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Protection of Ukraine's Cultural Heritage during the War

During the two months of the war, the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine documented 242 cases of war crimes committed by the Russian military against the cultural heritage of Ukraine. The purpose of the aggressor's actions is to destroy Ukrainian memory and identity. At the same time, social groups and foreign partners take intensive measures to preserve cultural heritage. This sphere of aggression was recognized on April 18, 2022, which is the International Day of Monuments and Sites and the Day of Monuments of History and Culture of Ukraine.

International protection. Ukraine and the Russian Federation are parties to the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of an Armed Conflict of May 14, 1954. In this international treaty, the parties undertook to protect cultural property against damage, destruction, theft, looting, and illegal seizure during wars or armed conflict. These countries are also parties to the First Protocol to this Convention, which, inter alia, regulates the preservation and movement of cultural goods in the event of occupation and war. Moreover, on April 30, 2020, the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine adopted the Law "On Ukraine's Accession to the Second Protocol to the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of an Armed Conflict", which details the implementation of the Convention's principles. It concerns, in particular, personal criminal liability for the destruction and removal of historical monuments and movable or immovable cultural heritage, and it states that the deliberate destruction of monuments is equivalent to a war crime. The Russian Federation has not acceded to the Second Protocol to the Hague Convention.

Destruction of cultural heritage. There were over 500 museums, 65 historical and cultural reserves, and approx. 170,000 monuments, including seven UNESCO World Heritage Sites (one of them is located in Crimea), in Ukraine before the war. Up to April 23, 2022, the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy had registered 242 cases of war crimes by the Russian forces against cultural heritage in 11 Ukrainian regions and in Kyiv. Kharkiv (84 cases), Donetsk (45), Kyiv (38), Chernihiv (24), Luhansk (17), and Sumy (14) regions suffered the most in this respect. The least amount of destruction was documented in Kyiv, as well as in Zhytomyr, Zaporizhzhia (5 cases each), Kherson (3), Dnipropetrovsk and Mykolaiv (one each) regions.

In total, 94 cultural heritage sites were destroyed or damaged as a result of hostilities, including 16 monuments of national importance, as well as 29 monuments in honour of historical figures and events of the 19th and early 21st centuries, 19 buildings, museum complexes, and reserves, 33 culture houses, theatres, and libraries, in addition to other valuable historical objects. However, religious objects – churches, protestant houses of worship, mosques and synagogues – suffered the most. 92 historic buildings were destroyed or damaged, 35 of them registered as monuments of history, architecture, and urban planning.

As a result of the Russian offensive, the Ivankiv Historical and Local History Museum northwest of Kyiv was burnt down. At the same time, the locals, while risking their lives, saved the works of an outstanding folk art painter, a representative of the so-called naïve art Maria Prymachenko. The building of the Donetsk Academic Regional Dramatic Theatre in Mariupol and the former Shchors cinema in the centre of Chernihiv were almost completely destroyed. The buildings of the Mariupol's Kuindzhi Art Museum (according to official reports, there were no works by Arkhip Kuindzhi there at that time, but only copies thereof), the Kharkiv Art Museum, the Ochtyrka Municipal Local History Museum (Sumy Oblast) were damaged, as were the Cathedral of the Assumption in Kharkiv and the complex of the Trinity-Elijah monastery in Chernihiv. Despite difficulties in obtaining information about the destruction in temporarily occupied territories and areas of hostilities, the Ukrainian authorities are still collecting and systematizing data.

Hidden evacuation. The majority of the Ukrainian population did not believe in the reality of a full-blown war. This is probably why the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy, despite numerous appeals by museum management, did not issue any recommendations regarding the early evacuation of cultural treasures. In this situation, museums, galleries, and nature reserves independently decided on the need to secure the most valuable exhibits. Portions of museum collections were taken to Western Ukraine under the guise of guest exhibitions before the Russian invasion. Three leading Odessa museums evacuated in this way the most valuable collections to a safer part of the country at the beginning of the year. The Dnieper Historical Museum, the Kharkiv Literary Museum, as well as museums of Vinnitsa, Zhytomyr, Sumy, and Chernihiv also partially removed their collections.

Saving cultural heritage. Since the beginning of the war, civic activists have launched several initiatives to protect monuments. On March 1, the Cultural Heritage Rescue Centre was established in Lviv. It has developed its own mechanism that enables museums, cultural institutions, and sacred organizations to receive quick volunteer assistance in preserving their collections. Requests for help came from many museums, primarily from the eastern and southern regions. Volunteer buses and cars provided most of this help. During the first month of operation, around 30 museums received financial assistance and aid in the form of packaging, conservation, and protective materials.

The Heritage Rescue Headquarters staff is also actively functioning in the field of protecting museum collections, documentation of losses, coordination with other initiatives, and providing humanitarian aid. Volunteers gather information about the urgent needs of museum employees through online surveys. The Museum Crisis Centre is the next important initiative, which supports small institutions and their employees who do not have the resources for evacuation. Priority was given to museums in small towns and villages in eastern and southern Ukraine. Volunteers provide them with fire extinguishers and packing materials, assist in the removal of collections, and provide financial support to workers who have been unable or unwilling to leave their museums and are in a difficult situation. Ivano-Frankivsk Gallery "Assortment Room" ("Асортиментна кімната") is another institution that helps to preserve cultural objects not included in the red lists. Gallery volunteers deliver humanitarian aid to war-hit regions and evacuate artists and works of art from bombing areas.

At the same time, Ukrainian entrepreneurs, social organizations, and volunteers got involved in the preservation of immovable monuments in various cities, covering them with sandbags, protecting them with boards, or wrapping them in plastic or protective nets. Among the first monuments that the residents of Odessa rushed to save was the monument to the prominent French statesman and distinguished Governor of Odessa, Duke de Richelieu, which has long been a symbol of the city. Similarly, in Kharkiv, the monument to Taras Shevchenko was secured with sand despite continuous shelling. By mid-April, around 30 facilities in Kyiv were secured in this way. Meanwhile, European organizations played a significant role in the protection of Lviv monuments. In particular, Poland has already sent three wagons of protective materials to the city.

Help from Western partners. Since the beginning of the war, foreign partners from Poland, Slovenia, Latvia, Germany, Switzerland, Great Britain, Denmark, Norway, Finland, and other countries have been actively involved in the preservation of Ukrainian cultural heritage and museum collections, providing financial, material, and technical assistance. Representatives of Polish museums established the Committee for Aid to Museums of Ukraine, which is aimed at supporting, among others, all Ukrainian museums and cultural institutions in securing collections, the most valuable pieces of art and monuments of Ukrainian culture, and in digitizing and inventorying their collections. By April 22, the Committee's support reached 40 museums and cultural institutions in Kharkiv, Kyiv, Dnieper, Lviv, Vinnitsa, and other cities.

In addition, all objects of Ukraine's cultural heritage are digitally archived by volunteers from the international project, "Saving Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Online" (SUCHO). The team consists of over 1,300 programmers, librarians, archivists, researchers, and amateur computer scientists. So far, over 30 TB of scanned documents, artworks, and many other digital materials have been saved from over 3,500 websites of Ukrainian museums, libraries, and archives.

Conclusions. As a result of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, not only critical and military infrastructure was severely damaged, but also residential buildings and cultural heritage sites, especially religious buildings, memorial complexes, monuments, museums, reserves, theatres, and libraries. The destruction of public and religious buildings indicates a massive shelling, which is an indisputable sign of the war crimes committed by Russia against the Ukrainian people and its cultural heritage.

Proper documentation of the war crimes is now a strategic task of the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine. To this end, a special website was created in March to collect information about the destruction and damage to cultural institutions and cultural heritage sites. All the gathered information can be used as evidence for the prosecution of those involved in crimes under Ukrainian and international law before the International Criminal Court in The Hague and a special tribunal established after the end of the war. Moreover, after the liberation of the Kyiv, Chernihiv, and Sumy regions, the problem of restoring the cultural infrastructure has become important. Therefore, the second strategic task of the ministry is to attract international financial support for the preservation, digitization, and restoration of the Ukrainian cultural heritage destroyed by the Russian military.