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**How Ukraine Resists a Militarily Stronger Russia:
Soldiers' Morale as a Key Factor**

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Abstract

This paper examines the impact of military morale in the Russian war in Ukraine, where a smaller state confronts a vastly superior adversary with significantly greater military capabilities. Military morale, defined as the willingness to fight and follow orders, plays a crucial role in offsetting disparities in military strength. The thesis finds that political regime, government legitimacy, fair treatment of citizens, and clear communication of war objectives to combatants are critical determinants of high military morale. The case study of Russia's and Ukraine's approaches to sustaining their military morale and undermining the opponent's morale offers insights into the events, tactics, and strategies that contributed to varying levels of morale and their impact on battlefield outcomes. The analysis of available interviews with captured Russian soldiers revealed that the Russian government uses deception and coercion to mobilize individuals who do not fully understand their role in the conflict, which lowers their morale. The thesis also identifies that propaganda and information are essential tools to increase one's chances of success on the battlefield.

The outcome of this paper is policy recommendations for the Ukrainian government on how to sustain military morale and take advantage of it in the course of war. These policies include softer mobilization, involving individual foreign fighters, extended military leadership training, a bottom-up communication approach, and mandatory mental health/resilience military training. These policies may also benefit other small states facing aggression from larger adversaries, enhancing their resilience and maximizing the psychological advantages of high morale.

Keywords: military morale, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, combat motivation, defense strategies, motivation to fight, small states resistance, great powers strategies, psychological aspect of war, military leadership, military resistance.

Introduction

Before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, many Western intelligence assessments made predictions that the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv, would fall within a few days.¹ The Russian side similarly anticipated this war to be quick, much like their invasion of Georgia in 2008. Moscow expected minimal resistance, believing its military capabilities would enable it to seize Ukraine swiftly.² Even though Vladimir Putin himself rarely claimed publicly that Russia could seize Kyiv within a few days, his close ally, Alexander Lukashenko, President of Belarus, stated in his interview, “If there were a war with Ukraine, we would take it in 3-4 days!”³ However, Ukraine has been resisting Russian full-scale invasion for more than three years. This raises a question of how Ukrainian soldiers continue to fight against a larger, better-armed enemy for years without giving up. Meanwhile, Russian troops, despite their numerical and material advantages, have demonstrated significant cracks in morale, marked by desertions, refusals to fight, and even an armed riot by the Wagner Group. Scholars describe numerous factors that explain this, including national resilience, foreign aid, military strategies, the role of nationalism, and others. This master’s thesis focuses on *the morale of military personnel* as a key factor contributing to the outcomes of the Russo-Ukrainian war.

Morale is what makes soldiers fight. Military capability and large weapon arsenals mean little if there are no motivated soldiers to fight. There is no one common definition of morale, and there is a lot of literature in such fields as psychology, sociology, military science, and history suggesting their view on what morale is. Historian Jonathan Fennell, in

¹ Megan Duzor, "6 Takeaways After 6 Months of War in Ukraine," VOA Special Reports, 2022, <https://projects.voanews.com/ukraine/6-months-of-war/>.

² Hanna Shelest, "How Putin underestimated Ukraine," IPS, March 25, 2022, <https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/foreign-and-security-policy/how-putin-underestimated-ukraine-5830/>.

³ Information agency BelTA, "Lukashenko: Ukraine will never fight with us, because the war will last a maximum of three or four days!", YouTube, video, 2 February 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kb9jgyJskGE>.

his essay, identifies morale as a “motivation and the willingness to act in a manner required by an authority or institution.”⁴ NATO standards place significant emphasis on military morale, stating that instead of relying solely on physical force (destroying enemy troops and equipment), it is essential to undermine the enemy’s will to fight.⁵ This underlines the importance of morale as an element of combat power that needs to be upheld in the army to ensure its success. Motivating people to fight in war is challenging, as it involves extreme physical danger, risking injury or death. However, certain aspects, such as regime type, country size, state institutions, traditions, and other factors, can make it easier to sustain morale within the army.

This thesis aims to investigate *under what conditions a country can benefit from higher soldier morale in armed conflict with a larger adversary*. Based on the answers to this question, I will suggest a set of policies the Ukrainian government should implement to maintain high morale among its soldiers and leverage it as an advantage in the course of the war. The research objectives are: 1) to understand the concept of military morale in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine; 2) to compare the approaches of the Russian and Ukrainian governments in sustaining military morale; 3) to evaluate the broader implications of military morale for asymmetric warfare; and 4) to offer policy recommendations on how Ukraine can use military morale to prevail on the battlefield.

The hypothesis of this study is that Ukraine’s military morale has greatly influenced the course of the Russian invasion and helped compensate for its comparatively limited military capabilities against Russia. If the Ukrainian government implements effective policies to sustain high soldier morale and democratizes its military recruitment process, I assume this will greatly benefit the Ukrainian army in fighting the enemy.

⁴ Jonathan Fennell, "In Search of the ‘X’ Factor: Morale and the Study of Strategy," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37, no. 6-7 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2013.846856>.

⁵ *NATO Standard Allied Joint Doctrine* (NATO STANDARDIZATION OFFICE (NSO), February 2017), https://www.coemed.org/files/stanags/01_AJP/AJP-01_EDE_V1_E_2437.pdf.

The significance of the study is underlined by the need to understand why Ukraine, despite having fewer military capabilities, managed to resist the Russian invasion in 2022 rather than lose immediately. Traditional analyses of war focus heavily on material capacity, logistics, or battlefield tactics. Yet such approaches struggle to explain the sustained determination and resilience of Ukrainian forces. Because of that, it is essential to analyze the psychological aspects of the military in the Russo-Ukrainian War, particularly the morale and motivation of soldiers to fight and risk their lives. Military morale for sure matters in the course of war; this thesis will explore under what conditions it is easier to achieve and sustain, and how to take advantage of it if you are a small state.

I base this paper on qualitative methods of research. It includes a case study of the morale of Ukrainian and Russian soldiers since February 2022. The case study will analyze the different approaches of both governments to motivate people to join and remain in the army. It will include an analysis of military strategies, policies, and communication messages from both countries. Furthermore, secondary sources such as analytical articles, news reports, and available interviews with combatants will be analyzed to understand their motivations, how governments communicated the invasion's objectives to them, and what incentives were offered. Specifically, I will include in-depth interviews with captured Russian and North Korean soldiers, released Ukrainian prisoners of war, and military leaders in both the Ukrainian and Russian armies to obtain first-hand insights into military operations planning, soldiers' morale, and the practices implemented to sustain high morale. This thesis also incorporates elements of autoethnography, as the author has lived in Ukraine during the Russian invasion, witnessed varying levels of military morale, and monitored how the public perceives the war and mobilization.

The policy recommendations are primarily targeted at sustaining morale in the Armed Forces of Ukraine and are intended to be implemented by its government, though they may

also be useful for other small states that are facing or may face aggression. Additionally, this study can provoke a new discussion in the field of International Relations, as war studies have so far placed great emphasis mostly on military capabilities, economic strength, and army size, without focusing much on soft power tools as key determinants of war outcomes for small states.

This thesis begins with a review of the literature on military morale, establishing the theoretical foundation for the analysis. It then turns to my findings and assumptions, contextualizing existing scholarship within the case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The analysis examines the role of North Korean soldiers and the Wagner Group rebellion, explores the Russian government's coercive treatment of its military personnel, and traces the evolution of military motivation from the outset of the invasion in 2022 to the present. It also analyzes Ukraine's military morale and the key political, ideological, and psychological factors that shape and sustain it. The final section offers policy recommendations for Ukraine on how to sustain high morale among its soldiers, compensating for disadvantages in military strength and weaponry on the battlefield.

Literature Review on Military Morale

Scholars have long been interested in the factors that influence the course of war and contribute to victory. Many, particularly those in the realist tradition, argue that power and military capability are the primary determinants of a war's outcome. However, historical evidence suggests that this is not always the case, as demonstrated by the Vietnam War and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. A contemporary example is Russia's war against Ukraine. Although the war is still ongoing and its ultimate outcome remains uncertain, Ukraine has continued to resist for three years despite being smaller and having fewer military personnel. This persistence suggests that additional factors, not just military power, contribute to a state's ability to sustain military resistance. These factors include national resilience, effective military strategies, soldier motivation, government leadership, and nationalism, among others. Consequently, scholars are particularly interested in examining smaller states with limited military capabilities to understand the determinants of their resilience in war. While war presents immense physical and mental challenges, the psychological toll it takes is often overlooked and underappreciated. Therefore, this section will review existing literature on military morale and the conditions under which soldiers exhibit higher morale within the armed forces.

The literature presented below examines morale either in the context of specific conflicts or through theoretical analysis from psychological, military, or political perspectives. However, no existing research comprehensively analyzes morale in the context of the Russian war in Ukraine, as the war is still ongoing. There is limited access to firsthand information from military personnel, government information, and civilians in occupied Ukrainian territories, which makes it difficult to understand their perspectives on what morale means and what factors contribute to resilience on the battlefield. My work will theoretically explore various sources that assess morale levels in both the Russian and Ukrainian armed

forces. The literature below is valuable as it highlights key factors relevant to morale and provides a framework for analyzing it in the specific context of the Russian war in Ukraine. More broadly, it contributes to a general understanding of what morale is and what shapes it.

Jonathan Fennell authored a book, *Combat and Morale in the North African Campaign*, which explores military morale and its role in combat success, leaning on the example of the British Army during World War II. In this thesis, I adopt his definition of morale as “the willingness of an individual or group to prepare for and engage in an action required by an authority or institution; this willingness may be engendered by a positive desire for action and/or by the discipline to accept orders to take such action.”⁶ Fennell’s key contributions are redefining how historians and military scholars understand morale and proving that morale is a significant determinant of military effectiveness.

Soldier morale is an inevitable element of overall military performance.⁷ Beyond strengthening one's own military morale, it is also important to actively undermine the enemy's psychological condition during military operations.⁸ Fennell categorizes the influences on morale into two groups: endogenous (internal) and exogenous (external) factors.⁹ Internal aspects include social and individual factors such as cohesion, fear, resilience, and leadership. External aspects are political, such as propaganda, war objectives, and ideology, as well as environmental, including weather, terrain characteristics, and distance. This classification is important and will be used for this thesis to identify the role of morale in the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Morale is closely linked to mental health. High morale is often associated with strong mental resilience and sustained energy. However, the war severely impacts combatants'

⁶ Jonathan Fennell, *Combat and Morale in the North African Campaign* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

⁷ Sean Childs, "Soldier Morale: Defending a Core Military Capability", *Security Challenges* 12, № 2 (2016): <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26465606>.

⁸ Childs, "Soldier Morale: Defending a Core Military Capability".

⁹ Childs, "Soldier Morale: Defending a Core Military Capability".

mental health, leading to conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, suicidality, sleep disorders, aggressive behavior, and substance abuse. NATO, in its report, acknowledges this gap, noting that “mental health training programs are less common, if present at all.”¹⁰ Recognizing the critical role of mental strength, NATO implements mental health training programs designed to build soldiers’ resilience and adaptability. These programs aim to enhance the well-being of NATO fighters by promoting healthy thoughts, emotions, and physical responses, ultimately ensuring optimal performance and readiness.¹¹ As stable mental health is the foundation of morale, it is essential that military leaders work on proper rotation, combatants' access to psychologists and counselors, and normalizing discussions about mental health.

Another task of this thesis is to identify when soldier morale is easier to sustain and on what factors it depends. One prevailing assumption is that democratic countries are more likely to win wars. This perspective suggests that the armed forces of democratic states exhibit higher effectiveness and morale compared to those of non-democratic regimes. Dan Reiter and Allan Stam, in their book *Democracies at War*, present an argument that “the armies of democratic states tend to fight with marginally better logistics, substantially better initiative, and superior leadership.”¹² While the authors do not assess the effectiveness of military tactics or civilian consolidation, they place significant emphasis on military morale, soldiers' willingness to risk their lives, and their consent to military leadership’s orders. They argue that the regime type and domestic politics are closely linked to the state's behavior in the international arena. Authoritarian leaders are more likely to take risks on the battlefield, as they are less concerned about being isolated or sanctioned by other states and international organizations, whereas democracies tend to be more cautious about engaging in wars. Reiter

¹⁰ *Mental Health Training* (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, January 2016), <https://www.sto.nato.int/Pages/default.aspx>.

¹¹ *Mental Health Training*.

¹² Allan C. Stam and Dan Reiter, *Democracies at War* (Princeton University Press, 2010).

and Stam, after analyzing 90 battles, concluded that soldiers in democracies perform better in combat than those in any other regime.¹³ This leads to the conclusion that military morale is higher in democratic states than in other regimes, increasing the likelihood of democratic armies succeeding in war.

Another scholar, Dobransky, also suggests that regime type and alliance formation are significant factors in determining war outcomes, with democracies winning 84% of all major wars.¹⁴ The author notes that while there is extensive literature criticizing democracies for their alleged inefficiency in warfare, various explanations, such as their diplomatic skills and engagement in alliances, highlight how democracies can successfully win wars. Clearly, even if democracies win wars more often, the role of military capabilities should not be overlooked, as regime type is just one of many factors influencing military morale and, more broadly, the outcomes of war.

Brotmarkle has also identified the role of democracy in shaping military morale. He argues that democracy, through open discussion, can persuade people that their involvement in the army is essential by clearly communicating its goals. As a result, military recruitment happens through dialogue rather than coercion.¹⁵ Morale can be achieved in both authoritarian and democratic states; however, it is essential that individuals feel convinced of their importance and see themselves as part of a larger group working toward a common goal.

Military morale involves obedience to the orders of military leadership. Levi in her book *Consent, Dissent, and Patriotism*, identified key factors that influence why citizens comply with government laws and regulations, as well as what motivates them to obey. Levi argues that institutions, organizations, and information shape citizens' decisions to consent or

¹³ Stam and Reiter, *Democracies at War*.

¹⁴ Steve Dobransky, "The Dawn of a New Age? Democracies and Military Victory", *Journal of Strategic Security* 7, № 1 (2014), doi:10.5038/1944-0472.7.1.1.

¹⁵ Robert Brotmarkle, "Development of Military Morale in a Democracy", *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 216 (1941), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1023707>.

dissent. As I have identified, voluntary consent is an indispensable part of high morale. Consent (and morale as a result) is more likely if citizens perceive the government as legitimate and fair, and when they see that other citizens are also complying.¹⁶ Additionally, a strong sense of patriotism shapes people's willingness to participate in military service. Overall, Levi does not argue that morale is higher in democratic rather than authoritarian states. Corruption and unfair treatment can occur even in democratic countries, making citizens reluctant to comply. Although in democracies, there is higher voluntary compliance because they foster legitimacy through representation, the rule of law, institutions, and fair policies.¹⁷ This leads us to the conclusion that a democratic regime provides a more favorable environment for sustaining military morale. However, such morale can also be present in authoritarian regimes if individuals there feel a sense of duty, fairness in policies, and patriotism, resulting in high morale and willingness to obey, similar to that in democracies.

To conclude, there is much literature on how democracy is related to military morale and how the regime type helps to sharpen soldiers' willingness to fight. Psychologists and military experts agree that under coercion, people are less likely to follow orders in the long term and are less willing to risk their lives compared to when they act voluntarily.¹⁸ In democratic states, recruitment policies are much softer, which means that soldiers there tend to have higher morale and a greater desire to join the armed forces compared to those in authoritarian states

Another factor scholars discuss in shaping military morale is nationalism. When people feel a sense of belonging to a nation, they understand what they are fighting for and are more willing to risk their lives to protect their land, leading to higher morale and a greater

¹⁶ Margaret Levi, *Consent, Dissent, and Patriotism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/consent-dissent-and-patriotism/E50114445D93F0FC74C91CA4FCE4BE6B>.

¹⁷ Levi, *Consent, Dissent, and Patriotism*.

¹⁸ Ilmari Käihkö, "'No Die, No Rest'? Coercive Discipline in Liberian Military Organisations", *Africa Spectrum* 50, № 2 (2015), doi:10.1177/000203971505000201.

willingness to fight. Mearsheimer defines nationalism as the belief that "peoples with a strong collective identity should have the right to self-governance."¹⁹ This makes compromise and acceptance of defeat more difficult, motivating individuals to fight harder in defense of their land. The scholar also argues that in a conflict, nationalism as a political ideology always wins. In the context of military morale, nationalism serves as a powerful motivator, driving individuals to defend their land and protect their people from foreign threats.

There is also a segment of literature suggesting that nationalism can provoke international conflict. Herrmann argues that "national attachment creates negative emotions around stereotypical enemies, for example, and increases people's propensity to violate norms."²⁰ This opinion views nationalism as one of the causes of war. However, other scholars challenge it, demonstrating that a rise in nationalism does not necessarily result in an aggressive military posture. Johnston, for instance, analyzes China to support the argument in favor of nationalism.²¹ The author says that there is no evidence that Chinese nationalism contributed to its belligerent behavior; instead, other factors, such as security dilemma issues, the authoritarian leaders and elite personal inclinations, or organizational motivations, are more significant drivers.²²

Overall, nationalism can play two distinct roles: for the attacking state, it may fuel a desire to attack and view other states as enemies, while for victim states, nationalism works positively by motivating people to mobilize in defense of their sovereignty and deter

¹⁹ John Mearsheimer, "Liberalism and Nationalism in Contemporary America", American Political Science Association, 2021, <https://www.mearsheimer.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Madison-Lecture-PDF.pdf>.

²⁰ Richard Herrmann, "How Attachments to the Nation Shape Beliefs About the World: A Theory of Motivated Reasoning", *Cambridge University Press* 71, S1 (21 April 2017): <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-organization/article/how-attachments-to-the-nation-shape-beliefs-about-the-world-a-theory-of-motivated-reasoning/7CB86BDBDF617CDE3D64184C049B8F4B>.

²¹ Alastair Iain Johnston, "Is Chinese Nationalism Rising? Evidence from Beijing", *International Security* 41, № 3 (January 2017): <https://direct.mit.edu/isec/article/41/3/7/12154/Is-Chinese-Nationalism-Rising-Evidence-from>.

²² Johnston, "Is Chinese Nationalism Rising? Evidence from Beijing".

aggressors. In both cases, whether attacking or defending, nationalism sustains morale and gives soldiers a clear sense of purpose in what they are fighting for.

Building on the discussion of nationalism's impact on military morale, Knott brings an interesting perspective that sees resilience and morale through the lens of existential nationalism. The author references a slogan frequently used by Ukrainian protesters and activists since the start of the full-scale invasion in February 2022, "If Russia stops fighting, there will be no war. If Ukraine stops fighting, there will be no Ukraine."²³ This implies that Ukraine is fighting for its right to exist and be able to govern its country on its own, without external Russian assistance or influence. Thus, when individuals feel a strong sense of belonging to a nation, they are more motivated to fight and engage in war, as they have a clearer understanding of the goals and purpose behind their actions. Russia also perceives Ukraine's aspirations to join the EU and NATO as an "existential threat" (as Mearsheimer argues in his article *Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault*), so Knott applies this perspective to the concept of existential nationalism as well.

Furthermore, research suggests that small nations often achieve better outcomes in governance and social cohesion, factors that greatly contribute to people's morale. When a nation comprises diverse cultures, establishing a unified set of values and ideologies can be more challenging. Historical examples, such as the collapse of the Soviet Union, illustrate how attempts to enforce a singular ideological framework across diverse populations can lead to instability and fragmentation. The book *The Power of Small States: Diplomacy in World War II* provides an insight into how small and militarily weak states can resist the strong pressure of great powers even in crisis periods. It challenges the realist perspective that the ability to use violence does not alone determines the course of world politics.²⁴ Both small

²³ Eleanor Knott, "Existential Nationalism: Russia's War Against Ukraine", *Nations and Nationalism* 29, № 1 (January 2023): doi:10.1111/nana.12878.

²⁴ Annette Baker Fox, *The Power of Small States: Diplomacy in World War II* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959).

and big states have high chances of winning the war, as they are equal actors in the international arena. Except for military tools, states should be able to deploy diplomatic, economic, social, and psychological means to achieve their goals. The author cites the example of World War II, a time before which small actors were not seriously considered in the context of global conflict. However, small powers like Finland, Portugal, Spain, and Turkey managed to survive such a large and bloody war. Also, other historical cases, such as the Vietnam War and the Soviet Defeat in Afghanistan, clearly demonstrate that great powers do not always prevail in wars.

Crevelde identifies another factor that shapes military morale. He argues that the reason for the German military's individual-level effectiveness during World War II was that the average soldier "felt himself a member of a well-integrated, well-led team whose structure, administration, and functioning were perceived to be, on the whole, equitable and just."²⁵ With this example, the author proves that high military morale, discipline, and motivation play a crucial role in determining combat performance. It can be effectively sustained if soldiers understand their role as individuals in a particular armed conflict and have a sense of purpose.

Clear and effective communication of war objectives is crucial in enabling combatants to comprehend their individual roles within the broader mission. However, it is equally important for the government and military leadership to ensure that these objectives are achievable and supported by a clear, practical plan for their accomplishment.²⁶ For instance, during the Vietnam War, the U.S. government struggled to clearly communicate its goals, which created confusion among soldiers and the public. The lack of clarity and achievable objectives contributed to declining morale, frustration, and rising anti-war sentiment. Small

²⁵ Martin van Crevelde, *Fighting Power: German and U.S. Army Performance, 1939-1945*, Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut, 1982, p. 163-164.

²⁶ Thomas W. Britt and James M. Dickinson, "Morale during Military Operations: A Positive Psychology Approach", *Military Life: The Psychology of Serving in Peace and Combat* (Praeger, 2005).

states can avoid this mistake by ensuring their political and military leadership clearly communicates realistic and achievable goals and assignments.

In summary, the literature review provides insight into the definition of morale and the various factors determining it. The findings of this review are the conditions under which soldiers' morale increases or decreases. They include a political regime (democracy/autocracy/others), fairness and legitimacy of government, transparent communication, achievable military objectives and goals, the ability to use soft power tools, and a sense of purpose among combatants. This literature provides valuable guidance for conducting a case study on how Russia and Ukraine have approached sustaining military morale.

Theoretical Framework

Building on the literature review, I expect Ukraine to exhibit high levels of morale in the face of Russian aggression due to several factors: its democratic regime type, active civil society, strong civilian support, legitimate institutions, and sense of nationalism. At the same time, I acknowledge that the authoritarian regime type in Russia does not automatically translate into low military morale. I do expect that deceptive top-down communication and forced participation through conscription or threats (which happens both in Russia and Ukraine) can make morale worse over time. When soldiers feel they have no choice, no clear information, or no trust in their leaders, their motivation to fight the war can decrease in the long term. I also assume I expect that over time, morale in both Ukraine and Russia may decline due to exhaustion, long-term suffering, and losses, even if the reasons and speed of decline differ.

I do not expect that foreign fighters, although they are a significant benefit to an army, will sustain high morale, as they risk their lives and fight for a foreign country's goals. They often face communication difficulties because of the language and have little cultural connection, which can make cohesion and integration more challenging.

Methodology

This empirical section is based on a comparative case study of morale in Russia and Ukraine during the ongoing invasion launched in 2022. As the nature and availability of sources differ significantly between the two states, I use distinct sources of information for each case. Across both cases, I work with qualitative materials, such as media reports, public speeches, interviews, and expert analyses, taking into account the existing limitations in accessing certain information.

The Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach would be beneficial for this thesis, as it involves Ukrainian veterans, psychologists, military chaplains, and civilians directly in the research process to better understand their perspectives on morale. Rather than studying morale *about* soldiers, this approach explores it *with* them, valuing their lived experiences and co-constructing knowledge grounded in their insights. However, such a practical project would require substantial funding, a presence on the ground in Ukraine, specifically in conflict-affected regions, and would entail significant security risks. For these reasons, PAR remains a consideration for future research, while this thesis focuses on available theoretical and digital sources.

For the case study of military morale in Ukraine, I have selected a range of sources, including available polling data, news reports, analytical articles, interviews with Russian prisoners of war, and testimonies from Ukrainian civilians and former military personnel. In contrast, to examine military morale in Russia, I draw primarily on Telegram channels - currently the most widely used social media platform in Russia²⁷ - as well as reports from independent journalists, research conducted by scholars abroad, official statements from the Russian government, intelligence released by Ukrainian officials, and publicly available data such as that found on Statista. These sources were chosen not only for their accessibility but also because they provide the most transparent and verifiable information currently available, given the challenges of conducting research during an ongoing war, the opacity of authoritarian Russia, and the presence of government-driven propaganda.

Since Ukraine and Russia differ significantly in terms of political regime, state size, and military capabilities, the factors I analyze for each case also differ. For Ukraine, as a victim of aggression, the war holds existential significance and mobilizes a strong sense of

²⁷ DataReportal and We Are Social, "Russia: Most Used Social Media Platforms 2024", Statista, March 2025, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/867549/top-active-social-media-platforms-in-russia/>.

national purpose. In contrast, for Russia, the war is one of several geopolitical pursuits and is often framed as a strategic operation rather than a matter of national survival.

Based on my personal observations and analysis while living in Ukraine between 2022 and 2024, I argue that factors such as mobilization issues, the killing and torture of Ukrainian prisoners of war in Russia, nationalism, civilian resilience and support, and the role of propaganda have significantly shaped military morale in Ukraine. These factors are explored in depth in the Ukraine case study section. At the same time, I have followed Russian narratives since 2022, actively monitoring official rhetoric and public statements by senior Russian leaders. This ongoing observation has laid the foundation for the analysis presented in the case study of Russians' military morale, helping to identify and critically examine key elements of Kremlin rhetoric such as "the Neo-Nazi regime in Ukraine," "we are liberating our brother nation," "Kyiv bombed Donbas for eight years," "special military operation," and "military training exercises, not a war."

When analyzing morale in Russia and Ukraine, the selection of sources introduces several potential biases that must be acknowledged. Ukrainian sources often emphasize heroism and resilience, trying to hinder information about losses and failures on the battlefield. Instead, access to genuine expressions of morale from the Russian military is restricted, which may not be representative of the broader situation in the military. The same applies to personal stories or interviews with Ukrainian soldiers: while they can be powerful, they are not always representative of the broader military. While there is an inherent risk of selection bias, the author has made a deliberate effort to maintain analytical objectivity.

The Role of Morale in the Russian War in Ukraine (2022-2025 analysis)

Military morale has undoubtedly played a significant role in shaping the course of the Russian war in Ukraine. If the Ukrainian people had not resisted Russian aggression in February 2022, it is likely that Russia could have swiftly seized a great portion of Ukrainian territory with minimal military force, similar to the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Russians have also been actively working to undermine the morale of Ukrainian soldiers and civilians through propaganda, the spread of fake news, and the online dissemination of videos showing the brutal executions of captured military personnel.

Since 2022, motivation to fight has been observed among both Ukrainian and Russian soldiers, though its levels have varied. This is expected, as with each passing month and year of war, soldiers have become less willing to fight as the conflict drags on and becomes increasingly difficult. This chapter presents a case study of two countries' governmental approaches to sustaining military morale. It also examines the key factors and tactics that contributed to maintaining high morale and how these elements enabled both countries to leverage it to their advantage in the context of this war. The findings from the case study will be used to develop policy recommendations for the Ukrainian government on how to sustain high military morale as a small state facing aggression from a much larger adversary.

2.1 Military Morale in Ukraine

In Ukraine, mobilization began on the very day the invasion started. Ukrainians felt a strong sense of nationalism and a deep need to protect their homeland, identity, and state sovereignty. At that time, the focus was not on whether Ukraine had enough resources to deter Russian aggression but rather on the imperative to defend the nation. Mack writes that the invasion of a small country “generates greater cohesion, minimizes constraints on

mobilization, and maximizes the willingness to incur costs.”²⁸ In the attacking state, there is a risk of achieving the opposite effect, potentially leading to societal division. This was proven in the Vietnam and Algerian wars, as well as in other conflicts. This means that Ukraine, as the victim state, has greater cohesion and morale, and its defeat is not guaranteed merely because it faces a great power.²⁹

Ironically, Vladimir Putin has only strengthened Ukrainian anti-Russian sentiment and pushed the country further toward the EU and NATO by invading it. Shevel writes that “Putin seemingly believed Ukrainians would welcome Russian troops “liberating” them from the “neo-Nazi junta” that allegedly seized power in Kyiv following the 2014 Euromaidan uprising.”³⁰ She states that if Russia had not initiated armed aggression against Ukraine, Ukrainian foreign policies would likely still be balanced between the EU and Russia. The author supports this argument with statistics from the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) poll, which states that “in February 2014, 66 percent of Ukrainians wanted Ukraine and Russia to be friendly neighbors with open borders, and 78 percent held an overall positive attitude toward Russia.”³¹ This example strengthens the argument that an attacked state rarely unites with the enemy; instead, it balances against the threat and becomes more resistant to it - another realist theory assumption.

As previously mentioned, various factors influence military morale, including propaganda, civilian support, visible success in battles, awards, and leadership decisions.

²⁸ Andrew Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict | World Politics | Cambridge Core", Cambridge University Press, 18 June 2011, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/world-politics/article/abs/why-big-nations-lose-small-wars-the-politics-of-asymmetric-conflict/90583542E0F98B15B0A2C37D390C9C41>.

²⁹ Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict | World Politics | Cambridge Core".

³⁰ Oxana Shevel, "A Decade of Dramatic Change in Ukrainian Society", *Current History* 122, № 846 (2023), doi:10.1525/curh.2023.122.846.273.

³¹ Shevel, "A Decade of Dramatic Change in Ukrainian Society."

Next, I analyze how each of these factors contributes to both sustaining and undermining morale within the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

As discussed in the previous chapter, what indeed lowers morale is the “negative” information received by soldiers. The Ukrainian side adheres to the Geneva Convention, providing healthcare and humane conditions for captured Russian soldiers. In contrast, the Russian side executes Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs), sends them to prisons or special camps, tortures, rapes them, and records these atrocities to post online. For example, in December 2022, Ukrainian prisoner of war Oleksandr Matsievsky was brutally killed by Russian executors after saying ‘Slava Ukraini,’ which means ‘Glory to Ukraine.’ This war crime was recorded and posted by Russians to their Telegram channels.³² The video then spread across Ukraine, intensifying hostility toward Russia and turning soldier Matsievsky into a national symbol of resilience. On the one hand, this situation strengthened morale by deepening hatred toward the attacking state. However, at the same time, Ukrainian soldiers are aware that brutal executions and torture are common for POWs, which lowers motivation to fight by producing fear and increases the probability of desertion.

A strong sense that surrender is not an option can significantly boost morale within the armed forces. When soldiers believe that their struggle is existential - that the survival of their country, families, and way of life depends on their resistance—they are more likely to remain committed despite adversity. For example, Andrii Protsenko, an athlete who remained with his family in the occupied part of the Kherson region, expressed this sentiment clearly: “We cannot surrender because it is our land and our country.”³³ Similarly, Ukrainian veteran and mother Mariana Zhaglo powerfully stated, “I am fighting so my children don’t have to,”

³² Lorenzo Tondo, "Zelenskiy awards Hero of Ukraine to PoW killed by Russian forces", The Guardian, 12 March 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/12/ukraine-identifies-pow-killed-by-russians-as-oleksandr-igorevich-matsievskiy>.

³³ "Andriy Protsenko: "We cannot give up - this is our land and our country"", Ukrainian Athletics Federation, 11 July 2022, <https://uaf.org.ua/2022/07/11/andrij-protsenko-zdavatsiya-ne-mozhna-tse-nasha-zemlia-j-nasha-kraina/>.

highlighting how the desire to protect future generations fuels unwavering determination.³⁴ Such statements of Ukrainians reflect the deeply personal stakes involved in the war, strengthening their will to keep fighting even in the most difficult circumstances.

Additionally, I analyzed the interviews of former Ukrainian prisoners of war, who had shared their experiences of “physical and psychological violence, including beatings and electric shock torture” before they were released from captivity and returned to Ukraine.³⁵ The Ukrainian POWs were kept hungry and denied adequate medical assistance, which led to the deaths of some of them. When this information is posted in the media, it assists international organizations and human rights advocates in investigating crimes committed by Russia. However, it also negatively impacts the overall morale of Ukrainian soldiers. When other Ukrainian soldiers witness this, it naturally fuels fear and discourages participation in the war. This is a significant problem, as there is no effective mechanism for identifying these criminals and prosecuting them for war crimes, specifically for the mistreatment of prisoners of war, which takes place either in Russia or occupied Ukrainian territories.

Visible progress on the battlefield is what increases soldiers' willingness to fight. The Ukrainian combatants felt euphoric when they liberated Kherson in November 2022, invaded the Kursk region in August 2024, or witnessed the explosion of the Crimean Bridge, a critical piece of Russian military infrastructure, in 2022. When the Ukrainian army liberated Kherson from the Russian occupation, its soldiers paraded through the city with a blue and yellow flag. The media reported that “wide-eyed Kherson locals hugged them, cheered, and threw flowers at the passing convoy.”³⁶ Volodymyr Zelenskyy officially arrived in Kherson and

³⁴ Anthony Loyd, "I'm Fighting So My Children Don't Have To: A Ukrainian Mother at War", *The Times*, 19 April 2024, <https://www.thetimes.com/world/article/im-fighting-so-my-children-dont-have-to-a-ukrainian-mother-at-war-2x6wcvlxz>.

³⁵ Hugo Bachega, "Torture, hunger and humiliation. Freed Ukrainians spoke about Russian captivity", *BBC*, 16 August 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/features-66518484>.

³⁶ Harriet Salem, "Moment that mattered: Kherson is liberated by Ukrainian troops", *The Slow Journalism Magazine*, 11 November 2022, <https://www.slow-journalism.com/moments-that-mattered/kherson-is-liberated-by-ukrainian-troops>.

said, “This is the beginning of the end of the war,” marking the battle for Kherson as an important milestone in this war.³⁷

Furthermore, Reuters interviewed Kyiv residents about their views on the role of the Kursk operation, which aimed to divert Russian troops from Porkovsk and Kharkiv. One of them, Olha Pavlovska, said, "This was a very brave and important step for maintaining morale in society."³⁸ Overall, besides boosting Ukrainian morale, the Kursk operation enabled Ukraine to capture portions of Russian territory and soldiers, which can be used in prisoner-of-war exchanges. It also helped undermine Russian morale, which never expected that its smaller victim could also attack its territories. Finally, successful military operations are essential for getting more foreign aid, as “supporters from all over the democratic world are pleased to see Ukrainian success on the battlefield, which encourages them to continue and even increase their support.”³⁹

Continuing with what boosts military morale in Ukraine are awards and social recognition. Without recognition from political and military leadership, the government, and the civilian population, it is very easy for soldiers to lose motivation and understanding of their role as individuals in a large conflict. Since various military awards are given for courage, professionalism, heroism, and self-sacrifice, they help raise motivation to fight and achieve more on the battlefield. The importance of awards is evident in the tendency of people who lost their loved ones in the Russian war to create petitions urging the President of

³⁷ Salem, "Moment that mattered: Kherson is liberated by Ukrainian troops".

³⁸ Dan Peleschuk, "Kursk incursion boosts Ukrainian morale after grim year", Reuters, 21 August 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/kursk-incursion-boosts-ukrainian-morale-after-grim-year-2024-08-21/>.

³⁹ Dinara Khalilova, "Kursk operation: What Ukraine achieved so far and potential future gains", The Kyiv Independent, 25 August 2024, <https://kyivindependent.com/kursk-operation-what-ukraine-achieved-so-far-and-potential-future-gains/>.

Ukraine to honor their fallen soldiers with the title of Hero of Ukraine, the highest state award.⁴⁰

In Ukraine, there is high public support for military personnel. The absolute majority (96%) of Ukrainians have a positive attitude towards the soldiers of the modern Ukrainian army.⁴¹ Relations with civilians, when they help fundraise for military needs or when children draw patriotic pictures for the military, help sustain morale by giving soldiers the sense that they are needed, remembered, and respected for their service. Many researchers argue that Ukraine's resilience in this war is largely due to the cohesion between the military and civilians and the extensive volunteering of civilians to support the war effort. For example, Ukrainian artists, when performing and touring with concerts, donate a significant portion of their revenue to buy drones or medical equipment and send them to the army. Additionally, many civilians raise millions of hryvnias (Ukrainian currency) through their personal social media accounts or by running charitable foundations, such as Serhii Sternenko, Ihor Lachen, Melania Podolyak, Serhii Prytula, and others.⁴² The civil society network and its fundraising efforts are essential during the war because Ukraine, as a small state, lacks the finances and weapons to confront its much larger adversary, Russia.

Another tactic used to maintain morale is the so-called media “propaganda,” which emphasizes mostly positive news and successes from the frontline. Even though Ukraine is a democracy, such a form of “propaganda” exists in the news during wartime. Casualty numbers are almost never disclosed, and battlefield losses are either concealed or not reported

⁴⁰ Volodymyr Mysan-Miliasevych, "They received 25 thousand votes, but were denied the title. Do petitions help to receive the Hero of Ukraine title?", *Life.Pravda*, 2 November 2023, <https://life.pravda.com.ua/society/2023/11/2/257339/>.

⁴¹ "The absolute majority of Ukrainians have a positive attitude towards the modern Ukrainian army — sociological survey", *Armiya Inform*, 4 May 2022, <https://armyinform.com.ua/2022/05/04/absolyutna-bilshist-ukrayincziv-pozytyvno-stavytsya-do-suchasnoyi-ukrayinskoyi-armiyi-socziologichne-opytuvannya/>.

⁴² Svitlana Kuts, "Third Sector as Third Power: A Study of Resource Mobilization by Ukrainian Civil Society in 2022-2023", *Ednannia*, December 2023, https://api.home.ednannia.ua/upload/kch/24/10/07/ISAR_Ednannia_Third_Sector_as_Third_Power_Report_Eng.pdf.

by the media. News reporters and political and military analysts often tend to say, “The Russian side is demoralized, weak, and suffering heavy losses.” However, this approach is largely accepted because publicizing losses could not only demoralize society, whose support is crucial during the war, but also assist the enemy in assessing Ukraine’s potential, which is not in the country's interests.⁴³

Much more dangerous is the propaganda used by Russia, particularly the kind it spreads in temporarily occupied Ukrainian territories. “Russian forces seized communication infrastructure and blocked any outside information. They actively spread narratives that heralded Russia’s liberating mission and vilified Ukraine.”⁴⁴ Russians tell Ukrainians under their occupation that the Ukrainian army has given up and is not trying to liberate them, urging them to obtain Russian passports. Human Rights Watch reports that if local Ukrainians from occupied parts of Zaporizka, Khersonska, Donetska, and Luhanska regions refuse to get Russian passports, they are forced to leave, according to a decree Vladimir Putin issued on March 20, 2025.⁴⁵ Russia intentionally spreads false narratives about Ukraine’s battlefield losses, leadership incompetence, and lack of international support. Unfortunately, this propaganda is often effective, aiding Russia in achieving its military objectives, undermining soldiers’ morale, and instilling doubt and fear.

Another crucial factor influencing military morale is the international support Ukraine has received in the form of financial aid and weapons from countries across the US, the EU, East Asia, and others. However, Ukraine has not received direct support from foreign troops,

⁴³ "Why there is not and should not be the whole truth about the war in the media", Shostka News City, <https://shostkanews.city/articles/198566/chomu-v-media-nemaye-i-ne-maye-buti-vsiyei-pravdi-pro-vijnu->.

⁴⁴ Jade McGlynn, "Russian Propaganda Tactics in Ukraine’s Newly Occupied Territories", *Russian Analytical Digest* 313 (21 May 2024): p.2, https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/Russian_Analytical_Digest_313.pdf.

⁴⁵ Kseniya Kvitka, "Get a Passport or Leave: Russia’s Ultimatum to Ukrainians", Human Rights Watch, 25 March 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/03/25/get-passport-or-leave-russias-ultimatum-ukrainians>.

which could have significantly strengthened its military capabilities. Notably, approximately 20,000 individuals from around the world have signed up to serve in the Ukrainian army since 2022, though experts estimate that only about 2,000 are actively serving.⁴⁶ This number is relatively small, given the scale of the Russian war against Ukraine. For comparison, North Korea has reportedly sent over 11,000 troops to support Russia's war effort, highlighting the disparity in international military assistance on the battlefield.⁴⁷

There is also a problem of military leadership within the Ukrainian army. Soldiers report some ineffective military leadership, sometimes in Soviet-style culture, which leads to numerous casualties and territory losses.⁴⁸ In the interview for the Kyiv Independent, a Ukrainian lieutenant, Bohdan Krotevych, expresses his concern that "Most (Ukrainian soldiers) are ready to give their lives for Ukraine, but the only thing that they want to know is that it was not for nothing."⁴⁹ Krotevych further states that there is a significant lack of trust in the military leadership. One of the reasons for this is the appointment of the new Commander-in-Chief, Oleksandr Syrskyi, born and raised in Russia. Syrskyi is known for his "Soviet-era" command style and a perceived tendency to prioritize rigid strategies over valuing military personnel and safeguarding their lives.⁵⁰ NATO standards assert that effective military leadership and supportive behavior are directly linked to maintaining high morale among combatants.⁵¹ Therefore, issues with military leadership in Ukraine can

⁴⁶ Cameron Manley, "Ukraine was a magnet for foreign fighters. After 2 bruising years, many are disillusioned or dead.", Business Insider, 11 May 2024, <https://www.businessinsider.com/ukraines-international-legion-is-still-fighting-but-not-many-left-2024-5>.

⁴⁷ Jack Kim, "North Korea has sent more troops to Russia, reports citing Seoul's spy agency say", Reuters, 26 February 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/north-korea-has-sent-more-troops-russia-reports-citing-skorea-spy-agency-say-2025-02-27/>.

⁴⁸ Natalia Yermak and Francis Farrell, "As Ukraine's fate hangs in the balance, 'Soviet' command culture damages war effort", The Kyiv Independent, 27 March 2025, <https://kyivindependent.com/as-ukraines-fate-hangs-in-the-balance-soviet-command-culture-damages-war-effort/>.

⁴⁹ Yermak and Farrell, "As Ukraine's fate hangs in the balance, 'Soviet' command culture damages the war effort".

⁵⁰ "Kursk incursion: Ukrainian General Oleksandr Syrsky shifts the focus of the war", France 24, 15 August 2024, <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20240815-kursk-incursion-ukrainian-general-oleksandr-syrsky-shifts-focus-war-russia>.

⁵¹ Janet Mantler, Gary Ivey and Ann-Renee Blais, "An Evidence-based Model of Morale: So What for Leaders?", *NATO*.

understandably undermine overall morale and diminish the willingness of Ukrainian combatants to fight.

Three years after the invasion began, the military morale is greatly lower in Ukraine, and there is a lack of people on the battlefield.⁵² It was expected that a prolonged war would be difficult to fight, even for those who feel deeply patriotic and committed to defending their land. Ukraine now faces challenges in mobilizing new soldiers, with reports of coercion and instances of violence during recruitment efforts. The neologism “busification” emerged in Ukraine to describe the forced placement of men by Ukrainian conscription officers on a bus to the mobilization centers. Those coercive measures force Ukrainian men who wish to avoid mobilization to stay away from public places where conscription officers patrol. As a result, they seek illegal ways to cross the Ukrainian border and evade military service. Furthermore, there have been 30,000 desertions from Ukraine’s army, as combatants feel exhausted and try to flee their post.⁵³ One of the reasons that explains this is the unequal ratio of Russian and Ukrainian soldiers, which experts estimate as 10 to 1.⁵⁴ This leads to poorer military morale, as soldiers feel they are engaged in an unequal fight, with some evading service while others bear the burden of defending the country.

The case study of Ukrainian soldiers' morale helped us understand which factors were important for sustaining military morale during the ongoing Russian invasion. It has also analyzed which events or aspects contributed to lowering morale. Overall, Ukraine's experience may serve as a valuable example for other small states facing attacks from larger adversaries. By examining these aspects, future researchers and policymakers can gain insights into effective strategies for boosting resilience, mobilizing civil society support, and

⁵² Scott Peterson, "Facing relentless Russia, Ukraine confronts shortages of men and morale", The Christian Science Monitor, 4 February 2025, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2025/0204/ukraine-battlefront-morale-military-shortages-russia>.

⁵³ Shola Lawal, "Why is Ukraine’s army facing a desertion crisis?", Aljazeera, 21 October 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/10/21/why-is-ukraines-army-facing-a-desertion-crisis>.

⁵⁴ Lawal, "Why is Ukraine’s army facing a desertion crisis?"

countering enemy propaganda, crucial elements for enduring prolonged conflicts and achieving eventual victory.

2.2. Military Morale in Russia

Many researchers and analysts claim that the military morale of Russian soldiers in the war against Ukraine is relatively low.⁵⁵ They argue that this is due to forced mobilization and the perception that it is Putin's war - ordinary Russians have no control over it, even if they oppose it. In this subchapter, I examine this claim to determine its accuracy and assess the level of morale among Russian combatants. To understand Russia's approach to communication with its soldiers and what shapes their morale, I analyze available resources, articles, and interviews with Russian soldiers in captivity. Additionally, I will explore the messages of civilian Russians in Telegram channels, specifically their news chats, to examine how Russian civilians react to the war and their opinions regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

At the beginning of the full-scale invasion, testimonies from captured Russian soldiers revealed that they had been misled by their higher leadership. Many reported being told they were merely participating in a "special military training exercise" and would soon return home, with no indication that they were being deployed to invade another sovereign state.⁵⁶ The Russian government told lower rank soldiers they needed to rescue the country from the Nazi regime. This idea was expressed by Putin in his address to the Russian people in September 2022, "The goal of the special military operation is to liberate Ukraine from the neo-Nazi regime that seized power in Ukraine in 2014 as a result of an armed coup."⁵⁷ When

⁵⁵ Yermak and Farrell, "As Ukraine's Fate Hangs in the Balance, 'Soviet' Command Culture Damages War Effort".

⁵⁶ Mia Jankowicz, "Captured Russians Said Their Leaders Lied About the Plan to Invade Ukraine, Leaving Them Unprepared for Fierce Resistance", Business Insider, 7 March 2022, <https://shorturl.at/M68he>.

⁵⁷ Michael Wasiura, "Putin: 'Partial Mobilization' to 'Liberate' Ukraine From 'Neo-Nazi Regime'", Newsweek, 21 September 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/putin-partial-mobilization-liberate-ukraine-neo-nazi-regime-1744860>.

confronted with the realities of war, including the killing of Ukrainian civilians and soldiers, Russian combatants encountered a stark contrast between what they had been told by their authorities and the actual nature of their mission. This disparity between official war objectives and the personal expectations of soldiers contributed to widespread disillusionment, thousands of desertions, and a significant decline in morale among Russian troops.⁵⁸

Wasielewski points out that Russian soldiers are treated as means to an end rather than as an end in themselves.⁵⁹ He also argues that the Russian authoritarian regime cannot survive without relying on violence. Russia, to achieve its brutal goals, employs similarly harsh approaches toward its own people to recruit them to participate in the war. While Ukraine, with its limited human resources, strives to preserve the lives of its soldiers as much as possible, Russia is willing to endure significant human losses to serve Moscow's political objectives. The author argues that such approaches to mobilization may be effective in the short term but tend to reveal weaknesses in the long term since they affect soldiers' willingness to fight, especially when they realize their lives are not valued.⁶⁰ As we learned in the previous chapter, military morale is built on fair and open dialogue - when the military understands the goal and its role in achieving it, and is prepared to follow the leadership's orders. This is precisely what the Russian military has struggled to provide.

For this case study, I analyzed a very insightful and important project by Ukrainian interviewer Emma Antoniuk titled *What should we know about Russian evil?* She visited a camp holding captured Russian soldiers in Lviv region, the West of Ukraine, and conducted interviews with ten of them, asking questions about the goals of the Russian war in Ukraine,

⁵⁸ ISW Press, "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment", The Institute for the Study of War, 5 March 2025, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-5-2025>.

⁵⁹ Philip Wasielewski, *The Roots of Russian Military Dysfunction* (Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 2023), <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/03/the-roots-of-russian-military-dysfunction/>.

⁶⁰ Wasielewski, *The Roots of Russian Military Dysfunction*.

their personal roles in the conflict, whether they feel responsible for wrongdoing, and how they perceive their president, Vladimir Putin. First of all, all of the respondents expressed the belief that Putin values their lives and that serving in the military is their duty, something they cannot refuse. They held a positive opinion of Putin, often describing him as a smart, responsible, and strong *tsar* (emperor). From Antoniuk's investigation, Russian soldiers are often poorly educated and, in many cases, include former prisoners and individuals with criminal backgrounds. The interviews reveal how the Russian government can effectively manipulate such people through years of sustained propaganda. Russian soldiers are convinced they came to Ukraine with a great and unique mission - to liberate Ukrainians, "the brotherly people." Most of them do not understand what exactly they are "saving" Ukrainians from. When asked deeper questions, they struggle to explain their mission or articulate the objectives of the war.⁶¹

In terms of morale and our study, the analysis of this project proves, first, that information and propaganda are essential tools, not less important than military arsenal, which can greatly serve in achieving military objectives. Second, morale to fight is high when citizens perceive their government as just and legitimate, and believe its policies toward them are fair. This is precisely what Russian POWs expressed - they do not see a problem with Vladimir Putin remaining in power since 2000. Thus, the issue with military morale can arise because many Russian soldiers do not understand their role as individuals and the broader implications of the war: for what purpose are they risking their lives?

Additionally, this project shows the conditions in which Russian prisoners of war are held. Russian soldiers know that being captured by the Ukrainian army is often safer than remaining on the battlefield. In captivity, they have access to warmth, food, opportunities to

⁶¹ Emma Antoniuk, "I Visited a Camp for Prisoners of War. What Should We Know About Russian Evil? Why Are They Like This?", *Tse Nikhto Ne Bude Dyvytys'*, video, 24 February 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-686oUf4NIA&t=2276s>.

exercise, medical and dental care, books, and other basic conveniences - none of which are guaranteed on the front lines, where the risk of death, serious injury, and inhumane living conditions is high. In contrast, Ukrainian soldiers fear capture, knowing that if they fall into Russian soldiers' hands, they are unlikely to receive food or medical care and may face beatings, torture, or execution. However, this asymmetry does not lower Russian soldiers' morale, as Ukraine abides by the Geneva Convention and other international humanitarian law, and, therefore, must meet those standards in its treatment of POWs.

This project of visiting POW camps, along with other interviews with Russian prisoners of war, is important as it sheds light on the scale and impact of Russian wartime propaganda. It challenges the common narrative that this war is solely Putin's by showing that many Russian soldiers themselves commit acts of rape, torture, and other war crimes - believing these actions are justified because their commanders instructed them to do so. It is also important to note that many atrocities committed by Russian forces were not directly ordered but carried out independently by soldiers. These testimonies are essential to examine when studying morale, as they reveal how propaganda, obedience to authority, and distorted perceptions of right and wrong influence soldiers' motivations and behavior on the battlefield.

Eugene Finkel, in his book *Intent to Destroy*, explains how Russia has been using genocidal tactics for centuries - killings, deportations, starvation, and cultural destruction - to dominate Ukrainians and destroy their path to independence. This is explained, the author claims, by the belief that Ukrainians and Russians are the same people, which is why Russia has always used violence to crush Ukrainian efforts to crystallize its identity and become a democratic state.⁶² Finkel argues that ordinary Russians are not simply passive victims of state propaganda but are often complicit, either through active support for the war, committing war crimes, or willingness to tolerate authoritarian rule. They dehumanize

⁶² Eugene Finkel, *Intent to Destroy: Russia's Two-Hundred-Year Quest to Dominate Ukraine* (New York: Basic Books, 2024).

Ukrainians and deny Ukrainian nationhood, making the use of violence, including atrocities, more acceptable or even justifiable in their eyes. This mindset, he suggests, is not limited to elites but is present among regular citizens as well.⁶³

In addition to analyzing interviews with Russian prisoners of war, this thesis also examines the comments of Russian civilians, particularly those found in Telegram channels reporting on the Russian invasion of Ukraine. I have included in my analysis seven Telegram channels, such as Military Informer (*Voyennyi Osvedomitel'*), Obsessed with war (Povernutyie na voyne), Archangel of Special Forces (*Arkhangel Spetsnaza*), Colonelcassad, Kirill Fedorov / War History Weapons (*Kirill Fedorov / Voyennaya Istoriya Oruzhiye*), Readovka, and Panchenko. Each of these channels has between 370,000 and over a million Russian-speaking followers. Specifically, I analyzed how Russian civilians respond to news about bombings targeting Ukrainian civilian infrastructure. The tone of most comments is one of gloating and hostility; many express satisfaction over the suffering of civilian and military Ukrainians. A common justification is the claim that “you started this war, so you deserve killings,” placing blame squarely on the Ukrainian side. In the comments, Ukrainians are often referred to using derogatory slurs such as 'khohols' and 'svinina' (pigs), reflecting deep-seated dehumanization and ethnic hatred.

I analyzed online responses to the Russian missile strike on Kryvyi Rih, which occurred on April 4th, 2025, and killed 20 Ukrainian civilians, including 9 children playing in a playground. The attack, widely condemned as a war crime, sparked disturbing reactions among Russian-speaking Telegram users. For instance, some comments included, “*Как игрушки хорошо горят в дитячем садочке*” (“How nicely the toys are burning in the kindergarten”) and “*Сейчас хохлы скажут что это детский садик был*” (“Now the khokhols will say it was a kindergarten”). These responses reflect the dehumanizing

⁶³ Finkel, *Intent to Destroy: Russia's Two-Hundred-Year Quest to Dominate Ukraine*.

narratives encouraged by Russian propaganda. The official stance of the Russian government is that such sites in Ukraine are military facilities disguised as civilian infrastructure, which contributes to public justification and even celebration of civilian casualties among Ukrainians.

Overall, the comments of Russian people on Telegram channels reflect a systematic use of hate speech that supports ethnic violence and mass suffering. Additionally, there is a blurring of civilian and military targets in Russian users' minds, reducing all of Ukraine to an enemy space. These attitudes are not isolated but reflect broader narratives of justification and propaganda internalization in Russian society during wartime, which proves that it is not “just Putin’s war.” This is because the emotional tone (glee, mockery, cruelty) of people’s comments shows popular endorsement of state violence, not just passive support of the war.

While many Russian males are reluctant to be mobilized due to the personal risks to their lives and health, they still believe the war in Ukraine is just. For example, United24Media investigated that the wife of a Russian soldier, Olga Bykovskaya, urged his husband to rape Ukrainian women. She said on the phone, “Just do not tell me anything. The most important thing is that you use protection.”⁶⁴ Furthermore, the Statista data shows a broader picture: “The majority of Russians expressed support for the actions of their country's military forces in Ukraine. In total, 80 percent of respondents certainly or rather supported them in February 2025.”⁶⁵ The literature review shows that strong civilian support can significantly boost soldiers’ morale, as it reinforces their sense of purpose and backing. However, in Russia, this is probably not the case - The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) research reveals a deep military-civilian divide within Russian society. “Although

⁶⁴ United24Media, "Olga Bykovskaya, wife of a Russian soldier, was sentenced in absentia to 5 years for urging him to rape Ukrainian women. A 2022 SBU intercept caught her...", Instagram, 2 April 2025, https://www.instagram.com/p/DH9UOyxuthy/?img_index=1&igsh=Ym14NnJtOHo5OHFo.

⁶⁵ Statista Research Department, "Russia: Opinion on Military Actions in Ukraine 2025", Statista, 6 March 2025, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1306904/russia-public-opinion-on-military-action-in-ukraine/>.

most Russians respect the military, not everyone is ready to bear the costs.”⁶⁶ In addition, most Russians have a limited understanding of military service, and their mythologized perception of the armed forces further deepens the divide between civilians and the military.⁶⁷ This leads to the conclusion that support for the war in Ukraine among Russian civilians does not necessarily translate into active support for the military or willingness to enlist, which signals a lower level of overall military morale in Russia.

In October 2024, reports emerged indicating that approximately 12,000 North Korean soldiers were assisting Russia in its war against Ukraine, specifically in operations aimed at repelling Ukrainian forces from the Kursk region. On the one hand, the involvement of North Korean troops significantly boosts Russia's military manpower, especially given that Ukraine, unlike Russia, cannot rely on foreign armies and faces challenges in resisting a much larger adversary alone. However, the Ukrainian spies intercepted phone calls showing that Russians have difficulties with integrating North Korean troops into their military operations.⁶⁸ The Russian military assigned translators and Russian servicemen to assist North Korean troops with communication and coordination. Additionally, Russian soldiers expressed anger and frustration over the presence of North Korean troops, not only due to communication difficulties but also because essential equipment and resources were reportedly redirected to support the Koreans. In the call, one of the Russian soldiers says, “What 15 crews are you talking about? We only have one training APC (armored personnel carrier). I want to kill him today, yes, after the Koreans. May I?”⁶⁹, which suggests a decline in overall military morale.

⁶⁶ Kirill Shamiev, "The Imperfect Equilibrium of Russian Civil–Military Relations", RUSI, 12 April 2021, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/imperfect-equilibrium-russian-civil-military-relations>.

⁶⁷ Shamiev, "The Imperfect Equilibrium of Russian Civil–Military Relations".

⁶⁸ Cybele Mayes-Osterman, "Chaos as Russia tries to absorb North Korean troops, Ukraine spies say", USA Today, 29 October 2024, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2024/10/29/russian-soldiers-north-korean-troops-intercepted-calls/75910608007/>.

⁶⁹ "Intercept Shows: russians Express Enmity to Arriving North Korean Soldiers", Defense Intelligence of Ukraine, 25 October 2024, <https://gur.gov.ua/en/content/ia-eho-khochu-ubyt-sehodnia-da-posle-koreitsev-rosiiany-vykazuiut-vorozhe-stavlennia-do-sol>

History shows that Russia has not had a successful military coup since 1801.⁷⁰ However, during its war with Ukraine, the emergence and activity of private military groups significantly influenced military morale. One of the most notable examples is the Wagner Group, led by Yevgeny Prigozhin. Tensions between Wagner and the official Russian military leadership, particularly Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, became increasingly visible. Prigozhin openly accused Shoigu of incompetence and strategic failures on the battlefield. These growing disputes culminated in the Wagner Group's rebellion in June 2023, highlighting internal fractures within the Russian military command and contributing to instability and lowered morale among troops. If the coup had succeeded, it would have significantly altered the course of the war by destabilizing the Russian government and undermining military morale.

What also contributes to sustaining morale is the occupation and education of combatants. "The Russians fighting in Ukraine are either mercenaries, prisoners, conscripts, or volunteers who are fighting for the promise of money."⁷¹ Radio Liberty shares a story of Eleman, a migrant from Kyrgyzstan, who was first sentenced in Russia and then sent to the battlefield.⁷² Human rights activists have reported that numerous penal colonies in Russia have been shut down, as inmates were transferred from these facilities to serve in the military. Additionally, reports suggest that Russian officials have intentionally made conditions in penal colonies unbearably harsh and inhumane to coerce inmates into enlisting in the war effort. The survey conducted in Russia also shows that educated young Russians are less willing to serve in the military and less likely to respect military traditions than their older

dativ-z-kndr.

⁷⁰ Shamiev, "The Imperfect Equilibrium of Russian Civil–Military Relations".

⁷¹ Stavros Atlamazoglou, "As Morale Tanks, Discontent Plagues Russia's Military in Ukraine War", *The National Interest*, 2 December 2024, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/morale-tanks-discontent-plagues-russias-military-ukraine-war-213941>.

⁷² Farangis Najibullah, "Russia Pressures Central Asian Prisoners To Fight In Ukraine As 'Expendable Force'", *Radio Liberty*, 18 October 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-central-asian-prisoners-war-ukraine-expendable/33162689.html>.

compatriots. Forceful mobilization and coercive methods might work in the short term, but generally, recruiting inmates would result in their low discipline and motivation to fight, especially if they are not Russians and come from different countries - they do not have a sense of purpose and patriotism, which is essential to sustain morale.

To summarize, the case study of Russian morale provides valuable insights into the methods employed by the Russian government to sustain military motivation, as well as the societal attitudes that shape it. The analysis reveals that the war against Ukraine is not merely a top-down initiative led by President Putin; rather, it is widely supported by segments of the Russian population who have been deeply influenced by years of state-sponsored propaganda. Many Russians deny the existence of a distinct Ukrainian nation and genuinely believe that the war began as a response to so-called neo-Nazi actions in Donbas. Although several factors have contributed to low morale among Russian troops, such as poor logistics, unclear objectives, reluctance to mobilization, and harsh conditions, many soldiers still perceive their actions as legitimate. They view themselves not as aggressors doing something wrong, but as fulfilling a patriotic duty to “liberate” Ukraine. This mindset illustrates how Russian narratives of moral justification can uphold military morale, even within an autocratic regime facing widespread international condemnation.

Policy Recommendations for the Ukrainian Government to Strengthen the Military

Morale

The first chapter of this thesis provided an understanding of military morale and the conditions under which it rises or falls. I then applied this literature to the context of the Russian war in Ukraine, identifying the specific factors that have shaped military morale and its role in this particular conflict. Now, it is essential to offer policy recommendations to the Ukrainian government on how to leverage military morale as a strength, ensuring that psychological resilience compensates for limitations in military capabilities. These policies acknowledge the conditions of war, which do not fully allow upholding of all human rights under such exceptional circumstances.

First, the Ukrainian government should consider implementing softer mobilization policies and recruiting people through encouragement and a comprehensive system of incentives, as voluntary enlistment has proven to be more effective than coercion. The use of force during mobilization fuels some Ukrainian men's desire to either flee the country illegally or avoid conscription through alternative means. The statistics show that more than 23,000 Ukrainian men have illegally crossed the border with Moldova since February 2022.⁷³ This data reflects just the statistics from a single border crossing: the actual number of Ukrainian men who have illegally crossed into Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and Romania is much higher, with the total figure remaining unknown.

To address this issue, the Ukrainian government, particularly the Ministry of Defense, should engage with the heads of local conscription offices and strictly prohibit the use of force in the mobilization process. In cases where force is applied, a clear system of penalties should be established and enforced. There is a need to avoid forceful methods, such as detaining individuals or transporting them against their will to conscription centers. The

⁷³ RFE/RL's Moldovan Service, "More Than 23,000 Ukrainian Men Crossed Illegally Into Moldova Since Start of Invasion", Radio Liberty, 10 August 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/illegal-ukrainians-crossing-border-moldova/33029450.html>.

result of such a policy would be that Ukrainians aged 18-60 do not fear military service and would be more likely to join the Armed Forces of Ukraine voluntarily, motivated by patriotism or the benefits offered, rather than by coercion.

Second, Ukraine needs to increase the recruitment of foreign volunteer fighters. It is highly unlikely that any country will send its troops to help Ukraine push back the Russian army. However, individuals from abroad can join the International Legion of Territorial Defense of Ukraine. Members of the Ukrainian diaspora worldwide, as well as other supporters of Ukraine, may be willing to enlist. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, together with the Main Directorate of Intelligence, can launch a campaign to communicate the defensive strategy and goals and establish a strong system of incentives for foreign volunteers. This effort could bring in another 2,000-5,000 foreign volunteers to fight against Russian aggression, helping to compensate for mobilization challenges and the lack of direct military support from other countries. Combined with the modern weapons provided by international partners, the presence of foreign volunteer fighters can signal to Ukrainian combatants that they are not alone in their fight for freedom, ultimately boosting morale and reinforcing a shared sense of purpose. For example, former Tory Parliament Member in Britain, Jack Loprest, joined the Ukrainian military in 2025 in a non-combat role with the motivation to use his experience in weapon procurement, diplomacy, and work with veterans to help Ukraine fight against Russia.⁷⁴

Third, the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Health, in cooperation with NGOs, NATO, and military commanders, should establish mandatory resilience and mental health training for all combatants. While numerous Ukrainian and international NGOs and clinics offer free counseling and therapy for active-duty soldiers, veterans, and their families, participation in these programs remains optional.

⁷⁴ Jamie Grierson, "Ex-Tory MP Reportedly Joins Ukraine Foreign Legion in Non-Combat Role", The Guardian, 4 February 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/feb/04/ex-tory-mp-reportedly-joins-ukraine-foreign-legion-jack-lopresti>.

The core issue lies in the perception of mental health care, as stigma and the fear of appearing weak often discourage soldiers from seeking support. Many combatants are also unaware of the resources available to them. To address this, psychological resilience training should be made mandatory, just like physical training, and modeled after best practices used by NATO member states. This would normalize mental health care within the military structure and help ensure that all soldiers receive the support they need before, during, and after deployment.

Fourth, it is essential to expand training opportunities for military leadership. Some current commanders were trained under the Soviet military model, which places heavy emphasis on physical strength and weapons capabilities, often neglecting the psychological well-being of soldiers and their families. This is important to implement because most current training programs are targeted at combatants rather than higher-ranking officers, leaving a gap in leadership development. Expanding professional education for military leadership - especially in areas such as mental health awareness, communication, ethical leadership, and personnel management - can help bridge this gap and reduce misunderstandings between soldiers and commanders. Such training should draw on contemporary standards, including practices adopted by NATO militaries, to ensure a modern, effective, and resilient command structure.

Fifth, introduce and institutionalize bottom-up communication within the military. Open dialogue between high-ranking commanders and soldiers should be encouraged through regular meetings and feedback sessions. In addition, anonymous feedback forms can be distributed among combatants, allowing them to freely express concerns about military service, leadership, and conditions within their brigade. Captain of US Air Force (USAF) Little, underlines the need for bottom-up communication as “The lower ranks are the

technical experts and a lot of times know more about what they operate than a leader does.”⁷⁵

This approach would not only improve trust and morale but also help Ukrainian commanders identify and address issues early, creating a more transparent and responsive military culture. Even though I acknowledge that it may not be possible to implement these practices in all zones of the frontline, commanders can and should apply them in locations where the intensity of military actions is lower. This would contribute to higher morale among Ukrainian soldiers, as they would feel that their opinions are valued and that military leadership puts efforts to improve their well-being, service conditions, and overall ability to achieve military objectives effectively.

Overall, it is understandable that war is exhausting, especially for a small state under attack by a great power with overwhelming military capabilities and a vastly larger number of combatants. Even with the best global practices, morale cannot always remain high, as soldiers experience fatigue, trauma, and constant exposure to death and violence. However, the recommended policies can strengthen the resilience of the Ukrainian Armed Forces and help ensure that they remain committed and determined, even under the most adverse conditions of prolonged war.

⁷⁵ Chris Little, "Leadership. A Bottom Up Approach", *The Field Grade Leader*, 5 January 2019, <https://fieldgradeleader.themilitaryleader.com/leadership-little/>.

Conclusion

The idea for this thesis topic emerged as a response to realist scholars who argue that military capabilities are the primary determinant of victory in war. While they often claim that states with superior military power are more likely to win, this thesis seeks to explore how non-military factors affect morale. Leadership, civilian support, national identity, and clear political communication also play a critical role in shaping war outcomes. Specifically, in this thesis, I focused on morale, defined as the willingness to fight and follow orders, using the example of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine launched in February 2022. This research finds that military morale, discipline, and the motivation to fight are critical factors in determining the success of combatants. High morale was one of the key factors that prevented Ukraine from collapsing within the predicted “three days.” Specifically, I examined the conditions that contribute to high morale, including the presence of a democratic regime, fair treatment of citizens, a legitimate and trusted government, strong patriotism and nationalism, a clear sense of individual purpose, available information, and clearly defined, achievable goals.

The case study of Russia’s and Ukraine’s approaches provided valuable insight into how both sides of the war address soldier morale and mental health, the types of incentives they offer, and their efforts to undermine the enemy's morale. The Russian Federation pays limited attention to the mental well-being of its combatants, relying more on coercion and propaganda. Despite being an autocracy, many Russian soldiers feel valued and view President Putin as a legitimate and fair leader who is 'liberating' Ukraine - an idea that, for some, helps sustain morale. In contrast, Ukrainians are driven by a deep sense of nationalism, which fuels their determination to defend their country at any cost. However, as the war drags on, it becomes increasingly challenging to sustain high morale and mobilize new recruits to join the armed forces.

Further developing this study is crucial, as it will provide some guidance for small states or those at risk of foreign aggression from a large power to enhance their preparedness and form effective warfare strategies. Those countries might include, but are not limited to, Moldova, Taiwan, Georgia, Estonia, Latvia, and others. Additionally, since the war in Ukraine is ongoing and issues related to morale and mental health among Ukrainian soldiers persist, the suggested policies could help the Ukrainian government identify current gaps and causes of low morale. Implementing such measures could strengthen resilience, foster patriotism, and ensure that soldiers remain both willing to fight and mentally stable.

The further research should dive into different non-military factors that shape the outcomes and the course of the war, and identify how much or how little they are essential. It will be useful to put all policies together, so the Ukrainian political leadership can take them all into account and become a more resilient and stronger country, able to defeat Russia's powerful army.

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