

**MILITARY UNITS AND SYMBOLISM:
UTILIZATION OF IMAGERY FROM MEDIEVAL RUS
IN THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR**

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Abstract. The concept of Rus holds significant relevance in the context of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war, particularly when examining the military memory of Ukrainians. This paper aims to analyze the significance of Rus in Ukrainian military memory, as reflected in the names of modern military units. The current names of individual Ukrainian brigades are intricately linked to important figures from medieval Rus and Lithuania. Despite the majority of units being named after figures from the Cossack era or individuals associated with the Liberation struggles of 1917–1921, the inclusion of references to the princely period serves to evoke military pride. Russia’s narrative revolves around the Soviet concept of the Great Patriotic War, emphasizing figures from medieval times without delving deeply into their ties to Rus. The conclusions highlight a distinctive precedent in terms of divergent memory politics, showcasing the Ukrainian perspective’s active exploration of Rus’ past as pivotal in Ukrainian statehood.

Keywords: Medieval times, Rus, Russian-Ukrainian war, historical memory, propaganda, military units

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3176/tr.2024.3.05>

Received 25 March 2024, accepted 16 July 2024, printed and available online 10 September 2024

1. Introduction

Manipulations with history are a common tool for totalitarian states. By employing various technologies, only certain facts, events, and personalities deemed favorable to the agenda of those in power are highlighted, while others are omitted. This selective approach allows for the implantation of curated ‘knowledge’ into the minds of citizens, which are planned constructs distorting the context of historical development. Such manipulations further restrict scientific discourse, hindering the free exchange of ideas overall. The contemporary Russian-Ukrainian war has brought to the forefront longstanding issues inherent in Russian-Ukrainian relations. The roots of these issues lie in shared chapters of the past, wherein the Ukrainian side was primarily a part of the Russian autocracy of the White empire of the Romanovs or the Red Bolsheviks’ empire. By leveraging this status and utilizing preexisting historiographical clichés, modern Russian political elites operate with predetermined biased assessments, which, if desired, can be applied to other parts of former Russian territories, such as Kazakhstan, Sakartvelo (Georgia), Moldova, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and so forth. The use of such ‘historical memory’ for foreign policy goals and within a militarized context can become a destructive trend, actively employed to fuel hybrid conflicts.

Any period, even one chronologically distant from the 21st century, can serve as a weapon for propagandists. As demonstrated by the contemporary Ukrainian experience, medieval times are an extremely important link in historical development, as they involve complex elements of state-building processes. Rus, or Kiyvan Rus, has long been considered the ‘cradle of three fraternal nations’: Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusians. This ideological stamp particularly flourished during the Soviet totalitarian era, although similar approaches were emphasized during the existence of the Romanov empire. Since 1991 and the collapse of the USSR, a scientific understanding of the issue of the existence and functioning of Rus has gradually solidified (Hurska and Parshyn 2023). Subsequent Russian appeals to authoritarianism and calls from Moscow elites to restore the former Soviet empire have influenced the perception of new dimensions of the myth of the ‘cradle of fraternal nations’. However, Ukrainian society by that time had already formed its own perception of the past of Rus, which had a distinctly Ukrainian-centric character. Thanks to scholarly research, widespread dissemination through the media, school and university history programs an image of the state centered in Kyiv, with a significant role of other princely centers (Chernihiv, Galich, Pereyaslav, Lutsk, etc.), and a list of prominent figures who left their mark on European history has been formed. It is not perhaps surprising that this potential was utilized against the Russian side during the outbreak of armed aggression in 2014–2023 – to restore military traditions and historical memory among Ukrainians.

The researchers partially addressed the proposed topic. In particular, important studies devoted to the past of Rus can be singled out. Mykhailo Hrushevsky (1866–1934) developed an extensive storyline detailing the historical trajectory of the Ukrainian people, covering its origins up to the termination of statehood in the 14th

century. This analysis delves into a history of the rise of the Galician-Volhynian state and the expansion of Tatar (Mongol) dominion over Ukrainian regions (Hrushevsky 2016). The military capabilities of Rus'ian boyars and princes were examined by Leontii Voitovych (Voitovych 2015). Furthermore, this scholar delved into the question of the ethnogenesis of the Slavs, tracing their origins from the advent of the Indo-European race in Europe to the formation of Slavic tribal unions and the subsequent establishment of early military-governmental state (Voitovych 2020). Nazarii Khrystan extensively explored the role and influence of Prince and King Danylo Romanovych on the Ukrainian intellectual atmosphere in Galicia (Khrystan 2023). Researchers also analyzed the scientific issue of using historical memory in the Russian-Ukrainian war. For example, Yaroslav Zatylyuk examined the main themes and plots of the Russian-Ukrainian 'war' for the 'Rus heritage.' The author focused on analyzing the period of conflict arising from Russia's desire to control the cultural and historical heritage of Rus (Zatylyuk 2022). His work contains valuable references for further research on this topic. Alla Kyrydon and Serhiy Troyan provided a comprehensive analysis of the underlying factors and reasons that led to the war between Russia and Ukraine during the period from 2014 to 2022 (Kyrydon and Troyan 2022). The authors began by outlining the historical, political, and social context that set the stage for the war. This included a discussion of Ukraine's historical relationship with Russia, the annexation of Crimea, and the subsequent unrest in eastern Ukraine. The researchers examined the complex interplay of factors such as nationalism, geopolitics, and internal divisions within Russia that contributed to the outbreak of hostilities. Serhii Plokyh examined the crisis in Ukraine that unfolded in 2014 within the context of historical events and relationships. He analyzed the sources and causes of the war between Ukraine and Russia, as well as its consequences and potential implications for the region and the world at large (Plokyh 2018). Furthermore, Leonid Zalizniak has elucidated the roots of the Russo-Ukrainian war from a civilizational perspective. The scholar identified that Ukrainian mentality has consistently gravitated towards Eurocentric values, whereas the Asian mentality of the Russian populace has never embraced European values and has harbored hostility towards their proponents (Zalizniak 2016). In this context, the work by Illia Parshyn and Khrystyna Mereniuk is significant. They demonstrated the adoption and dissemination of certain European knightly traditions in the Galician-Volynian State, while in the Suzdal lands from the 13th century, there was a partial assimilation of Mongolian customs (Parshyn and Mereniuk 2023). Myroslav Voloshchuk explored Russian-Polish political relations, emphasizing the significant alignment of Kyiv, Volyn, and Galician princes with the Polish Piasts (Voloshchuk 2019). Additionally, this scholar extensively analyzed Rus' relations with the Kingdom of Hungary based on a detailed genealogical analysis of *bellatores* (Voloshchuk 2014). Additionally, Illia Parshyn and Khrystyna Mereniuk demonstrated, using the example of medieval Lviv, that the city developed similarly to other European cities, characterized by its multiculturalism (Parshyn & Mereniuk 2022). Thus, contemporary historians have analyzed various aspects of the development of medieval Ukrainian lands, with the roots of the Russian-Ukrainian war in which the Rus heritage played a significant

role in ideological confrontation. However, the practical use of Rus' symbolism and imagery in the current military confrontation between Ukraine and Russia remains unexplored.

The appeal to the history of Rus is, therefore, an important object for study in view of the use of its image in the modern Russian-Ukrainian war. The purpose of the paper is to analyze concept of Rus as part of the military memory of Ukrainians during the Russian-Ukrainian war (based on the names of modern military units) and investigate Medieval Rus in contemporary Russian military propaganda.

2. Rus as part of the military memory of Ukrainians during the Russian-Ukrainian war (based on the names of modern military units)

Ukrainian and Russian national concepts seriously conflicted regarding the place of the princely Rus in their 'historical roots.' The Russian national narrative borrowed key concepts and the 'scheme' of imperial times, according to which the princely tradition from Kyiv was 're-based' to Suzdal, and from there – to Moscow rulers. During the Romanov Empire, the idea that after the Mongol conquest of Kyiv in 1240, perhaps, all of the population of the Middle Dnieper region 'emigrated' to the north was seriously discussed. However, this argument was refuted in publications as early as the 1850s (Zatyliuk 2022: 263). Mykhailo Maksymovych (1804–1873), a professor of botany at Moscow University, who became the first rector of Saint Volodymyr's University in Kyiv (Subtelny 2009: 229), actively opposed such a primitive view of the history of Rus and gradually turned into an active promoter of Ukrainian antiquity. Moreover, a definitive and substantiated answer to the question of the heirs of Rus was given by the Ukrainian historian with a worldwide reputation, Mykhailo Hrushevsky. In 1904, he published a short article titled "The Traditional Scheme of Russian History and the Problem of Rational Organization of the History of Eastern Slavs" (Hrushevsky 1965: 7-16), where he offered a scientific explanation of who actually owned Rus. He argued that the capital of Rus from the 10th century was located in modern Ukrainian lands, and in the 12th century, due to the political fragmentation of Rus, the princely tradition of power simultaneously shifted to the Vladimir-Suzdal Principality (in the present Vladimir region of the Russian Federation) and to Galych (Ivano-Frankivsk region, Ukraine). After this, these two branches – Russian and Ukrainian history respectively – diverged and no longer intersected (Zatyliuk 2022: 263). This thesis raised doubts about the established imperial stereotypes of the close relationship of 'fraternal peoples' – it turned out that these were two different nations that diverged already in the 12th century.

The period of Rus existence in modern Ukrainian discourse is extremely significant: the important role of Kyiv and other political centers in the 9th–15th centuries had a powerful influence on the cultural and political traditions of the further development of Ukrainian territories. In times of Russian invasion, there was a logical turn to this heritage as a time of independent development of Ukraine,

when local rulers had the opportunity to decide the fate of their possessions, to be active military players, and to conclude international agreements (in the medieval understanding of this word), including through marital diplomacy. Undoubtedly, Ukraine as a state did not exist during this time (although the word ‘Ukraine’ itself is known from chronicles from the second half of the 12th century), but the historical memory of Rus made it possible to consolidate Ukrainian society in the face of resistance against Russian forces and their collaborators.

The utilization of the ‘Rus heritage’ has left its mark on the formation of the renewed Armed Forces of Ukraine. The combination of military traditions from antiquity and modernity has enabled the revival of memories of renowned military figures, whose names began to be given to brigades of the Ukrainian army. At a round table held under the auspices of the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory on October 13, 2014, military experts, historians, journalists, and public figures gathered. During the discussion, they expressed the opinion about the necessity of cleansing the Ukrainian army from the vestiges of the Soviet past and emphasized the importance of shaping the national identity of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, taking into account Ukrainian military traditions. They primarily focused on figures from the Cossack era (hetmans Ivan Mazepa, Danylo Apostol, the last acting ataman of the Zaporizhian Sich Petro Kalnyshevsky, etc.) and Ukrainian War of Independence of 1917–1921. However, a significant aspect was the emphasis on the Kyivan-Rus heritage within the Ukrainian military.

The modern names of the units of the Armed Forces of Ukraine derive from various historical epochs. We have identified the contemporary names of 112 brigades, regiments, and other major independent units within the Armed Forces, including mechanized and tank forces, artillery, airborne assault forces, marine infantry, special operations forces, army aviation, and air forces. Based on this information, it is established that since the initiation of reforms in 2014, the names of many tactical military units have undergone changes. Due to persistent Russian aggression and the continuous deployment and equipping of new units and brigades, the renaming process remains incomplete. For example, 54 brigades are still without definitive names rooted in territorial affiliation or significant figures from Ukrainian history, with the territorial principle primarily guiding the naming of military units (see Table 1).

Military units named after figures of the Cossack era and The Ukrainian War of Independence demonstrate an equal number (14). This underscores the significance of these historical periods in determining the names for military units and divisions of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. It is crucial to note that the Middle Ages, represented by 10 units, have also gained recognition in the context of historical heritage. This indicates that the Ukrainian Armed Forces strive to encompass a broad spectrum of historical epochs to reflect the diversity and complexity of Ukrainian history in the names of their military units. Acknowledging the importance of Medieval Rus, the Cossack era, and the Ukrainian-Soviet War of Independence (1917–1921), the Ukrainian Armed Forces aim to preserve and honor the identity and traditions of the country as essential elements of national heritage amidst contemporary war. With

Table 1. Classification of the names of Ukrainian Armed Forces units

Period	Mechanized and tank forces	Artillery	Airborne assault forces Marine infantry	Special operations forces	Army aviation	Air forces
Rus (Middle Ages)	6	1	0	2	0	1
Ukrainian Cossackhood	6	4	0	0	0	4
The War of Independence (1917–1921)	6	1	3	1	1	2
Territorial affiliation	6	1	4	0	2	7
Others (no name)	29	5	11	1	1	7

Source: Author's development

20 units named according to the territorial principle, it is evident that the Ukrainian Armed Forces emphasize a comprehensive approach, acknowledging the importance of regional ties and affiliations in their nomenclature (see Figure 1).

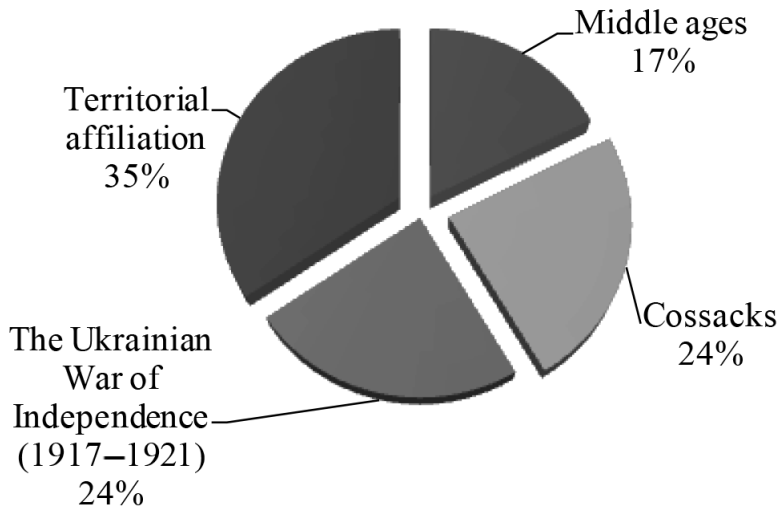


Figure 1. Linking the names of army units to historical or territorial topics.

Source: Author's development

In Table 2, the names of brigades, regiments, and training centers of the Armed Forces of Ukraine are presented, which are associated with historical figures of the medieval era. This illustrates the deliberate connection to the Middle Ages in the nomenclature of military units, emphasizing the significance of this historical period in shaping the identity of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. The inclusion of such names reflects a conscious effort to draw upon the rich historical heritage of the region, reinforcing a sense of continuity between the past and the present within the military structure. The names chosen for these units not only pay homage to medieval figures but also contribute to fostering a deepened understanding and appreciation of Ukraine’s historical legacy among the military personnel and the broader public.

Table 2. The names of brigades, regiments, and training centers of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, which are associated with historical figures of the medieval era

N	Name	Place of base
1	1st Radio Engineering Brigade was named in honor of the Galicia-Volhynian state	Lypnyky (Lviv region)
2	24th Separate Mechanized Berdychiv Iron Brigade “Prince Danylo of Galich” (from 2020 the 24th King Danylo Mechanized Brigade)	Yavoriv (Lviv region)
3	the 14th Prince Roman the Great Mechanized Brigade	Volodymyr (Volyn region).
4	the 30th Prince Konstantyn Ostrosky Mechanized Brigade	Zvyahel (Zhytomyr region)
5	the 40th Grand Duke Vytautas Artillery Brigade	Pervomaisk (Mykolaiv region)
6	the 53rd Prince Volodymyr Monomakh Mechanized Brigade	Severodonetsk\ Lysychansk, (Donetsk region)
7	66th Prince Mstyslav the Brave Mechanized Brigade	n. d.
8	169th Prince Yaroslav the Wise Educational Center	Desna (Chernihiv region)
9	Special Purpose Regiment Prince Svyatoslav the Brave	Kropivnytskyi (Kirovohrad region)
10	The separate special operations center “West” of “Prince Izyaslav Mstyslavovych”.	Khmelnyskyi (Khmelnyskyi region)

Source: Author’s development

Hence, as evident from Tables 1 and 2, the military units and brigades associated predominantly with the medieval era are the mechanized and tank forces. This can be explained by the fact that these military units form the backbone of the Armed Forces of Ukraine in the confrontation with Russian forces (since 2014).

However, some brigades were not immediately named that way. The new social discourse against the backdrop of the annexation of Crimea by the Russian authorities had tangible consequences. Thanks to extensive discussion, decommunization and the elimination of Soviet names in the military organization were initiated. These initiatives led to the renaming of certain military units. As experience demonstrated, finding optimal names required not only political will but also collaboration with scholars. For example, in 2015, an official name was approved – the 24th Separate Mechanized Berdychiv Iron Brigade “Prince Danylo of Galich” (based in Yavoriv, Lviv Region). Certain Soviet elements were removed from its name (such as orders of the October Revolution, Three times Red Banner Orders, Orders of Suvorov and Bohdan Khmelnytskyi, etc.), yet the appendix about “Prince Danylo of Galich” was retained.

Prince Danylo Romanovych (1201–1264) was the son of Prince Roman Mstyslavovych (†1205), the founder of the Galician-Volhynian state. According to Mykhailo Hrushevsky, this state formation continued the Kyivan state tradition in Ukrainian lands throughout the 13th-14th centuries (Hrushevsky 2016). His role in Ukrainian state-building is highlighted in both academic and pedagogical works (Hurska & Parshyn 2023: 13-15). However, fate had a certain irony in that Prince Danylo scarcely ruled in Galich (the capital of the Galician Principality). He primarily held sway over the Volhynian principalities, founding the city of Holm (historical ‘Холмъ’, modern Khelm in the Republic of Poland), where he was buried. Danylo managed to definitively conquer Galich only 40 years after his father’s death (Voitovych 2015). He didn’t remain to rule there, so the prefix ‘of Galich’ is somewhat conditional. Instead, according to scholars, it emerged in the 19th century under the influence of Moscow-friendly trends in history and significantly diminishes the importance of Prince Danylo’s figure for Ukrainian history (Khrystan 2023).

In 1253, Danylo Romanovych received the royal crown from the Pope, becoming the King of Rus. This symbolic act, undertaken during the confrontation with the Golden Horde, was an important manifestation of the ruler’s policy, a result of lengthy diplomatic efforts. Therefore, in 2017, the brigade of the Armed Forces of Ukraine received a renewed name – the 24th King Danylo Mechanized Brigade. Danylo Romanovych became the first king in the history of Rus (Voitovych 2015). The honorary naming of the brigade aimed to be familiar with his role for Ukraine, to emphasize overall recognition of the powerful Galician-Volhynian state by medieval leaders, including the papal Rome (Chuguj 2020). Some parallels point to King Danylo’s role in the confrontation with the Mongols, as at that time (13th century) the Galician-Volhynian state, which encompassed almost the entire territory of present-day Ukraine, acted as a bulwark against the threat from the East to European civilization.

The name of the founder of the Galician-Volhynian state was given to another

military unit – the 14th Prince Roman the Great Mechanized Brigade (city of Volodymyr, Volyn region). The mentioned Prince Roman Mstyslavovych was the most powerful prince of Rus at the turn of the 12th–13th centuries. According to M. Hrushevsky's definition, this ruler deserves separate recognition in Ukrainian history even because he united the Galician principality with the Volodymyr principality (Hrushevsky 2016). Assigning his name to the Volhynian brigade should be recognized as the restoration of historical justice, especially considering Prince Roman's successful campaigns against the Cumans, Prussian pagans, and rival Rus princes. In addition, the 1st Radio Engineering Brigade was named in honor of the Galicia-Volhynian state, but it got its name back in 2009.

Since 2014, several other decisions have been made regarding the renaming of other units of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. For example, a medieval context with an anti-Moscow direction is felt in the name of the 30th Prince Konstantyn Ostrosky Mechanized Brigade (based in Zvyahel, Zhytomyr region). Prince Konstantin (1460–1530) belonged to the prominent Ostrosky family, known as patrons and statesmen of Rus in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. In 1514, with smaller Lithuanian-Rus forces, he defeated a numerous Moscow army near Orsha, temporarily halting the tsarist aggression against Lithuania (Kazakou 2022). The naming of the brigade in 2018 in honor of one of the greatest victors over Muscovite armies is quite symptomatic.

Another example is the 40th Grand Duke Vytautas Artillery Brigade (city of Pervomaisk, Mykolaiv region), which received its final name in 2020. Lithuanian ruler Vytautas (1350–1430) was one of the most influential representatives of the Gediminas dynasty, competing with the Polish king and posthumously securing the title of Grand Duke of Lithuania (Petrauskas 2006). He is also a prominent figure in Ukrainian history, as he expanded the boundaries of his domains to the mouth of the Dnieper, expelling the Tatars from there. For a long time, Prince Vytautas resisted Moscow's influence, expanded his power to Novgorod and Ryazan. He was supported by the Rus'ian nobility, thanks to which the ruler dared to accept the title of King of Lithuania and Rus, but due to the opposition of Polish authorities, the crown did not come to him (Petrauskas 2006). Adopting such a name for a separate brigade allows emphasizing the role of Lithuanian rulers in Ukrainian history, to reassess the importance of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania for the development of Volhynia, Kyiv region, Podillya, Chernihiv region, and Galicia throughout the 14th–16th centuries.

In 2020, the 53rd Prince Volodymyr Monomakh Mechanized Brigade (city of Severodonetsk and city of Lysychansk, Donetsk region) received its final name. The figure of Prince Volodymyr Monomakh (1053–1125) is associated with the restoration of the authority of the Kyivan ruler among other Rurikids. He wrote the didactic "Instruction to his sons" (the motto of the 53rd brigade "Do not take off your armour in haste" is taken from this work), was an active diplomat, successfully fought against the Cumans, negotiated and reached agreements with other princes. Moreover, such a name is quite triggering for the Russian authorities, which consider this Kyivan prince one of the heroes of their history (Subtelny 2009). Examples include the later Moscow myth of the "Monomakh's Cap" (Plokhly 2006: 139) as

well as special mention of the centralizing policy of the ruler, supposedly inherited by his son Yuri Dolgorukiy (1091–1157), who ruled in Suzdal and actively fought for Kyiv. Prince Volodymyr Monomakh belonged to the Byzantine Monomakhos family through the maternal line. For the Kremlin regime with its nationalist discourses about sacred ties to the “Byzantine ashes,” this fact is an extremely important ideological construct. For this reason, naming the 53rd Prince Volodymyr Monomakh Mechanized Brigade and determining its location in Donetsk region, from where this Kyivan ruler expelled the Cumans during his reign, is a significant step for the self-awareness of the Ukrainian army.

A new appeal to the historical heritage of Rus took place after the start of the full-scale invasion of Russian troops into Ukraine in 2022. The formation of additional units of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, territorial defense units, and self-defense units was accompanied by patriotic uplift among Ukrainians. Newly formed brigades from the reserve also brought a piece of Rus to the battlefield against Russian forces. In particular, in July 2023, the 66th Prince Mstyslav the Brave Mechanized Brigade was finally named. Prince Mstyslav (†1036), although a rival of Kyivan Prince Yaroslav the Wise (the 169th “Yaroslav the Wise” Training Centre exists in the structure of Armed Forces of Ukraine), entered Ukrainian history as an outstanding military leader and ruler of Chernihiv, significantly expanding the boundaries of the Principality of Chernihiv and developing his capital (Subtelny 2009: 34). He also controlled the enigmatic Principality of Tmutarakan, the territorial identification of which is controversial; perhaps the city of Tmutarakan was located on the Taman Peninsula. However, this contradicts the information that Chernihiv princes freely traveled there, as crossing the steppes of the Northern Black Sea region and Azov Sea region was extremely problematic.

It is worth noting separately the awarding of honorary titles to units of the Special Operations Forces of Ukraine. In particular, in 2018, the 3rd Special Purpose Regiment was named “Prince Svyatoslav the Brave”. Prince Svyatoslav Ihorovych (938–972) was one of the most outstanding commanders of Rus in the 10th century. He distinguished himself in many wars with the Byzantine Empire, captured part of the modern Bulgarian lands, and broke the Khazar Khaganate (Howard-Johnston 2024, Mereniuk and Parshyn 2024). In 2020, the separate special operations center “West” of the Special Operations Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine was awarded the honorary title of “Prince Izyaslav Mstyslavovych”. Prince Izyaslav (1096–1154) was an energetic ruler of Kyiv who defended church independence from Byzantium and fought long and hard for the capital city of Rus. In 1151, he defeated Prince Yuri Dolgorukiy, whom Russian historiography considered one of the first specifically Russian princes. Giving “Rus’ian” names to the most elite units demonstrates attention to their personalities and the revival of the historical memory of Ukrainians through the naming of the respective units.

Therefore, assigning the names of outstanding medieval princes to separate brigades of the Armed Forces of Ukraine has generally become an important stage in restoring the historical memory of Ukrainians. It has also become relevant for military personnel. Military personnel, in the best sense, began to experiment with

their own names: they created informal nicknames, rituals, symbolism, and studied the history of their units. In doing so, they are shaping their own military ideology, which alongside battlefield achievements will strengthen the role of the army in societal life.

3. Medieval Rus in contemporary Russian military propaganda

The enduring illusion of an imperial past, meticulously crafted over the span of centuries, manifests itself through distinct mythologems within contemporary Russia. These mythological elements, diverse in nature, pay homage to a myriad of events and historical figures, each carrying its own symbolic significance.

Within these intricate narratives, a justification for the perceived supremacy of the Russians and their asserted right to the surrounding lands takes root that is actively promulgated within the modern Russian military (Pakhomenko and Tryma 2016). These myths not only serve as a testament to the historical continuity of the Russian identity but also play a pivotal role in shaping the contemporary worldview of Russian military personnel. Particularly pervasive is the narrative propagated within the Russian armed forces, where the idea of Russian superiority and entitlement to neighboring territories gains momentum. This narrative echoes policies that originated as far back as the late Middle Ages but have, remarkably, remained largely unchanged over the centuries.

The rhetoric of the Russian military leadership often emphasizes a shared history between Ukrainians and Russians, asserting that the two nations not only share common historical roots but also have centuries of shared struggles against mutual adversaries, primarily personified as Western Europe (Drugă 2023). Kremlin propaganda strategically employs a historical narrative to underscore the enduring ties between Ukraine and Russia, endeavoring to shape a perception of shared history that persists into contemporary times (Eggen 2022). This carefully crafted narrative consistently emphasizes the historical connection between Kyivan Rus, Russia, and Ukraine, presenting Kyivan Rus as an alleged ‘joint ancestral state’. The rhetoric draws upon religious imagery, likening the unity of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus to the indivisibility of the Holy Trinity: “Just as one cannot separate the Holy Trinity, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, as One God, one cannot separate Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. Together, they form Holy Rus”. This propaganda effort actively seeks to portray a shared narrative of ‘common roots’, with Kyiv often symbolically referred to as the ‘mother of Russian cities’. By doing so, it aims to reinforce historical connections and consolidate the influence of the aggressor state over Ukraine (Mandić & Klarić 2023). The strategic use of historical symbolism and religious connotations serves to strengthen the perceived cultural and historical unity between the two nations, contributing to the shaping of a narrative that aligns with the Kremlin’s military objectives.

The Museum and Temple Complex of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation plays a significant role in advancing Russian narratives regarding the unity of Rus

and the appropriation of its heritage. The initiative for constructing this complex was spearheaded by the Minister of Defense of the Russian Federation, Sergey Shoigu. Construction of the temple began in 2018 and was completed by 2020. This temple is considered the principal one for Russian military personnel; its mosaics depict numerous events from Russian history, featuring prominent Russian leaders from Joseph Stalin to the contemporary Vladimir Putin.

Curiously, The Russian Orthodox Church considers the portrayal of mosaics such as the Victory Parade with Joseph Stalin and the “bloodless reunification” of Crimea with Vladimir Putin, Sergey Shoigu, and other military figures entirely appropriate. This complex, initially perceived as a facility for training regimental priests and mercy sisters who would work with the military, now stands as a powerful demonstration of Russian narratives, impacting not only military personnel but all visitors. Although the complex is primarily dedicated to the Second World War, it incorporates many mosaics related to the history of Rus.

On the temple’s facade, Prince Volodymyr the Great and Princess Olga are depicted, a common feature in Orthodox Slavic churches. Inside, there is a mosaic of the Baptism of Rus by Volodymyr the Great in Chersoneses (modern-day Crimea). For contemporary Russia, this peninsula holds symbolic significance as it is where Prince Volodymyr was baptized. This figure plays a crucial role in Russian military propaganda, framing the occupation of Crimea not as an unlawful invasion but as a ‘just return’, as emphasized by a large mosaic in the temple: “Bloodless Reunification with Crimea”. However, such interpretations are historically contentious and flawed in both historical and legal aspects. Firstly, Volodymyr Sviatoslavovich is a Kyivan prince. Moreover, in international consensus, justifying contemporary political actions based on what happened with historical figures over a thousand years ago is not an internationally recognized legal basis.

Another significant figure in the temple is Alexander Nevsky (1221–1263), depicted with the visage of a saint, and Dmitry Donsky (1350–1389) in the Battle of Kulikovo (Galeotti et al. 2019). These figures have little relevance to Ukrainian history but were glorified during Soviet times and continue to be glorified in modern Russia, portraying Alexander Nevsky as a defender against the German threat and Dmitry Donsky as a protector of Rus from Mongol rule. In reality, the significance of the victories achieved by these historical figures is considerably exaggerated. The Crusades by the German knights persisted even after the defeat in 1242, and Mamai, the defeated Mongol commander in 1380, was merely a usurper of power and did not belong to the Chinggisid lineage (Halperin 2013). This selective glorification serves as a reminder of the nuanced approach taken by Russian military propaganda, carefully crafting historical narratives to reinforce specific ideals and perceptions that align with contemporary geopolitical objectives.

The Russian Orthodox Church also joined in the glorification of Prince Alexander, since he was canonized in the 16th century. Particularly active use of his name in propaganda campaigns began during the Second World War, when the Soviet authorities needed heroes who fought against the Germans (Fennell 2014). Under the current circumstances of the revival of militarism, the appeal to the figure

of the prince from the Russian point of view is justified – after all, it is about the fight against the “European threat”, which was once ‘overcome’ by this ruler. In the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, from February 2024, his figure was excluded from the liturgical calendar (*Orthodox Church of Ukraine removes St. Alexander of Novgorod (Nevsky) from Ecclesiastical Calendar, 2024*). This step can be considered an important ideological element of overcoming Russian influence in the cultural space of Ukraine. The Russian clergy also uses the figure of Dmitry Donsky. The blend of religious and political ideas, often referred to as the ‘Russian world’, as presented in the sermons of Moscow Patriarch Kirill, is built on a selective view of history. It draws from the Russian imperial concept of Orthodoxy, nationalism, and autocracy, as well as the Soviet narrative of East-West confrontation. This ideology emphasizes the patriarch’s role in shaping and disseminating a specific historical narrative, one that is carefully curated and contextualized (Lukyanenko 2023). However, during Dmitry Donskoy’s reign, the concept of a unified Holy Rus, now championed by Kirill (Gundyayev), never came to fruition. Based on this history, the patriarch seeks to justify Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. This interpretation of the past, which links historical events directly to the present, shapes the perception of the average Russian Orthodox Church parishioner, portraying the war initiated by Putin as ‘holy’ and geopolitically necessary for ‘historical justice’. However, this narrative is weakened by the fact that modern Russia’s conflict is with Orthodox Ukraine, not with non-believers, unless one considers sporadic propaganda urging a fight against the ‘collective West’ that ‘controls Ukraine’ (Lukyanenko 2023).

In the Museum and Temple Complex of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, numerous events commemorating historical events of Rus take place. It is typical for Russia to utilize the brand of Rus in organizing propaganda events for the Russian military. The Central House of the Russian Army (CDRA) named after M.V. Frunze is a particularly significant venue for hosting such events. In 2019 and 2020, a concert program titled “Here Rus Lives” (*Zdes’ Rus zhivet*) was broadcast for the Russian military, with screenshots from this event presented in Figure 2.

As evident from these illustrations, kokoshniks and balalaikas represent the Russian interpretation of Rus. This utilization of cultural symbols in military events underscores the intentional connection between historical narratives and contemporary military activities. The choice of these symbols reinforces a specific perspective on Rus, aligning with the overarching theme of Russian military propaganda.

Medieval Rus is frequently employed in Russian military propaganda as a symbol of past greatness, aiming to bolster the national pride of Russians through various manipulative mechanisms. For instance, scholars also note medieval names of individual submarines or ships (for example, submarine “Dmitry Donskoy”) (Atland 2011). Russia’s aviation groups, based at the 237th Guards Proskurovsky Red Banner Orders of Kutuzov and Alexander Nevsky Center for Aviation Technology named after I.N. Kozhedub, function as elements of military propaganda. Among them are the “Rus’ian Knights” (*Russkie vityazi*) actively participating in various military events. Another group is “Rus”, formed at the Vязma Aviation Training Center,



Figure 2. The portrayal of Rus during the concert for the military titled “Here Rus Lives”.

Source: illustration from website Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation

being Russia’s first aerobatic team, adding to its symbolic value. These aviation groups, accentuated by loud names and symbolism, contribute to shaping an image of a strong and united Russia for the spectators. Their participation in both military events and recruitment initiatives underscores their role in supporting propaganda narratives of ‘protecting the homeland’ from the Ukrainian armed forces.

Among the various orders known, Russia has only one order that is connected to Rus – the Order of Alexander Nevsky. The 45th Separate Guards Brigade of Special Purpose is particularly associated with this order. In 2005, the 45th Regiment was bestowed with the Battle Flag, honored with the title “Guards,” and awarded the Order of Alexander Nevsky. This order had previously been granted to the disbanded 119th Guards Airborne Regiment earlier that year. Notably, this order was established in 1942 and belongs to the military orders of the USSR. It was created simultaneously with the Orders of Suvorov and Kutuzov to commend the command staff of the Red Army for outstanding merits in organizing and leading military operations. However, in modern military units of the Russian Federation, elements related to Rus are not widely popular.

Unlike historical orders, new ones do not bear the names of known princes, a trend also observed in contemporary units. Russian President V. Putin has asserted in recent statements that Ukraine was invented by V. Lenin. However, Russians themselves do not prominently emphasize their ‘Rus heritage’ on the battlefield. Instead, the focus leans more towards honoring heroes of the First and Second World Wars. Narratives related to Rus are not particularly prevalent in contemporary

Russian military culture, except within general propaganda concepts and events (such as concerts), primarily aimed at a mass audience. Overall, the main focus among Russian military figures is on the figures of Alexander Nevsky and Dmitry Donskoy. At the same time, Russian military units primarily inherit Soviet traditions (with the addition of the Patriotic War of 1812–1814). For this reason, the memory of the Second World War dominates in their names. The use of ‘Rus’ naming in Russia is not observed. This clearly distinguishes this practice from the Ukrainian one, where heroes of the Second World War are almost not given attention: there are primarily a few exceptions in the names of higher military educational institutions in honor of Marshal Ivan Kozhedub or Army General Ivan Chernyakhovsky (until June 2023).

4. Conclusions

Therefore, the use of the ‘Rus heritage’ during the Russian-Ukrainian war is of significant importance for ideological confrontation. In Ukrainian practice, which is shaped by a rather Ukraine-centric understanding of Rus, medieval rulers and military leaders are held in much greater esteem. Specifically, the modern names of individual brigades of the Armed Forces of Ukraine are associated with prominent Rus’ian rulers and Ukrainian or Lithuanian figures of the late medieval period. Although the numerical advantage in naming belongs to representatives of the Cossack era or the Ukrainian liberation struggles of 1917–1921, the reference to the princely period allows for the stirring of interest and military pride in the times of mighty political development of Rus. Importantly, most of the analyzed dedication names are associated with resistance to the Cumans, Mongols, and Muscovites. This outlines a distinct vector of opposition to the East, which in contemporary realities fully corresponds to the need to fight against Russian forces.

The Russian experience of using historical memory about Rus is different. First and foremost, the old image of the Soviet ‘cradle of the three fraternal peoples’ is more often used in ideological propaganda about the unity of Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians. Examples of this are appeals to the baptism of the Rus’ian people in Crimea, which justified the sacred significance of the peninsula. Overall, the impression is formed that Rus primarily interests Kremlin elites as a religious concept of acceptance and the establishment of Orthodoxy in addition to territorial claims to Ukraine. In military organization and names, the figures of princes Alexander Nevsky and Dmitry Donskoy are emphasized. With discarding the Russian-Soviet myths about the importance of their victories for the ‘unified’ Rus, it is noticeable that these heroes are not associated with the functioning of the Kyivan state. This creates a rather unique precedent regarding the divergent development of memory politics, in which the Ukrainian side actively turns to the past of Rus, highlighting these times as a period of development of ancient Ukrainian statehood and local military traditions.

Ethical approval. All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Authors' contributions. Authors' contributions are equal.

Availability of data and materials. Data will be available on request. Consent to participate Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Consent for publication. All individual participants agreed to be included in the study.

Funding. The authors did not receive support from any organization for the submitted work. No funding was received to assist with the preparation of this manuscript. No funding was received for conducting this study. No funds, grants, or other support was received.

Conflicts of interest. The authors declare they have no financial and competing interests.

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