

## Museums as Humanitarian and Spiritual Help for Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars

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*what didn't you do to bury me  
but you forgot that I was a seed.*

Dinos Christianopoulos<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This article presents research on museums during the occupation and annexation of Crimea since 2014, as well as information relating to institutions in the Kyiv, Kherson, and Zhytomyr regions of Ukraine following Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. The first part of the article analyzes the situation of the Museum of Crimean Tatar Heritage housed in the sixteenth-century Bakhchysarai Palace. In the second part, the article discusses museums dedicated to Joseph Conrad, Polina Rayko, and Maria Prymachenko, together with activist 'open-air' museums by Banksy in the de-occupied part of the Kyiv region. With these geographical emphases, this article complements others in this collection.

**Key words:** Ukraine; War; Victory; Crimea; Banksy

### Introduction

The article discusses the destruction of cultural heritage in the Kyiv, Kherson, and Zhytomyr regions as well as in Crimea, an important part of Ukraine which Russia occupied in 2014 together with Donbas (see Vonnák's article in this issue). In 2022, after eight years of partial occupation and war, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began. Many museums in different regions of Ukraine and Crimea have suffered along with the local populations. Cultural sites and objects have been damaged, destroyed, flooded, or looted. Russian enemies violated the 1954 Hague Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property to demoralize Ukrainians and diminish their faith in an ultimate victory. But our enemies did not know that 'we were seeds'.

Through a study of several museums in particular geographical locations, I will demonstrate the extent to which Christianopoulos' declaration is true. My methodology consists of qualitative secondary analysis (QSA), which allows for the review of local and international sources.

### Architectural Monuments in Occupied Crimea 2014-2023: The Bakhchysarai Palace

Russia's war in Ukraine did not start in 2022; it started in 2014, when Russia occupied and annexed Crimea and, later, when it also occupied part of Donbas. In 2018, the Russian occupiers, not satisfied with mounting numerous challenges to people and institutions in

the occupied territory of Ukrainian Crimea, decided to 'renew' and 'rebuild' shrines which belonged to the Crimean Tatar nation and, in particular, the sixteenth-century Bakhchysarai Palace.<sup>2</sup> The palace had been in poor repair, but this work was carried out by a firm without expertise, which damaged the site extensively, leaving 'Centuries-old oak beams ripped out and concrete poured in their place. Priceless tiles removed. Murals nearly erased by high-pressure streams of water'.<sup>3</sup> In 2022, the Russian occupiers caused further damage; as a headline in the *Kyiv Post* declared, 'Russian Invaders Destroy Golden Cabinet in Khan's Palace in Occupied Crimea'.<sup>4</sup> On 19 December 2022, Ukrainian Minister of Culture and Information Policy Oleksandr Tkachenko issued a press release declaring that the invaders were 'erasing national memory with a new building' because 'The Khan's Palace in Bakhchysarai is a unique Crimean Tatar single architectural monument, which is evidence of the existence, development, [and] ethnogenesis of the Crimean Tatars in this territory'. Ultimately, Tkachenko asked UNESCO to stop the violence at heritage sites.<sup>5</sup>

Speaking more broadly of the cultural heritage of Crimea and Crimean Tatars, many museums, collections, exhibits, and memorials have been lost because of the occupation and annexation of Crimea. According to Liesl Gertholtz, the Director of PEN America, 'Russian occupying forces have systematically attacked Crimea's cultural heritage, taking over 4,095 sites of national and local importance and including them in Russia's cultural heritage protection system'.<sup>6</sup> In December 2022, the *Kyiv Post* quoted a Twitter statement by Emine Dzheppar, First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs in Ukraine, arguing that 'Russian terrorists know nothing else but to kill, destroy everything beautiful, erase the national memory & identity of my people'.<sup>7</sup>

### **Ukrainian Museums during the Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine 2022-2023**

From the first days of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, many museums and their exhibits were damaged due to Russian shelling. Not only were airdromes and critical infrastructure targeted but also cultural and educational sites. The widespread attacks indicated that the destruction was often deliberate and suggested that the goals of the occupiers were to eradicate Ukraine, its populace, and their culture.

As early as 25 February 2022, the Ivankiv Historical and Local History Museum was destroyed in a fire following a bombing attack. This was followed by violence against museums in many corners of the country, from Mariupol and Melitopol to Kharkiv and Chernihiv. Museum employees were anxiously not only about their collections but also about their buildings, which often were in architecturally important structures from previous centuries. While collections could be hidden and stored, buildings could not be moved or easily protected.

Institutions with international recognition such as the Odesa Fine Arts Museum, housed in a former palace of architectural importance, were damaged. However, as so many articles in this issue explain, even under the worst Russian attacks, some Ukrainian museums became points of resistance, resilience, and humanitarian support. They reconfirmed the endurance of the Ukrainian spirit and the nation's faith in victory. In this section, I will focus especially on these qualities in institutions in the Zhytomyr, Kherson, and Kyiv regions.

#### ***The Joseph Conrad Museum***

One of the museums of the Zhytomyr region, the Joseph Conrad Museum, sits on the land of a former Carmelite monastery. It became a humanitarian hub for civilians during the Russian bomb attacks. Sister Camilla, a local Carmelite, asserts, 'We did not hide anything from the museum collection. However, they [Ukrainians] hid humanitarian aid in the museum'.<sup>8</sup> The article citing the nun elaborates, 'In the first 2.5 months of the war, the entire space of the museum turned into a volunteer headquarters. Since the beginning of the war, people have been coming to the monastery of the Discalced Carmelites, which is in charge of the Joseph Conrad Museum. [...] People were looking for shelter, security, and sometimes humanitarian aid'. In the darkest hours, under the occupier's bombs and rockets, the museum's walls sheltered 'cats, dogs, tame rats, birds, children and elderly people who could hardly move. But it was clear that material goods no longer had any meaning for people. Everyone was worried only

about their loved ones'.<sup>9</sup> In this way, a museum associated with a famous international author quietly became a centre of humanitarian help.

### ***The Maria Prymachenko Collection and the Ivankiv Museum***

The Ivankiv Museum is known for its priceless collection of works by the famous Ukrainian painter Maria Prymachenko,<sup>10</sup> whose art 'captivated' Pablo Picasso in Paris in 1936.<sup>11</sup> According to the story's retellings, Picasso admired Prymachenko to the extent that he ordered others to 'Bow down before the artistic miracle of this brilliant Ukrainian'.<sup>12</sup>

Despite or because of Prymachenko's fame, Russian artillery explosions set the Ivankiv Museum building on fire on 25 February 2022. Members of the local population, who did not have specialized firefighting equipment (let alone tools appropriate for saving art), had only their bare hands with which to rescue paintings by their famous female compatriot. Heartbroken but undaunted by the fact that the fire damaged 25 of Prymachenko's works,<sup>13</sup> Ukrainians exhibited some of the rescued paintings in Kyiv as a symbol of the nation's indomitable spirit. During the four days of the exhibition, people stood in line to see the works.<sup>14</sup>

Even though she was not alive to see it, one of Prymachenko's paintings contributed to philanthropic efforts during the war. The painting was sold during a charity auction for half a million US dollars to support the Ukrainian army. After the auction, the new owner of the painting donated it to the National Art Museum of Ukraine so that it would continue to be part of the nation's patrimony.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Open-air museums by Banksy in the de-occupied part of the Kyiv region***

The famous British street artist Banksy visited several de-occupied cities in the Kyiv region in November 2022. Banksy left artworks behind in the form of murals on damaged buildings; in his characteristic style, these depicted spunky and humorous scenes related to the war. These artworks 'inspired' Ukrainians not only because of their artistic value but also because they symbolized the support of an internationally well-known artist for the country.<sup>16</sup> Security around these improvised open-air museums has become extremely important as they have become targets of thieves.<sup>17</sup>

Like Prymachenko's painting, Banksy's art became part of a philanthropic effort to aid the Ukrainian army. When he came back from Ukraine in December 2022, Banksy decided to sell 50 of his artworks to support the military.<sup>18</sup>

### ***World-class and Ukrainian Cultural Heritage flooded in the Kherson Region***

The examples above suggest some cause for optimism. Yet events in June 2023 have plunged many into despair. The long-suffering Kherson region, which for many months was under the occupation of the Russian invaders, was partly de-occupied together with the capital of the region, the city of Kherson, thanks to Ukrainian warriors. In June 2023, the area was flooded. To stop the Ukrainian offensive, the Russian occupiers blew up the dam on the Kakhovka Reservoir near Kherson city, which led to a technogenic ecological catastrophe resembling a second Chernobyl. In 1941, a similar tragedy occurred on the Dnipro River when the Kremlin ordered Soviet special service corps to blow up the dam to stop the Nazis. When the Russians did so, they also killed thousands of Ukrainians.<sup>19</sup> The tragedy of more than eighty years ago has been repeated in the twenty-first century.

As this journal goes to press, it is impossible to count or mourn the human lives that were lost in the flood. Many survivors find themselves hurt or ill as well as homeless and without the means to make a living. Trauma and mental anguish are prevalent as well. Animals and plants in the wild, in zoos, or in nature preserves have also ended up underwater.

The disaster has struck museums and heritage sites, causing extensive damage and destruction. The state of Ukraine has lost all or parts of the historic home museums of artist Pelageya (Polina) Rayko in Oleshky<sup>20</sup> and famous writer and satirist Ostap Vyshnya in the village of Krynyky. Also flooded are the Kherson Art Museum named after Oleksiy Shovkunenko, the Green Farms of Tavria complex, and many other cultural heritage sites and works of local and global importance. Museum workers wonder: How much longer does

Ukraine have to suffer to stop the Kremlin? The help of the international community is vitally important; however, an end to the invasion would be infinitely preferable.

### Conclusions

Currently, because of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, every sphere of life in the nation – from vital infrastructure to cultural, educational, and scientific efforts – has suffered. When the escalated war ends, it will not be quick or easy for the state to restore damaged or destroyed objects, heritage sites, and museums. Much of what we have lost is irreplaceable. But the Ukrainian spirit remains strong, and Ukrainians are already planning to rebuild the country, including museums and historical buildings in every region, including Crimea. In the meantime, Ukrainians need continuing international assistance to stop Russian aggression. This bloody, genocidal war in Ukraine is a catastrophe of global proportions, and the destruction of cultural heritage impoverishes us all.

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### Notes

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