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In this way, Ukraine and the West are trying to secure the cultural heritage that Russia wants to destroy.

: 22/03/2023

Report

Russia is systematically trying to erase Ukrainian culture, experts see. But already at the beginning of the war, an extensive international network of specialists was formed to safeguard cultural heritage. Who and what are active in this network and what exactly does everyone do?

[Nell Westerlaken](#) 22:2023,12 March 16 (UTC) —————◇◇◇—————



Using photogrammetry-made image of the destroyed Vasil Tarnovsky Museum in Chernihiv, May 2022. The museum, which lost part of its collection during the Second World War, served as a youth library since 1979. Image Bohdan Poshyvailo / Maidan Museum archive

In the first, chaotic weeks after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Ihor Poishivailo, museum director in Kyiv, received an urgent request from a colleague from the north of the country. If he could arrange a generator for the Regional History Museum of Chernihiv. The heavily besieged city was without power and Poishivailo has a large international network of cultural institutes. Perhaps one of them could come to Chernihiv's aid.

For a city on the front lines of a war, there seem to be more urgent matters than electricity for a museum. But when the air raid alarm sounded, at least fifty civilians found shelter in the museum cellar. "Through my network, I received aid material from Italy, including generators, within two weeks," says Poishivailo. "I sent one of them to Chernihiv. For the people in the basement, but also for the preservation of the works of art that could not be evacuated in time.

Feel-good solidarity

Meanwhile, he also had concerns about his own institution. Poishivailo is director of the Maidan Museum in Kyiv, which is dedicated to the Ukrainian popular uprising in 2014 against the then Pro-Russia government. "Immediately after the raid, we loaded our most valuable items and took them to a safe place in Western Ukraine. After that, we started helping to secure private and public collections." Poishivailo is co-founder of [Heri](#), the Heritage Emergency Response Initiative, a network to protect Ukrainian heritage.

From day one of the war, a huge flow of goods had started in Ukraine in individual trucks and convoys, in trains, vans and passenger cars. What no one saw, says Poishivailo, was that in those days a lot of unique, valuable art was secretly transported to the safe west of Ukraine, objects from antiquity, paintings from past centuries, valuable manuscripts, unique icons. Because that Russia was also out to destroy Ukraine's cultural heritage was obvious to Poishivailo and his colleagues from the beginning. 'We saw that already in the regions occupied in 2014: the Russians want to get rid of everything that reminds us of our Ukrainian identity - it is a spearhead in their warfare.'



Ihor Poishivailo, director of the Maidan Museum in Kyiv, with a rescued icon, April 2022. Image Bohdan Poshyvailo / Maidan Museum archive

In the other direction, toward the east, flowed military, medical and humanitarian relief supplies, including boxes of stuffed toys and cat food: the kind of feel-good solidarity that TV stations love to portray.

Not in the picture were the "cultural" relief goods, but they poured in from all over Europe, including the Netherlands.

Packaging material

'It seemed a little embarrassing at first,' says Cindy Zalm, staff member of the Museum of World Cultures Foundation in Amsterdam. 'The Ukrainians were fighting for their country and their lives and you're sending bubble wrap and cardboard.' But, she explains, 'Ukrainian museums made very urgent and specific requests for materials as early as the beginning of the war, through ICOM, the International Council of Museums. These ranged from acid-free paper and cardboard, crates and transport boxes for art objects to tape and fire extinguishers.'

Museums in the West looked at what they could spare. Among them were the Stedelijk and the Rijksmuseum in

Amsterdam, the Loo in Apeldoorn and the Centraal Museum in Utrecht donated packaging and other materials. Salmon coordinated the action in the Netherlands and also involved conservators, the Royal Library, an art transporter and a few other companies at the relief effort, for expertise or logistical help.

On March 21, 2022, just under a month after the Russian invasion, a full truck with a trailer drove from the Netherlands to a distribution point in Poland. Salmon: 'I have a lot of respect for the people who then transported the items further, into the war zone, to save cultural property. Often at the risk of their own lives.'



The cultural center in the Ukrainian town of Okhtyrka, August 2022. The historic building survived two world wars, but was heavily damaged in March 2022. Image Bohdan Poshyvailo / Maidan Museum archive

Cultural genocide

That the Russians specifically targeted Ukrainian cultural property is certain, according to experts. Seven Ukrainian museum directors, recently on a working visit to the Netherlands, even speak of a 'cultural genocide'. Wiping out local culture is a tried-and-true tool of autocratic leaders to make room for their own version of history. Putin left no doubt about it. Shortly before the invasion, he claimed that today's Ukraine was shaped entirely by Russia.

Russian looting of cultural property is numerous. For example, just before the Battle of Mariupol, spring 2022, dozens of Ukrainian-Russian paintings disappeared from local museums, including works by 19th-century romantic nature painters [Ivan Ajvazovsky](#) and [Archip Kubindzji](#). Works by Western European painters was not taken. In the occupied city of Melitopol, a [museum employee](#) was taken [hostage](#) by armed Russians when she would not reveal where the museum treasures were hidden.

A series of well-orchestrated raids took place in the city of Cherson. Just before the Russians withdrew from the city occupied since March in late October, they emptied archives, churches and museums in what looked like a military operation. They took valuable icons, pre-Soviet archives, archaeological objects, precious gold objects from the Scythians, the Sarmatians and other Black Sea peoples. Even the bones of [Grigori Pottyomkin](#), the 18th-century founder of Cherson and lover of Tsarina Catherine the Great, were stolen from the cathedral.

Clear pattern

Two trucks pulled up at the [Art Museum in Cherson](#) during those days. Ten thousand of the approximately 13.5 thousand museum pieces were loaded at the direction of art specialists, according to Human Rights Watch. Some of the stolen property turned up in museums in Russian-occupied Crimea. 'To secure them,' reads the Russian statement.

The war crimes, for that is what they are, did not go unnoticed. Satellite images showed the trucks in question, images of the robbery, secretly taken by passersby, circulated on social media. As soon as it was safe, teams of often Western-trained, forensic art specialists took stock of the damage.

'There is a clear pattern to Russian looting,' says American anthropologist Brian Daniels. 'They are well organized.' He is a member of an international team of specialists surveying the destruction and theft of Ukrainian heritage. In addition to the material damage caused by the battles, many tens of thousands of objects were systematically stolen from cultural institutions and churches.

'Such an investigation often starts with satellite images,' says Daniels, who gained relevant experience during the war in Syria and Iraq. 'The teams consider such a museum as a crime scene and cooperate with Ukrainian police whenever possible.' The evidence must be legally strong enough to ever bring the perpetrators to justice. 'We MUST record this for the sake of humanity, even though at this point we don't know where the war will end.'

The cultural value of Ukrainian heritage cannot be overestimated, Daniels says. "Whether it is architecture, paintings, archaeological finds or the simple little church with icons where your family has come for generations, they are witnesses to continuity, to who you are and what it means to live in that place.

That many objects are in Russian hands is clear, according to experts. Poishivailo points to an October report from the Russian newspaper *Izvestia* in which Russia claims to have expanded its museum deposits by 44 thousand objects worth 1 billion rubles, or 12.5 million euros.



Installation at the Maidan Museum in Kyiv, with which the museum commemorates the convoy of volunteers that was hit by a Russian missile in May 2022 on its way from Italy to Chernihiv 10 kilometers from its final destination. Everyone perished. Image Bohdan

Poshyvailo /

Maidan Museum archive

Cultural ecosystem

Among other things, Daniels is working with the [Conflict Observatory](#), a U.S.-based NGO founded specifically for Ukrainian cultural property that uses *open source intelligence*, such as freely available satellite imagery and social media. The observatory is part of a large international network, a kind of cultural "ecosystem" that has emerged since the [beginning of the war](#) to map and, where possible, save or protect Ukrainian cultural assets.

Universities and art institutes deploy expertise, private and government agencies contribute with money and materials, professionals and volunteers join hands. This in close cooperation with Ukrainian organizations.

Playing a prominent role in this web of culture is the Dutch Cultural Emergency Response ([CER](#)), until recently part of the Prince Claus Fund. 'We are now working on mobile digi-kits, specialized, portable equipment that fits in a backpack that also allows smaller museums in Ukraine to digitize their collections,' says CER director Sanne Letschert.

CER spent over 1.2 million euros in 2022 in Ukraine to more than a hundred heritage institutions for, among other things, evacuations of artworks, repairs, expertise promotion and support of

cultural institutions. Before winter set in, damaged historic buildings were repaired provisionally, with financial help from the State Department.

Among other things, the CER helped stabilize Museum Khanenko in Kyiv, which had been damaged by an explosion. Unknown as the museum may be in Western Europe, it has works by Dürer, Rembrandt, Lucas van Leyden, Piranesi and Goya. 'The broken roof and windows were also sealed so that it stays dry and warm inside,' says Letschert. 'The difference with CER projects in other countries is that there, a year after the disaster, there is usually no more need for emergency cultural assistance. In Ukraine, the end is not yet in sight.'

Russian missile

Museums in Ukraine also realize this. The war itself has now become part of dynamic museum memory. A burned-out generator is on display in Ihor Poishivailo's Maidan museum. Poishivailo had transported the device from Italy to the museum in Chernihiv - there was still room in a convoy of minivans carrying humanitarian and military supplies. Also accompanying them was a volunteer, Anastasia, 19, from Chernihiv. Poishivailo: "She had been sent to safe Poland by her parents at the outbreak of war. But she was homesick and was on her way back. She wanted to surprise her family.'

10 kilometers from the final destination, the convoy was hit by a Russian missile. Everyone perished, including Anastasia. In Chernihiv, she became the face of the suffering inflicted by the Russians. Poishivailo collected the burned-out generator and put it on display, as a silent witness to both Ukraine's human and cultural tragedy.



The convoy of volunteers hit by and missile from the Russian military in May 2022, near Chernihiv. Image Bohdan Poshyvailo / Maidan Museum archive



Museums need to tell new story

Ukrainian museums are looking resolutely to the future, a future without Russians, a recent working visit of seven museum directors to the Netherlands revealed. Many collections and stories are emerging in a new light, especially those of political and war museums.

Olha Honchar, founder of the museum Territory of Terror in Lviv: "Before this war, we focused on Nazi and Soviet terror, the tradition of evil. Now there is a story to go with it. From the front we are sent material, such as parts of explosives and objects, uniforms and helmets of Russian soldiers."

For art museums, it is more complicated. What to do with the vast legacy of Ukrainian-Russian artists and writers in museums and libraries? Will there be a de-russification? 'Good question,' says Oksana Barshinova, director of the National Art Museum of Ukraine in Kyiv. 'We have work by Ilya Repin, for example, and he is not uncontroversial in Ukraine.'

Ukrainian-born painter Repin (1844-1930) was a child of Russian parents and left on young age to St. Petersburg. 'Many of his scenes fit into the story of imperialist Russia. But in the details, such as faces, clothes and objects, we recognize Ukraine. We will have to rethink who Repin really was. The same goes for other artists. It is a long-term process.'



Damaged church in Lukashivka, near Chernihiv, May 2022. Image Bohdan Poshyvailo / Maidan Museum archive





Odesa

Unesco placed downtown Odesa, the "[pearl of the Black Sea](#)," on the World Heritage List in January. President Zelensky had requested this in October. Unesco immediately put Odesa on the red list of "endangered cultural heritage. The UN organization counted 246 damaged cultural sites in early March. 107 cultural sites such as theaters, 20 museums, 88 buildings of historical or artistic value, 19 monuments and 12 libraries.

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