UKRAINE AND BOSNIA: WARS TO ERADICATE PEOPLE, THEIR CULTURE AND MEMORY

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Symposium speakers and moderators (from left): Damian Koropeckyj, Amila Butorovic, Aleksandar Hemon, Jim Slade, Ihor Poshyvailo, Laurie Hart and Roman Koropeckyj.

By Peggy McInerny, Director of Communications

UCLA International Institute, January 6, 2022 — "Ukraine, speaking frankly, was not ready to protect cultural heritage in... a situation [of] full-scale aggression," said **Ihor Poshyvailo,** director of the Maidan Museum," co-founder and coordinator of Ukraine's Heritage Emergency Response Initiative (HERI) and member of the National Council for the Recovery of Ukraine from War.

Speaking at the symposium, "War on Culture/ War on Memory: Ukraine, Bosnia and the Global Defense of Heritage," held at the Getty Center in early December, Poshyvailo detailed the destruction and looting of Ukraine's material culture in its war with Russia, together with Ukraine's efforts to establish an infrastructure and practices for emergency cultural management.

> *Destroyed cultural sites in Ukraine include historic churches (particularly wooden churches), cathedrals, synagogues, mosques, museums, monuments, libraries, archives, theaters and cultural centers.*

Poshyvailo was one of several speakers who addressed the symposium, which was organized by the UCLA Center for European and Russian Studies and cosponsored by the President's International Council, J. Paul Getty Trust; Office of the UCLA Vice Chancellor for Research and Creative Activities; UCLA Center for Near Eastern Studies; UCLA Department of Slavic, East European & Eurasian Languages & Cultures; and South East European Film Festival.

The meeting examined Ukraine's ongoing struggle to preserve its cultural heritage alongside that of Bosnia Herzegovina, both during and after the Bosnian War of 1992–95. A presentation on the Getty Conservation Institute's open-source Arches software program, created to catalogue cultural heritage sites and objects, and a screening of director Tim Slade's documentary film, "The Destruction of Memory" (2016), rounded out the day.

Cultural destruction part and parcel of genocide

Ukrainians consider the war with Russia to have begun in 2014, when Russia seized Crimea and occupied parts of the Luhansk and Donetsk provinces of Eastern Ukraine. With Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, attacks on its cultural monuments and institutions increased sharply.

"It's clear that Russia invests so much to destroy Ukrainian cultural identity because... Ukrainians can resist only when they can feel themselves a separate nation," said Poshyvailo. "Over 500 objects [have been] destroyed or damaged [over] the last nine months all over Ukraine, in 15 regions... the most damaged objects are historical buildings.

"[It's] about destroying Ukrainian identity... and rewriting history by destroying Ukrainian, not only history, but the Ukrainian nation as it is. That's why we're seeing ... genocide in Ukraine from the Russian side."

Destroyed cultural sites include historic churches (particularly wooden churches), cathedrals, synagogues, mosques, museums, monuments, libraries, archives, theaters and cultural centers. Often the valuable objects that remain after a bombing are then further damaged by weather.

Over three dozen museums have been damaged or destroyed, including the Museum of Local Lore and Culture in the city of Ivankiv, which housed a collection of works by Ukrainian artist Maria Prymachenko (most of which was fortunately removed in advance); the Hryhorii Skovoroda Museum near Kharkiv and the Kuindzhi Art Museum in Mariupol.

Arguably the most famous historic building to be obliterated, in a simultaneous act of cultural and human annihilation, was the Mariupol Drama Theater. In March 2022, 300–600 people who had taken shelter in the theater died when Russian bombs leveled the structure, despite signs visible from the air that children and civilians were in the building.

Poshyvailo described a complex environment in which cultural objects and museum collections in Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine are being looted in multiple ways. Soldiers steal individual art objects from homes and private collections; Russian museum authorities target collections (such as the Scythian gold collection from the Melitopol Local Law and Culture Museum) for removal to Russian museums; and organized groups target specific artworks and artists for theft and sale to private collectors.

In some cases, parts of collections (e.g., the Scythian gold collection) and specific cultural objects (e.g., a marble toilet basin that belongs to the Popov Manor House near Vasylivkaz), had previously been stolen by Russian forces during Soviet times.

Russia openly admits stealing cultural property, said Poshyvailo. "[T]he Russian publication Izvestiia in October [2022], published information that their so-called museum depository was enlarged with some 44,000 objects... valued [at] 1 billion rubles looted from at least four art museums in Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk and Berdyansk."

The Cultural Heritage Monitoring Lab in Virginia has confirmed that Ukrainian cultural sites are being specifically targeted by Russian and Russian-backed forces by proving that these sites are not located near military installations, he said.

Monitoring and documenting crimes against culture, together with control of illegal trafficking, have become major priorities for Ukraine. Poshyvailo noted that the country is receiving crucial assistance from the Smithsonian Cultural Rescue Initiative, Cultural Heritage Monitoring Lab,** the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine and the General Prosecutor's Office in Ukraine as HERI works to coordinate protection activities and institute new guidelines with local, municipal and national governmental authorities, as well as the Ukrainian military and independent volunteer citizen groups.

International cultural heritage organizations — among them, UNESCO, ICCROM (International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property, a nongovernmental organization), the EU, Global Heritage Fund, Aliph Foundation and Europa Nostra — and countless museums worldwide are also extending emergency assistance to Ukraine.

Damian Koropeckyj, a researcher at the Cultural Heritage Monitoring Lab, has been instrumental in creating both a geo-located cultural heritage inventory of 28,000 cultural sites in Ukraine and a methodology that uses NASA remote sensing satellites to track where active battles are occurring and compare those locations to the geo-located inventory. "In total, the lab has confirmed now over 285 impacts to cultural heritage throughout Ukraine," he said.

At the same time Russia is targeting cultural assets for destruction, Koropeckyj emphasized that Russian and Russian-backed "separatists" forces have built over 100 public monuments in the occupied territories of Eastern Ukraine since 2014. The goal of these often massive monuments — in some cases built in the exact places where either Ukrainian memorials or Soviet-era monuments were destroyed in battles since 2014 — is to shore up Russian narratives that Ukrainian land is historically Russian.

"I think [this] is very illustrative of where heritage sits on the list of priorities during these military operations," he remarked, given that Russian forces were already constructing and renovating monuments in Mariupol before they even established full control over the city.

Bosnia: Erasing a people and the spatial memory of their existence

"When Bosnia and Herzegovina seceded in 1992 to be recognized by the UN as an independent state, its cultural complexity, both historic and demographic, was the first target of nationalist claims to purity, [an] 'ethnic cleansing' — a euphemism invented by the Serbian nationalist leaders — that was aimed against all Bosnians who would not give up on their layered, messy identities and culture," said **Amila Butorović,** professor of humanities at York University in Toronto.

In a presentation that addressed the interrelated nature of cultural destruction and genocide during the 1992–95 war, Butorović argued that the cultural production that once integrated multicultural, multiconfessional Bosnia had, 30 years later, become a mechanism of deepening division among Bosniaks (generally, Bosnian Muslims), Serbs and Croats following the Dayton Accords that ended the war.

"Based on the example of Bosnia, we see how a targeted population [primarily Bosnian Muslims] had to be biologically as well as culturally destroyed.

"Their presence needed to be systematically reduced to absence in all aspects of their centuries-long history, culture and values, which were manifested through architecture, art and written culture. This would ensure that their spatial memory was to be erased as well for the generations to come.

"A premeditated demolition of historical and cultural heritage went hand-in-hand with killings and forced expulsions. First, building by building, village by village — [excising] microhistories — then region by region. Removing the elements of the past was also ensuring the removal of any desire to return... in the future by those who escaped massacres and executions."

Butorović, whose sister Aida was killed by a sniper during the war while retrieving rare books from the National Library, noted that a comprehensive international report on the destruction of cultural sites in the country preceded the massacre of Muslims in Srebrenica, widely considered an act of genocide.

The scholar illustrated the destruction of a shared Bosnian cultural heritage by tracing the fate of four celebrated cultural treasures in Sarajevo — the Oriental Institute, the National Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Gazi Husrev-geb Mosque and the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The deliberate shelling of the Oriental Institute during the war resulted in the loss of virtually its entire collection of Arabic, Persian, Ottoman Turkish and Bosnian manuscripts, together with provincial archives of Ottoman Bosnian court registers and cadastral records.

The bombing of the National Library destroyed over 1.5 million books and written records of Bosnian shared history and culture. "It's considered the largest single act of deliberate book burning in recent times," said the scholar. The Gazi Husrev-beg Mosque built in 1531, the central mosque of Sarajevo, was also severely damaged by artillery attacks.

Although the latter two sites were rebuilt after the war, their character completely changed. The Gazi Husrev-beg Mosque was restored with Saudi funding and lost its original colorful Ottoman style, although public protests forced certain features to be recreated. The National Library has been repurposed to house the municipal government.

Butorović identified the potent stakes in cultural war when she asked, "So what are the lessons we can learn from these examples? It seems to me that the most important one is that cultural heritage is primarily about the future and only secondarily about the past. By selecting it, we project what we want to be and how we want to be remembered. Who we are is projected onto our selection of tangible and intangible markers that identify us.

"Based on the dominant post-war attitudes in Bosnia, heritage is now there to take us apart, rather than bring us together, and that which once did keep us together has no longer such status. The National Library does not belong to [us to] share books and knowledge. The National Museum remains in the administrative vortex. The mosque is now a transnational mosque that belongs only to certain believers. Even the Mostar bridge — [which] you know has been renovated — at best belongs to the tourists."

Butorović argued that "in the absence of a better understanding and treatment of post-traumatic society, the past attaches itself only to trauma." Unless the principle of diversity is accepted and connected to a shared, collective, memory and heritage, she said, those with ethnic, religious or socioeconomic agendas will continue to attack difference in the post-war period.

Filmmaker Tim Slade, Maidan Museum Director Ihor Poshyvailo and UCLA Center for European and Russian Studies Director Laurie Hart.

Cultural destruction part of the original definition of genocide

A screening of Tim Slade's film, "The Destruction of Memory" (2016), based on the book of the same name by Robert Bevan, sparked a nuanced discussion among symposium panelists.

The film traces the intertwined history of genocide and cultural destruction in the twentieth century, surveying, among other things, the Armenian genocide; Hitler's genocide of Jews during World War II; and the war crimes of the Taliban in Afghanistan, Daesh in Syria and Iraq and the Malian Al-Qaeda affiliate in Mali. It ends with the first international conviction, in 2016, of an individual for the war crime of having destroyed several historic tombs in Timbuktu.

Perhaps most important, the film emphasizes that Raphael Lemkin, the Polish lawyer who coined the word "genocide," included both the physical destruction of a people and the destruction of their culture in his original definition of the word. Although he submitted this two-part definition to the United Nations as the basis for a genocide convention following WWII, the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide adopted in 1951 only included the first part.

Writer and Princeton University professor **Aleksandar Hemon** commented that the Russian invasion of Ukraine was striking for its clear genocidal intent. "The bombing of the Oriental Institute [in Sarajevo], the bombing of museums in Ukrainian villages — we [by virtue of being Bosnian] know what that means... As bad as the war in Iraq was, and I remember it as being bad, the intent was not to destroy Iraqi memory, right?" he asked.

Both Butorović and Poshyvailo stressed the essential fragility of culture. "Even though we had the technology to preserve, we also had the technology to destroy. So it's constantly pushing [our] ability to actually be cognizant of the value of these things, that are so fragile in fact," Butorović commented. Poshyvailo agreed: "It's such a complex situation [in Ukraine]. It's all so fragile: our cultural heritage, our climate — it's not protected in the face of war."

And, as several speakers underlined, the end of a genocidal war does not end the question of cultural memory, but poses it anew.

"[I]n Ukraine, today, we have a lot of discussions in the damaged cities and towns, [regarding] monuments and central squares: What to do with them?" asked Poshyvailo.

"For example, to start to rebuild immediately or to leave something for the next generations... to preserve this gnawing memory? And the balance should be found because local communities usually try to get rid of this traumatic of memory... but of course, something should be left."

** Officially, the National Memorial to the Heroes of the Heavenly Hundred and Revolution of Dignity Museum in Kyiv.*

*** The Cultural Heritage Monitoring Lab in Virginia is a partnership between the Smithsonian Cultural Rescue Initiative and the Virginia Museum of Natural History.*

All photos by Peggy McInerny/ UCLA.

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