

Military identifying marks as propaganda tools

“The strength is in the truth”

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Resumé

Under invasionen i Ukraina, i syfte att att skilja sina egna styrkor från fiendens, använder sig de ryska trupperna av flera identifieringsmärken. Två av dessa är symbolerna Z och V. I artikeln visas hur de militära identifierings- och igenkänningsmärkena, som varit framtagna av strikt praktiska skäl, har förlorat sina ursprungliga betydelser och på kort tid blivit starkt laddade krigsstödssymboler.

THE INVASION OF Russian troops in Ukraine gave rise to several new symbols which are used by the Russian government as a propaganda tools and enjoyed popularity among the war-supporters both in Russia and abroad. These symbols have originated from the marking of Russian military vehicles and equipment used by Russian troops deployed in military operations in Ukraine. This kind of marking is helpful to be able to distinguish one's own task forces from the enemy forces, which is really a relevant question when both sides, the Russian and the Ukrainian, are using almost the same models of military vehicles. The marking of military equipment with this kind of identifying marks is a pretty simple measure to avoid friendly fire. It has to be mentioned that the similar system of identification and recognition of its own forces is used both by Russian, and Ukrainian troopers (more about this kind of individual recognition marks see below).

Z and V as identifying marks

Before and during intervention the Russian military forces used several different identifying marks on their military vehicles and equipment. Those marks were painted with white paint and their looks were based on images of the Latin alphabet letters. According to Ukrainian sources the following letters are used by Russian military: Z, Z enclosed in square, O, V, X and A (Сухопутні війська ЗС України 2022). The sources on the Ukrainian Ground forces interpreted them as the marks used to distinguish different task forces from one another. According to the Ukrainian Ground forces the meaning of these marks is the following: Z – military forces coming from East Russia; \square – military forces coming from Crimea; O – military forces coming from Belarus; V – marines; X – Chechens forces; A – Special forces (Сухопутні війська ЗС України 2022). It should be mentioned that there were also

Russian military vehicles marked with the identifying mark / observed in Ukraine.

It has to be mentioned that this kind of interpretation of Russian marks is not correct. For example, there are numerous photos and videos which show Chechens troupers deployed by Russia using V marks on their military vehicles and equipment. Even information about other identification and recognition marks providing by Ukrainian military does not correspond to reality. Probably, the same grade of reliability has a version about Z and V marks as a distinguishing sign used during the joint Russian-Belarusian military exercises 2022 which interpreted as “Zapad” (West) and “Vostok” (East), marks made to distinguish two groups of a conditional enemy troops (western and eastern). It is worth noticing that the information above was published on the several Russian websites just one day before the invasion (e.g. ШИШКИН 2022), and in the light of this fact can be seen as a part of disinformation campaign. Another version explains the letter-marks on Russian vehicles as a sign showing where departments using those marks are supposed to advance. Even this version seems to be incorrect, because some kind of demasking of one’s own intentions like this should be both unlikely and ignorant.

Z and V as symbols of war-support

As shown above, it seems to be not possible to explain those marks origin and original meanings. However, from all Russian identification and recognition marks mentioned above, the most commonly seen, and the most attention-grabbing, marks became the Z and V letters. In the light of this fact, it seems not to be surprising that only those letters had been adopted by Russian propaganda.

Approximately one week after beginning of the invasion, the Russian Ministry of Defense explained on its Instagram account the meanings of these letters. According to the Ministry, letter Z stands for slogan: «За победу» (“Za pobedu” – “For Victory”) and V stands for slogans «Сила в правде» (“Sila v Pravde” – “The strength is in the truth”) and «Задача будет выполнена». (“Zadacha budet vypolnena” – “The task will be completed”) (МАКСИМОВА 2022). The use of Z and V letters as propaganda tools became a real success. These identifying marks quickly lost their practical significance and became the strong emotionally charged symbols used to show support for current military intervention which became named by state-owned TV channel RT as “Operation Z” (RT 2022). It seems that their symbolical meanings had forced out their practical significance even in the Russian military forces deployed in Ukraine which manifests itself by usage of these marks on almost all vehicles which were unmarked before (ПИНЧУК 2022).

Beside the slogans mentioned above, the Russian Ministry of Defense launched several other slogans playing with the meaning of Z and V letters. On the Instagram account of the Ministry can be found posters with following slogans: “За мир” (“Za mir” – “For peace”), “За правду” (“Za pravdu” – “For truth”), “Заканчиваем войны” (“Zakanchivaem vojny” – “We end the wars”), “ЗаПацаноV” (“Za pacanov” – “For guys”), “Vперед, парни” (“Vpered, parni” – “Go ahead guys”), “V небе тоже мы” (“V nebe tozhe my” – “We are in the sky, too”) and so on (Минобороны России 2022).

The usage of Z and V letters ceased quickly to be the prerogative of the Ministry of Defense and became the commonly accepted way for the general public to show their support for the Russian state, and its domes-

tic and foreign policy. In the presentation below only a few examples of this kind of symbol usage are mentioned. In different regions of Russia flash mobs took place when participants lined up in the form of letter Z. The online-edition SOTA (2022) published an instruction book on propaganda of the army and the benefits of sanctions for the Russian Federation with tips about organization of such actions. In this manual, SOTA propagated for usage of the Z letter and several hashtags – “ЗаРоссию” (“Za Rossiju” – “For Russia”), “ЗаНаших” (“Za nashih” – “For ours”), “ЗаПутина” (“Za Putina” – “For Putin”), “СвоихНеБросаем” (“Svoih ne brosaem” – “We don’t leave ours”). As it is seen above, three of these hashtags are based on use of the Z symbol. At the same time, several online stores began to sell clothes with V and Z marks. In several cases of visual representation these symbols became incorporated with the Saint George ribbon – another symbol with extremely strong emotional charge.

The Saint George ribbon

As it has been stated earlier, both Russian and Ukrainian armies actively use the system of identification and recognition of its own troops. The Ukrainians use for this purpose yellow or blue brassards at least since spring 2014 when it became necessary to distinguish their own military personal from the militant separatists on the East Ukraine. The Russian military forces in its turn wear the white brassards most often around left arm and right thigh. These kinds of identification marks were also used by Russian troops, (at least) since the Battle of Tskhinvali in August 2008 where it was worn simultaneously on both arms. At the same time Russian troopers in Ukraine also use, for the same purpose, the red brassards

and the Saint George ribbon (black-orange-black-orange-black ribbon). In the latter case the ribbons are often placed around the helmets, and along the jacket’s sleeves.

The Saint George ribbons modern history begun on April 14, 2005 when a celebratory action called “Георгиевская ленточка” (“Georgievskaja lentochka” – “The Saint George ribbon”) was launched (Oushakine 2013, 284). In the Russian state-owned information-agency’s RIA-Novosti’s press release, it was explained that the goal of the action was to mark an “attitude toward the celebration of the great Victory” and (inter alia) mark “feelings of pride and recognition of the colossal role” Russia (in origin text “our country”) “played in fighting global fascism and in liberating Europe during the Second World War” (ibid., and. РИА Новости 2005). The commemorative aspect of the ribbon expanded further, when it began to be used as an incorporated part of the Russian military vehicles mark on the Victory Day Parade several years later.

The Saint George ribbon’s celebratory action can be seen as a part of construction of the Russian politic of memory with its weight point on the narrative of the great Victory in the Great Patriotic War. This historical event, and the Russian’s citizens’ attitude towards it, is the only one of Russian’s historical events which survived during the Russian’s identity crises of 1990:s, and which still has a power to unite people around it. Probably, the attitude toward the Great Patriotic War is the only one common value for almost all of Russia’s population, and it is not surprising that just this historical event became a cornerstone in the new Russian ideology, which began to be crystallized and fill the ideological vacuum during Putin years as president of the Russia. Oushakine (2013:287) points out that the Saint George ribbon’s celebratory action was “Accompanied by two main

slogans "My grandpa's victory – is my victory!" (Pobeda deda – moia pobeda!) and "I remember it! I am proud of it!" (Ia pomniu! Ia gorzhus'!)" which "was aimed at marking a socio-symbolic community that was united not so much by a shared experience, as by a newly learned vocabulary of public gestures".

At the same time the ribbon was "a mnemonic object that has little known history of its own but helps to manifest a certain link with history" (Oushakine 2013, 286). It could not suggest "any clear modality of its reading" and was unable to "produce or sustain a narrative of its own" (ibid., s. 287). Because of what is mentioned above, the ribbon had to borrow the narratives of someone else's (ibid., s. 288). Oushakine asserts that the ribbon's symbolic vacuity required a meaningful context, which was found in its usage in the role of "connecting link that strung together other people's stories" (ibid.).

However, the ribbon's symbolic meaning expanded over time and began to refer not only to the great historical event of the Great Patriotic War, but even to the Russian World concept and its dramatic present. This new content was added to the ribbon's symbolic meaning when it began to be used by Anti-Maidan movement in East Ukraine on the beginning of 2014. The logic of radical-conservative patriotism leads to transformation of the space-time continuum. Time changes its course and instead of linear direction begins to go sunward, constantly, as in the Divine Liturgy, reproducing the same events again and again (Iserell 2021, 42). According to this kind of time perception, which is deeply based on the Orthodox thoughts, the contemporary events are not something new. On the contrary, they are just a recurrence of the events of the past. Time goes in circles. Only details change but the essence remain

the same – the present wars and conflicts are just a continuation of the previous.

If this logic applied to the situation in Ukraine, the Kremlin interpreted it in the terms of the eternal confrontation of the civilizations. The new Ukraine's government was defined as a fascistic one, which not only challenged Russia's security, but even posed a threat to the whole Russian World. Because of the Saint George ribbon's strong association with fighting against global fascism its symbolic content gradually changed – instead of being the commemorative symbol, the ribbon became the symbol of the Russian World's resistance against the "world's fascism". This content became stronger when the former Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) officer Igor Girkin (Strelkov) went into East Ukraine with his squad and began to use the ribbon as the mark of belonging to his unit (Later the Saint George ribbon became incorporated on the emblem of "Народное ополчение Донбасса" – "Narodnoe opolchenie Donbassa" / "People's militia of Donbass").

Even the official ban of the ribbon as such, countries such as Ukraine (Радио Свобода 2017) and Latvia (Spalvēns 2021) (which regarded by Kremlin as fascistic), strengthened this approach. At the same time, the street harassment of Anti-Maidan supporters who were wearing the ribbon, which was retranslated by the state-own Russian medias, gave this symbol almost sacral status and sanctified it through their sacrifice and martyrdom.¹ In this way the Saint George ribbon was transformed into some kind of symbol of confession of faith. The ribbon, like the Christian's cross during different periods of Persecution of Christians, became in the minds of the Russians the symbol which people could die for.

Z and V letters and their fusion with The Saint George ribbon

Looking at the visual representation of the Z and V symbols it is not possible to neglect that on some of them, letters are made in the Saint George ribbon's colors and on others they are white. Even if white brassards are used by Russian troops to distinguish their own soldiers from Ukrainians, it seems to be less likely that this color was chosen as visual representation of the symbols mentioned above. Most probably the white color in this case was chosen without any ideological references.

It is really interesting that the Z symbol and the Saint George ribbon are being used on posters together with two different contents: referring to the concept of the Great Patriotic War, and struggle against global fascism (on the first case), and referring to the concept of Katechon (on the second case). The first one use slogan «За победу» (“Za pobedu” – “For Victory”) and depicts letter Z made of the Saint George ribbon. The posters' backgrounds consist of two parts – duotone photography which depicts Russian's soldiers of WWII period (entering into the combat or marching in the Victory parade with the captured Germans banners) and colour photography depicting modern Russian soldiers and military vehicles. In such a manner, through usage of collage consisting of archive and modern photos, strengthened the connection between the Great Patriotic War and ongoing intervention in Ukraine – narrative which Kremlin uses to justify its actions.

“The strength is in the truth” and the concept of Katechon

Most of the posters with V symbol quote the well-known quotation from Aleksei

Balabanov's crime film «Брат 2» (“Brat 2” – “Brother 2”): «Сила в правде» (“Sila v Pravde” – “The strength is in the truth”). This iconic film from 2000 reflects a growing sense of patriotism and on a remarkable intuitive way through its main character Danila Bagrov who embodies the concept of Katechon and retranslates the thesis about protection of Russian people everywhere, regardless of in which country they actually live (Engström 2021).² The concept of Katechon became one of the most significant concepts which the Russian government took into service during the conservative turn, and which is being used to justify its domestic and international political decisions. It seems interesting to mention that “Brat 2”, which was criticized for its Russian-centrism and nationalistic character, was banned in Ukraine as an artwork which contain scenes that humiliate Ukrainians on the basis of their nationality (TCH 2015).

In this way (as it has been shown above) the Z and V letters in the short term have been transformed, from strictly practical significant military identification and recognition marks, into the strong emotionally charged symbols of war-support. In their new meaning they become these symbols, incorporated with other significant symbols and include in their concept the main significant and actual concepts which create a modern Russian political discourse. The case above represents a very interesting example when an emblem, (namely the sign without any kind of symbolical meaning), became a powerful political symbol which created debate and probably will be criminalized in the several European countries.

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Notes

1. e.g. Аргументы МД 2014, Таймер 2015, Таймер 2014, Перший Козацький 2016.
2. Katechon (from Greek: "ὁ κατέχων", – "the one who withholds") is a cultural and political ideology which was constructed from a theological concept initially and is used in the right-wing circles of intellectuals as the basis of the Russia new state ideology, foreign policy and security policy. The "conservative turn" in Russian politics is the result of a return to precisely this ideology. The idea of Russia as a Katechon is directly related to national security and defense policy. It is used as an ideological basis for a new wave of militarization and anti-Western sentiment, as well as for legitimizing Russia's actions during the Ukrainian crisis. More about Katechon read in: Engström, Maria: *Contemporary Russian messianism and new Russian foreign policy*, Contemporary Security Policy, 35(3), 2014, pp. 356-379.