Cultural Heritage in the Russo-Ukrainian War: a Victim in the Conflict

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EN **Abstract.** This paper discusses the devastating impact of the Russo-Ukrainian war on cultural heritage in Ukraine. It highlights the destruction and plundering of cultural sites and artifacts in a broad historical context. The study traces the Russian historical narrative and its connection to state ideology, emphasizing the ideological use of archaeology to support territorial claims of nowadays Russia. The authors discuss the impact of the military conflict on museums in Ukraine since 2014. The article details the challenges faced by museums during the conflict, including the occupation of Crimea and certain areas of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions, as well as the destruction and relocation of museum collections. The analysis highlights the severe consequences of hostilities on Ukraine's archaeological heritage. The loss of archaeological sites and museum collections due to conflict-related activities, looting, and destruction is emphasized. The paper discusses the challenges faced in monitoring and documenting these losses and proposes initiatives to address the crisis. Finally, the authors provide some recommendations on minimizing the consequences of war for objects of cultural heritage, stressing that these recommendations could be useful for any country, even if its involvement in a large-scale military conflict currently seems unlikely.

Keywords: Ukraine; Russo-Ukrainian war; archaeology and politics; cultural heritage; museum; archaeological landscapes; destructions.

ES El patrimonio cultural en la guerra ruso-ucraniana: una víctima del conflicto

ES **Resumen.** Este artículo discute el impacto devastador de la guerra ruso-ucraniana en el patrimonio cultural en Ucrania. Destaca la destrucción y el saqueo de yacimientos y artefactos culturales un amplio contexto histórico. El estudio rastrea la narrativa histórica rusa y su conexión con la ideología estatal, enfatizando el uso ideológico de la arqueología para apoyar las reclamaciones territoriales de la Rusia actual. Los autores discuten el impacto del conflicto militar en los museos de Ucrania desde 2014. El artículo detalla los desafíos afrontados por los museos durante el conflicto, incluida la ocupación de Crimea y ciertas áreas de las regiones de Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia y Kherson, así como la destrucción y reubicación de co-

lecciones de museos. El análisis destaca las graves consecuencias de las hostilidades en el patrimonio arqueológico de Ucrania. Se hace hincapié en la pérdida de sitios arqueológicos y colecciones de museos debido a actividades relacionadas con el conflicto, el saqueo y la destrucción. El documento analiza los desafíos enfrentados en el monitoreo y documentación de estas pérdidas y propone iniciativas para abordar la crisis. Finalmente, los autores proporcionan algunas recomendaciones para minimizar las consecuencias de la guerra para los objetos del patrimonio cultural, haciendo hincapié en que estas recomendaciones podrían ser útiles para cualquier país, incluso si su participación en un conflicto militar a gran escala actualmente parezca poco probable.

Palabras clave: Ucrania; guerra ruso-ucraniana; arqueología y política; patrimonio cultural; museo; paisajes arqueológicos; destrucciones.

Sumario: Introduction. Imperial ambitions and archaeology as a reason to justify Russian invasion. Museums of Ukraine during the Russo-Ukrainian war. Archaeological heritage. Concluding remarks. References.

Introduction

Ten years ago, it was almost impossible to imagine that a significant part of Europe would soon turn into a zone of military conflict on a scale unprecedented since the end of World War II. The brutal, unprovoked aggression of the Russian Federation against peaceful towns and villages resulted in numerous human casualties, the forced displacement of many people, massive economic losses, and damage to infrastructure and communications. War, like any other type of destructive activity, negatively impacts people's lives, the economies of countries, and the world in general. The military conflicts that have occurred in recent decades around the world show that cultural heritage, including archaeological sites, becomes one of the most vulnerable segments of social life. For example, the invasion of Iraq caused intensive looting of the archaeological sites: the total area of the looting was much greater, than all archaeological investigations ever conducted in southern Iraq (Stone 2008, p. 137) During the conflict in Syria the cultural heritage suffered significantly from direct bombing and damage to archaeological sites, military use of archaeological areas, civil occupation of archaeological sites and historical monuments, illegal construction and illegal excavations (Sabrine 2002, P. 223). The protection of cultural property during armed conflicts requires joint efforts from civil authorities, military commanders, international organizations and the academic community (see: Radin 2011; Rush 2012; Johannot-Gradis 2015).

In Ukraine, as of 13 March 2024, UNESCO has verified damage to 346 sites since 24 February 2022, including 127 religious sites, 31 museums, 154 buildings of historical and/or artistic interest, 19 monuments, 14 libraries, 1 archive[1]. The war in Ukraine belongs to the type of conflicts in which the cultural heritage is not just a victim of hostilities, but one of the reasons for the conflict itself. Some of the sites and cultural institutions were damaged during military actions, while others were plundered and/or misappropriated by the Russian officials. The legislative framework for protection of the cultural heritage, both national and international, appeared to be almost inefficient under conditions of the full-scale military conflict (Okhrimenko 2022: 53-55). The ongoing war, which appears to be far from its conclusion, raises many questions of great importance not only for Ukraine but for any modern nation. How and why can cultural heritage become a matter of military conflict? What specific damages can modern warfare inflict on the cultural heritage of a particular country? Is it possible to protect objects of great historical and archaeological value from the ravages of military actions? The aim of this article is to provide answers to these questions.

Imperial ambitions and archaeology as a reason to justify Russian invasion

Vladimir Putin declared the so-called "denazification of Ukraine" as one of the chief goals of his invasion, which, in fact, means the

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[1] The statistics is constantly renewed on the UNESCO's web-site: https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/damaged-cultural-sites-ukraine-verified-unesco?hub=66116 [Actualizada el 02/04/2024]. Acceso el 31/03/2024.

demolition of Ukrainian national identity, history, and public memory. Hüseyin Saltan in his recent publication (2023) argues that Russia's invasion attempt against Ukraine emerged as a military result of both the preservation of its historical heritage and a geopolitical obsession. In particular, he states that the legitimacy of ultra-nationalist groups in Ukraine, "state-based ethnocentric policies", as well as "the gradual cultural cleansing policies of both the people and the government in the process of constructing a national identity during and after the events called Euromaidan or the Revolution of Honor" formed the basis of Russia's propaganda for military action against Ukrainian nationalism (ibid., p. 21). In fact, the in 2019, five years after the annexation of Crimea by Russia, the only far-right political party with clear anti-Russian agenda ("Svoboda") gained only 2,16% of votes and failed to get to the parliament. The same year Vladimir Zelenskyy was elected as a President of Ukraine – a person of Jewish origin, who used to speak Russian on daily basis and previousely was deeply involved in the Russian entertainment and film industry. Meanwhile, Saltan clearly emphasizes the true reason of the Russian invasion in Ukraine in his paper: "it was unthinkable for many Russians that "Little Russia" - Ukraine - was not a part of Russia" (ibid., p. 15).

Seven months before the full-scale invasion, Putin published an essay titled "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," in which he stated that "Russians and Ukrainians were one people – a single whole," who created Ancient Rus – a state with a single religion, language, and ruling dynasty, with its capital in Kyiv, "the mother of all Russian cities." Even after the state's decline, its population maintained a common language, faith, and an aspiration to reunite under the rule of the Moscow tsar. Later, it was the Polish elite and some Austro-Hungarian-backed Ukrainian intellectuals who formed "the idea of the Ukrainian people as a nation separate from the Russians."[2]

There can be little doubt that the roots of the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine lie in this historical narrative, which was actually produced by Russian nationalistic historiography to justify the territorial claims of the Russian empire in Central Europe. One might admit that the entire concept of 'Ancient Rus' (or 'Kyivan Rus' as it was called later) was a very important part of Russian state ideology since the times of the Grand Duchy of Moscow. In the 19th – early 20th centuries, Russian historians argued that Kyivan Rus was the earliest Russian state inhabited by the so-called "Single Russian ethnicity" or "Old Russian ethnicity" (Yusova 2005: 384-394).

From linguistic and archaeological points of view, this theory seems very anachronistic. In the case of accepting it, one must also accept the fact that during the Middle Ages, a single ethnic identity could exist on such a vast territory from the Baltic to the Black Sea. The origin of the name Rus is unclear (Danylenko 2004). Since the 9th and 10th centuries, it was used either as an ethnic label to identify the Vikings of Eastern Europe or as the name for the Middle Dnipro area with the center in Kyiv. Various Slavic chiefdoms dominated this territory until the Vikings established a ruling dynasty with a capital in Kyiv in the early 9th century. They formed an early medieval empire along the trade route from Scandinavia to Byzantium, similar to those established by Charlemagne or Cnut the Great in the West. The population of Rus consisted of separate communities that possessed complicated mixture of identities, and were connected to each other mostly by the church and political power of the prince (Plokhy 2006: 10-48).

In the mid-13th century, Rus dissolved due to the Mongol invasion. In the North-West of the former Rus, the Moscow princedom emerged. Later, it appropriated the name Rus and became the Tsardom of Rossja (Greek transcription of the word Rus). From the early 18th century, it was named the Russian empire. Meanwhile, the lands of Ukraine were incorporated into the Lithuanian and Polish states which in 1569 formed a single state – Rzeczpospolita (Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth). The economic exploitation and Catholic expansion in lands where the majority of the population were Orthodox fueled conflict, resulting in an uprising under the leadership of Bohdan Khmelnytskyi that broke out in 1648. The events of the next few years were commonly called the "civil war" within Rzeczpospolita in Polish historiography, while within Russian historical narrative they are seen as a popular uprising for "Ukraine's reunification with Russia". In fact, it was rather a conflict of private interests, which soon exposed unresolved social contradictions and grew into a large-scale struggle of the Orthodox population of Ukraine for

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[2]   The article by Vladimir Putin is available on the Boris Yeltsin Presidential Library web-site: https://www.prlib.ru/en/article-vladimir-putin-historical-unity-russians-and-ukrainians [Actualizada el 12/07/2021]. Acceso el 05/09/2023

self-determination. This struggle, in which the leading role was played by the Ukrainian Cossack military organization, resulted in the creation of a state headed by a Cossack hetman. Political instability, as well as an unfavorable international situation, led to the fact that in 1653, the Cossack State entered into Muscovite Russia with broad autonomy rights. Over the next few decades, Ukraine became the scene of bloody ethnic and religious conflicts fueled by expansionist ambitions of Moscow, Warsaw, and the Ottoman Empire (Plokhy 2015, p. 73-107).

The Russian government, since the late 17th century, tended to narrow the rights of Cossack autonomy. After Ivan Mazepa's unsuccessful attempt to withdraw Ukraine from the sphere of Russian influence during the Northern War, direct rule of the Collegium of Little Russia (1722-1727) was actually introduced. Attempts by Pavlo Polubotko and other Cossack leaders to find a compromise on the preservation of Ukrainian autonomy ended in their imprisonment. In 1764, the hetman's institute was eliminated; in 1775, the Zaporozhian Sich, the symbolic center of Cossackdom, was destroyed. Finally, in 1786, the last signs of autonomy were abolished. Since then, Ukraine has been completely incorporated into the Russian Empire. During the next century, the Russian ruling elites directed their efforts toward the assimilation of the Ukrainian population. The decree issued by the Minister of Interior Pyotr Valuev in 1863, as well as the so-called Ems Ukaz issued by Emperor Alexander II in 1876, banned the use of the Ukrainian language in print, school teaching, church life, theatre, and so on (see: Remy 2016).

Despite significant differences in language and culture, most Russian officials and scholars denied the existence of Ukrainians and Belarusians as separate national entities. At the same time, they celebrated the great symbolic role of Kyiv and some regions of Ukraine in Russian state and nation-building. Archaeology, as an emerging discipline, had to adapt itself to this ideological narrative (Klejn 2012; Shephard 2016).

Since 1712, local authorities throughout Russia were encouraged to search for antiquities and send them to Saint Petersburg to enrich the collections of the Russian imperial metropolis. Russia began to appropriate artifacts found in the lands of Ukraine at the same time when the first systematic archaeological excavations began in the second half of the 18th century. The Scythian burial Melgunovsky Kurhan (Lyta mohyla) was one of the first cases. The treasure, which included an iron akinake-sword with a handle covered with gold in a gold-plated wooden scabbard, silver elements of a stool from an Assyrian palace, a gold diadem, 17 massive gold plates in the form of eagles, and many other artifacts, were transferred to the Kunstkamera museum in St. Petersburg, and then to the Hermitage.

In 1859, Alexander II established the Imperial Archaeological Commission (IAC) – a state institution that coordinated and organized all excavations. Since 1889, it was the only authority that issued permits ("Open letters") for archaeological field studies. Such permits obliged archaeologists to submit "all the most valuable and interesting findings" for consideration by the Commission and the emperor himself. It is not surprising that almost all such findings removed from Ukraine and other countries subjugated to Russia later replenished the collections of the Hermitage and other museums located in Saint Petersburg and Moscow. This practice continued even after the Russian empire ceased to exist and the Bolsheviks established their rule in Ukraine. The most significant treasures of Scythian gold, valuable artifacts from Greek colonies of the North Pontic area, as well as religious icons and mosaics from Ukrainian churches dating from the Rus period, were moved to Russia and never returned.

The creation and representation of collections of archaeological findings from the territory of the Russian empire and the USSR had significant ideological meaning. It contributed to the creation of the concept of "Fatherland's history" ('otechestvennaja istorija'), according to which all lands incorporated into Russia were historically connected from the earliest times. The concept of unified 'Fatherland's history,' coined in the Russian empire and Stalin's USSR, is still relevant in present-day Russia. Moreover, it is actively promoted outside Russia to justify claims on its former provinces (Konstantinova 2023).

The exhibition "Scythians: Warriors of Ancient Siberia," organized by the State Hermitage and held in the British Museum in London from September 2017 to January 2018, is one of the most recent examples of this approach. Although the exhibition's name focused the viewer's attention on Siberia, the exposition included a vast number of findings made in the territory of Ukraine. Among them were golden Scythian artifacts from Lyta Mohyla, Solokha, and Chortomlyk burial mounds, which are currently part of the Hermitage's collection. An edited volume that accompanied the exhibition (Simpson, Pankova 2017) did not even mention that these artifacts came from the territory of Ukraine.

Instead, the book includes a foreword by the Hermitage director in which the Iron Age Scythians are uncritically equated with modern Russians:

> Scythians are also present in the Russian national psychology in the form of 'the Scythian war'. Historical sources relate that when attacked the Scythians pretended to flee in defeat, drawing the enemy deep into the steppe, where they suddenly turned on them and destroyed them. Such was their response to Achaemenid forces. And in modern history Russia too has made use of its vast territory to apply the same tactics to war. Such was Russia's response to Polish, Swedish, French and German invasions (Piotrovsky 2017: 8).

In 2022, Mikhail Piotrovsky, in his interview with Rossiyskaya Gazeta, strongly supported the Russian invasion in Ukraine, claiming that "We are all militarists and imperials" (Kishkovsky 2022). This point of view, represented by one of the key figures in the Russian academic milieu, shows that the imperial perspective is still relevant when it comes to the cultural heritage of countries that were formerly part of the Russian empire/USSR.

Museums of Ukraine during the Russo-Ukrainian war

At this stage, it is possible to conditionally distinguish two periods in the Russian-Ukrainian war (and, correspondingly, two stages in the activity of museums during this time):

1. February 2014 - February 24, 2022;
2. After February 24, 2022 (Ivanysko 2023).

Russia's aggression against Ukraine began in February 2014 with the occupation of Crimea, the organization of pro-Russian rallies in cities in the east and south of Ukraine, and the occupation of certain areas of Luhansk and Donetsk regions. Museum institutions in these territories automatically fell under occupation or were under the threat of destruction due to hostilities. The central government of Ukraine was not prepared for hostilities, and museum collections were not evacuated. Even information about these collections can be considered lost. According to the registers of the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy, as of 2014, there were 99 museums in Crimea, 24 in Donetsk Oblast, and 23 in Luhansk, which housed hundreds of thousands (perhaps millions) of movable cultural heritage items (Kulturni tsinnosti 2017: 7).

The fates of the museum institutions in Crimea and the temporarily occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk regions were different. The occupation of Crimea was, in a sense, "bloodless," with no hostilities taking place. Museums were reformatted and re-registered in accordance with the legislation of the aggressor state. Russia immediately began to include the Crimean museums' collections in its register of cultural heritage objects, the state museum fund, and the national property of the Russian Federation, seizing and declaring as its property not only the territory but also the cultural heritage. Among them are almost 150 objects listed in the UNESCO catalogs (Kulturni tsinnosti 2017: 5-6).

As of June 7, 2023, more than 248,000 museum objects from Crimean museums (under the designation Krasnodar Territory) were included in the State Catalog of Russia, acknowledging the fact of theft. Among them are items from the Ievpatoriia Museum of Local History (the museum building is included in the State Register of Immovable Monuments of Ukraine) - 27,086 items; the Crimean Republican Museum of Local History "Central Tavrida Museum" - 17,438; the Historical and Archaeological Reserve "Naples of Scythia" (the capital of the Crimean Scythians) - 7,614; Feodosia Museum of Antiquities (founded in 1811, one of the oldest historical and archaeological museums of Ukraine) - 11,479; Museum "Sudak Fortress" - 8,854; Bakhchisarai State Historical and Cultural Reserve - 21,356; National Reserve "Tavrian Chersonesus" (included in the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2013) - 6,145; Kerch Historical and Archaeological Museum (founded in 1826) - 13,574[3]. In some cases, museum objects were physically relocated from Crimea (Tavrian Chersonesus, Sudak, Central Taurida Museum, Feodosia National Art Gallery, etc.) to the territory of the occupying state (Kulturni tsinnosti 2017: 6). This fact, along with the observation that these objects serve Russian ideology, was even noted by UNESCO (Follow-up to decisions 2021: 5-6, 11, 20).

The Russian Federation also claimed museum objects that were taken from Crimean museums to the Netherlands for exhibition even before the start of the Russo-Ukrainian war. Court hearings lasted about 10 years, and in the end, the court made a decision in favor of Ukraine. There was an active discussion on

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[3]   See the Russian Goskatalog database: http://projects.pandan.eusp.org/goskatalog

this issue in the legal field, which did not always take into account the normative framework of the museum legislation of Ukraine (for example, Kasinec, Šuška 2020). The result of the court hearings was a correct decision that the items will be temporarily stored in the state-controlled territory of Ukraine until the de-occupation of Crimea[4].

Crimean institutions and their collections now serve Russian propaganda, but the museums and objects themselves hold no value for the occupation authorities. Thus, the Bakhchisaray Reserve, which was included in the preliminary list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites in 2013, suffered serious damage. In 2015, local residents pointed out the emergency state of the monument. During the implementation of the "restoration" project, developed by the company from Simferopol called "Kiramet," with the general contractor being Atta-group from Moscow (both without experience in the field of restoration), the unique 18th-century paintings

were damaged. Authentic beams and roof tiles were also cut and destroyed, and cracks appeared on the walls of many buildings (Kulturni tsinnosti 2017: 6-7; Mekhed 2017; Holubov 2018; Morozova 2018). The former director of the reserve points out that the authenticity of the objects has essentially been lost (Malynovska 2018; Rzheutska 2019). The 2021 UNESCO report recognized the deliberate nature of such actions (Follow-up to decisions 2021: 11-12). By the beginning of 2022, the results of this restoration by non-professionals were already visible (Nekrecha, Hakh 2022). Illegal excavations in Crimea (including on the territory of the reserve and the world heritage site - Tavrian Chersonesus) and constructions initiated by the occupiers (for example, the construction of an observation square in Tavrian Chersonesus, which endangers the authenticity of the monument) are leading to the destruction of immovable heritage (Follow-up to decisions 2021: 5-7, 9-12).

Fig. 1. Local History Museum of Makariv, Kyiv region. In the spring of 2022, the town was under partial occupation, and fighting was taking place directly in it. The museum was looted by the occupiers, some of the exhibits were destroyed (for example, a wooden statue of Christ by a local artist). From the left - the director of the museum, V. Gedz, demonstrates the warhead of the GRAD projectile, which hit the territory of the Kyivan Rus hillfort (Photo by P. Shydlovskyi, October 2022)

The fate of the museums in Luhansk and Donetsk regions was markedly different. These were territories where active hostilities were taking place, and museum

institutions were not shielded from physical destruction. One of the first to suffer was the "Isolation" Art Center, the premises of which were converted into a prison and a torture

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4   https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/articles/cevpz4gek0no

chamber (Slipchenko 2014). The art project team managed to evacuate part of the collection; however, the most valuable works could not be removed because they were integrated into the architecture and landscape of the space. In August 2014, due to artillery shelling, the building of the Donetsk Regional Museum of Local Lore was destroyed. (It had been one of the largest museums in Ukraine until 2014, housing approximately 150,000 storage units). The museum lost its collections, and the institution and its employees had to be relocated to Kramatorsk. Financial challenges ensued, affecting employee salaries, premises, and other aspects (Stepura 2021).

Fig. 2. The building of the "Museum of Antiquities", which housed the regional library for youth in the city of Chernihiv. In March 2022, the Chernihiv Regional Youth Library became one of the first cultural monuments to be partially destroyed as a result of a Russian missile strike. This is a unique architectural vestige, which has a protected status, was built at the end of the 19th century and is also known as the Tarnovskyi building (Photo by V. Skorokhod, Institute of Archaeology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, 2022)

The Luhansk Regional Museum of Local Lore had to relocate twice: first from occupied Luhansk to Starobilsk, and after a full-scale invasion, from occupied Starobilsk to Lviv (Tsybulska 2022). The director and employees had prepared the collections for evacuation from Starobilsk before the full-scale offensive, but events unfolded rapidly, making evacuation impossible. Consequently, the museum lost its collections twice - first in Luhansk and then in Starobilsk.

The events of 2014-2015 highlighted the challenges faced by both museum institutions and authorities (both central and local) during hostilities. These challenges included the actual vulnerability of museums, their

collections, and employees, the inability to evacuate museum collections and staff, and the absence of a unified electronic record system in Ukraine. As a result, not only objects but also information about them can be considered lost. Some museum objects were irreparably destroyed, while others were preserved, but all documentation remained in the occupied territories.

The issue of restitution, which involves the return of cultural values illegally removed from Ukrainian museums after 2014, has become more pressing. Significant efforts will be required to prove Ukraine's ownership of these items, given the lack of documentation and the absence of electronic accounting in Ukraine. Therefore, in December 2020, a scandal erupted due to the gift by the President of Bosnia and Herzegovina to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia of an icon that was taken from occupied Luhansk. Only thanks to old inventory marks was it possible to prove that the icon belonged to Ukraine (Teslia 2020).

Additionally, museum institutions face difficulties when relocating, including finding new premises, securing financing, maintaining a team, and acquiring new collections, among other challenges.

At the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022, as intelligence from leading world countries warned of an imminent full-scale offensive, the issue of evacuating museum collections became relevant once again. Some museums, such as the Luhansk Regional Museum of Local Lore, previously relocated to Starobilsk, began preparations for evacuation but were unable to complete the process in time. Others were not granted permission to do so by local administrations (Borsukova 2022; Mamonova *et al.* 2022; Yankovskyi 2022; Kunytskyi 2023). In any case, neither the central nor local authorities, nor the museum institutions themselves, were fully prepared, necessitating a reaction to the rapidly evolving circumstances. After February 24, 2022, the beginning of the full-scale Russian offensive on Ukraine, museums disassembled their exhibits, maintained strict secrecy, and evacuated their collections to safer locations. Employees lived within the museums to ensure the safety of the collections (Levada 2022; Prokopenko 2022; Higgins 2023a). The National Committee of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine compiled a red list of cultural heritage items from various museum institutions that represent Ukraine's history and are under threat of illegal seizure and theft.

The entire heritage of Ukraine, encompassing both cultural and natural elements, is under threat of destruction, as Russian missiles have the potential to reach any part of Ukraine, and even beyond[5]. Reports of the destruction or damage to museum institutions appeared in the mass media early on: as early as February 25, the historical and local history museum in the village of Ivankiv, Kyiv region, which housed paintings by Maria Prymachenko, was destroyed (though some paintings were saved by museum employees) (Smorzh 2022). Makariv Local Lore Museum, Kyiv region, was robbered by the occupiers (Fig. 1). In March, air bombs damaged the buildings of architectural monument museums, such as the Okhtyrka Museum of Local History and the Regional Youth Library in the building of the Museum of Antiquities in Chernihiv (Fig. 2). On May 7, a direct missile hit completely destroyed the National Literary and Memorial Museum of Hryhorii Skovoroda. Museums in the Kharkiv region are consistently being destroyed (Merkulova 2023).

A missile attack on Kyiv on October 10, 2022 caused partial window damage at the Khanenki National Museum of Art, the Taras Shevchenko National Museum, the Kyiv Art Gallery, the National Museum of Natural History of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, the Kyiv History Museum, and the memorial museum-apartments of Mykola Bazhan and Pavlo Tychyna (Kotubei 2022) (Fig. 3). While the museum collections were not affected in the latter case, the institutions suffered financial losses and had to quickly repair the buildings (architectural monuments) before the autumn-winter season. In June 2023, the Russian Federation committed another act of destruction of cultural heritage: as a result of the explosion of the dam at the Kakhovka HPP, about 10 museums were in the flood zone, including the homes-museums of the artist Polina Raiko and Ostap Vyshnia, which were completely submerged (Bilash 2023). This list of destruction and damage could go on. As of March 25, 2024, the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy had counted more than 1024 damaged or destroyed objects of cultural heritage in Ukraine, with over 80 museums and galleries affected[6].

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[5] See Map of cultural losses project by the Ukrainian Cultural Fund: https://life.pravda.com.ua/culture/2022/04/6/248121/ https://ucf.in.ua/en/news/culture_loss
[6] Official statistics by the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy, April 8, 2024. Available at https://mcip.gov.ua/news/cherez-rosijsku-agresiyu-v-ukrayini-postrazhdaly-ponad-tysyachu-pamyatok-kulturnoyi-spadshhyny/

At the end of February 2022, events unfolded too rapidly, and some museum institutions in Ukraine found themselves in newly occupied areas. Museums in territories controlled by Ukraine and in the temporarily occupied territories encountered different yet similar challenges simultaneously (Kliushnychenko 2023). Saving the lives of museum employees was the foremost priority. After the full-scale offensive, the task of evacuating museum employees arose, both from the controlled and occupied territories. However, evacuating from the occupied territory was significantly more challenging, with reports in the mass media about the abduction and interrogation of museum workers (Mamonova *et al*. 2022; Tsybulska 2022). Some museum workers and their families sought refuge in safer places in Ukraine and around the world, becoming refugees, while others joined the ranks of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and the Territorial Defence Service to defend their homeland with weapons in hand. Some museum workers chose to remain in their cities and towns to safeguard the museum collections to the best of their ability. In effect, museum employees in Ukraine put their lives at risk every day. In April 2023, employees of the Kupiansk Regional History Museum were tragically killed during a missile attack (Borsukova 2022; Larin 2023).

Fig. 3. The consequences of missile attack on the center of Kyiv on October 10, 2022. As a result of the attack, a number of architecture monuments, museums and university buildings were damaged. One of the rockets hit the territory of the park in front of the buildings of the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, as a result of which the exhibition of the KNU Archaeological Museum was damaged (Photo by P. Shydlovskyi, October 12, 2022)

Fig. 4. Modern exhibits of Ukrainian museums. On the left - the exhibition "Fascism = Ruscism" in the Chernihiv Historical Museum (Photo by P. Shydlovskyi, March 2023). On the right - an exhibition at the National Museum of the History of Ukraine (Photo by S. Ivanysko).

Another urgent problem was ensuring the preservation and evacuation of museum collections. As mentioned earlier, in reality, museums were not prepared for evacuation; they had to carry it out after the start of a full-scale offensive. While it could be organized in the territories controlled by Ukraine, the collections from the occupied territories are, in most cases, lost. Thanks to the initiative of some individual managers, the most valuable items from the collections were evacuated or hidden (Borsukova 2023; Tsybulska 2022). However, some museum workers became collaborators and assisted the occupiers in looting the museums they worked in. Thus, despite limited access to information, it became known that the collections of several museum institutions were removed. For instance, the Melitopol Museum of Local History, as well as local history and art museums in Mariupol and Kherson (Chernovol 2022; Mamonova *et al*. 2022; Shyian 2022; Yankovskyi 2022). Archaeological exhibits were taken from the "Kamiana Mohyla" museum in the Zaporizhzhia region to the "Tavrian Chersonesus" reserve in Crimea, seemingly for an exhibition. As history shows, museum objects from such exhibitions held in Russian museum institutions are rarely returned. Activists noticed packing materials apparently prepared for the "evacuation" of Crimean museums already at the end of 2022. In May 2023, museum objects from the "Tavrian Chersonesus" reserve were similarly taken to

Veliky Novgorod (Albul 2023). Determining the exact number of museum objects stolen by Russia is a lengthy and challenging process. Documentation has also been exported, and the return of these valuable items will be a protracted endeavor.

Museums in the territory controlled by Ukraine or evacuated from the occupied territory must restart their activities. For evacuated institutions, the challenge of restoring statutory and financial documentation and retaining museum staff has arisen. Other museum institutions have commenced the process of documenting the impact of military actions in Ukraine and informing the world about the events in the country (Fig. 4).

Museum institutions and individual employees are joining forces to support each other during these difficult times. The Heritage Rescue Headquarters and the Museum Crisis Center have been established, and initiatives that existed before the full-scale invasion continue to provide assistance to museums in coping with new challenges. One should mention also the Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Online (SUCHO) that began on March 1, 2022 as an emergency response effort organized by three digital humanities practitioners, and quickly grew to over one thousand volunteers who are collaborating online to digitize and preserve Ukrainian cultural heritage (Dombrowski, Kijas, Majstorovic 2022).

Despite the disassembled exhibits, museum life in Ukraine has not come to a halt.

New exhibitions, cultural events, and displays of museum objects from Ukraine abroad are ongoing (Horlach 2022; Horlach 2023; Tsupko 2023). Trainings and courses are being organized on how to operate during times of crisis, and foreign colleagues are visiting to learn from the experience of museums during times of conflict (Higgins 2023a,b).

Museum work and the preservation of monuments are highly sensitive areas, especially in the face of economic and political challenges. The Russian-Ukrainian war, particularly the onset of full-scale hostilities, has highlighted the vulnerability of this field and raised pressing issues that must be addressed. It is evident that the mechanism for evacuating museum institutions should be improved, possibly with the involvement of international organizations. Additionally, the digital documentation of museum collections in Ukraine should be enhanced, as the data from these registries can be utilized in the restitution process for cultural valuables.

It's worth noting that civil society has played a significant role in addressing the challenges faced by museum institutions and employees following the full-scale offensive. The museum community has come together to assist affected institutions and staff, and various events are being held to promote Ukrainian culture and inform the global community about the events unfolding in Ukraine. The proactive involvement of civil society, including dedicated preservationists and museum professionals, demonstrates a commitment to making maximum efforts to rebuild the cultural sector, restore monuments, and repatriate exported cultural treasures.

Archaeological heritage

The consequences of hostilities are particularly devastating for archaeological heritage, given the irreparable nature of archaeological sites, their inseparable connection to the landscape and ecological environment, and the universally valuable information that can be obtained through research (Ivakin, Shydlovskyi 2022).

The most significant loss for Ukrainian archaeology has been the looting of museum collections that ended up in occupied territories. Irreparable losses resulted from the absence of well-developed protocols for protecting museum collections during bombings and evacuating assets from frontline areas. Effective evacuation procedures were not in place, and the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine did not provide clear instructions, materials, or organizational support for rescue operations regarding museum assets (Levada 2022). This problem remains unresolved, even with the constantly shifting frontlines in the south and east of our country. In such conditions, the losses are staggering, with hundreds of regional local history museums falling victim to looting. Among the most well-known are the museums of Kherson, Melitopol, and Mariupol. The collections of the Kherson Museum of Local History, along with those of other museums in the city, were systematically transported to occupied Crimea, indicating large-scale theft of Ukrainian cultural heritage by the Russians.

The Human Rights Watch documented looting of museums and cultural institutions in Kherson from March 2 to November 11, 2022. During this period, Russian officials looted the Kherson Regional Art Museum, the Kherson Regional Museum, St. Catherine's Cathedral, and the Kherson Region National Archives. From an archaeological perspective, the pillage of the Kherson Regional Museum, which possessed a collection of about 180,000 objects, appears especially devastating. According to the Human Right Watch, "from October 24 to 26 about 70 people, most in civilian clothes or apparently part of Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB), looted the museum. They left the flora and fauna collection untouched but pillaged almost everything else, including silver, Scythian gold, imperial Russian medals, ancient Greek vases, and World War II relics."[7] The Melitopol Museum of Local Lore was recognized for its remarkable collection of Scythian gold, the traces of which have now been lost. The Mariupol Museum housed unique archaeological resources, including the collection from the excavations of the Mariupol Neolithic Cemetery by the renowned Ukrainian archaeologist Mykola Makarenko. The museum itself suffered greatly due to the hostilities that occurred directly in the city, and the surviving exhibits were looted by the occupiers, with reports indicating that remnants were transported to occupied Donetsk (Shydlovskyi *et al*. 2023, p. 6-8).

During the Russian attack and occupation of parts of Ukraine, criminal groups became particularly active, with the aim of illegally obtaining archaeological objects for subsequent sale and placement in private collections both within Ukraine and abroad (Hardy 2022).

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[7] See the official report on the Human Rights Watch web-site: https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/12/20/ukraine-russians-pillage-kherson-cultural-institutions

Fig. 5. The "Princely" mound in Chernihiv damaged as a result of a rocket attack (Photo by P. Shydlovskyi, March 2023).

The question of archaeological monitoring

As a result of the unprovoked aggression by the Russian Federation, we are witnessing the large-scale destruction of historical landscapes and the damage to thousands of archaeological sites that were either in the process of research or had not even been uncovered yet.

Determining the extent of the losses to archaeological sites is currently impossible with certainty. First, the factors causing damage to archaeological objects must be identified. The following phenomena or actions can be attributed to these factors:

– The destruction of sites due to direct military operations on the frontline, such as rocket attacks, artillery shelling, and mortar fire. It is worth noting that this war primarily involves remote warfare characterized by powerful artillery attacks, including missile strikes, a "wall of fire", artillery and tank duels, and more. These actions result in the most severe damage to landscapes, including archaeological sites (Fig. 5).

– The destruction of sites caused by the construction of modern military facilities like dugouts, trenches, firing positions, and observation posts. During the Russian troops' offensive in the spring of 2022, the northern, eastern, and southern regions of the country were under threat of occupation, and the exact stopping point of this offensive was uncertain. Consequently, the entire country practically turned into a network of checkpoints, dugouts, trenches, and observation posts, built with the participation of the entire population. Understandably, such activities led to significant landscape transformations. Similar activities occur on both sides of the front, but it's important to recognize that our actions to establish military facilities were a response to a treacherous invasion, and we had no other option but to protect lives and homes first. In this context, the destruction of parts of monuments and cultural layers was a necessary response to a real threat of enemy attack (Fig. 6).

– The use of monuments as modern military facilities. It's clear that in both past eras and contemporary warfare, topographically prominent features of the landscape, such as high points, riverbanks, terraces, lakes, swamps, and ravines, are strategically significant. An analysis of military operation maps in Ukraine confirms that both warring parties fully utilize the topographical features of the terrain (with the understanding that our troops have the advantage, defending our own land). The frontlines are often located along rivers, terraces, watersheds, and defensive, observational, or fire structures are strategically positioned considering the terrain's features. Consequently, anthropogenic

landscape features like mounds, ramparts, ditches, and ancient hillforts also become crucial points on the landscape, as they either directly mark or themselves serve as prominent landscape features. For instance, burial mounds, ranging from the Early Iron Age to the Late Middle Ages, were traditionally built on the highest points of the terrain, and as a result, they have become convenient locations for modern military facilities (Fig. 7).

– Looting of archaeological sites. Such actions can be observed on both sides of the conflict. Notably, the monument protection system hardly functions in frontline areas and the "gray zone," making it difficult to track the actions of looters, who aim to remove archaeological objects from their context and sell them. Illegal excavations were repeatedly reported in the liberated territories of the Luhansk region during surveys conducted from 2016 to 2021.

– Acts of vandalism targeting visible archaeological objects, including known cases of vandalism against ancient architecture and megalithic sculptures from the Early Iron Age to the Middle Ages. One of the most well-known cases is the shelling of a group of Polovtsian sculptures near the city of Izium in the Kharkiv region (Shydlovskyi, Telizhenko, Ivakin 2022).

Fig. 6. Dugouts and defense structures in the ancient rampart of the Scythian hillfort near the village of Khodosivka, Kyiv region. (Photo by P. Shydlovskyi, October 2023)

However, monitoring the state of archaeological heritage objects faces significant challenges because the vast majority of monuments, including settlements and burial grounds, exist in an "unregistered state," and assessing the extent of damage requires specialized research. Several major issues hinder the process of recording the destruction of archaeological sites:

a. The matter of object registration. The problem arises from the fact that, even before the war, archaeological object registration was severely lacking. For years, some regions failed to provide information about newly discovered archaeological objects to the central executive body responsible for cultural heritage protection—the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine. According to Ukrainian legislation, only an object included in the State Register of Immovable Monuments of Ukraine is officially recognized as a monument. Consequently, applying a full set of site protection measures to newly discovered objects is challenging. The same applies to documenting losses and damage—how can one document the damage caused to an archaeological object if that territory is not officially designated as an archaeological

site? The protection of archaeological heritage is in crisis, largely due to several factors, with the primary one being the lack of documentation for the vast majority of archaeological sites. This lack of documentation prevents these territories from obtaining monument status, creating additional difficulties in accessing archaeological areas during monitoring and reducing the number of officially recorded losses caused by invaders (Shydlovskyi et al. 2023).

Fig. 7. Modern fortifications on the territory of the Kyivan Rus hillfort of Oster with the remains of 11th century architecture, Chernihiv region. (Photo of the Archaeological Landscapes Monitoring Group, 2023)

Currently, cultural heritage protection activities in Ukraine primarily focus on "visible" heritage objects, such as architectural monuments, religious structures, and monumental artworks (Fig. 8). The figure of approximately 1024 damaged cultural heritage objects cited by the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine hardly accounts for archaeological sites (Shydlovskyi, Kuijt, Skorokhod et al. 2023). Unlike architectural and monumental art vestiges, archaeological objects remain hidden, and their discovery is contingent on direct field research, including archaeological surveys and excavations. Many archaeological objects are only uncovered as a result of catastrophic events such as floods, earthquakes, or, in our case, military actions. Therefore, recording the loss of a certain site requires immediate creation of monument protection documentation, which includes, among other things, cultural and chronological attributions. This documentation process

can only be carried out with direct fieldwork on the site and requires collaboration between archaeologists and site protection experts.

b. Another challenge in monitoring the state of archaeological heritage is the issue of access to objects. Currently, many frontline territories in the Kharkiv, Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson regions are inaccessible for any fieldwork due to direct threats to life and health. However, demining and reconstruction processes have already commenced in de-occupied territories in the Kyiv, Zhytomyr, Chernihiv, and Mykolaiv regions. Nonetheless, work in these de-occupied territories is significantly hindered by limited access, requiring coordination with military administrations, the Territorial Defense Service, and other entities within the power bloc.

Northern territories bordering Belarus and the Russian Federation have been placed under heightened security measures, including bans on the use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), patrolling, and more. Consequently, much time is devoted to coordinating actions with various authorities during monitoring activities.

c. The direct risk to life must also be considered. When conducting work in de-occupied territories, there is a significant danger of encountering minefields, as well as threats from artillery and mortar attacks and the infiltration of saboteur groups (Fig. 9). This risk is particularly pronounced in the border territories of Chernihiv, Sumy, and Kharkiv regions, which are constantly shelled from the Russian Federation's territory.

Fig. 8. The Church of the Ascension of the beginning of the 20th century, destroyed as a result of a rocket attack in the village Lukashivka, Chernihiv region. (Photo by P. Shydlovskyi, October 2023)

Fig. 9. Damaged by military trenches and mined territory of a Bronze Age settlement near the village of Bilohorodka, Kyiv region. (Photo by P. Shydlovskyi, March 2023).

Initiatives and solutions in archaeological landscapes monitoring

Despite the overall decrease in the number of field archaeological research projects in Ukraine, a significant shift in research topics is evident. The ongoing war has necessitated a shift from academic research and projects focused on academic problems to more pressing concerns related to the preservation and monitoring of both natural and cultural heritage. At the regional level, initiatives have emerged aimed at safeguarding heritage, including the efforts of public organizations and volunteer groups involved in evacuating and preserving museum collections, as well as documenting damage to heritage sites.

Between 2016 and 2021, the process of documenting archaeological losses in the territories of Luhansk and Donetsk regions controlled by Ukraine was initiated by an expedition led by S. Telizhenko from the Institute of Archaeology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine. Telizhenko also compiled the manual "Archaeological Sites and Warfare," outlining the actions to be taken when discovering objects of archaeological significance for military personnel. The manual was published with the assistance of the Union of Archaeologists of Ukraine (Telizhenko 2020). It is noteworthy that the initiative to monitor the condition of monuments in areas threatened by military actions has largely been driven by public and scientific initiatives, with limited involvement from state institutions (Telizhenko 2023).

In the summer of 2022, the Institute of Archaeology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine established the Monitoring Archaeological Expedition, tasked with documenting the loss of archaeological heritage resulting from military aggression by the Russian Federation.

To gain an approximate understanding of the war's impact on archaeological heritage, it is essential to initiate the process of documenting the destruction of landscapes. Moreover, this endeavor should encompass various fields, including archaeology, ecology, geology, biology, and more. Archaeological monitoring should serve as a catalyst for revamping the system of object documentation to a new level, involving the creation of a database linked to digital maps and the delineation of territories affected by military actions. Given the limitations on remote landscape observation, these studies should primarily rely on direct fieldwork by archaeologists, including reconnaissance and test excavations of war-affected areas. Satellite images and aerial data should complement the creation of archaeological maps, though access to such data is currently restricted.

In response to these challenges, representatives from multiple scientific, educational, and museum organizations formed an initiative known as the Archaeological Landscapes Monitoring Group. This group includes

practicing archaeologists and monument experts from institutions such as the Institute of Archaeology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, the Ukrainian State Institute for Cultural Heritage, the Faculty of History of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, the National Museum of the History of Ukraine, and several public organizations.

The German Archaeological Institute (DAI) has played a significant role in supporting monitoring activities. Through an individual grant to Alla Bujskikh from the Institute of Archaeology of the NAS of Ukraine, the DAI has enabled the implementation of the project "Ukrainian Archaeological Heritage Threatened by War: Saving and Protection." This project focused on the Kyiv, Chernihiv, and Mykolaiv regions, which were either under occupation or directly impacted by hostilities. The project involved surveying several well-known archaeological sites in these regions.

Fig. 10. Medieval mound cemetery of the 10th-11th centuries "Boldyni Hory" in the center of Chernihiv. The cemetery area was significantly damaged as a result of rocket attacks and the construction of fortifications (Photo by P. Shydlovskyi and V. Skorokhod, 2023).

One of the main objectives of this initiative is to conduct monitoring work in the de-occupied territories of Kyiv and Chernihiv regions (Bujskikh *et al*. 2023). Two separate units—Kyiv and Chernihiv—were established to examine several sites, particularly prominent hillforts from the era of Kyivan Rus, which include Makariv, Motyzhyn, Biloghorodka, Tumasch, Vyshhorod, Chernihiv, Sedniv, Oster, and others. The works have revealed damage to the Makariv hillfort from rocket attacks, significant landscape alterations near Bilohorodka, damage to the Vyshgorod fortress due to rocket attacks, and extensive damage to the Shestovytsia barrow cemetery from the 10th to 11th centuries AD in the Chernihiv region (Kuijt et al. 2024).

A striking example of the destruction of the archaeological landscape is the situation with the medieval mound cemetery of Boldyni Hory (Hills) in the city of Chernihiv. This cemetery, located in the city's southwest on the terrace of the Desna River, has always been a cherished local site and a protected archaeological area. The Boldyni Hory mound cemetery, a nationally significant monument, is part of the burial mound necropolis of the ancient city of Chernihiv from the 10th century AD. Its destruction occurred in February 2022 during the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the Chernihiv region (Fig. 10).

During the early stages of the Russian troops' attack, Chernihiv was partially encircled, and intense battles took place on the city's outskirts. This resulted in damage to medieval architecture from the Kyivan Rus era, religious structures, and numerous archaeological sites within the city and its surroundings. Military installations, trenches, and dugouts were established within the burial ground area, causing damage to around ten mounds. The expedition recorded 27 trenches and two shell impacts. The damage to specific embankments and the space between mounds could lead to further erosion, displacement of artifacts and burials, impairment of the area's aesthetic appeal, and more. Moreover, ruined barrows can attract treasure hunters, further exacerbating looting of individual mounds.

The work in Kyiv and Chernihiv regions involves not only identifying destroyed areas of sites and assessing the condition of monuments that were under occupation but also entering metadata into a database with precise mapping of monument boundaries. This process will facilitate the necessary documentation for registering these objects in the State Register of Immovable Monuments of Ukraine. With the arrival of spring, plans are in place to expand these efforts to cover lesser-known sites, including camps, settlements, ground and barrow burials, while simultaneously establishing local focus groups of archaeologists and preservationists in other regions of Ukraine (Shydlovskyi, Kornienko, Ivakin 2022). A certain result of the work of the Archaeological Landscapes Monitoring Group was the publication in 2023 of the collection of works in VITA ANTIQUA almanac "Culture Heritage and the War: challenges and solutions" (Shydlovskyi, Ivanova eds. 2023).

Following the destruction of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (HPP) by Russian military forces on June 6, 2023, water levels in the Dnipro River in the area began to recede rapidly, revealing areas that had been submerged for centuries. These areas contain objects from various historical periods, including World War II, the Cossack era, and numerous archaeological eras, including the Upper Palaeolithic.

During the construction of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (HPP) in the 1950s, the territory, deemed extremely valuable from environmental, historical, and cultural perspectives, was submerged. The flooding not only affected modern settlements but also submerged numerous archaeological objects beneath the waters of the Kakhovka Reservoir. Now, due to a rapid decrease in the water level across the entire reservoir area, as well as downstream territories of the Dnipro River and its tributaries, new challenges have emerged concerning the protection of archaeological heritage. In the autumn of 2023, an archaeological survey by the Monitoring Expedition of the Institute of Archeology of the NAS of Ukraine together with the Khortytsia National Reserve took place on the territory freed from water, in a result of which a number of archaeological sites were discovered and facts of destruction and robbery of archaeological heritage objects were recorded.

Specifically, illegal excavators have become increasingly active, employing metal detectors to search for valuable items washed away by the receding waters. They are not only seeking valuable objects but are also causing further harm to archaeological sites that have been damaged or have become more accessible due to coastal erosion, shallowing of territories, and other factors in the Kherson, Mykolaiv, Dnipropetrovsk, and Zaporizhzhia regions. In response to this situation, and after consulting with archaeologists and preservationists, the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine has taken the initiative to create a comprehensive historical-archaeological expedition. The mission

of this expedition includes documenting the damage to archaeological sites resulting from breaches of the dam and changes in water levels, depending on the region, as well as salvaging movable objects associated with these sites.

The Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine has established an interdepartmental Coordination Center for the preservation of cultural heritage and cultural values in the territories affected by the destruction of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant. The government has also directed regional military administrations in Dnipro city, Zaporizhzhia, Mykolaiv, and Kherson, in collaboration with local self-government bodies, the National Police, and the Territorial Defense Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, to immediately restrict public access to the areas affected by the destruction of the Kakhovka HPP.

Among other public initiatives that deal with the preservation of cultural and museum heritage, which does not directly concern archaeological sites, is The Heritage Emergency Response Initiative (HERI) and Museum Crisis Center. Of great importance are projects and activities whose purpose is to record the loss of visible heritage using modern remote methods and 3D and VR technologies. In the future, these data will become the basis for calculating the damage caused by the aggressor state to the cultural heritage of Ukraine. [8]

Concluding remarks

The Russo-Ukrainian war has brought neglected problems to the forefront, making them relevant and focusing attention on them, even as it laid bare issues that were previously overlooked by governments and bureaucracies. The war is not over yet, so the precise number of the lost and damaged objects of cultural heritage is still to be counted. However, some significant conclusions could be made already at this point.

Firstly, the notion that the era of imperialist conquest and inter-ethnic conflict is over and will never be repeated, at least in Europe, has proved to be wrong. Against the background of the growing popularity of radical ideologies, no one can guarantee that war will not break out in one or another region of the world. Adherents of neo-imperialist and militaristic views seek justification for their rightness in a distorted reading of history. We must admit that the manipulation of cultural heritage in the modern world can be used as a powerful propaganda tool. That is why the academic community around the world should concentrate its efforts on building and popularizing historical narratives based on the values of humanism and the equality of all nations and cultures.

Secondly, the entire conflict between Russia and Ukraine clearly demonstrates what particular damages to objects of great cultural value could be caused by modern warfare. Full-scale war primarily involves powerful artillery and missile attacks that bring tremendous destruction to all types of buildings and archaeological sites. This kind of remote warfare causes severe damage to archaeological landscapes as well. Another significant issue is the destruction of sites caused by the construction of dugouts, trenches, firing positions, and observation posts. Burial mounds, ramparts, ditches, and ancient hillforts still hold certain tactical value on the battlefield. Finally, objects of cultural heritage have become the first and foremost victims of looting and vandalism. It's not just about the misappropriation of museum collections by occupiers, but also the illegal excavations of archaeological sites that remain defenseless against metal detectorists.

Thirdly, civil authorities and academic institutions are unable to prevent or stop the war. However, their activity could potentially minimize the consequences of war for objects of cultural heritage. Such objects should be registered, documented, and digitalized as comprehensively as possible. The government must develop protocols for protecting museum collections during bombings and evacuating assets from frontline areas. If hostilities cannot be avoided, local authorities should provide clear instructions, materials, or organizational support for rescue operations regarding museum assets. These recommendations can be useful for any country, even if the involvement of that country in a large-scale military conflict currently seems extremely unlikely.

In the face of the threat of losing a part of Ukraine's cultural heritage due to aggression, the significance of this heritage is undergoing a profound reassessment within society. An understanding of the importance of preserving and studying objects of historical, anthropological, ethnographic, and archaeological value is taking shape. The struggle of Ukrainians for independence also represents a fight for humanistic values, including respect for the cultural and natural heritage of all mankind, a value of paramount importance.

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[8]   https://www.mccukraine.com/ , https://war.city/

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