

Introduction: Voices from Ukrainian Museums

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An introduction to our themed issue on museums in Ukraine after the full-scale Russian invasion of February 2024. This introduction summarizes the main aspects of the articles and describes the process of editing the issue.

A key point of the article is that the war has forced a re-examination of the appropriateness of certain traditions in journal editing.

Keywords: Ukraine museums, war, heritage, Russian aggression

Our editors frequently receive suggestions for themed issues on topics related to museums. Some of the recommendations reflect major trends in the field, such as the use of social media or decolonization, while others focus on events which have a profound impact on exhibitionary institutions. Our November 2020 issue on first responses to the Covid epidemic was one such issue. In July 2022, our production editor received an email which proposed a focus on the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine:

We feel the support of people around the world and we are grateful for the help we receive. Right now we consider it necessary to show that the aggressor does not intimidate us and will not force us to stop our life for a single day. That is why we would like to propose you prepare a themed issue "Spotlight on Ukraine" for your highly respected periodical *Museum and Society*. Although the authors are currently in different parts of Ukraine, and some of them are in the combat zone, we continue holding out. The support of the international community is very important, because only together can we achieve peace.

The Ukrainian cultural worker who sent the proposal promptly fell out of contact for ten months. Until late May 2023, our team did not know whether he was safe, in danger, or even alive. A last-ditch attempt to reach him garnered a response describing a harrowing winter. He is not named here; he graciously stated a preference for crediting all of Ukraine's 'heroic' scholars, and anonymity may protect him from additional risk. We remain grateful for his foresight. As the member of the editorial team handling this issue, I am especially obliged for this opportunity to learn more about my Ukrainian heritage and the tenacity of the country's citizens. The result of the process is a panoply of voices and ideas, ranging from those who are opposed to maintaining any Russian presence in Ukrainian museums and memorials (such as those dedicated to Pushkin) to those who feel that obliterating histories related to Russia constitutes a loss of heritage. This topic will resound with readers from the UK and USA familiar with the debates related to memorials to historical personages who enslaved Africans.

The creativity and resilience of Ukrainian museum staff is evident in almost every article in this edition. Authors describe their difficulties in obtaining packing materials and finding safe storage; the effect of damage to beloved buildings; and the importance of recording and registering the existence of endangered objects and buildings for posterity. These accounts are pertinent to those in the many other parts of the globe experiencing conflict. Some readers will be fascinated by the heroic efforts of museum staff to continue to offer a demoralized public a full schedule of exhibitions and events. Institutions are understaffed because men

have been conscripted and other employees have been forced to flee. Under these conditions, a children's art sale to raise funds for animal shelters overburdened by homeless pets is especially notable. Such programmes bring home the extent of the devastation and the ways in which the war has permeated all aspects of life in Ukraine.

Specialized museums such as historic mansions and sites dedicated to war have faced their own challenges, and items related to the current aggression are already finding their way into displays. Certain practitioners have felt the urgency of collecting photographs and other objects for exhibition in other nations, so that the world will comprehend the scale of the conflict. Members of our audience who practice 'instant' collecting and develop pop-up exhibitions will find these aspects of the issue intriguing. This raises another pertinent question: is it ever too soon to exhibit objects related to traumatic events? What responsibilities do museums have when they display captured weapons or bloodied items belonging to the war dead at a time when the outcome of war is undecided, and visitors may be experiencing their own losses?

In contrast, museum historians may be interested in articles addressing the challenges of recent events in comparison to designing exhibitions related to previous conflicts, especially World War II. In this context, an emphasis on nationalism in Ukrainian museums has helped people maintain their spirits and convictions of the importance of independence. This nationalism has manifested in multiple ways, ranging from lessons on the Ukrainian language to fierce efforts to protect the work of Ukrainian artists in institutions that have been under attack. Repairing buildings and ensuring that they are not restored in shoddy ways by Russian invaders have become critical efforts. Even so, Ukrainian government hierarchies have had differential impacts on regional museums throughout the nation, yielding insights into the kinds of administrative structures that are most (and least) effective in times of crisis.

The effects of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on museums have been pervasive but not entirely tragic, and the articles in this journal issue leave reason for hope. Ultimately, they remind us of the resilience of museum workers and their institutions. Together, they play critically important roles in the lives of citizens, which go far beyond education and entertainment, which are often perceived as the primary roles of museums today.

Compiling this issue has presented lessons in the effects of war on academic research and publication, and it has involved multiple ethical dilemmas. These are not simply the kinds of distinctions posed by working with non-native English speakers – for instance, whether to offer transliterations or use the Cyrillic alphabet for notes and references (we decided to use whatever authors supplied), or to spell place names exactly as they did, yielding inconsistencies within the issue. Editing this issue has involved more serious concerns. The authors submitting articles have been at the very least overworked and in some cases traumatized by military attacks. Their internet fluctuated with electricity outages, and their days might be spent collecting broken glass from windows and floors, mourning the damage to historic buildings. Consequently, it seemed petty and insensitive to insist on deadlines, flowing academic English, or carefully referenced theoretical arguments drawn from works in extensive – and open – research libraries. Instead, our call for papers asked for shorter pieces offering insights into current conditions, updates on wartime museum initiatives, opinion pieces, and affective responses to events. Submissions went through double blind peer review and two rounds of revisions, but these familiar processes did not prepare me for deciding whether I could reject an article whose contents moved me to tears. In the end, I determined that the emphasis had to be on the voices emerging from Ukrainian museums and letting them be heard. Significant communications with authors were translated into Ukrainian by volunteers, and, where necessary, I worked closely with authors to ensure that their English was comprehensible but also an accurate reflection of their thoughts. I welcomed articles with overlapping topics because they offered diverse perspectives on events. In one situation, I reviewed copyediting changes to an article for an author in a city that was being shelled. The Nova Kakhovka dam disaster in early June 2023 forced another author to make a last-minute revision to her article after copyediting was complete – I supplied relevant news articles in English because these weren't available to her at short notice. We also had to consider who could be named in articles and who might be put at risk; at the same time, we worried about

whether naming and discussing individual Russians and collaborators might bring about libel charges. In some cases, I consulted with specialists to understand Ukrainian traditions and practices mentioned in submissions, and I provided authors with PDFs of reference works that were not accessible in Ukraine. Some of our readers may be unaccustomed to such activist editing. However, an underlying theme of this issue is that the Russian violation of Ukrainian borders not only put a population at risk but, in a much narrower context, set off intensive questioning about museum and research practices, ethics, and values. Flexibility and adaptation have been requisites in the editorial process as well as in daily life in Ukraine; I was delighted that authors in other nations contributed articles about international support for Ukrainian museums.

Readers may wonder why this issue is in English only. Some of the articles were originally written in Ukrainian and translated, not only because it is our practice to publish in English, but also because we lack the resources and capabilities to edit work in Ukrainian. Authors repeatedly reminded me that publishing in English and making their situation known around the world played a key role in their decision to participate in this process. Nevertheless, I would support republishing this issue in Ukrainian if the possibility were to arise.

In closing, thanks again to the Ukrainian cultural worker who inspired this issue, which has allowed other Ukrainians to voice their thoughts on how the invasion of 2022 has affected their institutions. The authors of the articles met our call for papers with honesty and bravery. They were indefatigable in meeting stringent deadlines even when they were under attack. They scrupulously drew attention to inequities within Ukrainian culture, for instance in representations of women at war, instead of limiting their criticism to Russian incursions. Scholars in Slavic studies provided advice as I was beginning this work: thank you to Victoria Donovan, Tatiana Senkevitch, Emily Channell Justice, and Christine Worobec. I couldn't have done it without you. Thank you as well to the *Museum & Society* team and our reviewers, including Peter Lester, Tom Eaton, Jen Walklate, Gordon Fyfe, Suzanne MacLeod, J. Pedro Lorente, Annette Fromm, Claire Sutherland, Anna Woodham, Laura Brandon, Anna Tulliach, Alexandra Bounia, Sam Alberti, Jenny Kidd, Kris Morrissey, Randi Marselis, Alexandra Woodall, Adrienne Kochman, Eleanor Armstrong, Eric Gable, Katy Bunning, and Sharon Macdonald. And finally, I am grateful for the memories of my Ukrainian grandparents, Bertha Tigay Saposs and David J. Saposs, fiercely independent thinkers who believed in the importance of heritage.

This issue is dedicated to the museum workers of Ukraine and to the memory of our beloved production editor, Jim Roberts, who supported this project wholeheartedly. His obituary can be found at the end of the issue.