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Aleksandra Kuczyńska-Zonik

Looting by Russian archaeologists in the occupied territories of Ukraine

In early December 2025, officers from the Internal Security Agency in Poland detained the Russian archaeologist Alexander Butyagin, who was wanted by the Ukrainian authorities in connection with illegal excavations in Crimea. This is not the only case of crimes against archaeological heritage in the occupied territories of Ukraine, as Russian researchers are not only conducting excavations without the necessary permits, but are also systematically destroying cultural layers and removing artefacts to state and private museums within the Russian Federation.

Archaeologist detained. Alexander Butyagin, who was arrested in early December 2025 by the Polish authorities, is the head of the Northern Black Sea Region Archaeology Section in the Department of the Ancient World at the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg. He was detained in Warsaw at the request of the Ukrainian authorities whilst travelling from Amsterdam to Belgrade, where he was due to deliver academic lectures.

Since the 2000s, Butyagin has led several archaeological expeditions in Crimea, including at the site of the ancient Greek city of Myrmekion, situated in the eastern part of the Kerch Peninsula. Remains of defensive walls, houses, vineyards, and temples were discovered at the site, along with a hoard of 30 gold coins from the time of Alexander the Great, one of the most significant finds from the era of the Kingdom of Bosphorus (4th century BC).

Since 2014, Butyagin had been obtaining permits for excavations in Crimea from the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation without consulting the Ukrainian authorities, thereby conducting them illegally. This work continued even after criminal proceedings were initiated against him in January 2022. The Ukrainian authorities also accused him at the time of destroying cultural heritage sites. The losses were estimated at over 200 million UAH (4 million EUR). The charges against Butyagin were based on a breach of the Second Protocol to the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict.

Russian researchers are excavating archaeological sites. Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine has contributed to an intensification of illegal archaeological activities by Russian researchers in the occupied territories of Ukraine. The Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation has begun issuing permits for excavations in parts of the Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, and Donetsk regions, which has significantly facilitated this practice. Work of this kind in Crimea, Sevastopol, Kerch, and the Seversky Donets River valley has been carried out by Russian archaeologists under the auspices of leading academic institutions, including universities and research institutes. The Ukrainian authorities report that, as a result of these activities, over half a thousand sites of Ukraine's cultural heritage have been damaged or destroyed, whilst thousands of movable cultural artefacts have been excavated from archaeological layers or removed from Ukrainian museums. Some of them have ended up on the black market.

The obliteration of Ukraine's cultural heritage. In March 2025, the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence confirmed the theft of 164 archaeological artefacts from the temporarily occupied territory of Crimea, also publishing a list of 14 Russian museum curators accused of misappropriating artefacts from illegal excavations and denying their connection to Ukraine's heritage. The exhibitions they organised, as well as the lectures and educational programmes they conducted, served to justify the occupation and incorporate the artefacts into the Russian cultural sphere. Architectural monuments of the Crimean Tatars are also being destroyed, including the Khan's Palace in Bakhchysarai and Sultan Kalga's Akmejitsarai Palace (in the ancient city of Akmejit) – sites of profound historical and religious significance. The looting of artefacts and the destruction of sites form part of a systematic plundering of Ukrainian heritage and historical memory and are part of a plan aimed at eradicating Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar identities from the peninsula. Archaeological sites are also being devastated during the



construction of the 'Tavrida' motorway – one of Russia's key infrastructure projects on the peninsula. Illegal treasure hunting is also taking place without the required permits, using metal detectors, which is punishable under the national law 'On the Protection of Cultural Heritage' and the Criminal Code of Ukraine.

International protection of archaeological heritage. The primary international instrument governing the protection of archaeological heritage during wartime is the aforementioned 1954 Hague Convention, supplemented by the 1977 Additional Protocols. Under this instrument, every state must take measures to protect its own cultural heritage from armed attack. The parties to the conflict must not direct military operations against cultural property and must avoid its accidental destruction. The use of cultural property for military purposes is prohibited. In the context of archaeological heritage, the Convention prohibits an occupying power from conducting archaeological research or excavations without the consent of the sovereign state. If cultural property is removed from occupied territory for the purpose of its protection, it must be returned once hostilities have ceased. Both Russia and Ukraine are parties to the Convention (1957).

Based on the provisions of the Hague Convention, UNESCO, together with partner organisations, is assessing the damage to cultural property in Ukraine during the war. Data from the organisation as of mid-December 2025 indicate the destruction of 514 immovable sites, including three archaeological sites in the Kharkiv and Mykolaiv regions (the 'Verkhni Saltiv' Historical and Archaeological Museum-Reserve, the Stara Bohdanivka II site and the Chortuvate VII site). To date, eight Ukrainian sites have been inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List, including the archaeological site of the 'Tauric Chersonesos' National Reserve (Sevastopol) and its economic macroregion (chora).

Since February 2025, Ukraine, alongside Albania, Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, and Mexico, has also been a party to the Council of Europe Convention on Offences against Cultural Property (2017)¹. The Convention lists the main types of activity associated with the illicit trade in cultural property: theft and robbery, looting (the unlawful removal of ancient relics from archaeological sites, buildings, or monuments) and the forgery of cultural property. The Convention imposes an obligation on states to implement legal provisions and take practical measures at both the national and international levels to prevent the illicit trade in cultural property and its deliberate destruction or damage.

Conclusions. Archaeological heritage forms an integral part of cultural heritage as a component of social security and the socio-economic and cultural development of the state. Illegal excavations, the destruction and damage of sites, the export and sale of artefacts on the black market, and their reinterpretation in line with Russian ideology are further examples of the erasure of the cultural identity of Ukrainian citizens, which accompanies Russia's military aggression. It is worth noting that the archaeological sites on the northern coast of the Black Sea, and above all in Crimea, form a significant part of the heritage of the ancient Greek world, which lies at the foundation of European civilisation. Consequently, their looting and destruction amounts to the erasure not only of elements of Ukraine's cultural heritage but also of that country's affiliation with Western culture.

Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Russian Federation has actively exploited archaeological heritage as a tool for the political legitimisation of its presence in the occupied territories. Under the pretext of scientific research, Russian archaeologists are systematically carrying out excavations at Ukrainian cultural heritage sites, in reality appropriating or destroying them. These actions constitute a serious violation of international humanitarian law.

UNESCO – the UN agency specialising in international cultural, educational, and scientific cooperation – remains an important platform for cooperation on the protection and return of cultural property as well as the recovery and restoration of cultural values destroyed or damaged as a result of armed conflict. Shortly after the outbreak of full-scale war, members of UNESCO opposed the Russian Federation's breach of its obligations under international law. This decision was initiated by 64 Member States, and in the vote during the session of the

¹ Ministry of Culture of Ukraine, 26.03.2025, <https://mcsc.gov.ua/en/news/the-president-signed-the-law-ratifying-the-council-of-europe-convention-on-offences-relating-to-cultural-property/> [22.12.2025].

UNESCO Executive Board, only Russia voted against it. This, therefore, sends a strong signal of solidarity with Ukraine and unequivocal opposition to Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Significantly, in November 2023, the Russian Federation was also removed from the UNESCO Executive Board, which weakened Russia's institutional agency – its actual ability to initiate processes and shape the agenda within the Board.

However, Russia remains a member of UNESCO, and its delegation to the organisation publicly emphasises that the organisation's actions and reports concerning Ukraine are 'biased' and 'politicised'. Russia can, therefore, continue to lobby, slow down proceedings, water down the language of statements, and build coalitions in its own interests. In November 2025, Russia submitted official documents confirming its candidacy for the UNESCO Executive Board for the period 2025–2029, but was unsuccessful, while in contrast, the applications from Ukraine, Romania, and Moldova were successful.