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The Last Journey of Fallen Soldiers in Ukraine: Traditions and Legal Norms

Summary: The Russo-Ukrainian war, which has existed as a limited conflict since 2014 and acquired the character of a full-scale war since 24 February 2022, has led to numerous casualties among both civilians and military personnel. This has brought to the fore the issue of a dignified farewell on the final earthly path of soldiers who gave their lives in battle or died of wounds. In Ukraine during the specified period, informal traditions for the departure of the fallen began to materialise. A military funeral ceremony was developed and, in 2021, legislatively enshrined, which constitutes the formal component of bidding farewell to the fallen. The essence of this ceremony lies in the dignified honouring of the deceased defender, in rendering them due military honours to emphasise that the person being buried is not just anyone, but someone thanks to whom the state of Ukraine exists. This is further supported by the designation of special places for the burial of fallen soldiers, including the National Memorial Military Cemetery, solemnly opened in 2025. These aspects are continually evolving and changing, adapting to new conditions and societal demands. An example is the nationwide minute of silence introduced in March 2022, shortly after the start of the full-scale war, as a daily ritual of gratitude, respect and remembrance for the fallen. This symbolic unifying act, open to the participation of all, is intended to preserve the memory of the Russo-Ukrainian war and the cost of the common struggle for freedom and independence.

Keywords: Russo-Ukrainian war, national memory, military funeral ceremonial, military cemetery, honouring the fallen

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In loving memory of our son, Taras Kharuk,
Lieutenant of the Medical Service, 14th Separate Mechanised Brigade,
fallen on 30 August 2022.

Death has always been an inseparable companion of soldiers and an inherent attribute of any war. Since ancient times, the farewell to those fallen in battle has been accompanied by specific rituals. Although their form has changed repeatedly over the centuries, the essence has remained constant: the community and society paying tribute to those who gave their lives defending their comrades-in-arms and fellow citizens.

The current Russo-Ukrainian war has become the bloodiest armed conflict in Europe since the end of the Second World War. Tens of thousands of Ukrainian men and women have sacrificed their lives in the struggle against Russian aggression. The dignified commemoration of the fallen and their farewell on their final earthly journey is a matter of profound importance, touching not only the families of the deceased but also their local communities and Ukrainian society as a whole.¹ This commemoration may be conventionally divided into several dimensions: the informal traditions surrounding the farewell to the fallen; the legal norms governing the burial of soldiers; and the establishment of special burial sites for the fallen.

The article presents how Ukraine commemorates its defenders who died in the war with Russia since 2014. This study considers official legal regulations, military ceremonial procedures, burial sites and informal practices. As illustrated in the article, armed conflict has influenced funeral rituals, which in turn has fostered national identity and social unity.

The article is based on legislative acts and decrees issued by the President and the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine. The authors also utilised press and online publications. This approach allowed the study to highlight both the legal aspects of these ceremonies and their social and symbolic significance.

Informal traditions of bidding farewell to the fallen

The emergence of informal customs began during the Revolution of Dignity in early 2014. As a result of the attempts by the authorities of President Viktor Yanukovich to disperse the protest camp (known as the Euromaidan) in the centre of Kyiv, on Independence Square, the first protesters were killed on 21–22 January. Between 18 and 20 February, during large-scale assaults on the protest camp, the number of victims reached one hundred. The fallen were immediately referred to as the Heavenly Hundred (ukr.: *Небесна сотня* = *Nebesna sotnia*). On 21 February, a public farewell for the

1 See: Beck K.F. 2025, 122–144.

deceased was held on Independence Square. Their bodies were carried in coffins to the stage as ‘Our Father’ (ukr.: *Отче наші* = *Otche nash*) was recited over them. News agencies reported: ‘From time to time, Lemko folk songs resounded.’² The song in question was ‘A Duck Floats on the Tisza’ (ukr.: *Пливе кача по Тисині* = *Plyve kacha po Tysyni*). The 2002 a cappella version performed by the vocal ensemble ‘Pikkardiyska Tertsia’ (ukr.: *Пікардійська Терція*) was chosen as a requiem during the first memorial services on Independence Square for the heroes of the Revolution of Dignity. The composition was first performed in January 2014 at the funeral of the fallen Belarusian Mykhailo Zhiznevskiy. His friends knew that ‘A Duck Floats on the Tisza’ was his favourite song, and therefore they played it during his farewell.³ Because of the deep symbolic and emotional resonance of this song, it continued to be performed in memory of the fallen and gradually became an unofficial hymn sung in honour of the activists of the ‘Heavenly Hundred’ and soldiers who died in the war in eastern Ukraine. Among contemporary informal customs is the formation of a ‘living corridor’, in which residents of a city or village greet their fallen compatriot by kneeling as the funeral procession passes.

At times, new informal traditions have had to replace old Soviet ones. Since the time of the USSR’s military intervention in Afghanistan, the term Cargo 200 (ukr.: *Вантаж 200* = *Vantazh 200*; originally rus.: *Груз 200* = *Gruz 20*) has become established as a euphemism for the dead. Under this code name, aircraft from Afghanistan delivered the bodies of fallen soldiers to the Soviet Union.⁴ In the context of Ukraine’s war against Russia, the use of this term-rooted in the imperial past-became entirely inappropriate. Therefore, in June 2022, veteran and civic activist Leonid Ostaltsev proposed replacing *Vantazh 200* with the designation ‘On the Shield’ (ukr.: *На щиті* = *Na shchytі*).⁵ The new name alludes to ancient military traditions, when fallen warriors were carried by their comrades in a shield.

Ostaltsev’s proposal was supported by both the society and the authorities. In August of the same year, the units of civil-military cooperation responsible for transporting the bodies of fallen defenders of Ukraine restructured the Humanitarian Project of the Armed Forces of Ukraine ‘Evacuation 200’ (ukr.: *Евакуація 200* = *Evakuatsiya 200*) into the Humanitarian Project ‘On the Shield.’⁶ Corresponding logos were developed for the vehicles used to transport the bodies of the fallen to burial sites.

Naturally, every funeral is accompanied by a ceremony of the relevant confession; however, this in detail will not be dwelt upon. It should only be noted that the clergy

² *Na Maidani...*

³ *U ‘Plyve kacha’...*

⁴ Korovushkin V.P. 2020, 80.

⁵ Savoskina K. 2022.

⁶ *Ne “Vantazh 200”...*

and communities of all religious denominations duly render final honours to the fallen. Yet there are also reprehensible exceptions when priests of the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine refuse to perform the burial service for soldiers.⁷

Formal Legal Norms Governing the Burial of Fallen Soldiers

The formal legal norms regulating the organisation of burials for fallen soldiers are embodied in the military funeral ceremonial, approved by the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on 2 July 2021. These norms are stipulated in Appendix 18 to the *Charter of Garrison and Guard Duty*, titled *Procedure for Conducting the Military Funeral Ritual*.⁸

The main mission of this ritual is to ensure the dignified commemoration of the fallen defender, rendering them appropriate military honours in such a manner that their relatives and local community understand that the person being laid to rest is not an ordinary individual, but someone whose sacrifice underpins the very existence of the Ukrainian state. Regardless of the number of attendees, the family's financial circumstances, or the location of the burial, the ritual is to be performed with precision and reverence, properly honouring the memory of the Warrior who gave their life for the Fatherland. The military funeral ceremony is a privilege granted primarily to fallen defenders of Ukraine and to service members who have previously participated in the defence of the country's independence and territorial integrity.

The ceremony consists of several parts — transportation, farewell (commemoration), and burial. It provides for the participation of an honour guard, military band (or, a bugler and drummer), saluting and a guard bearing the State Flag of Ukraine with a mourning ribbon. Officials of local self-government bodies are obliged to assist in organising the ceremony in every way, while units of the National Police of Ukraine, when necessary, are to ensure the temporary closure of roads during the passing of the funeral cortege. The ceremony also requires the participation of a member of the clergy during the farewell and burial. The ritual is conventionally divided into military and religious parts. Moreover, since the events of the Revolution of Dignity, the tradition of performing funeral services in public squares has become widespread. Consequently, the farewell often takes place not within a religious building but under the open sky.⁹

The contemporary Ukrainian military funeral ceremonial draws simultaneously on ancient national traditions and the standards of the present time. While there is no need to examine all of its components in detail, one element deserves particular mention:

7 "Je vypadky..."

8 *Zakon Ukrainy 'Pro vnesennia zmin do Zakonu Ukrainy...*

9 Buket Ye. 2024.

the covering of the fallen soldier's coffin with the State Flag of Ukraine. Before the coffin is lowered into the grave, the flag is carefully folded and accompanied by appropriate words, presented by the head of the cortege to a relative or another close person of the deceased. Ceremonies involving the State Flag represent a completely new element of the funeral ritual, previously absent in Ukraine, although they are customary in most NATO member states. On the other hand, national traditions whose roots go back to the Cossack era include a rifle salute performed during the lowering of the coffin into the grave. The custom of kneeling while accompanying the coffin with the body of the fallen also dates back to Cossack times.

The transportation of a soldier who has died or been killed in the line of duty — including those who perished outside of the territory of Ukraine — to the places of farewell, commemoration, and burial (or cremation) is conducted at the expense of the state budget. Businesses, institutions, organisations and establishments of all forms of ownership located near the site of the farewell ceremony for the deceased soldier are encouraged to limit the conduct of entertainment and other public events.

Certain provisions of the military funeral ceremony, although formally approved in the relevant normative act, cannot be implemented under current wartime conditions. This applies, in particular, to the Day of National Mourning, which, according to regulations, should be declared in Ukraine when three or more soldiers who died in the line of duty are buried on the same day. Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the number of fallen soldiers each day, regrettably, far exceeds this threshold. Consequently, days of mourning are now declared only within individual territorial communities.

On 14 October 2018, on the grounds of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, the Memorial Complex for Honouring the Memory of Service Members of the Armed Forces of Ukraine — Hall of Remembrance (ukr.: *Меморіальний комплекс вшанування пам'яті військовослужбовців Збройних Сил України — Зала пам'яті* = *Memorialnyi kompleks vshanuvannya pam'iaty viiskovosluzhbovtiv Zbroinykh Syl Ukrayiny — Zala pam'iaty*) was inaugurated. The memorial is dedicated to those who gave their lives for the freedom, independence and territorial integrity of Ukraine, as well as for global peace and order. Since its opening, each day the names of the soldiers of the Armed Forces of Ukraine who died on that same calendar date since 1992 — either in combat for Ukraine or during peacekeeping missions — have been recited aloud. After each name, the Bell of Remembrance tolls.¹⁰ Beginning on 29 August 2019, the Hall of Remembrance began honouring not only members of the Armed Forces but also service members of all military and law-enforcement formations who died in battles for Ukraine. Finally, on 15 March 2021, the commemoration ritual was extended

¹⁰ *Vidkryto...*

to include fallen volunteer fighters. As of early 2020, a total of 2,678 plaques bearing the names of the fallen had been installed in the Hall of Remembrance.¹¹

The beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the armed forces of the Russian Federation on 24 February 2022, necessitated a reconsideration of the ways in which the memory of the fallen was honoured. The daily ritual held in the Hall of Remembrance — which had included the reading aloud of names and the tolling of the bell — was suspended. In its place, on 16 March 2022, by a Decree of the President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskiy, a daily nationwide minute of silence was introduced to honour the memory of those killed as a result of Russian armed aggression. The commemoration takes place at 9:00 a.m.¹² The procedure for conducting this nationwide minute of silence was not explicitly defined. It has been most consistently observed in military institutions and educational establishments, and gradually extended to other institutions, including schools, universities and businesses. In cities — though not yet universally — it has become customary to pause traffic for one minute in observance of the ritual.

At the end of 2024, a draft ‘Ceremonial Protocol for the Minute of Silence’ was developed. It was prepared by the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, in cooperation with the public organisation ‘Vshanui’ (ukr.: *Buanyū*), and with the participation of the Centre for Human Rights and War Memorialisation at the Kyiv School of Economics. The draft incorporated the results of public discussions and the approaches expressed during a series of roundtables held jointly with the Committee of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine on Humanitarian and Information Policy. The document emphasises that the minute of silence is practiced as a daily ritual of gratitude, respect and remembrance. This symbolic unifying act, open to the participation of all people, is intended to preserve the memory of the Russo-Ukrainian war and the cost of the collective struggle for freedom and independence. The ritual consists of textual and practical components and is performed voluntarily, at each person’s own discretion. The textual part may include words spoken during the announcement of the Minute of Silence, while the practical part may involve various gestures — such as stopping, standing up, placing a hand over the heart, bowing the head, or folding the hands in prayer. During the Minute of Silence, it is recommended to pause all services, including electronic ones (accompanied by an appropriate on-screen message), and to temporarily halt work tasks where possible. These provisions may be included in the schedules of government bodies, educational, cultural, and healthcare institutions, enterprises and organisations of various forms of ownership, as well as reflected in internal workplace regulations. An important element of personalising the ritual

¹¹ Kozubenko O. 2020.

¹² *Ukaz...*

is the remembrance, by the collectives of institutions and organisations, of those among their members who have participated in the defence of Ukraine's independence and territorial integrity since 2014.¹³

Places of Burial for the Fallen

Military cemeteries are unique spaces of remembrance. They differ from other memorial complexes in their profound symbolic meaning, as they form an integral part of a nation's historical memory. Such cemeteries become tangible witnesses of an era, reminding future generations of the sacrifice and heroism of those who defended their homeland. Unlike civilian cemeteries, military ones often possess a distinct atmosphere and visual composition that emphasise their solemn character, ranging from pathos to contemplation.

Ukrainian legislation — specifically the Law of Ukraine 'On Burial and Funeral Affairs' (Article 23) — provides that, by decisions of the executive bodies of village, settlement, and city councils, certain areas within cemeteries may be designated as sectors for the burial of deceased (fallen) service members. For honorary burials, local self-government bodies may allocate land plots outside existing cemeteries, on which memorial boulevards, squares, parks, or Mounds of Glory may be established.¹⁴

At the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian war, the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory developed recommendations on possible ways to honour the memory of fallen soldiers and to organise military burial sites. It was advised that plots for military burial sectors be designated in central or most frequently visited parts of cemeteries in villages, towns and cities. In urban areas with several cemeteries, the creation of a dedicated military sector at the central cemetery was recommended. A military burial sector should include: a perimeter separated from the rest of the cemetery by paths or greenery (for example, a hedge); sufficient distance between graves and the surrounding paths; a designated area for the construction of a monument to the fallen soldiers, and a flagpole for the State Flag of Ukraine. It is also recommended to take into account the possibility of holding ceremonial and commemorative events within the military burial sector, such as visits by honorary delegations, memorial services, flower-laying ceremonies, the posting of an honour guard and requiem gatherings.¹⁵

An illustrative example of organising a place of burial for fallen soldiers is the city of Lviv. In 2014, the burial of fallen Ukrainian service members began at the Lychakiv Cemetery. When available space in one of its sections became exhausted, it was decided in early spring 2022 to conduct burials at the Lychakiv Military Cemetery

¹³ *Proiekt...*

¹⁴ *Zakon Ukrainy "Pro pokhovannia..."*

¹⁵ *Viiskovi pokhovannia...*

(on Mechnykov Street), also known as the Field of Mars, which is located adjacent to Lychakiv Cemetery. On 20 May 2022, the executive committee of the Lviv City Council adopted a resolution to create the Memorial Complex of Military Burials of the Heroes of Ukraine on Mechnykov Street, and to move the remains of Soviet Army servicemen and other individuals from the Second World War to another cemetery.¹⁶

Among all the burials at the Field of Mars in Lviv, one deserves special mention: the grave of Przemysław Rasewicz-Kuczyński, a Polish volunteer who fought for Ukraine from 2022 and was killed on 6 August 2024, during a combat mission. Before his death, he requested to be buried in Lviv — a wish that was fulfilled on 14 August. Przemysław Rasewicz-Kuczyński thus became the first foreigner buried at the Field of Mars.¹⁷

For several years, discussions had been underway in Ukraine regarding the establishment of a National Military Memorial Cemetery (NMMC) (ukr.: *Національне військове меморіальне кладовище* — HMBK = Natsionalne viyskove memorialne kladovyshche — NVMK), modelled after Arlington National Cemetery in the United States. The initial plans envisaged its creation between 2015 and 2018,¹⁸ but practical implementation began only in the spring of 2022. On May 31st, they officially defined the NMMC's legal status as:

A spatial complex located on a specially designated land plot, including a military cemetery, a museum complex, a ceremonial building, and other necessary facilities for the organisation of honourable burials of deceased persons who defended the independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity of Ukraine, and who fulfilled their duties and oath of allegiance to the Ukrainian people.¹⁹

Debates over the choice of location for the NMMC continued for more than a year. Several sites within and around Kyiv were considered. Ultimately, on August 19, 2023, the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine decided to establish the cemetery near the village of Hatne, in the Fastiv district of Kyiv Oblast.²⁰ The official opening of the National Military Memorial Cemetery took place on 29 August 2025, the Day of Remembrance of the Defenders of Ukraine, honouring those who died in the struggle for independence. The first burials were held on the same day.²¹

The commemoration of the fallen extends far beyond the dignified conduct of their final journey. On 12 August 2024, the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine approved

¹⁶ *Miskrada...*

¹⁷ Masiuk M. 2024.

¹⁸ *Plan...*

¹⁹ *Zakon Ukrainy 'Pro vnesennia zmin do deiakykh...*

²⁰ *Pro realizatsiiu...*

²¹ Vikarchuk O. 2025.

the Concept for Honouring the Memory of Fallen (Deceased) Defenders of Ukraine. The main objectives outlined in the concept include:

- Preserving the memory of the war for future generations of the Ukrainian people
- Maintaining public awareness that the war concerns everyone, and that the defence of the homeland is a shared responsibility of the entire nation
- Uniting society around the figures of heroes, who differ in background but share a common goal — regardless of gender, religion, skin colour, or political beliefs — the defence of the state.

Every fallen soldier is posthumously awarded a state award: the Order of Bohdan Khmelnytsky, 3rd Class (for officers) or the Order 'For Courage', 3rd Class (for sergeants and privates). In addition, many brigades have established their own commemorative insignia for the fallen, which are presented to their families. It has also become common practice to grant posthumous honorary citizenship to fallen soldiers in their hometowns.

Since 2014, the war with Russia has become an inseparable part of Ukrainian social reality. On 24 February 2022, it evolved from a localised conflict in eastern Ukraine into a full-scale war. The existential nature of this war has significantly changed Ukrainians' attitudes towards commemorating the fallen. A fallen warrior is now not merely a service member who fulfilled his duty, but a person who, at the cost of his own life, saves thousands of his compatriots. Funerals of the fallen are becoming mass events in both small and large communities. Not only relatives and close friends come to pay their last respects but also hundreds of fellow residents.

Thanks to the courage and self-sacrifice of its defenders, Ukraine continues to resist a far larger and stronger enemy. Tragically, many defenders have given their lives in this struggle. Ensuring their dignified remembrance remains a sacred duty of the Ukrainian state and the entire nation.

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