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THE EVOLUTION OF MILITARY SYMBOLISM IN UKRAINIAN GRAPHIC DESIGN

Symbolism in design constitutes an integrated visual-semiotic system composed of graphic elements that employs informational and affective means to achieve visual ethnonational identification. It transmits the values and sociocultural experience of a society, thereby enabling the immediate verification and differentiation of a subject within the media environment (Danylenko, 2003; Kosiv, 2019).

V. Karpov argues that military symbolism serves as an instrument of combat management and identification (Karpov, 2007). Under conditions of extreme visual interference—such as dust, smoke, and low illumination—the pragmatics of design are manifested in the radical reduction of decorative elements. This reduction ensures a high speed of cognitive sign-processing, which constitutes the primary functional objective of military insignia.

The foundational source of contemporary Ukrainian military identity is the semiotic system of the Rurikid dynasty (10th–13th centuries). The earliest form of military symbolism is considered to be the golden bident of Sviatoslav Ihorovych Rurik, dated to 957 CE (Fig. 1), attested on coins, seals, and signet rings. It is from this symbol that the process of constructing military identity in Ukraine originates.



Fig. 1. The seal of Sviatoslav Ihorovych Rurik, 957–972 CE.

During the 13th–14th centuries, the Kingdom of Galicia–Volhynia adopted a golden lion on a blue field as its heraldic emblem, establishing the chromatic foundation for military symbolism in Ukraine.

In 1848, the Supreme Ruthenian Council in Lviv adopted the blue-and-yellow bicolour as the national flag, and from that point these two colours became the primary visual marker of the Ukrainian movement in the armed conflicts waged within both the Austrian and the Russian empires.

From the late 16th century onward, the era of Cossack heraldry emerged (Bielov & Shapovalov, 2008). The Cossack coat of arms is the first documented in 1592 on seals and in 17th-century chronicles under the designation “Knight with a Firelock” or “Cossack with a Musket,” depicting an armed male figure (Fig. 2). The emblem subsequently served as the heraldic device of the Hetmanate, the Sich, the Zaporozhian Cossacks, and later the Black Sea and Kuban Cossack hosts.



Fig. 2. Seal of the Zaporozhian Host under Hryhorii Loboda, 1592.

The predominant military colours were ultimately established as crimson, azure, and yellow, which appeared frequently on company and regimental standards.

The War of Independence of 1917–1918 coincided with a period of active development in Ukrainian graphic design, prompting a formal reinterpretation of Cossack heraldry and the trident. The Ukrainian graphic artist Heorhii Narbut stripped the trident of superfluous detail, rendering it in a markedly lapidary form. The trident was subsequently adopted as the identifying insignia of the Ukrainian army. The typeface UAF Sans, designed by Narbut, was employed across all military documents,

orders, and currency—establishing a typographic coherence within military symbolism that persists to the present day.

In 1919, triangular and rhomboid sleeve insignia were introduced alongside an ornamental collar element known as the “zubchatka”. This constituted the first systematic attempt to establish a visual rank hierarchy that would remain legible in the absence of epaulettes.

Following the defeat of the Liberation Struggle (1917–1921), the lapidary trident, the Cossack cross, and Narbut’s typographic legacy were displaced by the so-called “red visual doctrine.” The central element of Soviet symbolism became the red five-pointed star (pentagram), accompanied by golden wheat sheaves, oak, and laurel foliage, within a chromatic palette of red and gold. The trident was officially declared as a symbol of “nationalist gangs,” while the Cossack cross was designated as an enemy religious element. The use of blue and yellow was strictly prohibited by criminal law. As a consequence, following the restoration of independence in 1991, the Armed Forces of Ukraine continued for an extended period to wear Soviet uniforms and insignia. The process of de-Sovietisation accelerated after 2014, with the explicit aim of returning to authentic historical sources. A four-pointed rhomboid star was formally introduced. This form directly references to the cockades of the Ukrainian State under Hetman Pavlo Skoropadsky.

The central symbol became the Cossack cross with flared terminals (Fig. 3), which today serves as the emblem of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. The Soviet chromatic palette was replaced by wormwood, marengo, coyote, and dark navy. The typographic identity draws on the heritage of Heorhii Narbut, yielding a distinctly Ukrainian script for inscriptions and official documents.

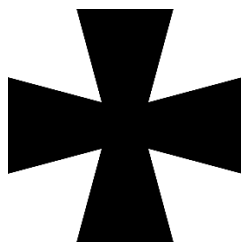


Fig. 3. Cossack cross with flared terminals.

The design system developed after 2022 is grounded in the principles of laconicism and scalability. A notable trend is the integration of folk ornament and ancient Ukrainian visual signs into military branding. An illustrative example is the 13th Brigade of the National Guard of Ukraine “Khartiya,” whose insignia constitutes a variation of the coat of arms of the Kharkiv Sloboda Cossack Regiment—a drawn bow with an arrow. It also includes a stylised letter “Kh” that references both the unit’s name and its regional origin (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Insignia of the “Khartiya” Brigade.

The foregoing analysis demonstrates that contemporary Ukrainian military symbolism represents the outcome of a synthesis between a deep historical heritage and the principles of modern graphic design. The study reveals a consistent orientation toward tradition and cultural distinctiveness. This visual and symbolic dimension contributes to the elevation of morale and the cultivation of an individual’s loyalty to the military as a result of an emotional bond, while adhering to the compositional and chromatic standards of graphic design practice.

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