**Museum activists as agents of social change in war: The case of Ukraine.**

**Abstract**

The authors highlight the importance of museums’ activism as these institutions become agents of social change in war. The article provides an understanding of how local stakeholders in conflict scenarios such as the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 can become empowered and develop effective strategies to preserve their values and reconstruct individuals’ professions. In addition, the authors present examples of international solidarity in the museum community which have supported Ukrainian museums and their workers. The research findings support the potential of museum activism in sustaining cultural heritage in times of conflict.

**Key words:** museum activism, museum workers, stakeholders, war, society, values, initiatives, solidarity, cultural heritage, responsibility.

**Framework**

This article clarifies the activist strategies of Ukrainian museums in 2022 in reacting to Russian aggression, illustrating how the museums have contributed to social change. Such interventions have been essential: according to the Center for Strategic Communications and Security, in the year after 24 February 2022, 550 cultural heritage sites were destroyed or damaged in Ukraine, including 33 museums. Cultural heritage sites in Ukraine need(ed) protection, evacuation, conservation, restoration, and reconstruction.

By studying civic initiatives aimed at preserving and restoring cultural heritage in museums, the article aims to provide a better understanding of how the traditions of volunteerism, which developed strongly after the Revolution of Dignity in 2014, as well as international solidarity, have continued after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian army. The article combines the theoretical approach of human rights museology with examples of specific museum practices. The human rights approach to heritage and ‘museology’ places emphasis on people and processes, on enhancing each person’s capacity to be an actor moving towards their legitimate and fundamental needs, their capacity to choose freely and act according to their values (Gouriévidis 2014; Bouchard 2016; Sandell 2016). Sandell argues that museums can ‘contribute to broader processes of social and political change’ as moral agencies and sites ‘within which the ethical norms that frame human rights negotiations are articulated, continually recast, and disseminated’ (Sandell 2016). This approach has the potential to contribute to restoring peace and promoting reconciliation.

Studies on the causes and consequences of heritage destruction within a human rights framework, including attacks on museums (Brosché *et al*. 2017; Turku 2018), mostly focus on the role of international and official actors such as states and intergovernmental organizations. Less attention has been paid to the role and initiatives of local museum activists in responding flexibly and preventing the destruction and loss of museum collections. Reconstruction presents constantly changing challenges, opportunities, and dilemmas as well. A stakeholder-driven approach to reconstruction involves foreseeing the vision for recovery. Then sharing among all stakeholders and being locally rooted can maximize participation and inclusion, contributing to sustainability (Khalaf 2020).

In the case of Ukraine, the recently developed notion of museum activism has been a crucial factor in the sustenance of cultural heritage in war. The potential of the museum as an instrument for activism must include a greater understanding of the role of the institution’s human agents (Hollows, 2019). Activist museum practice enables museum workers to be citizens and to assume agency, as well as responsibility for the consequences of their actions or inaction (Janes, Sandell 2019). In this article, we examine three organizations which practiced activism in supporting Ukrainian museums and their workers in current of war.

**Museum Crisis Center**

During the first year of the war, our personal communications in social media indicated that museum activists in Ukraine faced new challenges: the need to continue providing emergency financial assistance, in particular for the evacuation of museum workers; the introduction of a scholarship system for longer-term support of cultural activists; the need to provide psychological support to cultural sector workers and teams that help others; the development of a website about museums in Ukraine with the ability to collect personal donations.

The Museum Crisis Center (ICC) was created to meet these needs - an initiative of the activists of the Lviv Museum ‘Territory of Terror’, it is administered by two NGOs, New Museum and Other Education. The Museum Crisis Center values and supports local museums together with the people who maintain their knowledge and collections.[[1]](#endnote-2) According to the founders, while the state primarily funds large national museums, local museums, which are the heart of culture, should receive greater assistance. As Olga Gonchar, founder of the Museum Crisis Center and director of the memorial museum of totalitarian regimes ‘Territory of Terror’ reported:

*On the third March 2022, I wrote a post on Facebook about helping those who stay in Ukraine with their museums because many opportunities and support have appeared for those who go abroad. And it was and remains important to preserve the people of culture in Ukraine because they are the bearers of unique knowledge and those who create meanings.2*

The primary task of the Museum Crisis Center from 24 February 2022 until now has been to provide emergency museum aid as well as financial support for museum workers who find themselves in hot spots and difficult life circumstances but continue to work in their profession. The ICC has also offered financial, organizational, and human support for regional museums and their teams. Funding has been provided by individuals, international cultural organizations, Ukrainian businesses, private cultural organizations, Ukrainian museums and galleries, and auctions abroad. The first sponsors were Pinchuk Art Center, the public organization Kyiv Biennale, MistOst e. V. Berlin, and the Sigrid Rausing Trust. In addition, our partners from the public organization Other Education received a grant from the European Commission. Subsequently, the project was supported by the Ukrainian company Elementum Energy and the international ALIPH (International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas) foundation. Later, auctions of works by Ukrainian artists were held in Amsterdam, Paris, London, Belgium, and Venice, the funds raised being contributed to the Museum Crisis Center. [[2]](#endnote-3)

These funds and those collected by the Museum Crisis Center monitoring group through individual contacts have been distributed through the center's network. In the summer of 2022, requests for financial assistance to evacuate cultural workers from the occupied territories were added to the Museum Crisis Center's work. These people had been blacklisted – they were persecuted, abducted, tortured, and killed, so assistance has been vital in every sense of the word.

The Museum Crisis Center has kept the public informed about these struggles and its work on Facebook under the hashtag #quickmuseumhelp, giving it international visibility.

**Heritage Emergency Response Initiative (HERI), Ukraine**

Protecting collections is a critical task described in other articles in this journal issue. Thanks to cooperation with a variety of partners, but in particular, the Clementii Sheptytskyi Museum of Folk Architecture and Rural Life in Lviv, twenty-one Ukrainian museums received donations of packing materials and evacuation crates, thus enabling them to secure their collections.

On a larger scale, the Heritage Emergency Response Initiative is a museum defense initiative established in early March 2022 by the National Museum of the Revolution of Dignity and the NGO Tustan. Its goal is to save Ukrainian heritage and help in recovery. In the ‘About us’ section on the Facebook page of the headquarters of this group, its main goal is outlined: ‘Rapid response to war, protection of museum collections.’

Since March 2022, the initiative has been helping to preserve and evacuate collections, providing methodological, legal, psychological, financial and technical assistance to cultural institutions of the country, documenting losses and crimes against culture, collecting artifacts and oral histories of the war, conducting training, working as a focal point between government agencies and institutions, the non-governmental sector, international organizations, experts, and the public. Among the tasks of the headquarters is protecting museum collections from losses. During the first months of the war, museums needed packing materials for dismantling, evacuating, and preserving collections; by autumn, other equipment was added to this list. Ukrainian museum workers needed help to survive the winter and cope with electrical problems due to the increasing shelling.

Examples of the NGO’s work are abundant. On April 11–12, 2022, in cooperation with the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), through its First Aid and Resilience for Cultural Heritage in Times of Crisis (FAR) programme, as well as teams from ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites), ICOM (International Council on Museums) and Blue Shield, HERI organised a training seminar for museum workers on assessing the risks and losses of cultural heritage as a result of military actions. Seventy-two Ukrainian experts from institutions from fourteen regions have completed the training. [[3]](#endnote-4)[[4]](#endnote-5)

On International Museum Day, the Heritage Emergency Response Initiative, with the support of the European Federation of Cultural Associations ‘Europa Nostra’ and the Global Heritage Fund in partnership with the ALIPH, established the Heritage Solidarity Fellowship for Ukraine. Its main goal is to support specialists in Ukraine's cultural sphere in times of hardship. Working in a museum or other cultural institution was one of the important requirements for receiving the scholarship. On 17 December 2022, on its Facebook page, HERI announced a second tranche of scholarships due to the overwhelmingly large number of applications with the support of the Global Heritage Fund.

Members of HERI represented Ukraine at international events that took place after 24 February 2022, such as the 26th ICOM General Conference (Prague, Czech Republic, 20–28 August), the European Cultural Heritage Summit 2022 (Prague, Czech Republic, September 25-27), and NEMO's European Museum Conference 2022 (Loulé, Portugal, 9–11 October 2022). In this way, Ukraine was well-represented in discussions about the future of its museums.

In the autumn of 2022, the organization organized expeditions to the de-occupied Ukrainian territories to document the crimes of Russian troops in Ukraine. These materials became the basis for the exhibition "Rashism [Russian Fascism] is. . . " held in Kyiv in September and October.[[5]](#endnote-6) Another exhibition mounted by HERI in collaboration with the museum community was ‘War for Identity. The Power of Cultural Resistance’, which opened on 21 November 2022 in the Kyiv City Art Gallery LAVRA. HERI contributed materials it collected to the main part of the exhibition, presenting not only facts regarding the destruction of museums and the resistance of Ukrainians but also evidence illustrating international support for the Ukrainian museum community.

This hard work has been noticed across the globe. The American Archaeological Institute recognized HERI’s crucial work at a challenging time for the nation, presenting the organization with its 2022 Outstanding Public Service Award. Ihor Poshyvaylo, Head of the HERI, said:

*The role of the museum, or rather cultural, activism in times of war is crucial in preserving our heritage. After all, public authorities or city self-government cannot adequately respond to the needs of rescuing culture, having traditionally prioritized the military and humanitarian spheres. Therefore, cultural leadership is an essential factor in the rapid response to emergencies in war and an effective tool for the state. After all, in many cases, the heads of cultural institutions had to make crucial decisions, not officially regulated, to preserve their teams, buildings, and collections. From knowledge, training, coordination of actions, indifference, and civic responsibility, the fate of specific cultural values, losses, or stories of a successful rescue.[[6]](#endnote-7)*

HERI has maintained its worthiness for such recognition. In February 2023, HERI initiated its first international forum, "War in Ukraine. The Battle for Culture".[[7]](#endnote-8) The meeting became a large-scale informal platform for discussing and responding to the challenges of preserving cultural heritage today and summarizing the results of a challenging war year. The topics raised have significance for many nations beyond Ukraine.

**International solidarity of museum society: Activities of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and its Ukrainian Committee**

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Ukrainian ICOM raised the issue of the ethical responsibilities of Russian museum workers, some of whom condemned the Russian aggression in Ukraine, while others openly defended it. For instance, the President of ICOM Russia, Alexander Sholokhov, deputy of the Russian State Duma, voted for illegally annexing Ukrainian territories.[[8]](#endnote-9) A Russian army recruitment center opened in the Darwin Museum in Moscow. These are two of many examples of Russian museums’ support for their country’s aggression.

Other important activities of ICOM Ukraine include additions to the Emergency Red List of Threatened Cultural Heritage of Ukraine, which was completed on 22 November 2023.[[9]](#endnote-10) This is the first Red List created during a war. ICOM of Ukraine, together with museum experts and the Department of Protection of the ICOM, began work on the list in April. Yuliya Vaganova from the Khanenko Museum (Kyiv), Natalie Dzyubenko from the State Natural History Museum (Lviv), Yulia Lytvynets from the National Art Museum (Kyiv), and Anastasia Cherednychenko, Vice-Chairman of ICOM Ukraine, were involved in this activity as well.

ICOM global quickly condemned any destruction or threat to cultural heritage, and called for relevant actors to support museums and museum personnel. At the operation level, ICOM has worked closely with members inside and outside Ukraine to ascertain the needs of museums and museum professionals and then to ascertain what could be offered to meet these needs. On 20-28 August 2022, the 26th General Conference of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) took place in Prague, where one of the central topics was the protection of the cultural heritage of Ukraine during the Russian-Ukrainian war. The aim of a separate panel within the conference, ‘Heritage protection responses in Ukraine’ was to highlight actions already carried out and offer an opportunity to have an exchange on future needs of the museum community. Chair of ICOM Ukraine Kateryna Chuyeva, vice-president Anastasiia Cherednychenko, and member of HERI Vasyl Rozko sought to convey the most relevant information to the world museum community.

Representatives from Ukraine in Prague saw their participation as museum activism at the international level. To some extent, it was, because, despite the general support, several occurrences were alarming. Leila Ibrahimova, director of the Melitopol Museum of Local History, was forced to cancel her participation in the conference due to anonymous threats to her family, which is under occupation. The head of the museum ‘Territory of Terror’ and the Museum Crisis Center, Olga Gonchar, could not deliver her report ‘Museum and Military's Mutual Help: Experience of the Museum Crisis Center’ due to changes in the program initiated by the organizers.

At the Prague meeting, Svitlana Muravska's report on the losses of university cultural heritage during the war was also left out of the program. However, the head of UMAC [Committee for University Museums and Collections], Marta Lourenço, asked to deliver the report at the off-site meeting, which took place at Charles University. Expressions of international solidarity led to a a campaign to support university museums in the East and South of Ukraine, initiated by UMAC ICOM, Universeum, and UMAC ICOM Poland. It was largely made possible through networking in social media immediately after the ICOM conference in Prague,

Nevertheless, an important consequence of ICOM Prague 2022 was that certain ICOM member countries took responsibility for supporting museums in Ukraine. At its board meeting on February 8, 2023, the board of ICOM Germany unanimously voted to ban ICOM Russia. The German National Committee is also calling for representatives of the Russian National Committee to be suspended from all international bodies and for Russian delegations and members to no longer be admitted to events. They have also asked for ICOM Russia to be excluded from the global association until further notice. A statement from the German group declared:

*The cultural sector must not permanently claim a special role or postulate a general impression of innocence. The systematic looting of Ukrainian museums, which according to current knowledge, is supported by Russian museum actors and is an example of ethical transgression, should no longer go uncommented. The reports and pictures from Ukrainian museums speak a clear language.[[10]](#endnote-11)*

**Conclusions**

The role of Ukrainian museum activists during the war has been to preserve cultural property by dismantling and evacuating it, while also supporting staff in the short and long term. Museum activists have become the center of a volunteer movement and new NGOs, which, in many cases, have performed the functions of the state authorities, often in the absence of action from the latter. These NGOs have participated in coordinating national and international aid initiatives; saving cultural heritage; minimizing losses and risks; creating a rapid response system, network, and infrastructure; documenting the crimes of the Russian Federation against the culture of Ukraine; and collecting artifacts related to the war. This article has contributed to global knowledge of these strategies of solidarity within the museum community, explaining their importance as elements of reconstruction policy and further sustainable development of cultural heritage after the wars.

Yet the initiatives outlined in this article comprise only a partial picture of the solidarity actions undertaken by Ukrainian and other museum workers to protect and preserve cultural property and support colleagues in critical situations. A comprehensive analysis of these activities will require more thorough study and deeper understanding gained from historical distance. Further research is also needed on the influence of the political context, including discussion of the extent to which local communities or national museum entities bear responsibility in times of crises, especially with respect to preventing destruction and initiating reconstruction of cultural heritage.

On a broader level, it is clear that changing global attitudes and increasing respect for cultural diversity should be prioritized in sustaining museums’ missions and professional human capital in times of war. Museum activism, responsibility for the wellbeing of cultural workers, and international solidarity are vital factors for cultural heritage preservation, reconstruction, and sustainability.

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