During Poroshenko's presidency, a decommunization programme was launched.

According to Riabenko and Kuzio, civil society groups, local councils, and nationalist organizations had already begun removing Soviet symbols by 2014, laying the groundwork for legal reforms the following year (Riabenko & Kuzio, 2020). Russia's annexation of Crimea and aggression in eastern Ukraine even prompted many Russian-speaking Ukrainians to question Soviet interpretations of the Great Patriotic War. The disintegration of pro-Russian political forces and the banning of the Communist Party in 2015 solidified this transformation in Ukraine's memory politics (Hrytsenko, 2017, pp. 266–272, 821–830, 1012–1016).

Additional momentum for the process of *decommunization* – as it was commonly dubbed – came from civil society mobilization, heightened patriotism in response to Russian aggression, the formation of volunteer battalions from EuroMaidan groups, and the active role of nationalist organizations on the ground. While western Ukraine had removed Lenin statues in the early 1990s, the Euromaidan period (2014–2015) saw similar actions in central and eastern regions, with the April 2015 decommunization laws accelerating the so-called “Leninopad” (Riabenko & Kuzio, 2020, pp. 72–75). Kulyk finds that the process of dismantling Communist-era monuments and changing street names contributed to tensions within Ukraine as to the interpretation of history. It was only the 2022 full-scale invasion that had a unifying effect. Viewed as unprovoked Russian aggression by an overwhelming majority of the population, it prompted stronger national identification and broader acceptance of previously contested elements of the national project (Kulyk, 2024, p. 306).

While the historical policy of Ukrainian presidents prior to 2014 differed in views on what constituted national history and heritage, it did not bring about any momentous changes in attitudes towards the Soviet legacy. However, the shock of Russian invasions of 2014 and 2022 brought about a policy that increasingly stressed the distinction between the Ukrainian and the Soviet, viewing the latter as more hostile than ever before during the Ukrainian independence.

Changes to Military Symbols 1991–2024

Uniforms, Flags, and Emblems

The development of Ukrainian military symbolism took place in the difficult context of transforming former Soviet Army units into the Armed Forces of Ukraine. As outlined above, Ukrainian society was facing a deep crisis at the time, something that was reflected in how the armed forces were managed. At the outset, uniforms remained Soviet, creating the problem that both those who swore allegiance to Ukraine and those who did not wore the same outfit. An all-Ukrainian competition for new uniforms was announced, but deepening economic difficulties made mass production impossible. As a temporary measure, existing uniforms were modified through changes in insignia and fittings, beginning with cockades and buttons. Projects for new insignia had been

completed by summer 1992. The first step of the implementation of changes was the replacement of buttons bearing the Soviet star with ones depicting the Ukrainian trident, along with the introduction of new cockades. In December 1992, the standard model of the general military emblem was presented, differing from the general emblem of the Soviet Army only in that the five-pointed star surrounded by oak leaves was replaced with the trident (Karpov, 2016, pp. 190–192).¹ These measures likely sought to balance the need for new symbols with the economic realities. The latter were the main contributing factor to the long life of the Soviet era *Butan* field uniforms, and its Ukrainian modification, *Dubok* (the name referring to its oak leaf camouflage), in the Armed Forces of Ukraine. In 2014, the new MM 14, a NATO-inspired field uniform, was introduced, its pixel camouflage bringing a definite break with Soviet era uniforms. (Volodymyr, 2023). In 2015, a whole new working and dress uniforms entered the service. Vitalii Khaidukevych, member of the commission on uniform design change, emphasized that “the Ukrainian army should not look like a remnant of the Soviet [army]”. In his view, most “post-Soviet” militaries resemble each other too closely, “like identical twins”, when it comes to uniforms and insignia. Therefore, radical changes undertaken in 2014–2015 were necessary (Baturin, 2015).

Slobodianiuk (2017, p. 78) claims that once Ukraine got its own armed forces, there was an urgent need to construct a national military identity, distinct from the Soviet heritage. He finds that this task was complicated by the lack of systematic state policy, the absence of regulatory documents, and the limited experience of Ukraine’s military-political leadership in matters of symbolism. Karpov (2016, pp. 166–167) suggests that the work of creating the symbolism proceeded slowly and lacked focus and proper organization. Unit commanders often took the initiative to design and produce their own emblems. However, the use of history was important from the outset. The Ministry of Defence commission selected crimson as the colour for the Ground Forces flag and the Battle Flag, in line with the traditions of banners from the Cossack era. The emphasis was placed on using the national coat of arms (the trident and blue-and-yellow colours), and the adaptation of historical military imagery, notably from the Ukrainian People’s Republic. This combination suggests a desire among the hierarchy to institutionalize a sense of national pride among the troops that until very recently were Soviet (Slobodianiuk, 2017, pp. 79–80).

The main emblem of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, approved in 1992, became the model of the emblems of the Ministry of Defence, the General Staff, and the different branches of the Armed Forces. The Military Heraldry Service was guided by the principle of continuity with the historical traditions of the Ukrainian military. The symbol was based on a crimson cross with equal, widening arms. This cross, often referred to as “Cossack”, “steppe”, or “Zaporizhian”, is frequently found on Cossack banners of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, on the coats of arms of the officer elite, and on old seals. The crimson colour is closely associated in popular memory with the Zaporizhian martial tradition. The cross and its colour is supposed to signify

the fidelity of today's Ukrainian army to the traditions of the defenders of the nation's freedom. The small State Coat of Arms of Ukraine (the golden trident in the middle of the cross) marks the readiness to defend independence and territorial integrity (Karpov, 2016, p. 180).

There were disagreements as to the influence that episodes from Ukrainian history should play in the development of military symbolism. For instance, when the General Staff officers' emblem with two crossed maces placed over a four-pointed star was presented, it employed the symbols of the Ukrainian General Staff of the time of Hetman Pavlo Skoropadskyi in 1918. However, the link to that historical period made the symbol too nationally loaded for most officers of the General Staff in the early 1990s. According to Karpov, they did not share a statehood-oriented ideology as they had served in Soviet Army staff positions. Thus, the symbols were abandoned (Karpov, 2014, p. 132). Eventually, the symbol reappeared on the emblem of the Ministry of Defence.

There were two main tendencies when it came to military heraldry in the early years of the Ukrainian statehood. The first was to explore Ukraine's history to identify the relevant military symbols. In a way, Karpov remarks, this process was typical of the wider process of state formation, when history was becoming an orientation point for the present. In emblem design, it meant that heraldry often incorporated historical symbols from the Cossack era, foremost the uprising led by Bohdan Khmelnytsky against the Polish Crown in mid-seventeenth century, and the Ukrainian independence struggles of 1917–1921.

The second tendency was based on the achievements of the Soviet school of design. This was expressed in mere modification of emblem shapes and the replacement of clearly Soviet attributes with ones symbolizing Ukraine while retaining the background and uniform. At the same time, the main factor influencing the design of emblems, cockades, and other uniform symbols was the line drawn between the distant historical past with the ongoing state-building in contemporary Ukraine (Karpov, 2014, pp. 133–134).

The emblem of the Ministry of Defence combines the Armed Forces symbol with golden crossed maces and an upward-pointed sword. During the struggle for independence (1917–1921), crossed maces appeared on generals' insignia in the Ukrainian Army and the Ukrainian Galician Army, as well as on staff badges. They continue to be used in badges of the Ministry of Defence, the General Staff, and certain corps and divisions. The maces symbolize the Ministry's political and administrative authority, while the sword represents combat readiness and military capability. The emblem of the General Staff depicts crossed swords, wings, and an anchor, symbolizing unified command of all branches of the Armed Forces. The service emblems combine the common Armed Forces symbol with branch-specific elements: crossed swords for the Ground Forces, stylized falcon wings with an upward-pointed sword for the Air Force, and crossed anchors for the Navy (Karpov, 2016, pp. 181–182). While retaining the historically loaded national traits, the symbols of the branches of the armed forces also reach out to the international military community, using generally acknowledged and recognizable symbols (swords, wings, and anchors).

In November 2000, the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine developed a Concept for the development of symbols, emblems, and banners of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and other military formations provided for by Ukrainian legislation. The concept aimed to strengthen public socio-political awareness and highlight the role of the armed forces and other military formations in state and society. It emphasized patriotic education, the restoration of national military traditions, and the continuity of defending the homeland. Additional objectives included enhancing the prestige of service, especially the officer corps, and shaping a credible and attractive image of the Armed Forces both domestically and internationally (Karpov, 2016, p. 173, 179). This work likely mirrors an attempt at improving the prestige of the armed forces in society and within the force itself.

Honorary Names of Military Units as a Mirror of Development of Military Symbols

Awarding honorary names for military units (and frequently, replacing them) has been an important part of defining the symbolic space of the Ukrainian armed forces. Masnenko & Prysiachniuk (2024, p. 6) find that fundamental changes when it comes to names of military formations started in 2014, after the war had begun. They claim that “a broad mental break-through” occurred when it came to the function of the armed forces and paramilitary formations, “their potential allies and real opponent”. A new historical culture took shape in the Ukrainian society (Masnenko & Prysiachniuk, 2024, p. 7). The conceptual changes brought a paradigm shift in the tradition of naming military units. “The factor of spilling of blood” was decisive, the authors maintain, as it provoked a suitable intellectual reaction in society to the challenges the Ukrainian state was facing (Masnenko & Prysiachniuk, 2024, p. 13).

For a considerable time, the names of military units prevailed that went back to Soviet times or reproduced Soviet understanding of the past and military splendour. The first Ukrainian names of units appeared during the time of Leonid Kravchuk as president, 1991–1994 (the frigate *Hetman Sakhaidachnyi*, or a military liceum named after “the Heroes of Kruty”). After the Black Sea Fleet was divided between Russia and Ukraine during the first presidential period of Leonid Kuchma, 1994–1999, numerous naval vessels were named after Ukrainian towns, several of which carried historically martial denominations. Kuchma’s second presidential period (1999–2005) saw attempts at state regulations of the names of military units. Two decrees were issued in late 2000, regulating the naming of units and military educational institutions. According to the authors of the article, changes were introduced, but only in minuscule doses, “under full domination of the Soviet tradition”. For instance, a new name, “Prince Danylo Halytskyi” (Danylo Romanovych, head of the Galician-Volynian principality in the thirteenth century) was added to the perfectly Soviet name of “24. Mechanized Iron Division of Samara-Ulianovsk Berdychiv, awarded with the Order of October Revolution, thrice the Order of

the Red Banner, the orders of Suvorov and Bohdan Khmelnytskyi” (Masnenko & Prysiachniuk, 2024, p. 10). The added name built a continuity from the Soviet times, the full name referring both to combat operations, martial qualities, and communist and military awards. The name of Bohdan Khmelnytskyi, head of the Zaporizhzhian Host in the mid-seventeenth century, was added to “The Military twice Red Banner Institute of Rocket Troops and Artillery” at Sumy University. One also finds the name of a Soviet-Ukrainian personage, such as the Ukraine-born rocket scientist Koroliov, on Kuchma’s naming list (Masnenko & Prysiachniuk, 2024, p. 11). From the above, one finds that there was time for introducing the first historical figures, such as Hetman Petro Sakhaidachnyi (died 1622) and cadets who took up arms against the Bolshevik forces in 1919 (“The Heroes of Kruty”). This was followed by the introduction of many Ukrainian town names once the Black Sea Fleet had been divided, suggesting a unity of Ukraine by recounting the names of renowned towns (in Ukrainian, a symbolic act in the 1990s when Ukrainian struggled as an official language). At the same time, there was a tendency towards hybrid forms of names where the Soviet heritage and Ukrainian innovation were combined. The cases of Koroliov and Kozhedub suggest that to the decision makers, the Soviet and Ukrainian pasts were not mutually exclusive. Rather, the Ukrainian state appears to have been viewed as a historical extension of the Soviet Union (which it in fact was as a *legacy state*) and characterized by both Ukrainian and Soviet features. A series of formative events – 1991’s declaration of independence, the referendum that confirmed it, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union – did not bring about radical change.

This interpretation may be further strengthened by the policy during the presidency of Viktor Iushchenko. He has often been associated with his supposedly radical memory politics. However, Masnenko and Prysiachniuk find that the Soviet-inspired sphere of the names of military units remained largely unaffected, but in a few cases. Kharkiv Aviation University was named after (the Air Marshall) Ivan Kozhedub, while three units from regiment to brigade level were named after Petro Franko (one of the military leaders of the Ukrainian Galician Army in 1918–1919), Bohdan Khmelnytskyi, and Ivan Vykhovskiy (one of the successors of Khmelnytsky in the 1650s), respectively. While introducing names from pre-Soviet Ukrainian history, such as those of the two Cossack military-political commanders, Iushchenko – at least on paper – would still bring up personages from the Soviet past.

Viktor Ianukovych kept this tradition in place, taking “a Great Patriotic War turn”. Notably, he named the National Defence University of Ukraine after Ivan Cherniakhovskiy, a Ukraine-born Soviet general who was killed in East Prussia in 1945, a decree later rolled back by Volodymyr Zelensky a year into the full-scale Russian invasion in 2023 (Masnenko & Prysiachniuk, 2024, p. 11). Ianukovych largely framed Ukraine’s history and heritage within the context of “shared history” with Russia, particularly the glorification of the “Great Patriotic War”, and other themes potentially reinforcing ties with the eastern neighbour (Hrytsenko, 2017, p. 1034).

Overall, prior to the end of 2022, Masnenko and Prysiachniuk find several main tendencies when it comes to awarding military units and institutions honorary names. Most honorary names denoting persons (81 per cent) refer to developments before 1991, while 19 per cent refer to contemporary developments, notably the defence of the Ukrainian state since 2014. Seven persons are identified as belonging to the Soviet tradition (Masnenko & Prysiachniuk, 2024, p. 15). One of those whom the authors have in mind is likely the aviation constructor Oleg Antonov, born in Siberia, being a rare case of being Soviet, ethnically Russian, and born in the Russian SSR. His merit apart is having been a world-renowned aviation constructor who for 30 years worked in the Ukrainian SSR. Consequently, the 15th Transport Aviation Brigade that uses Antonov planes was named after him – in 2018 (Moroz, 2023, p. 25).

A considerable part of the honorary names of military units is covered by names referring to regions and toponyms. These are supposed to invoke pride in the region of a particular unit's dislocation or roots, for instance, "128th Separate Mountain Assault Transcarpathian Brigade" or "25th Separate Airborne Dnipro Brigade" (Masnenko & Prysiachniuk, 2024, p. 16). In the case of honorary names, one finds a long transitional or "hybrid" phase, with Soviet names being deposed starting in 2014, while a handful have been retained, notably of those with Ukrainian origins who reached the highest echelons of the Soviet military, but also those who had made a great international name while working in the Ukrainian SSR (Oleg Antonov).

Heralding the New Times: The Changing Calendar of National Military Holidays

A symbolic area that interweaves history and tradition is that of national military holidays. Military holidays of branches or combat arms of the armed forces were publicly celebrated and widely reported in the media before the full-scale invasion in 2022. Under more peaceful conditions, celebrations took place on various levels all over Ukraine, making military holidays a nexus of pride in the armed forces on state, regional, and local levels (Lototska, 2021). The sphere of military holidays has undergone considerable changes, gaining pace and depth since 2014. One may say that the development went from mimicking Soviet and Russian mnemonic policies to the rapid creation of a calendar based on experiences – historical and contemporary, of the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

An interesting example is the Day of the Defender of Fatherland Day on February 23, celebrating the creation of the Red Army in 1918. In 1991, this holiday was excluded from the list of public holidays in Ukraine, but became a public holiday again in 1999 during Leonid Kuchma's presidency. According to Verbytska, this points to "imitation and re-appropriation by the Ukrainian government at that time of some elements of the Russian Federation's memory policy" (Verbytska et al., 2019, p. 41). The example fits the "hybrid" memory and naming policies of the time of Leonid Kuchma as president, and accounts for conceptual dependence on the former metropolis.

The year 2014 was one of decisive changes to the calendar of military holidays in Ukraine. Within a few years, a whole new spectrum of holidays was in place, reflecting Ukrainian history and the contemporary experience of battle engagement and losses during the campaigns against Russian and separatist forces in Donbas. The list of holidays starts with 20th January, commemorating defenders of the Donetsk Airport in 2014–2015, and continues with the Day of the Foreign Intelligence Service of Ukraine, referring to the creation of a similar structure in 1919. The majority of the holidays, however, refer to contemporary developments, such as the Day of the Ukrainian Volunteer, the Day of the Territorial Defence, the days of the International Peace Keepers and of the Ukrainian Peacekeepers on 29 May and 15 July, respectively, or the Feast of the Protective Veil constituting the Day of the Defenders and Defendresses of Ukraine on 1 October. The last-mentioned goes back to the Cossack tradition of viewing the Virgin Mary as the protector of the Zaporozhian Host – a rare reference to early modern times, with the notable exception of the Day of the Infantry (May 6), commemorating the victory of the Zaporizhian Host under Bohdan Khmelnytsky over a force of the Polish Crown (Panasiuk, 2024). The holidays dedicated to peacekeeping refers both to the international context and experience of many international missions, of which Ukrainian contingents have been a part of since 1992, and the Ukrainian participants over the time of independence.

The calendar of military holidays evolved from being shaped by Soviet and Russian traditions to reflecting the realities of independent Ukraine's struggles with Russia, with vignettes referring to early modern history.

Symbols of Change: From Soviet Legacy to National Military Culture

A new Ukrainian military culture, almost devoid of Soviet elements, was possible only once the frame of what constitutes Ukrainian history had been expanded to encompass history from the times of Kyivan Rus to struggles for independence in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The process of constructing the tools for creating and decoding the new military symbolism lasted over 30 years. The introduction of Ukrainian military symbols started in the months following the independence in August 1991. Its main characteristic was the replacement of symbols of a defunct state, the Soviet Union. Introduction of new symbols was hampered by a lack of funding and agreement as to what symbols should be chosen from the historical depository, itself depending on undecidedness as to the geopolitical course of Ukraine, defence priorities due to economic challenges, and institutional conservatism among parts of the officer corps shaped by the Soviet experience.

The Ukrainian case demonstrates how military culture echoes broader social and political transformations. Finlan defines military culture as “the human dimension of the armed forces”, encompassing symbols, practices, and beliefs that sustain identity while being inseparable from society. The changing emblems, unit names, and holidays of the Armed Forces since 1991 mirrored both the fragility of the post-Soviet state and its subsequent consolidation under pressure from Russia, starting in 2014.

Soviet stars on buttons gave way to tridents, while uniforms and insignia often retained Soviet or Soviet-inspired design. These partial modifications created an impression of continuity in the absence of resources and a clear state policy. However, the introduction of Cossack crosses, crimson colours, and references to the Ukrainian People's Republic shows how the armed forces mined the past for usable symbols. Here, Karlsson's concept of the *uses of history* helps explain the process. The appeal to early modern and independence struggle traditions fulfilled an *existential use* of history, orienting the military in the uncertain post-Soviet present of the 1990s, when Ukraine was facing economic and social collapse, the political infighting of the first decade and a half of the twenty-first century, and finally, the invasions of 2014 and 2022. It was *moral*, as it turned to parts of Ukrainian history previously forbidden to study and discuss, such as the Kruty cadets or Hetman Skoropadskyi, but also included historical symbols such as the trident of the blue-yellow flag. The uses of history were also *ideological*, as they were shaped in competition between various political forces, providing state and military leaders with legitimizing narratives for independence and sovereignty, being at odds with the traditional pro-Soviet (and increasingly so, pro-Russian) vision of the past, and consequently, the future.

Masnenko and Prysiazhniuk argue that the "factor of spilled blood" produced a mental breakthrough in Ukrainian society starting in 2014. From the perspective of military culture, the introduction of new honorary names of units connected present sacrifices to historical struggles by embedding soldiers' experiences within a national narrative going back to the times of Kyivan Rus. This process exemplifies Finlan's argument that formative events leave lasting imprints on military institutions. However, in Ukraine, the scale of the 2014 and 2022 changes suggests Reznikova's stronger category of "strategic shock" is more accurate. These shocks transformed national strategy, military doctrine, and readiness, while reshaping the symbolic landscape of the armed forces. The process of modifying and changing honorary names can be interpreted within Hobsbawm's concept of "invented traditions". Newly added or thoroughly changed names called for new celebrative rituals that eventually would enter the information spaces. The same applies to the introduction of a new military holiday calendar. That the strategic shocks of 2014 and 2022 accelerated these developments only strengthens Hobsbawm's thesis that traditions are often constructed in periods of rapid change and considerable challenges to the prevailing order, in order to fill gaps left by the collapse of older frameworks. Those frameworks proved to be predominantly of a mental nature; a trickle of criticism towards Russia and the Soviet past it has glorified had turned into a flood.

The reorientation of the military holiday calendar demonstrates the interplay of politics, society, and armed forces, likely characteristic of the new military culture in the making. The replacement of Soviet dates such as February 23 with the Day of the Defenders and Defendresses of Ukraine (October 1) shows how history has been harnessed to express new values. Linking the holiday to the Cossack cult of the Virgin Mary as protector demonstrates the layering of existential,

moral, and ideological uses of history in Karlsson's sense. It also underscores the Hobsbawmian concept of the invention of tradition, as new holidays linked to different past experiences were added, and old ones removed. These changes shaped celebrations on various levels all over Ukraine; branches of services, types of services, holidays, memorializing events, state, regional, and local.

The Ukrainian case also offers comparative insights. While many Western European militaries developed their cultures over four to five centuries (notably Denmark, Great Britain (Scottish and English legacy), France, the Netherlands, Spain, and Sweden), Ukraine's armed forces developed a symbolic identity within a few decades, under conditions of the systemic crisis of the 1990s and war. Ukraine illustrates how strategic shocks can accelerate the evolution of military culture, within the sphere of military symbolism, the invention of traditions, and uses of history. The period from 2014 to the present could also serve as a platform for future studies of how armed forces reinvent themselves conceptually, as well as in terms of modernizing and improvising materiel during an existential war.

Military Ukrainian symbols – particularly such as honorary names of military units – retained “hybrid” features, referring to both Ukrainian and Soviet history. To many contemporaries within the state and military structures, such separation seemed superficial for a considerable time after the independence. Thus, Ukrainian and Soviet were not necessarily seen as mutually exclusive. In fact, few Soviet Ukrainian elements still remain (Soviet commanders of Ukrainian origin, internationally acknowledged people), raising a question of whether the making of symbolic space and history uses has passed the transitional phase. This suggests a degree of inclusiveness on the part of the reformers, and likely an acknowledgement that the Soviet experience, for the foreseeable future, will be a part of the Ukrainian collective one.

Conclusion

The chapter examined Ukraine's transformation of military culture and symbolism from 1991 to 2024, showing that Soviet legacies initially dominated emblems, uniforms, unit names, and holidays but were gradually reframed towards distinct national symbols. It shows how economic constraints, institutional conservatism, and political and societal divisions slowed change, while the strategic shocks of Russia's invasions of 2014 and 2022 accelerated reform. Emblems shifted from Soviet stars to tridents and Cossack crosses; uniforms moved from Soviet-style to NATO-inspired pixelated camouflages; honorary unit names evolved from Soviet and hybrid forms towards Ukrainian historical figures and toponyms. The military holiday calendar was reoriented from Soviet dates to commemorations rooted in contemporary combat experience and national traditions. The chapter maintains that these processes involved existential, moral, and ideological uses of history, the gradual introduction of new traditions, generating an ever-evolving military symbolic space where Ukrainian and Soviet symbols still co-exist side-by-side.

Note

1 Karpov, UZ, 190–192.

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