

## Ukrainian Museums' Exhibitions and Educational Programmes During the First Six Months of War

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### Abstract

The extraordinary and brave work of Ukrainian museum workers to protect collections and to continue activities in the face of war exemplifies the possibilities for similar institutions in conflict situations. This paper illustrates some of the main activities of Ukrainian museums from the period of the outbreak of war on 24 February 2022 through to August of the same year, focusing especially on exhibitions, educational programmes, and events, both online and on-site. This research is based on thematic and chronological approaches, using data from descriptions of educational projects on museum websites and social media. The article analyzes museum exhibitions on Russian aggression as well as museum programmes more broadly. The organization of online and offline museum events, projects, excursions, exhibitions, classes for children and refugees, museum workers' meetings on Museum Day (May 2022), the opening of a new museum, actions in support of the armed forces of Ukraine, and volunteer activities of museum workers in Ukraine are briefly presented. While this article can touch on these broad and diverse topics only briefly, it underlines the value and necessity of further studies focused on the adaptation mechanisms of museums in the challenging conditions of war.

**Key words:** Ukraine, museums, war, educational programs, Russian aggression

### Introduction

The full-scale aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine beginning on 24 February 2022 divided the lives of millions of Ukrainians into 'before' and 'after'. Millions of people were forced to leave their homes and build new lives elsewhere. Hopes for a quick end to the war faded as the conflict and struggle continued for months. Museums as public institutions reflected the changes wrought by war.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the content of a selection of exhibitions and educational programmes initiated by Ukrainian museums between 24 February 2022 and August 2022. The adaptations of these museums offer important examples of larger socio-cultural transformations within Ukrainian society during this period. In addition, this article offers one of the first published reviews of exhibitions and activities at the new National Museum of War in Ukraine, which had to adapt even as it opened.

Recent research (Pearson and Keene 2017) has examined the activities of museums in previous wars. Elżbieta Olzacka, for example, has drawn attention to transformations in the work of Ukrainian museums after the Revolution of Dignity (November 2013 - February 2014) and the war in the east of Ukraine since 2014. She concluded that museum exhibitions have created their own history of the Ukrainian nation (Olzacka 2020). Her view as a researcher from a country other than Ukraine is important in lending credibility to the efforts of these museums. The dramatic events of the war beginning in 2022 have transformed Ukrainian museums' ways of functioning, but so far the adaptations have not been reflected upon fully

by researchers. This article, like others in this issue of the journal, constitutes an attempt to address this gap in existing research.

Our methodology consisted of thematic and chronological internet searches, which allowed us to identify changes in the programmes that Ukrainian museums offered to visitors after the outbreak of war on 24 February 2022. Data was drawn from information on museum exhibitions and educational programmes posted on the Pedagogical Museum of Ukraine website,<sup>1</sup> as well as on other museum websites and relevant social media pages.

As of February 2022, there existed over five thousand museums under various forms of ownership in Ukraine. With the outbreak of war, museums in all regions of the country faced the challenge of dismantling exhibitions and evacuating collections to safer areas. The circumstances made it difficult for museums to make emergency plans. Some activities resumed in late March and early April 2022, mainly due to the liberation of the Kyiv region and the shift of the frontline to the east and the south of Ukraine. Since then, activities in museums have increased, depending on their proximity to the fighting. At the same time, there is still no truly safe place in the country due to the unpredictability of attacks on critical infrastructure, constant blackouts, land mines, and other disruptions. Any plans must be tentative and contingent.

### **The activities of the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War<sup>2</sup>**

The National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War in Kyiv, with its emphasis on conflict, has been exemplary in its ability to mount exhibitions and create programmes in rapid response to unfolding events. During the period under study, the museum organized six exhibitions on its primary topic and one collaborative touring exhibition on Russian aggression. It was a pioneer in the creation of war-related exhibitions as events happened. Early in March 2022, while fighting on the outskirts of Kyiv was taking place, the director of the museum, Yuri Savchuk, put together the first photo exhibition about the current war. The concept for the exhibition was developed on 5 March. Three days afterwards on 8 March, extensive gunfire erupted in the area, and on 23 March, the exhibition *Kyiv: One-Day Report*. March 8, 2022 opened at the World Centre for Peace, Freedom and Human Rights in Verdun, France. The exhibition has subsequently travelled to nine countries across Europe and America.

According to the director, 'when we started working on the project, seven out of more than one hundred [employees] were physically working in the museum. It was an extraordinary challenge to keep the team together and continue working'.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the museum succeeded in preparing the off-site photograph exhibition and maintaining its operations in Ukraine. Institutional data from the first six months of the war confirms this success. The museum received only ten per cent fewer visitors in 2022 than in 2021. This was remarkable given that the war had forced the museum to be open for shorter periods of time.

The National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War was the most active institution we studied during the six months: Ukrainian colleagues elsewhere were busy with various other tasks, ranging from storing objects to collecting war-related materials and organizing exhibitions. One of the most prominent exhibitions was *Ukraine-Crucifixion*, which opened on the date of 8 May, the Ukrainian Day of Remembrance and Reconciliation.<sup>4</sup> It was the first museum exhibition in the country about the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war. With the help of original objects and photos, the display showed the realities of full-scale Russian aggression. The exhibition, displaying a shell from a Buk anti-aircraft missile system and personal belongings of Russian soldiers, reminded residents of the proximity of tragic events. Subsequently, this part of the exhibition was presented in the Chernivtsi Regional Museum of Local Lore in Western Ukraine, which has proved a safer region of the country during the war.

### **Exhibitions elsewhere and a new museum**

The hostilities did not stop exhibitions at other institutions, but in many cases, activities in museums were put on hold after 24 February, with the opening of most new exhibitions postponed until a later date.

After several months, new exhibitions focused on various aspects of the war. In May 2022, exhibitions on Russian aggression were held in two museums. The private Arms and Armor Museum of Yevhenii Gredunov in Brovary, within the Kyiv region, opened on 8 May. The exhibition title translated as *The Muscovite-Ukrainian War. Battle for Kyiv. March 2022. Battles in the Brovary Direction*. A second exhibition, *Invasion: Kyiv Under Attack*, was organized by the National Museum of the History of Ukraine and opened to the public on 30 May. Both institutions presented objects collected during fighting in the Kyiv region.

Art exhibitions were also opened to the public. On 25 - 26 June 2022, the exhibition site Apartment No.6 in Odesa, which also functioned as a community meeting space, presented Iryna Potapenko's solo show *Basement Chronicles*, which focused on the work of artists during war. On 14 July 2022, the exhibition *The Muses are not Silent*, dedicated to art created during the war, opened in the 'Powder Tower' at Lviv's Centre for Architecture, Design and Urbanism. Pavlo Gudimov, one of Ukraine's most famous gallery curators, created the exhibit, which featured works by more than 60 artists. At the end of July 2022, in the Sheptytskyi National Museum, Lviv, an exhibition of Maria Prymachenko's three works *Giving to Ukraine!* also opened.<sup>5</sup>

A unique event was the opening on 27 July 2022 of a new museum, the House of Dmytro Chyzhevsky.<sup>6</sup> Preparations for opening the museum had been taking place for more than a year, and the war did not force a change in these plans. The collection of documents, books, and photographs from the late -nineteenth to early-twentieth century was acquired before 24 February 2022. The museum team linked the institution's founding with the important task of reminding visitors of Ukraine's centuries-old history, spiritual traditions, and creative culture, strengthening collective memory at a time when the nation and its identity were under threat.

### Online events<sup>7</sup>

While the museums described above brought exhibitions to the public in a timely manner, online activities focused on the psychological rehabilitation of children as well as the well-being of adults. Programmes for young people typically combined learning with fun. The Children's Centre of the Shevchenko Museum in Kyiv offered classes involving play that parents could follow with their children at home. Similarly, the Cherkasy Art Museum posted art puzzles online. The National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War presented the animated video *War Sketches*, which was based on the works of artist Anton Logov and his five-year-old daughter Vira, who were forced to leave Kyiv because of the war. The team at the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War, whose exhibitions are described in detail above, prepared a series of online lessons entitled 'World War II: From Tragedy to Memory'. The Museum of the History of the City of Kyiv presented the online project, 'How are you, Kyiv?' – a chronicle of the life of the capital and its inhabitants during the war, and the National Museum of the Holodomor-Genocide in Kyiv offered a video tour.

Unsurprisingly, museum staff developed activities for adults to promote national awareness. While Russian and Ukrainian languages were both commonly used in the country before the war, the former has increasingly been associated with colonialism and aggression.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, online classes in Ukrainian language and culture were offered by the Museum of Prominent Figures of Ukrainian Culture in Kyiv. The National Historical and Cultural Reserve 'Hetman's Capital' in Baturyn, which was formerly a Cossack capital (with the Hetman being the head or leader of the state), organized a telecast dedicated to local history, 'We are the Children of the Cossack Generation, the Bloom of Ukrainian Land', as well as an online 'Journey Through Time' for children. Another National Historical and Cultural Reserve site in Chyhyryn proposed a drawing competition dedicated to 'The Struggle for the Independence of Ukraine: Past and Present.' Seemingly, no aspect of the nation's past has been neglected. The director of the National History Museum of Ukraine, a noted archaeologist, even streamed a show on the impact of the war on Ukrainian Viking heritage. In contrast, several institutions sought to provide distraction and relief online for war-weary citizens – the Khortytsia National and Cultural Reserve Facebook page provides an example.

Online programming served museum staff as well. In May 2022, two events were held for Museum Day. They were designed to bring colleagues together and to voice a key

question for all Ukrainian citizens: 'How are you?' The first event was titled 'Conversation in Times of War' and was organized by the Pedagogical Museum of Ukraine, in partnership with the Department of History, Museum Studies and Cultural Heritage of Lviv Polytechnic National University. The second event was a meeting for museum professionals from the Territory of Terror Museum in Lviv and the Luhansk Regional Museum, from which some staff members were evacuated to Lviv.

### **In-person activities for children**

The first live events for children in Ukrainian museums were offered to audiences in cities located in the west of Ukraine, a relatively safe part of the country since the beginning of the conflict. The nature department at the Volyn Regional Museum of Local Lore invited children to fairy-tale storytelling events in early in April 2022. The Museum of Folk Architecture and Rural Life in Uzhgorod presented a class on traditional methods of sowing fields in Transcarpathia. Other institutions also presented programmes linked to their subject specializations.

In the following months, events often focused on holidays, such as Easter, Mother's Day, International Museum Day, and Kyiv Day. Institutions including the National Historical and Ethnographic Reserve in Pereiaslav, the National Museum of the History of Ukraine, the Vinnytsia Regional Museum of Local History, the Lviv Historical Museum, the Art and Memorial Museum of Ivan Trush in Lviv, and the Museum of the History of Agriculture in Volyn, all scheduled programmes for these holidays, so that children could engage in fun activities that were ordinarily part of the calendar year.

Once the school holidays began, museums also offered activities for older children. These featured opportunities for learning, entertainment, and developing self-awareness. For example, the Museum of Precious and Decorative Stones in Kyiv offered a course on geology; the Vinnytsia Regional Museum of Local History presented an interactive archaeological tour entitled 'A Lesson About Survival'; and the War Childhood Museum in Kyiv held a reading by the author Olya Rusina. Well-being was part of the emphasis at Khmelnytskyi Art Museum's art-making hub, with activities designed in consultation with psychologists, while the Mystetskyi Arsenal, one of the foremost cultural sites in Ukraine, organized a series of art therapy sessions. As the organizers pointed out, 'this program arose from our desire to support each other, comfort [others] and find points of stability'.<sup>9</sup>

### **In-person adult programming and events**

Programmes aimed at an adult audience resumed at the end of April on a sporadic basis. For example, the Chernivtsi Regional Museum of Local Lore and the Literary and Memorial Museum of Olga Kobylyanska (a prominent Ukrainian female author), also based in Chernivtsi, organized a literary rendezvous. This was made possible primarily due to the city's geographical location in the country's extreme west. It was the first event organised by the museum after the start of the full-scale war.<sup>10</sup>

Just as exhibitions often took a nationalist focus, a distinctive feature of most of the tours and lectures between May and June 2022 was the emphasis on Ukrainian history and identity, both on a national and regional level. This focus formed part of an effort to bolster collective national memory. Indeed, Ukrainian museums' educational programmes contributed to the implementation of a policy of de-Sovietization and de-Russification after 24 February 2022. The table below presents examples of such programmes.

Museum	Educational Programme	Aim
Kyiv Museum of History	Tours of the Zolotovoritsky quarter and Kyiv street art	To articulate Ukrainian identity through Kyiv architecture
National Art Museum	An online quiz titled 'The Modern in Ukrainian Art'	To demonstrate how Ukraine participated in the Modernist movement
Museums of the Sixtiers	A lecture by art critic Natalia Kukil about the destruction of two historic mosaic panels in a Mariupol restaurant	To demonstrate the depth of Ukrainian culture in Mariupol and the extent of the damage inflicted by the war
Volyn Regional Museum of Local Lore	A series of lectures on historical topics	To raise visitors' awareness of positive aspects of Ukrainian history
Kyiv-Pechersk Reserve	The tour 'On the Paths of Hetman' by Ivan Mazepa <sup>11</sup>	
Cherkasy Regional Museum of Local Lore	Tours titled 'The Power of History'	
Lviv Museum of History	The project 'Historia Magistra Vitae Est: Our Statehood'	To outline the main stages in Ukraine's achievement of statehood

### Events for refugees

The projects described above aimed primarily at promoting nationalism for those still at home. However, museums did not overlook the growing number of people who were forced to leave their homes. Certain programmes were intended for this target audience. For example, the Dnipro History Museum<sup>12</sup> began offering workshops for refugees in April 2022. These and other activities took place as part of a Walpurgis Night event. Other institutions that offered activities for refugees included the Andrey Sheptytskyi National Museum and the Khmelnytskyi Regional Museum of Local History. These programmes helped to familiarize refugees with distinctive aspects of local history and culture, as well as the traditions of religious holidays observed in the region.

To contribute a solution to the language problem, the Museum of the History of Malovyskivshchyna in the Kirovohrad region organized a lecture and workshop titled 'History of the Written Language'. Similarly, the Museum of Folk Architecture and Life in Lviv organized the 'SpivRozмова' [Song Talk] music club. Its purpose was to create a space for practicing spoken Ukrainian through the use of folk songs for the refugee audience, which was mainly Russian speaking.

### Actions in support of the armed forces of Ukraine

With the suspension of ordinary life during the invasion, many museum employees actively volunteered to support the war effort. The most common contributions consisted of weaving camouflage nets and making amulets for soldiers. On the eve of the Easter holidays, employees of the National Historical and Cultural Reserve at Chyhyryn and the Manevtskyi Museum of Local History in Volyn Oblast helped children to make figures of angels for Ukrainian soldiers. According to dominant beliefs in Ukrainian society, such amulets protect soldiers from bullets and allow them to return home unharmed.

Museums showed support in other ways too: admission fees from a lecture at the Ivan Franko Museum in Lviv were given to the Ukrainian armed forces; the Ivan Franko Museum sponsored a fundraising quiz, 'I Love Ukraine', for International Museum Day; and both The National Museum of Folk Art based in the Hutsul region of Pokuttia and the Museum of Easter

Egg Painting in Kolomyia, Ivano-Frankivsk, organized a charity talent show. During the events, anyone could share their inspiration: sing a song, recite poems, dance, or simply listen.

## Conclusion

Russia's full-scale invasion has completely changed Ukrainian society. It has also brought about significant change in the activities of museums. The museum that has perhaps been more active than any other in its response to the war has been the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War. Nonetheless, the number and diversity of educational museum programmes and exhibitions has grown as the frontline of active hostilities has shifted eastwards. Several museums resumed events in late March and early April 2022. These programmes took place online and focused primarily on children, aiming to support their well-being during and after the traumatic experience of the Russian invasion. Subsequently, many exhibitions and programmes returned to being on-site events attended in person. Even so, museums continued to face enormous challenges, such as the difficulty or impossibility of using collections that had been dismantled or evacuated, the departures of employees, and the reluctance of the public to attend museum programmes and engage in other forms of entertainment during a period of intense uncertainty and suffering.

The museum exhibitions and educational programmes that went ahead aimed to present unique aspects of Ukrainian history, culture, language, and identity. These events were successful in attracting large numbers of visitors and reinforcing a sense of Ukrainian nationalist pride. Such activities played a vital role in helping to challenge and change stereotypes that Russian propaganda had been cultivating for years, relating to the superiority of the Russian language and cultural differences between the Eastern and Western parts of Ukraine.

The experiences of museum employees and the specific details of implementing educational programmes in wartime are some of the issues that require more detailed consideration. As time passes, it will become increasingly necessary to understand how museums can adapt and contribute to society in the surreal circumstances of an ongoing war. The violent struggle for Ukraine's freedom and democracy is taking valuable lives on a daily basis in a war that has deep implications not only for Europe but for the rest of the world.

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## Notes

1. 'Освітні програми музеїв' ['Educational Programmes of Museums'], Pedagogical Museum of Ukraine, 2022. [http://pmu.in.ua/category/museum\\_pedagogics/osvitni\\_programy\\_muzeiv/](http://pmu.in.ua/category/museum_pedagogics/osvitni_programy_muzeiv/), accessed 20 December 2022.
2. Officially, the museum is called the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War in Kyiv. However, Ukrainians often call the institution the Museum of War.
3. 'Muzeini dialoghy: Rizdviana zustrich u Muzei viiny' ['Museum Dialogues: Christmas Meeting at the Museum of War'], National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War, 2022. <https://fb.watch/i4ZXwW95MI/>, accessed 18 January 2023.
4. 'Museum Dialogues', National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War, 2022.
5. Maria Pryimachenko (1909 - 1997), one of the most famous Ukrainian artists and the laureate of the Taras Shevchenko National Prize of Ukraine (1966), is a renowned creator of 'naive art'. UNESCO declared 2009 as the year of Maria Pryimachenko.
6. Dmytro Chyzhevsky (1894 - 1977) was a famous scholar of Ukrainian literature and philosophy as well as a professor of Slavic studies at Heidelberg University.



7. The following descriptions are based on materials published on the Pedagogical Museum of Ukraine website at [www.pmu.in.ua](http://www.pmu.in.ua). The information here is intended to supplement the website, which is not fully in English.
8. Controversy stems from the use of two languages in Ukraine – Ukrainian, the official language of the state, and Russian. For centuries, the Russian language served as a tool of colonization. Since the occupation of Crimea in 2014 and the invasion that began on 24 February 2022, the Russian language has increasingly been viewed as an unwelcome Russian influence in Ukraine. Surveys conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology in 2014 and December 2022 show that there have been fundamental changes in Ukrainians' attitudes toward the Russian language. While in 2014, only nine per cent of respondents considered knowledge of the Russian language as culturally and politically unimportant, by 2022 this number had risen to 59 per cent. In the past year, Ukrainian society has increasingly used Ukrainian to the exclusion of Russian. See Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 'Мова та ідентичність в Україні на кінець 2022-го' ['Language and Identity in Ukraine at the End of 2022'], Zebruc 2023. <https://zbruc.eu/node/114247>, accessed 18 April 2023.
9. 'Освітні події в межах "Виставки про наші відчуття"' ['Educational Events Relating to the Theme of "Exhibitions About Our Feelings"'], МИСТЕЦЬКИЙ АРСЕНАЛ, 2022. <https://artarsenal.in.ua/povidomlennya/osvitnya-programa-do-vystavky-pro-nashi-vidchuttya/>, accessed 18 January 2023.
10. Literary and Memorial Museum of Olga Kobylanska, Facebook site 2022, [https://www.facebook.com/Kobylanskamuseum?locale=ru\\_RU](https://www.facebook.com/Kobylanskamuseum?locale=ru_RU), accessed 28 April 2022.
11. Ivan Mazepa was a famous Ukrainian statesman and military leader. He served in the Russian army in the Moscovia region during the Great Northern War, but in 1708 he joined the Swedish army. Historians of Tsarist Russia have used Mazepa as an example of an ungrateful traitor, and official Russian ideology continues to promulgate this view.
12. Due to heavy fighting in the area, the number of refugees that have fled from Dnipro and the surrounding region is higher than elsewhere. This statistic was first reported in March 2022 by the Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine. The movement of refugees from this region continues to take place at the time of this article's submission.

## References

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