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Keeping the Memory Alive: Ukrainian Commemoration Practices in Public Spaces Amid the War with Russia in 2025

Summary: On 24 February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, marking a dramatic escalation of the conflict that had been simmering since 2014. Russian troops advanced into Ukrainian territory from Russia, Belarus and the occupied Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea. According to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 14,200–14,400 people were killed between 14 April 2014 and 31 December 2021. Additionally, 12,500 civilians and 45,100 soldiers have been killed since the full-scale invasion, prompting efforts to commemorate those who perished in the war. This article discusses and shows images of different commemorative practices that take place in Ukraine during the ongoing war, including Independence Square in Kyiv, the Field of Mars and Saints Peter and Paul Garrison Church in Lviv and the Alley of Glory in Ivano-Frankivsk. The results show many forms of commemoration, such as the installation of national flags and cubic frames displaying banners with the faces of soldiers who died due to Russian aggression.

Keywords: Ukraine, commemoration, photography, Kyiv, Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk

<p><i>... One, two... She notices me and stops. “Go away,” she says. “Write your texts. Stay out of my game.” I go,</i></p>	<p><i>so heavy, like on an autumn road, knee-deep in mud, one endless night in Donbas, one endless approach to the position,</i></p>	<p><i>a backpack on my shoulders stuffed with stories that press on my memory, dragging me down with the untold and the unlive.</i></p>
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Fedir Rudy¹

¹ Rudy F. 2025.

On 24 February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Russian military forces entered the country from Russia, Belarus and Crimea.² In addition, Ukraine's air defence system had to ward off a huge missile and airstrike, which damaged nearly 75% of its stationary air defence facilities within the first 48 hours.³ The ongoing war has resulted in a refugee crisis involving 3.6 million internally displaced people and 6.8 million Ukrainians who have fled abroad, as well as 12,500 civilian deaths.⁴ Additionally, since the full-scale invasion, Ukraine has lost over 45,100 soldiers on the battlefield.⁵

Prior to the full-scale invasion, there had already been an ongoing war in Eastern Ukraine between Ukrainian government forces and separatists supported by Russia.⁶ Following the anti-government protests known as the Euromaidan 2013–2014, pro-Russia separatists took control of governmental buildings on Crimea and raised the Russian flag on 27 February 2014.⁷ Since then, Russia has maintained control over the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea and supported pro-Russian separatist forces who took control of parts of Donetsk and Luhansk later that year.⁸ According to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights,⁹ 14,200 to 14,400 people were killed between 14 April 2014 and 31 December 2021, including at least 3,404 civilians, an estimated 4,400 Ukrainian forces and 6,500 members of armed groups.

The number of lives lost in a war is more than a statistic. Behind these numbers are human beings with families and stories whose demise leaves behind deep sorrow and long-lasting consequences. Because war and armed conflicts persist, individual and collective commemorative practices are carried out to remember and honour those who have died.¹⁰

This article discusses and shows images of different commemorative practices carried out by Ukrainians during the ongoing war in their country. For this purpose, the background of the photographs is explained. Afterwards, central terminologies are clarified before different public commemoration sites are shown, including Independence Square in Kyiv, Saints Peter and Paul Garrison Church and Field of Mars in Lviv and the Alley of Glory in Ivano-Frankivsk. Finally, a conclusion is drawn.

2 Walker N. 2023, 4.

3 Kharuk A. 2024, 143.

4 *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2025, 4.*

5 Basmat D. 2025.

6 Walker N. 2023, 4.

7 Walker N. 2023, 4.

8 Walker N. 2023, 4–5.

9 OHCHR 2022.

10 Mitima-Verloop H. et al. 2020, 2; referring to Hunt N. 2010.

Background of the Photographs

All journeys to Ukraine were undertaken in a private capacity.¹¹ The photographs included in this article did not contribute to a systematic or comparative approach to studying different commemorative practices. All locations shown in this publication are open to the public. There were no safety concerns associated with visiting these places, apart from the possibility of Russian air strikes.

The photos included in this article were taken at different times throughout 2025. The photos of Independence Square were taken on 29 and 31 August (Fig. 1–6), those of Saints Peter and Paul Garrison Church were captured on 18 April and 28 August (Fig. 7–10), those of the Field of Mars were taken in the early evening hours of 18 April (Fig. 11–14) and those of the Alley of Glory¹² in Ivano-Frankivsk were taken on 20 and 22 April (Fig. 15–18). Some locations are official commemorative spaces initiated by a city's mayor (e.g. Alley of Glory), while others were started by the families of fallen Azov soldiers (e.g. Independence Square). All these locations are commonly known as commemorative spaces. In addition to the locations shown here, there are public memorials in almost every village and town, as well as many modern forms of remembrance, such as graffiti/stencils, billboards on country roads and memorial museums at music festivals, such as at Faine Misto Festival in Lviv.¹³

Commemorative Practices

Commemoration can be defined as a practice involving 'a ritual or a display destined to celebrate the memory of a person, a group or an event'.¹⁴ Gilbert et al.¹⁵ distinguish three forms of commemoration: textual commemoration (e.g. written words), memorial commemoration (e.g. sculptures, museums and gravestones) and aural

11 The main emphasis of the various journeys to Ukraine was on producing social reports within the scope of my work as a freelance journalist. Activities included, for example, visits to an organisation distributing food to internally displaced persons in Khmelnytskyi Oblast, as well as to a kindergarten in Ivano-Frankivsk, where children's play was interrupted by an air raid siren (Beck K.F. 2025a). In addition, I engaged in private cooperation with colleagues at Vasyl Stefanyk Precarpathian National University in Ivano-Frankivsk, which included delivering lectures at the university.

12 Numerous cafes and shops can be found on both sides of the Alley. A young Ukrainian woman said that some people don't like 'the view', drinking their coffee and eating their cake while looking at the portraits of the fallen soldiers standing just a few metres away, but she followed with: 'If it bothers you, then it's just right' (Beck K.F. 2025b). The picture showing a cigarette in the opening of a grave-light was taken on 22 April 2025. A young man kneeled in front of a portrait at the Alley of Glory and lit two cigarettes. While he placed one cigarette in the grave-light before the portrait, he smoked the other himself, as if they were smoking a cigarette together. When he left the memorial site, the deceased's cigarette continued to burn.

13 Beck K.F. 2025c.

14 Glew A. 2022, 27; referring to Denis P. 2015.

15 Gilbert C. et al. 2020, 3.

commemoration (e.g. music, sound and silence). However, they acknowledge that this is not an exhaustive list and additionally mention ceremonial forms of commemoration. To summarise, commemoration includes all public and private actions that have as their intention ‘keep[ing] the memory of a person or a thing alive’.¹⁶ They are seen as a ‘call to remembrance’, hence, to letting a person, thing or event ‘continue to have a trace in the world’, and is ‘founded on, and therefore an expression of, our values’.¹⁷ Specifically for the Ukrainian context, A. Kharuk and L. Kharuk write that ‘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.’¹⁸

Glew¹⁹ clarifies that the existing literature is mostly focused on commemoration after a violent conflict has ended, hence, ‘when it is [already] possible to establish which side won or lost, or at least to assess the general outcome of a conflict’. In contrast, commemorative practices during an ongoing war are under-researched.

Kyiv — Independence Square

Independence Square, or Maidan Nezalezhnosti, is the central square of Kyiv. In 2022, changes were observed in the means of commemoration in public spaces and the organisation of memorial complexes.²⁰ Hence, the installation of national flags, each representing a fallen defender and often bearing their name and date of death, has emerged as a public initiative dedicated to commemoration. These flags are visible in the central areas of many cities in Ukraine, such as Independence Square in Kyiv. Popova²¹ considers the National Memory Lawn on Independence Square, organised by the families of fallen Azov soldiers in June 2022, ‘one of the most visible spontaneous memorials’. Subsequently, more people joined the initiative, placing flags inscribed with the names of those killed by Russian aggression. Alongside numerous Ukrainian flags, flags from Poland, Germany, Finland, Argentina, Colombia and the United States are displayed, among many other countries. Thus, according to Popova,²² ‘[this] growing sea of tributes gradually transformed the square into a powerful space of collective mourning’.

16 Mitima-Verloop H. et al. 2020, 2; referring to Bomba 2016, 7.

17 Gilbert C. et al. 2020, 1.

18 Kharuk A., Kharuk L. 2026.

19 Glew A. 2022, 185.

20 Nikolaienko V.A. et al. 2025, 758.

21 Popova V. 2025, 7; referring to Titorchuk V. 2024.

22 Popova V. 2025, 7.



Fig. 1. Memorial at Maidan Square, Kyiv (Photo: Beck K.F. 2025)



Fig. 2. Memorial at Maidan Square, Kyiv (Photo: Beck K.F. 2025)



Fig. 3. Memorial at Maidan Square, Kyiv (Photo: Beck K.F. 2025)



Fig. 4. Memorial at Maidan Square, Kyiv (Photo: Beck K.F. 2025)



Fig. 5. Memorial at Maidan Square, Kyiv (Photo: Beck K.F. 2025)



Fig. 6. Memorial at Maidan Square, Kyiv (Photo: Beck K.F. 2025)

Lviv — Saints Peter and Paul Garrison Church

Saints Peter and Paul Garrison Church in Lviv is one of Ukraine's most significant spaces for commemorating soldiers killed in the Russian aggression. Originally a Jesuit church²³ from the early 17th century, it was reconsecrated as the principal military church of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church and was placed under the care of the Center for Military Chaplaincy.²⁴

According to Ben,²⁵ the church has served as a central site for public military funerals since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Inside the church, many portraits of fallen soldiers can be found. In addition, there is a 3-meter birch cross that withstood heavy shelling by the Smerch Multiple Launch Rocket System in 2014 in Pobeda Village, Luhansk Oblast; it was brought to the church by Lviv natives of the 80th airborne brigade.²⁶ Destroyed military equipment and shell fragments are arranged on the floor surrounding the cross, and paper doves hang from the ceiling. According to the church priests, the doves, which were created by children in 2014, will remain in place until Ukraine attains victory against Russia. Pictures of children who have lost their fathers in the war since 2014 are also displayed.²⁷



Fig. 7. Birch cross from Pobeda Village, Luhansk Oblast, in the Saints Peter and Paul Garrison Church, Lviv (Photo: Beck K.F. 2025)

23 Druzdiev O. 2021, 85.

24 Chraibi C. 2021.

25 Ben B. 2022.

26 Ben B. 2022.

27 Ben B. 2022.



Fig. 8. Saints Peter and Paul Garrison Church, Lviv (Photo: Beck K.F. 2025)



Fig. 9. Paper doves created by children in the Saints Peter and Paul Garrison Church, Lviv (Photo: Beck K.F. 2025)



Fig.10. Saints Peter and Paul Garrison Church, Lviv (Photo: Beck K.F. 2025)

Lviv — Field of Mars

New commemoration sites are associated with soldiers who fell in the war, including new military cemeteries, such as the reactivated Field of Mars near the Lychakiv Cemetery in Lviv.²⁸ According to Holyk,²⁹ the Field of Mars (or Mars Field) illustrates the shifting memory policies and commemorative spaces in 20th-century Eastern Europe. Originally established in Lviv during World War I, it functioned as a military cemetery for soldiers of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. After World War II, the remains of Austrian soldiers were exhumed, and representatives of the Soviet armed forces were interred in their place. Beginning in February 2022, the cemetery's role shifted once again when it became the burial site for Ukrainian soldiers who had fallen while fighting against the Russian army. Dulyaba³⁰ points out that, as of this writing, plans are underway to establish a memorial complex for military graves, comprising a cemetery, a memorial square, a museum, a monument to the unknown soldiers, a chapel, and a columbarium (a place for urns containing ashes).

28 Holyk R. 2024, 39.

29 Holyk R. 2024, 39–40.

30 Dulyaba N. 2024.



Fig. 11. Field of Mars, Lviv (Photo: Beck K.F. 2025)



Fig. 12. Field of Mars, Lviv (Photo: Beck K.F. 2025)



Fig. 13. Field of Mars, Lviv (Photo: Beck K.F. 2025)



Fig. 14. Field of Mars, Lviv (Photo: Beck K.F. 2025)



Fig. 15. The Alley of Glory, Ivano-Frankivsk (Photo: Beck K.F. 2025)



Fig. 16. The Alley of Glory, Ivano-Frankivsk (Photo: Beck K.F. 2025)



Fig. 17. The Alley of Glory, Ivano-Frankivsk (Photo: Beck K.F. 2025)



Fig. 18. The Alley of Glory, Ivano-Frankivsk (Photo: Beck K.F. 2025)

Ivano-Frankivsk — Alley of Glory

Ivano-Frankivsk lies in the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains and, with a population of just under 240,000, ranks among the smallest regional capitals in Ukraine. In the autumn of 2022, Ivano-Frankivsk began to create the Alley of Glory to honour the defenders who had fallen since 2014. Along one of the main pedestrian streets, cubic frames were installed, displaying banners with the faces of soldiers who had lost their lives due to Russian aggression. Each portrait is accompanied by the soldier's name and a brief note acknowledging their service and sacrifice.³¹

Conclusion

Since the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war, a significant number of casualties have been reported in Ukraine. Existing literature predominantly focuses on commemoration after a violent conflict has ended. In contrast, commemorative practices during an ongoing war are under-researched.³² Thus, the objective of this article was to provide a visual documentation of some commemorative practices that have emerged in the context of the ongoing war. For this purpose, the background of the photographs was explained. Afterwards, central terminologies were clarified before public commemoration sites were shown, including Independence Square in Kyiv, Saints Peter and Paul Garrison Church and Field of Mars in Lviv and the Alley of Glory in Ivano-Frankivsk. As mentioned in the introduction, the number of lives lost is not just a statistic but represents human beings with families and stories. Their deaths have an impact and cause deep sorrow, prompting efforts to commemorate them. The results show various forms of commemoration, such as flags bearing the names and dates of death of defenders, and frames displaying the faces of soldiers who lost their lives to Russian aggression.

*'Why did the war take my dad?
I hate the war!'*

Pylyp Grytsenyuk, 5 years old

31 Derevianko N. 2023.

32 Glew A. 2022, 185.

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