

## Book Review

Stuart Frost\*

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**Ukrainian Institute, ICOM UK, ICOM Ukraine, Museums Association and British Council, *Supporting Decolonisation in Museums: Focus on Ukraine, 2025*, online, free, Part 1: Introduction pp. 2-54, Part 2: Essays, pp. 3-20**

On 24 February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, starting the largest conflict in Europe since the Second World War. Cultural destruction and the devastation of heritage have inevitably been amongst the consequences: UNESCO has verified damage to 485 cultural heritage sites since the Russian invasion began, and deliberate looting and illegal excavations have also taken place.<sup>1</sup>

The *Supporting Decolonisation in Museums: Focus on Ukraine* guide was published online at the beginning of July 2025 prompted by the current war, seeking to help equip those with an interest in culture, heritage, and museums with knowledge and frameworks that they can use in their practice.<sup>2</sup> The authors acknowledge that the guide they have produced has been inspired by the Museum Association's *Supporting Decolonisation in Museums* guidance, a document which very much focuses on decolonisation in relation to British colonialism (Filevska and Blyzinsky 2023: 67).<sup>3</sup>

The term decolonisation is used so widely in different contexts that its meaning can be difficult to pin down. Here in the *Focus on Ukraine* guide decolonisation is helpfully defined as: '[t]he act of interrogating and dismantling dominant narratives to identify potential colonial privilege, oppression or discrimination. Minimising or removing the influences or effects of colonialism' (53). In the context of Ukraine, and this guide, decolonisation is framed as a never-ending process that 'means protecting, restoring and advocating for Ukrainian culture and identity by campaigning against their erasure' by Russia (20).

The guide, produced collaboratively with the support of ICOM UK, ICOM Ukraine, the Museums Association, the Ukrainian Institute, and the British Council, consists of two parts. Part One is a decolonisation guide of about 50 pages, including a practical five step journey towards decolonisation. Photographs of Ukrainian museums are used to divide the main sections. Part Two consists of six short essays, each written by a different author, predominantly Ukrainian, expanding on a theme introduced in the first part of the guide.

Part One begins with a compact introduction, and an explanation of why the guide is necessary. This is followed by several short sections providing essential background knowledge about Ukraine, focusing on its geographical location bordered by seven countries for example, and offering a helpful succinct historical overview. The latter provides several timely reminders, one being that Russia's current war on Ukraine began not in 2022, but in 2014 when it invaded and illegally annexed Crimea. Another is that Russian efforts to deny and undermine Ukraine's desire for independence have a long history. Whilst the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 – and the subsequent war – provided the impetus to bring this decolonisation guide into existence, the need for such a guide has been long-standing.

It would be easy to assume that the *Supporting Decolonisation in Museums: Focus on Ukraine* guide is most useful for museums, galleries, and libraries that have significant holdings that directly relate to Ukraine, but in fact it offers insights that are relevant to anyone working in a cultural organisation. There are practical suggested steps that most organisations should find both relevant and easy to implement without difficulty or controversy. The five-step guide to decolonisation, for example, includes the following eminently deliverable recommendations (30-46):

1. Learn about Ukraine and commit to change
2. Review your collections, catalogues and object labels
3. Use correct language, spellings and terminology
4. Check the provenance
5. Communicate with your audiences and diversify public programming

The guide emphasises that language really matters and there are multiple reminders about why in the context of Ukraine and Russia it is important to use it accurately and precisely. The authors point out that the country's name is Ukraine, not 'the Ukraine'. Ukraine's name without a definite article is clearly stated in the declaration of independence and the constitution. The use of an unnecessary 'the' is a legacy of the former name, The Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (1922-1991). They also stress the importance of transliterating place names from Ukrainian rather than Russian, Kyiv not Kiev, and rather than Peter the Great, and Catherine the Great, the guide reminds the reader to use the more neutral official names Peter I and Catherine II. Russian narratives, voices, and perspectives have often dominated accounts of Ukraine's history and have been used and perpetuated uncritically.

As stated rather pointedly in the guide: 'Russia has yet to embark on its own decolonisation journey. Its colonial narratives are not widely exposed or understood' (5). Events in Ukraine have given increased momentum to wider debates about decolonisation in relation to Russia in other countries that were once part of the Russian Empire and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Both the Russian Empire and Soviet Union included many non-Russian people whose native language was not Russian. The guide is certainly relevant to other former Soviet republics, arguably offering a useful model to develop and adapt to other contexts.

This stimulating and thought-provoking publication strikes a good balance between theoretical perspectives, case studies, and practical, achievable actions: the guide gives examples of good and better practice rather than best practice, for instance. It is relevant to anyone who wishes to better understand Ukraine's history and cultural heritage. Essential as it is that British institutions continue to work towards decolonisation in relation to the British Empire, this important publication serves as a timely reminder that they also have an obligation to counter harmful colonial attitudes wherever they exist, and to strive to avoid inadvertently maintaining or perpetuating misleading and harmful narratives.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> UNESCO, 'Damaged Cultural Sites in Ukraine verified by UNESCO', UNESCO 2025. <https://perma.cc/8NFX-CP85>, accessed 13 November 2025.
- <sup>2</sup> Museums Association, 'Supporting Decolonisation in Museums: Focus on Ukraine', Museums Association 2025. <https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/decolonising-museums/the-ukrainian-institute-and-project-partners-release-new-museum-guide-on-ukraine/>, accessed 26 October 2025.
- <sup>3</sup> Museums Association, 'Supporting Decolonisation in Museums', Museums Association 2021. <https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/decolonising-museums/supporting-decolonisation-in-museums/>, accessed 26 October 2025.

## References

Filevska, T. and Blyzinsky, M. (2023) 'A Global Approach to Decolonizing Ukrainian Cultural Heritage', *Museum & Society*, 21 (2) 65-71.

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