

A Global Approach to Decolonizing Ukrainian Cultural Heritage

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Abstract

A new partnership project aims to create a guide to decoloniality for use in Ukraine, the UK and globally. Decoloniality – a developing practice in the UK and elsewhere – is essential for the long-term protection of cultural heritage in Ukraine and other countries impacted by Russian colonial rule. By encouraging readers to question long-held assumptions about Russia's role as a colonizing power, the guide will act as a tool for specialists and non-specialists struggling to accurately identify and describe cultural heritage from Eastern Europe. At the time of writing, planning for this pilot project is at an early stage, but the guide is envisaged as a much-needed step towards enhancing global perspectives on the rich cultural heritage of this often misunderstood and underrepresented region. This paper focuses on two key challenges we face in embarking on this one-year project: concepts of nationality in a region with historically shifting borders and issues surrounding language, terminology and transliteration.

Key words: Ukraine, Crimea, decolonization, borders, language, transliteration, Russification

Introduction

Ukraine has been reclaiming its suppressed history since regaining independence in 1991, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of Soviet occupation. Under Russian and Soviet rule, archives held by museums, libraries, government organizations and centres for academic research were censored, restricted, hidden or destroyed. Access to such information was only possible after 1991, resulting in a great rediscovery of knowledge. However, since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, stories have emerged about the deliberate Russian destruction of cultural organizations, looting of heritage, and brutal treatment of cultural workers within temporarily occupied areas.¹ As of 17 May 2023, UNESCO had verified damage to 256 cultural sites and counting, including museums, monuments, libraries and archives, as well as buildings of historic, artistic or religious interest.² Such cultural obliteration is a recognized feature of wars globally. After all, war is as much about destroying cultures and identity as it is about killing people and seizing land (Bevan 2016). Ukraine has been on the receiving end of cultural devastation before, notably during the Second World War when Kyiv was taken and retaken by German Nazis and Russian Bolsheviks (Nicholas 1995: 199–200).

Russia's colonial narrative has long asserted the country's supremacy over its neighbours, ensuring that the distinct cultural heritage of individual former colonies and Soviet nations remains virtually invisible to the West. Yet today's aggressive rhetoric emerging from the Kremlin has prompted a growing awareness of the persistent and harmful nature of Russian claims to superiority in the cultural sphere. The Russian narrative is persistent because it has long been accepted by many in the West. Academic research about Ukraine, Crimea and other states in central and eastern Europe, the Baltic, Caucasus and central Asia has

often been swept under the catch-all heading of Russian or Slavic Studies, as if all of these states remained colonies.³ The narrative is harmful because the distinctive voices of these other states are rarely heard or taken seriously in the West. Museums, galleries and other cultural organizations are partly responsible for creating and disseminating this narrative. In a keynote speech at the 2022 conference of the British Association for Slavonic and East European Studies (BASEES), historian Olesya Khromeychuk noted:

The question we need to ask ourselves – in academia, in curatorial rooms and galleries, in thinktanks, on political advisory boards – is why, until Ukraine was attacked, had we not thought of ensuring that we have inhouse expertise on the largest country in Europe? Why had we thought of a nation of over 40 million as small and insignificant? Why had we chosen to dismiss its culture as minor? Why had we decided that learning the Ukrainian language was pointless because they all speak Russian there anyway? That is also what Putin said. The answers to these questions are likely to be uncomfortable. They are likely to speak of our own prejudices and conscious and unconscious biases.⁴

Such biases explain why, for example, it is rare to see adverts in the West for the art of Kyrgyzstan or music from Moldova, whereas exhibitions about Fabergé Imperial eggs and renditions of Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* have long been considered crowd-pleasers. It is not that Kyrgyzstan, Moldova or other countries lack expertise, virtuosity and connoisseurship; rather, that Russian voices have dominated Western consciousness thanks to the Russian propaganda machine. The priority given to economic interests in the West has also led to acquiescence and the suppression of culture and artistry.

Since February 2022, however, cultural and heritage organizations across the world have been swift to organize support for their Ukrainian counterparts under attack. Shipments of packing crates, conservation materials and digitizing equipment have been coordinated from across the world to help record, preserve and conserve irreplaceable collections.⁵ Funds have been allocated to support museums and museum professionals working in Ukraine.⁶ Work placements have been offered to cultural heritage employees fleeing the war, as well as funds to cover continuing professional development.⁷ Online talks and conferences, such as *Heritage in Crisis* organized by the UK branch of ICOM (the International Council of Museums)⁸ and the *Culture in Crisis* programme organized by London's V&A (Victoria and Albert Museum), have encouraged museum and gallery professionals in the UK and beyond to develop their understanding of Ukraine's rich cultural heritage.⁹

In addition, a growing movement has advocated for decolonizing the broader understanding of Ukrainian history and culture. This movement has grown globally as well as within Ukraine. In April 2023, for example, a new law was signed by President Zelenskyy regarding the decolonization of toponyms.¹⁰ Gone are the streets, squares and parks named after Russian icons. They have been replaced by the pantheon of great Ukrainian cultural figures such as Taras Shevchenko, Lesia Ukrainka and Ivan Franko – names that are becoming increasingly familiar in the West. Of course, it is not possible or desirable to erase the Russian version of history completely, but changes such as these build optimism for the future and renewed confidence in what it means to be Ukrainian.

As part of this movement, the Ukrainian Institute in Kyiv, which promotes Ukrainian culture abroad, has organized events to broaden the conversation. These have included an intensive programme during the 59th Venice Biennale in 2022¹¹ and a 2022-23 season of culture in association with the British Council.¹² What started as a handful of talks and seminars about decolonization with groups of museum and gallery professionals from across the world has evolved into a partnership project. The result will be a written guide to complement the valuable work already taking place in the cultural heritage sector. The guide will become one of many weapons in Ukraine's cultural diplomacy arsenal, an important part of the country's struggle for democracy and global visibility. Among the challenges facing this year-long pilot project is the ambition to make the guide meaningful for users based both inside and outside of Ukraine. To achieve this, partners from the UK (which has experience in unpicking its own colonial legacy) are sharing knowledge and resources with experts from Ukraine. The intention

is to support and facilitate the task of untangling and interpreting the latter's complex history.

Inspiration for the guide

The proposed guide will be modelled in part on the UK Museums Association's (MA) invaluable publication, *Supporting Decolonisation in Museums*.¹³ The MA guide recognizes that 'colonialism has profound human consequences' as an 'expression of power that relies upon oppression, extraction of resources and silencing'. It provides a framework which 'aims to rebalance power and representation away from the coloniser narrative of history and society' in order to challenge persistent harmful narratives. Although squarely aimed at UK cultural heritage organizations, the methodology, framework and best practice it contains can be adapted to suit other countries dealing with complex historical and political legacies of colonialism.

The MA guide stresses the importance of recognizing that 'decolonising practice is about facing up to histories of racism and exclusion'. Whereas the MA guide is written for a UK-based audience coming to terms with its past as a colonizer, a key difference is that the new Ukraine-oriented guide will be written from the point of view of the formerly colonized. It will help to reveal deep-rooted prejudices and biases that can be traced back to colonial rule. For obvious reasons, it is unlikely to be embraced any time soon by Russia, which regularly justifies the war in terms of its lost empire.¹⁴

At the time of writing, the process of compiling this new guide for Ukraine and agreeing on a framework is at an early stage. Taking inspiration from the MA model, the process is envisaged as evolving from a series of facilitated workshops, each tackling a specific theme, to draw out issues, guidance and recommendations for best practice. The workshops are intended to both generate and test content for the guide. Topics are likely to be diverse, ranging from Avant Garde art to Crimean archaeology. We also intend to identify case studies which show how the guidance can be applied. The nature of the project means that, even though the number of people participating in the initial workshops will be limited, a ripple effect will ensure that the guide will reach increasing numbers of people globally, broadening the discussion, generating new research and prompting associated activities such as conferences, publications and digital toolkits. Although the focus will be on Ukraine, the guide is intended to be applicable to other countries in the region that may also be struggling to make their heritage visible in the West.

Concepts of nationality in a region with historically shifting borders

The new guidance will likely tackle the issues of historically-shifting borders and concepts of nationality. Take for example Lviv, a historic city in the west of Ukraine. The name of the city has changed several times under different occupying states. It has been known as Lemberg (under Austro-Hungarian rule), Lwów (under Polish rule), Lvov (under the Soviets), and Lemberg again (under the Nazis) before reverting to the Ukrainian name Lviv. This city – and other towns, villages and regions in the west of Ukraine – changed hands at least eight times between 1914 and 1945, sometimes overnight (Sands 2017: xvii). Each of the occupying states has left a mark on the city, its residents and its cultural heritage. A well-known saying claims that it would have been possible for someone to be born in the Austro-Hungarian empire, schooled in Poland, married under the Third Reich, employed in the USSR and a pensioner in Ukraine without ever leaving town. The challenge today is to decide how that person would have described their nationality; the guide will provide advice and alternatives.

This issue becomes particularly thorny when deciding how to describe an artist's or object maker's nationality for acquisition records, inventories, online catalogues and object labels. The authors of this paper have seen many incorrect and often baffling attempts by curators struggling to unpick the historical record or, worse, taking the lazy route of referring to the whole of Eastern Europe as Russia. Best practice today would be to give a person's birth date and birthplace followed by their date and place of death, using current place names. Ideally, these would be followed by a list of places where the artist or maker was active, again using current place names. Not only does this approach avoid the challenge of matching historic place names with certain dates, it also neatly sidesteps the issue of specifying nationality in a region where borders have been in flux and an individual's national identity may differ from

that of the ruling state.

Language, terminology and transliteration

For UK-based museums, galleries, libraries and archives tackling decolonization, their primary focus is to deal with the legacy of the British Empire. However, they also have a responsibility to recognize non-British colonial legacies and to describe those sensitively, using accurate terminology and spellings. In the case of Ukraine and many other East European states, this requires transliterating from the Cyrillic to the Roman alphabet. It also means transliterating from the Ukrainian language rather than from Russian. Although the two languages and alphabets are similar, they have significant variations – just as English has some similarities with German or Dutch, but they are all considered separate languages. Explaining the nuances of language in translation and transliteration will be a key challenge for those compiling the guide.

When transliterating place names for catalogue entries and exhibition captions, it is important to start with Ukrainian spellings rather than Russian ones; to use, for example, Kyiv (Київ) and Kharkiv (Харків) rather than the Russian Kiev and Khar'kov. Such spelling mistakes, seen in many online collections databases, are often a legacy of inputting by staff with insufficient language expertise. The University of Cambridge Library has recognized this issue and put in place a strategy to review and correct historic catalogue entries.¹⁵ Their approach is straightforward and relatively easy to implement. More importantly, it can be replicated by any museum, gallery or archive which is truly committed to the principles of decolonization. After all, a UK-based museum would no longer be expected to use English spellings for places located in the former British Empire – for instance, in India – where local names differ. Hence, the English colonial name Calcutta has reverted to the Bengali name Kolkata.

Another mistake common in the West is to use the definite article when referring to Ukraine. In English, we would not say 'the France', 'the Germany' or 'the India', so it seems strange that many people persist in referring to 'the Ukraine' when, as a sovereign country, its name is clearly stated in its declaration of independence and constitution.¹⁶ Use of the definite article can be traced back to colonial rule when Ukraine was known as The Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. It is also reflected in Putin's derogative use of prepositions when referring to Ukraine in his speeches. As linguistic anthropologist Kathryn E. Graber points out, 'that little word "the" might suggest that the speaker does not much care whether Ukraine is an independent state'.¹⁷

Despite numerous attempts by Russia to eliminate the Ukrainian language, fictional prose, poetry and songs have flourished. Throughout history, there have been prolonged periods when Ukrainians were not allowed to study, publish or even perform in their own language (Dibrova 2017). This ban was written into law in 1876 with the Ems Ukaze, a decree issued by Emperor Alexander II. Harvard professor of Ukrainian History Serhii Plokhly explains that the Ems Ukaze prohibited

... all publications in Ukrainian, as well as the import of Ukrainian-language books from abroad. It also banned Ukrainian-language theatre productions and public performances of Ukrainian songs... The Ukrainian language, culture and identity came to be seen as a threat... to the unity of the [Russian] empire (Plokhly 2016: 167).

In the 1930s, Russification – a policy of forced assimilation of minority groups into Russian culture – was imposed on Ukrainian people, with Moscow consistently ordering the restriction, persecution, sentencing and even execution of Ukrainian artists, writers and poets. The 'Executed Renaissance' is a term used to describe a generation of talented Ukrainian writers and artists from the 1920s who were among those brutally crushed during Stalin's purges of the 1930s. Starting with the forced famine known as the Holodomor, such purges had far-reaching and long-term effects, as described here by London School of Economics Professor Anne Applebaum in her book, *Red Famine*:

Millions assumed that any association with Ukrainian language or history was

toxic, even dangerous, as well as “backwards” and inferior. The city government of Donetsk dropped its use of Ukrainian; factory newspapers that had been publishing in Ukrainian switched to Russian. The universities of Odesa, which had recently adopted Ukrainian, also went back to teaching in Russian. Ambitious students openly sought to avoid studying Ukrainian, preferring to be educated in Russian, the language that gave them greater access and more career opportunities (Applebaum 2018: 222).

This greater access to education and career opportunities for Russian speakers in Ukraine persisted until after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Under Russian rule, Ukrainians and ethnic groups such as Crimean Tatars became victims of a long-term policy of Russification that was intended to eliminate their language, their culture and their identity. Many people – including academics and professionals – aligned themselves with Russia for the benefits that offered while being unaware of subconscious biases and prejudices that were being instilled in them, even though they went against their own culture. Hence one of the objectives for the guide will be to reveal hidden biases that may exist within Ukraine and elsewhere, and to encourage museums and galleries globally to actively celebrate the cultural and linguistic diversity of Ukraine and, by extension, all countries of Eastern Europe.

Conclusion

The new guide on decoloniality in Ukraine is due to be published as a partnership project in 2024. It will encourage cultural heritage professionals in Ukraine, the UK and internationally to question long-held assumptions about Russia's role as a colonizing power, helping to reveal hidden prejudices and biases that may have resulted from aggressive policies of Russification. The practice of decoloniality is essential for the long-term protection of cultural heritage in Ukraine and other countries of Eastern Europe. The proposal for a guide has received widespread support and is envisaged as a cultural diplomacy tool in Ukraine's struggle for democracy and global visibility. Although the focus will be on Ukraine, the guide is also intended to be relevant to other countries in the region which may also be struggling to unpick the past and to make their voices heard in the West. As well as acting as a springboard for further research, conferences and publications, this pilot project will be a much-needed step towards enhancing global perspectives on the rich cultural heritage of this significant – yet often misunderstood and underrepresented – region.

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Notes

1 David Salazar, 'Russians Kill Ukrainian Conductor for Refusing to Participate in Concert', OperaWire 17 October 2022. <https://operawire.com/russians-kill-ukrainian-conductor-for-refusing-to-participate-in-concert/>, accessed 26 May 2023.

2 UNESCO, 'Damaged Cultural Sites in Ukraine Verified by UNESCO'. <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/damaged-cultural-sites-ukraine-verified-unesco>, accessed 26 May 2023. Figures on the website are updated regularly.

- 3 Ukrainian Institute, 'Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar Studies in the World', 2023. <https://ui.org.ua/en/ukrainian-and-crimean-tatar-studies-2/>, accessed 13 June 2023. This report – which includes an interactive map – reveals that many academic courses tend to focus on Ukrainian culture and language rather than on politics and economics.
- 4 Olesya Khromeychuk, 'Where is Ukraine on the Mental Map of the Academic Community?', Keynote Lecture, BASEES Conference, University of Cambridge 8 April 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJthJb1tk0Y>, accessed 30 May 2023.
- 5 ALIPH Foundation, 'Action Plan for the Protection of Heritage in Ukraine', 2022. <https://www.aliph-foundation.org/en/projects/aliph-action-plan-for-ukraine>, accessed 26 May 2023. ALIPH is one of many organizations funding projects to support the protection of cultural heritage in Ukraine. Its work is further described in other articles in this issue.
- 6 ICOM, 'Solidarity Projects Ukraine: Funded Projects', 16 December 2022. <https://icom.museum/en/news/solidarity-projects-ukraine-funded-projects/>, accessed 26 May 2023. Through the work of its international branches, ICOM is one of many organizations supporting the protection of cultural heritage in Ukraine.
- 7 Katya Belaia-Selzer Studio, 'Ukrainian Heritage', 2022. <https://www.katyarestoration.com/index.php/ukrainian-heritage/>, accessed 26 May 2023. Belaia-Selzer has organized professional development opportunities for conservators from Ukraine for several years and has compiled a dictionary of conservation terms – in Ukrainian and English – available on her website.
- 8 ICOM UK, 'Heritage in Crisis: Decolonising Ukrainian Cultural Heritage', 30 November 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iOOZPR5BHRk>, accessed 26 May 2023.
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