

# The meaning of "Z"



## WHERE HAS IT APPEARED FROM?

- From the outset of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the letter "Z" began appearing on tanks and other military vehicles, and in less than a fortnight has been adopted by Russian politicians, civilians, schoolchildren and athletes, despite there being no "Z" in the Cyrillic alphabet (the equivalent is З). There have since been a variety of explanations as to what it means.
- Initially, it was thought that the "Z" was in fact a number "2" - representing the 22 February (22/02/2022). That was the day Russia ratified an agreement on "friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance" with the self-proclaimed breakaway regions in eastern Ukraine - Donetsk and Luhansk.
- One Russian news anchor argued that it represented two 7s (one upside down) to mark 77 years since the end of the Second World War.
- Others argue that the symbol had no wider meaning than to mark out Russian military vehicles to prevent friendly fire, and the propaganda campaign is simply born out of opportunism.
- There seems to be no accepted origin, but often with symbols it is less important what they mean than what they can make people feel.



## A SYMBOL OF PRIDE

- Symbols have always been an important part of national pride and identity, flags being the most obvious example, and they often gain potency in war time.
- Z has quickly become a symbol of pride and solidarity with Russia's military. It has been used alongside messages "Za pasanov!" ("For the lads!") and "Za pobedu" ("For victory!") by the Russian Defense Ministry.
- It has also become a symbol of general national pride in the face of international condemnation of the invasion, which the Kremlin has tried to frame as an attack on Russian culture by the West. The image on the left reads "Promotion for those who are not ashamed to be Russian. Distribute! #Wedon'tabandonourown." It has become particularly popular among Russia's youth.
- In this capacity, the adoption of the symbol by the regime bears some similarities to Churchill's famous "V for victory!" Aiming to create a sense of pride in resistance (and even stubbornness) against a formidable enemy.
- The symbol has also been incorporated into Russian pride in its victory against Nazi Germany. In the left image, the symbol is coloured in the black and orange stripes of the St George's Ribbon, an award created in the Second World War to denote those who had fought against fascism. According to Channel One anchor Vitaly Eliseev, the traditional May Day Parade marking the end of the Second World War will feature a squadron of MiG fighter jets flying in a "Z" formation.



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## A SYMBOL OF INTIMIDATION

- Symbols can also be utilised to create fear, intimidation and humiliation; the jolly roger, the totenkopf and the infamous yellow stars of Nazi occupied territory. Likewise, "Z" has taken on a sinister role in Russian society as a tool of intimidation to mark out critics of the war.
- Vandals have sprayed "Z" onto the doors of those critical of the war, often with messages calling for a purge of "scum and traitors." The image on the right is one such instance; the accompanying message reads "don't sell your homeland, bitch."
- The Kremlin has tacitly encouraged this behaviour. Vladimir Putin has called for a "societal cleansing" of "scum," while Duma (Russian parliament) members have denounced any critics of the war as "traitors," while free media have been forced to label themselves as "foreign agents"
- This approach fits the Kremlin's track record of utilising nationalist and criminal groups to intimidate critics into silence.
- In this regard, some have drawn similarities to the swastika as a symbol of blind nationalism and hatred. But "Z" lacks the historical depth of the swastika, it is important to view it in a wider context of symbols in general and the role they play in constructing a narrative.



Source: the Mirror