

Museum Activists as Agents of Social Change in War

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Abstract

The author highlights the importance of museum activism as 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 rebuild their careers. In addition, the author presents examples of international solidarity 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.

Keywords: museum activism, museum workers, stakeholders, war, society, values, initiatives, solidarity, cultural heritage, responsibility.

Framework

This article analyzes the activist strategies of Ukrainian museums in reacting to Russian aggression in 2022, illustrating how museums have contributed to social change. Such interventions have been essential: according to the Ukrainian government's 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.¹ Cultural heritage sites in Ukraine need(ed) protection, evacuation, conservation, restoration, and reconstruction depending on their location.

By studying civic initiatives intended to preserve and restore cultural heritage in museums, the article aims to provide a better understanding of how the tradition 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 museums and cultural heritage stresses the importance of individuals as responsible and ethical actors (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: 7). 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 roles of states and intergovernmental organizations. Less attention has been paid to local museum activists' initiatives to prevent the destruction or capture of collections. In addition, reconstruction presents constantly changing challenges, opportunities, and dilemmas. A stakeholder-driven approach to reconstruction begins with an assessment of community needs and desires. Once this information has been collected, sharing plans with community members or engaging them in planning 'can maximize participation and inclusion', contributing to sustainability (Khalaf 2020: 11).

In the case of Ukraine, the recently developed notion of museum activism has been a crucial factor in the sustenance of cultural heritage during the current war. According to Victoria Hollows, '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: 81). Activist museum practice empowers museum workers as citizens and recognizes their 'responsibility for the consequences of their actions or inaction' (Janes and Sandell 2019: 18). It may also take the form of supportive NGOs which collaborate with museums and heritage sites to ensure their survival. In this article, we examine three such organizations which have practiced activism in supporting Ukrainian museums and their workers.

Museum Crisis Center

During the first year of the war, the author's personal communications in social media indicated that museum activists and organizations in Ukraine faced challenging needs for continuing emergency financial assistance, in particular for the evacuation of museum workers; for longer-term sustenance for cultural activists in Ukraine or abroad; for psychological support for cultural sector workers and members of assistance organizations; and for websites about the status of museums in Ukraine, especially 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 Territory of Terror Memorial Museum of Totalitarian Regimes in Lviv, 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 research and collections.² According to the founders, the state primarily funds large national museums, so local museums, which are the heart of culture, require greater assistance. As Olha Honchar, founder of the Museum Crisis Center and director of the Memorial Museum, 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.³

The primary task of the Museum Crisis Center from 24 February 2022 to the present has been to provide emergency museum aid as well as financial assistance 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 and organizational support for regional museums and their teams, as well as additional personnel. 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 ALIPH Foundation (International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas). Later, auctions of works by Ukrainian artists were held in Amsterdam, Paris, London, Belgium, and Venice, and the funds raised were donated to the Museum Crisis Center.⁴ Similar auctions are described in other articles in this collection.

Funds collected by the Museum Crisis Center monitoring group have been distributed throughout 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 domestic and international partners, many Ukrainian museums have received donations of packing materials and evacuation crates, thus enabling them to secure their collections.

On a larger scale, the Heritage Emergency Response Initiative (HERI) 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. The 'About us' section of the group's Facebook page declares its mission: 'Rapid response to war, protection of museum collections'.⁵

Since March 2022, the initiative has been helping with collections, providing methodological, legal, psychological, financial, and technical aid to cultural institutions in Ukraine. During the first months of the war, museums needed packing materials to dismantle, evacuate, and preserve collections; by autumn, other equipment was added to this list. Ukrainian museum workers needed help to survive the winter and to cope with electrical problems due to the increasing shelling. In addition, HERI has been involved in documenting losses and crimes against culture; collecting artefacts and oral histories of the war; conducting training for workers experiencing unfamiliar conditions; and working as a liaison between and among government agencies, cultural institutions, the non-governmental sector, international organizations, experts, and the public.

Examples of the NGO's work are abundant. On 11-12 April 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 of Museums) and Blue Shield, HERI organized a training seminar for museum workers on assessing the risks and losses of cultural heritage as a result of military actions. Seventy-two experts from institutions in 14 regions of Ukraine have completed the training.⁶

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 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 is one of the requirements for receiving the fellowship. On 17 December 2022, on its Facebook page, HERI announced a second tranche of awards due to the overwhelmingly large number of applications; these were given with support from the Global Heritage Fund.

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

In the autumn of 2022, the organization arranged expeditions to the de-occupied Ukrainian territories to document the crimes of Russian troops in Ukraine. Reports from these visits became the basis for the exhibition *Rashism [Russian Fascism] is...* held in Kyiv in September and October.⁷ 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 collected and contributed materials 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 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 [have] had to make crucial decisions, not officially regulated, to preserve their teams, buildings, and collections.⁸

HERI has maintained its worthiness for such recognition. In February 2023, HERI initiated its first international forum, 'War in Ukraine. The Battle for Culture'.⁹ 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 difficult war year. The topics raised have significance for many nations beyond Ukraine.

International solidarity: the activities of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and its Ukrainian Committee

Following the Russian invasion, Ukrainian ICOM raised the issue of the ethical responsibilities of Russian museum workers, some of whom condemned their country's aggression in Ukraine, while others openly defended it. The President of ICOM Russia, Alexander Sholokhov, deputy of the Russian State Duma, voted in favor of illegally annexing Ukrainian territories.¹⁰ A Russian army recruitment center opened in the Darwin Museum in Moscow. These are two 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 2023.¹¹ This is the first Red List created during a war. ICOM Ukraine, together with museum experts and the Department of Protection of ICOM headquarters, 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 their personnel. At the operations level, ICOM has worked closely with members inside and outside Ukraine to ascertain the needs of museums and museum professionals and to locate necessary items. On 20-28 August 2022, the twenty-sixth General Conference of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) took place in Prague, and 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 to offer an exchange on the future needs of the Ukrainian museum community. Chair of ICOM Ukraine Kateryna Chuyeva, vice-president Anastasiia Cherednychenko, and HERI member Vasyi 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 a large extent, they were correct because, despite the general support, several alarming events occurred. 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; Melitopol is under occupation. Olha Honchar could not deliver her report 'Museum and Military's Mutual Help: Experiences of the Museum Crisis Center' due to changes in the programme.

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

Despite these hardships, an important consequence of ICOM Prague 2022 was that many ICOM member countries took responsibility for supporting museums in Ukraine. At its board meeting on 8 February 2023, the board of ICOM Germany unanimously voted to ban ICOM Russia. The German National Committee of ICOM is also calling for the suspension of representatives of the Russian National Committee from all international museum bodies and for Russian delegations and members to be refused admission to ICOM events. They have asked for ICOM Russia to be excluded from the global association until further notice. A statement from the German group declared:

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 [without comment]. The reports and pictures from Ukrainian museums speak a clear language.¹²

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 including new NGOs, which in many cases have performed the functions of state authorities in the absence of action from the latter.¹³ 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 artefacts 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 war.

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 the 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, attention to the wellbeing of cultural workers, and international solidarity are vital factors for cultural heritage preservation, reconstruction, and sustainability.

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Notes

- 1 'More than 550 Objects of Cultural Heritage Destroyed or Damaged in Ukraine', Ukrinform 2023. <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-society/3697665-more-than-550-objects-of-cultural-heritage-destroyed-or-damaged-in-ukraine.html>, accessed 5 June 2023.
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- 3 Territory of Terror Memorial Museum of Totalitarian Regimes, 'Tekst dopovidi dyrektorky muzeiu Olhy Honchar na International Council Museum – ICOM 2022' ['Text of the Report of the Museum Director Olha Honchar at the International Council of Museums – ICOM 2022'], 25 August 2022. <https://museumterror.com/publications/%d1%82%d0%>

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 - 5 Штаб порятунку спадщини / Heritage Emergency Response Initiative. <https://www.facebook.com/HERI.Ukraine/>, accessed 5 June 2023. The mission statement is only available in Ukrainian. [Editor's note: The images and text on this Facebook page provide graphic illustrations of the damage and destruction to heritage sites and museums in Ukraine.]
 - 6 Heritage Emergency Response Initiative, 'Report #2: On the Activities of the Heritage Emergency Response Initiative (HERI), March-June 2022', 17, 19. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1-deb5PTaP3VdbGERJtcLBG91yjo1HmA/view>, accessed 22 April 2023.
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 - 8 Ihor Poshyvailo, interview by Svitlana Muravska, 5 January 2023.
 - 9 'U Kyievi vidb.uvsia pershyi mizhnarodnyi forum "Viina v Ukraini. Bytva za kulturu"' ['The First International Forum "War in Ukraine. The Battle for Culture" Held in Kyiv'] European Prostrir 13 February 2023. <https://www.prostir.ua/?news=u-kyievi-vidbuvsya-pershyj-mizhnarodnyj-forum-vijna-v-ukrajini-bytva-za-kulturu>, accessed 22 April 2023.
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 - 13 Vonnák's article in this issue discusses the role of state hierarchies in supporting regional museums.

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