



STORIES & IMPACT

A War on Collective Memory

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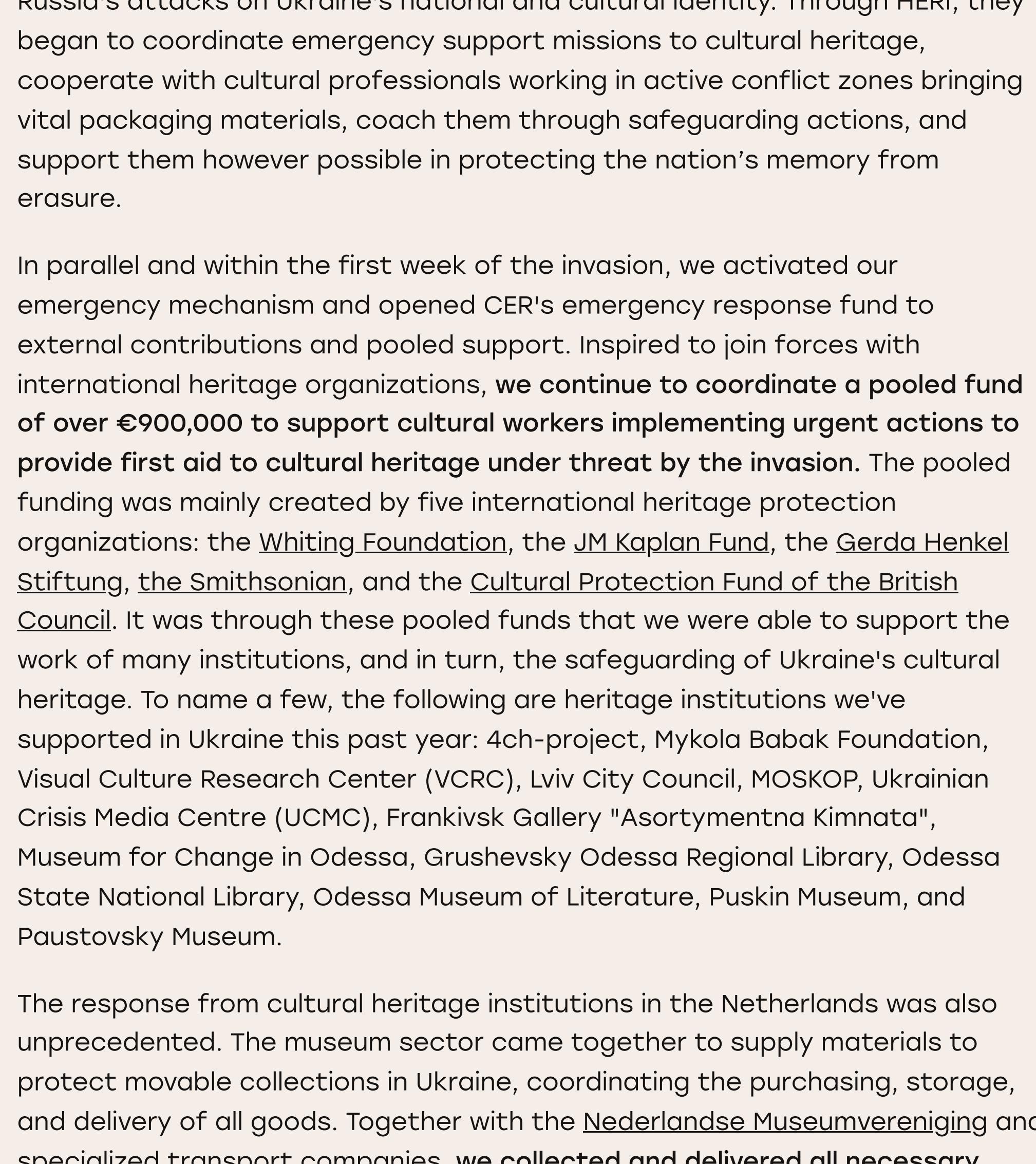
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Date

November 29, 2022

It's been almost a year since Ukraine was invaded by Russian troops.

All over the world, first responders acted immediately to save lives. At the same time, two professionals in the cultural field, [Ihor Poshyvailo](#) and [Vasyl Rozhko](#), came together to discuss options to support the battlefield where a war on collective memory was also being fought. Early on, Poshyvailo and Rozhko recognized that the existential nature of the war meant Ukraine was defending more than its territory – it was defending the very idea and reality of itself. The war on collective memory became clear when Vladimir Putin said, "Ukraine doesn't exist, it was invented." In response are words from our long-time Ukrainian partner, Oleksandra Kovalchuk, "Well, our artwork, our heritage collections, that is what proves Ukraine existed. That's why it's so important to preserve it."



Ukraine Action Plan

Our proactive action helped Poshyvailo and Rozhko with expertise to assist their heritage community in conducting early recovery measures. Both participated in CER, Smithsonian Institution, and ICCROM training and mentorship programs for first aid to cultural heritage before the war broke out. With their previous training, the two joined forces with other brave and trusted volunteers to create what began as a small but strong emergency network in response to the invasion. Soon after, and with the support of the Ministry of Culture, Poshyvailo and Rozhko founded the [Heritage Emergency Rescue Initiative \(HERI\)](#); an initiative by Ukrainian museum experts set up in response to Russia's attacks on Ukraine's national and cultural identity. Through HERI, they began to coordinate emergency support missions to cultural heritage, cooperate with cultural professionals working in active conflict zones bringing vital packaging materials, coach them through safeguarding actions, and support them however possible in protecting the nation's memory from erasure.

In parallel and within the first week of the invasion, we activated our emergency mechanism and opened CER's emergency response fund to external contributions and pooled support. Inspired to join forces with international heritage organizations, we continue to coordinate a pooled fund of over €900,000 to support cultural workers implementing urgent actions to provide first aid to cultural heritage under threat by the invasion. The pooled funding was mainly created by five international heritage protection organizations: the [Whiting Foundation](#), the [JM Kaplan Fund](#), the [Gerda Henkel Stiftung](#), the [Smithsonian](#) and the [Cultural Protection Fund of the British Council](#). It was through these pooled funds that we were able to support the work of many institutions, and in turn, the safeguarding of Ukraine's cultural heritage. To name a few, the following are heritage institutions we've supported in Ukraine this past year: 4ch-project, Mykola Babak Foundation, Visual Culture Research Center (VCRC), Lviv City Council, MOSKOP, Ukrainian Crisis Media Centre (UCMC), Frankivsk Gallery "Asortymetna Kimmata", Museum for Change in Odessa, Grushevsky Odessa Regional Library, Odessa State National Library, Odessa Museum of Literature, Puskin Museum, and Paustovsky Museum.

The response from cultural heritage institutions in the Netherlands was also unprecedented. The museum sector came together to supply materials to protect movable collections in Ukraine, coordinating the purchasing, storage, and delivery of all goods. Together with the [Nederlandse Museumvereniging](#) and specialized transport companies, we collected and delivered all necessary materials to evacuate collections under attack in Ukraine. Our joint efforts helped several museums in Ukraine.



The impact

Upon reflection, our experience with Ukraine confirms one of our founding principles: accessing hard-to-reach places, particularly in a crisis like Ukraine's, depends entirely on established personal connections. We have observed that external actors often lack this approach, and our venture in Ukraine confirms why supporting locally-led response initiatives in emergencies is essential. HERI's founders, who are all well-established, respected, and well-known professionals in the field, reached much further into civil society than we, as outsiders, would have been able to do otherwise. This approach remains critical to achieving our aim of supporting culture in crisis, always doing so in direct cooperation with local actors in the affected communities. At CER, we understand that decentralizing to strong local infrastructures for emergency response is the future of heritage rescue.

We are pleased to share that HERI is now a key go-to center for national and international actors working with cultural heritage protection in the country. With the ongoing close support of CER and others, HERI has grown into an indispensable center for cultural emergency response in Ukraine. Follow them here as they continue to protect culture in crisis.



For this coordinated and joint support in Ukraine, we are grateful for the collaboration and contributions of the [Whiting Foundation](#), the [JM Kaplan Fund](#), the [Gerda Henkel Stiftung](#), the [Smithsonian Institution - Smithsonian Cultural Rescue Initiative \(SCRI\)](#), the [Cultural Protection Fund of the British Council](#), [TEFAF](#), the [Teiger Foundation](#), the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#), and the [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands](#).

Photos | Maidan Museum

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