

Why has the letter Z become the symbol of war for Russia?

The origins of the symbol, sported by athletes and popping up on social media, are a mystery, but several theories have been proposed

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What is the Z symbol?

Open source analysts and military experts first spotted the mysterious Z-shaped letter hand-painted on Russian tanks and military trucks massed on the Ukrainian border on 19 February, leading to widespread speculation among western experts as to what the letter meant.

As Russia's invasion began, more military hardware was spotted emblazoned with Zs, as well as other letters, including O, X, A and V. The letters seen on the hardware were usually framed by squares, triangles, and other painted shapes. The letter Z does not exist in the Cyrillic Russian alphabet.

The most popular theory used by military experts to explain the letters is that they were written according to the respective areas where the Russian troops are usually stationed, with Z potentially standing for *Zapad* (west).

Others believe the letters were drawn in an attempt to avoid friendly fire, while some pro-Kremlin Russian military experts have speculated that the letter Z stands for the name of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy, and the letter V for Vladimir Putin.

The Russian defense ministry itself has not commented on any of the theories, and instead posted on its Instagram channel that Z meant *Za pobedu* ("for victory") and V stood for "power of truth".

How has Z become the symbol of the war in Russia?

In the past two weeks, Z has gone from a military marking to the main symbol of public support for Russia's invasion of [Ukraine](#).

Just three days after the invasion, the Kremlin-funded state network RT announced on its social media channels that it was selling Z merchandise, including T-shirts and hoodies, to show support for Russian troops. Since then, countless [flashmobs](#) across the country have been organised by the authorities, in which young Russians are seen wearing a Z shirt while displaying their support for the war. The Z letter has also been [painted](#) on large Soviet-era apartment blocks and posted on street advertisement signs.

A number of schools have also posted images of children standing in a Z formation. One image that has been circulating online since Sunday showed terminally ill children from a hospice in the southern city of Kazan forming a Z to support the invasion of Ukraine.

Officials eager to show their support for the war have even pledged to include the letter in the names of their region. Sergei Tsivilev, head of the Kemerovo region, announced that he had decided to rename the region and add the letter Z to the region, which might now be listed as KuZbass.

The symbol has also had some limited exposure outside Russia. On Friday, thousands of Serbs waving Russian flags and carrying Z letters marched through Belgrade to the Russian embassy in a show of public support for Moscow after its invasion of Ukraine. And on Saturday, the Russian gymnast Ivan Kuliak [sported the Z insignia](#) as he stood next to Ukraine's Kovtun Illia, the gold medallist at a gymnastics World Cup event in Doha.

How has Russian society reacted to Z?

Walking around Moscow, one occasionally spots cars with a Z painted on them, but the sign is yet to see genuine widespread use among the Russian population.

Russia has a history of promoting certain signs and symbols to gather support for its military. During the country's annexation of Crimea, Russia heavily promoted the use of the orange- and black-striped ribbons of Saint George. The ribbon now enjoys wide popularity in Russia as a way to show public support for the Russian government and the military.

Some Russians, however, have ridiculed Z. During Sunday's countrywide rallies against Putin's invasion of Ukraine, some protesters were seen holding signs with the word *Zachem* (For what?).

Russians have also taken to the internet to post various memes satirising Z. In one, Harry Potter is seen showing Ron his lightning-shaped scar, which has been modified to show the letter Z.

More ominously, Z has been used as an intimidation tactic against those who oppose the war. Members of the opposition art collective Pussy Riot, as well as the anti-war NGO Memorial, have [said](#) the Z symbol was painted on the door of their flat.