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THE ROLE OF UKRAINIAN LIBRARIES IN PRESERVING CULTURAL HERITAGE DURING WARTIME

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Abstract

This report outlines Ukrainian libraries' response to wartime conditions and strategies implemented to safeguard library collections and buildings. It focuses on conservation of collections and buildings and their preservation through documentation and digitization. The information is gathered from public librarians' testimonies and reflects a snapshot of conditions rather than a detailed record or assessment.

Keywords: wartime, cultural heritage preservation, Ukraine.

Introduction

The Russo-Ukrainian war began on February 24, 2022, when the Russian government launched the largest ground military campaign in Europe since World War II (Hathway, 2023). According to the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency's count as of April 2023, casualties are estimated at over 354,000 individuals. The Russians have suffered between 189,500–223,000, with 35,500–43,000 killed and 154,000–180,000 wounded. The total number of Ukrainian casualties is estimated at between 124,500–131,000, with 15,500–17,500 killed and 109,000–113,500 injured (Faulconbridge, 2023).

Given that the war targets the cultural identity of the Ukrainian nation, one of the invading forces' targets has been cultural institutions—museums, archives, libraries, and cultural centers. When the war started, 109,903 objects were officially registered as objects of Ukrainian cultural heritage (Shlepakova, 2023), which includes all types of heritage entities, from objects of

archeological significance to monuments and parks. Under Ukrainian regulations, libraries and museums are responsible for safekeeping the moveable objects of cultural heritage, especially those registered in the Museum Fund of Ukraine, the State Register, and the collections and documents of the State Library Fund of Ukraine (State Emergency Service of Ukraine, 2022; The Law of Ukraine, 2000).

Libraries are also responsible for safekeeping collections that are not officially recognized as cultural heritage objects but play an important role in supporting cultural survival, e.g., local ethnographic and historical collections that are usually acquired and preserved by regional public libraries. These collections are the major source of Ukraine's post-Soviet history as an independent nation, and the war has exacerbated their significance. Not only do they counter the Russian government's narratives that seek to justify the war by obfuscating the past and denying Ukraine the identity of an independent nation, as illustrated by a pre-war article by the Russian President "On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians," they are also a major repository of collective memory that facilitates connection among Ukrainians who are currently displaced. Unfortunately, some of these collections have been lost in the regions most affected—namely, Kharkiv, Donetsk, Kherson, and Mikolaiv, which collectively account for the largest number of ruined libraries (Y.M. National Library of Ukraine, 2023).

The reported number of impacted cultural institutions and libraries varies by reporting source. The Ministry of Culture and Information Policy (June 2023) documents that as of June 26, 2023, 1,582 objects of cultural significance have been affected since the start of the war, including instances of total destruction. Close to 40% of affected objects—or 598 entities—are libraries. However, this number only includes libraries whose collections and/or premises are officially considered culturally significant; the total number of affected libraries is significantly larger. For example, according to the recent estimate by the Y. M. National Library of Ukraine (2023), 2,361 public libraries, or about 16.5% of the 14,351 public libraries that existed before the war, have experienced damage. This number includes 298 libraries that suffered significant damage and 89 libraries that completely lost their buildings, or the spaces within the buildings where they were housed. These are estimates, given the difficulties of reporting during wartime, and do not include data from the regions uncontrolled by Ukraine—the Crimea, the city of Sevastopol, and the Lugansk region.

While it is difficult to quantify the damage to Ukrainian cultural heritage, UNESCO (2023) has assessed the damage at 2.6 billion dollars. The estimate accounts for damage to cultural institutions, monuments, and objects of archeological and architectural significance. Over half of the estimated sum reflects destruction of buildings.

Response

At the start of the war, the Ukrainian government issued a set of immediate steps to secure the safety of cultural heritage entities. They also delineated separate directives related to cyber protection and information security. These orders were carried out by the governments of territorial communities (hromadi), who liaised with the institutions responsible for the collections' safekeeping. When it comes to libraries, imposed measures included:

- change of schedule or complete closure of the library;
- termination of some or all staff members;

- preparation of materials for evacuation—if a library possessed relevant collections, and it was safe for staff to remain in the library—and request for their transport from the local government;
- creation of inventories for evacuated objects;
- securing of official/institutional documents and/or preparation for their evacuation;
- creation of backup copies of inventories and official documents;
- protection of the building against air and ground attacks (State Emergency Service of Ukraine, 2022).

Libraries' response to the government decrees depended on local conditions. Those in the cities facing immediate threats—areas such as Chernihiv, Kharkiv, and the cities of the Donbas region—had little or no time to prepare and evacuate objects. Some libraries turned their premises into bomb shelters or places of humanitarian assistance.

Conservation of collections and buildings

In the areas where librarians had time to respond, they worked on protecting buildings and collections in the event of ground and/or air attacks that could cause fire and/or flood. Major preparations included taping windows to prevent glass from shattering in all directions, and placing heavy drapes, i.e., black-out curtains, to make it difficult to identify the buildings from the air (Stambol, 2022).

Olga Bulgakova, deputy director of research at Odesa Regional Library, one of Ukraine's oldest depositories and a site of cultural heritage, remembers, "When we returned to work on the first of March [2022], the first thing we did was buy a large amount of Scotch to tape the windows... We began looking for opportunities to conserve or maybe evacuate some of our collections... We loaded sand at sea, weaved camouflage nets, we even thought that we would have to bring this sand to every institution in the city that had to be defended" (City Face Project, 2022).

Librarians in relatively safe areas also prepared collections for evacuation or conserved them on the library premises. Common measures included wrapping materials in craft paper, packing them in boxes, and sealing the boxes or area with plastic drop cloth.

"During the first days of invasion when the threat of occupation of our region was real," says Liudmila Diadyk, director of Cherkasy Regional Library, "we received from our local authorities a set of actions—The Algorithms—that directed planning, preparing, and carrying out the evacuation of culturally significant objects to safer areas. To evacuate the entire collection of the library accounting for over 2 million items, we would need 15 vans. Fortunately, the threat of invasion of our region had passed. At the same time, we still had to evacuate the materials registered as cultural heritage of Ukraine, which when completed, consisted of 40 boxes of items. The Cultural Heritage Rescue Center in Lviv, to which we turned, provided packing materials. We created a complete inventory of these items and made backup copies of the information containing personal data. While today our working conditions remain relatively safe, we are still 450 kilometers away from the war zone."

In the city of Chernihiv, librarians at the Regional Library of the Youth and local volunteers helped save collections that survived the library's bombing during the first weeks of war, and

conserved the building for restoration. The building will be restored with support from a partnership between the World Monuments Fund and Cultural Emergency Response (World Monument Fund, 2023). After freeing the city of Siversk in the Donetsk region, military and civilians evacuated books from multiple libraries, with materials amounting to roughly five tons of books, and brought them to Kramatorsk (Novini Donbasy, 2023).

In Kherson, which was freed by the end of December 2022, librarians at the regional library conserved collections while facing shelling. The library lost some of its historical and rare collections due to looting. “Local ethnographic collections are missing, which are the most valuable thing that exists for our region, for Ukraine,” said the library’s director, Nadiya Korotun, in March 2023. “Each [regional] scientific library deposits such materials. We have 8,000 publications registered in the State Register of Ukraine, and we know that only we have had them... We simply can't start the inventory in these hyper-terrible conditions... because shelling is regular. Collections were conserved ... the whole world helped us with materials and money, because there was no budget for the library” (Vgoru, 2023).

Documentation

Another effort in the preservation of cultural heritage consisted of documenting collection damage to compile evidence of cultural war crimes. Within the first months of war, the Ukrainian government issued the Manifesto “Cultural Consolidation toward Victory,” which outlined 12 priorities of wartime cultural policy. One of the priorities—memorialization—emphasized the significance of documenting war crimes to create and preserve memories of the Ukrainian resistance. To support this effort, the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy constructed online platforms, such as Destroyed Cultural Heritage of Ukraine and Save Ukrainian Culture, where people can add evidence and view images documenting destruction. The state entity Ukrainian Cultural Fund, whose priorities include the preservation of cultural heritage, published a map of cultural losses (as of December 2022, 550 monuments and cultural sites are reported as damaged or destroyed). The state officials also emphasized digitization and international collaboration as important avenues to preserve culture.

Librarians, likewise, documented cultural war crimes. Kharkiv State Scientific Library staff employed Open-Source INTelligence (OSINT) instruments used in war intelligence to collect data on regional cultural crimes. To share findings, they founded a portal the Libraries of Kharkiv Region. The portal also includes links to several online platforms and initiatives created to document damages to and safeguard cultural heritage, termed [Digital Platforms of Evidence of Crimes](#) against the Cultural Heritage of Ukraine. Librarians at the National Historical Library of Ukraine likewise began documenting evidence of cultural war crimes on their own platform, “Cities and villages of Ukraine.” Another project of theirs, “Cultural front: We are Ukrainians,” collects a variety of materials, supported by library resources, on Ukrainian art, culture, and wartime conditions.

Digitization

Digitization has been widely used to preserve cultural heritage. As the war has progressed, international partners have stepped in to help Ukrainian libraries, with a significant effort conducted by the Saving Ukrainian Heritage Online (SUCHO) initiative. SUCHO donated digitization technology to over 35 libraries, offered unlimited free cloud storage to preserve digital collections, and engaged its volunteers to help describe digital materials and share them

with the world in their gallery space. The war also advanced discussion of the development of the first National Electronic Library of Ukraine. The Ukrainian Library Association (ULA) announced the project on the sixth day of the war, calling on all libraries to collect and create e-materials for the future National Electronic Library (Ukrainian Library Association, 2022).

“We are free, strong and brave,” the ULA members declared in this announcement. “We stand side by side in this war together with the entire Ukrainian people! And we will win! And when we win, we will do what has not been done for 30 years - create the National Digital Library of Ukraine! Let the first collections [of this library] be collections about this war and about our victory!”

As the war unfolded, the ULA began developing the idea with the Ukrainian Ministry of Culture and Politics and in collaboration with IFLA and UNESCO (Ukrainian Library Association, 2023).

Conclusion

Ukrainian librarians have responded to the difficult and ongoing conditions of war in creative and courageous ways. Their internal resilience and external partnerships have invited opportunities to collaborate, learn new skills, and spread awareness about crimes against culture and endangered cultural heritage. Through their monumental efforts, these librarians, and the institutions they represent, have helped save thousands of cultural objects.

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