



By: Iuliia Mendel, TA Kyiv

Ukraine's culture under fire



When, in the summer, another Russian strike sent a blast wave that damaged **St Sophia Cathedral** in the centre of Kyiv, many Ukrainians were shaken – even in the fourth year of Russia's brutal full-scale aggression.

St Sophia is one of Ukraine's greatest monuments; founded in the 11th century, it is part of the UNESCO World Heritage list and known to almost every Ukrainian. History lives within this cathedral.

The cathedral itself grew out of Prince Volodymyr's decision to Christianise Kyivan Rus', inspired by how Christianity had propelled Byzantium into the future – and by the geopolitical advantages it offered.

By accepting Christianity, Volodymyr married the Byzantine princess Anna Porphyrogenita, giving Kyivan Rus' new alliances and a foundation for political flourishing.

The construction of St Sophia Cathedral was started under Volodymyr and built over roughly two decades, ultimately completed under his son Yaroslav the Wise, whose reign transformed Kyiv into a spiritual centre of Eastern Europe at the time.

Erasing Ukrainian cultural heritage and identity

Today, due to Russian aggression, 1,612 cultural heritage sites in Ukraine have been destroyed or damaged, along with more than 2,000 cultural infrastructure facilities – including museums, libraries, galleries, theatres, nature reserves, parks, and much more.

Yet even these figures are difficult to calculate with precision, as almost the entire territory of the Luhansk region and large parts of the Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk, and Kherson regions remain under temporary occupation, making full documentation of the losses nearly impossible.

It is clear that some parts of Ukraine's cultural

heritage matter to Russians as well – though not in the way heritage is meant to be valued. Their actions speak for themselves.

When Russian forces withdrew from my native **Kherson**, which had endured eight months of occupation in 2022, they systematically looted museums and removed monuments. During the last three days, they took everything in sight.

"Such actions are part of a broader policy aimed at erasing Ukrainian cultural heritage and identity" - former Ukrainian Deputy Prosecutor General Gyunduz Mamedov

Russian soldiers ransacked the Kherson Art Museum, stripping it of its collections. They removed artworks dating from the 17th to the 20th centuries, loading valuable pieces into trucks and even a school bus, all under the guard of armed men in plain clothes.

"This is far from the only instance in which Russian occupation has been accompanied by the removal of cultural property. Such actions are part of a broader policy aimed at erasing Ukrainian cultural heritage and identity," wrote former Ukrainian Deputy Prosecutor General Gyunduz Mamedov, who documents war crimes against cultural heritage, in a statement on his Twitter page.

They also dismantled and carried away two **monuments** from the city centre – the statues of Alexander Suvorov and Fyodor Ushakov, both celebrated Russian imperial military commanders.

Suvorov is remembered as an 18th-century general who expanded the Russian Empire's control in Eastern Europe, while Ushakov was an admiral whose naval victories helped secure Russia's dominance in the Black Sea.

Their busts, installed in the 1950s during Soviet rule, were taken down and transported to an unknown location.

Protecting artefacts in wartime

Preserving cultural heritage rarely makes major headlines, yet an enormous number of people are engaged in this work – and not only scholars or journalists.

One initiative has sought to involve civilian professionals and public services in territorial defence units so they can help safeguard and assess cultural heritage sites located within military zones.

For now, museum workers, archaeologists, and cultural experts simply cannot reach these areas on their own.

Alongside these efforts, a large network of volunteers plays a crucial role. Among them is **SUCHO**, which in early 2023 began supplying power stations to Ukrainian libraries, archives, museums, and other cultural institutions.

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SUCHO also provides liberated museums and libraries with essential equipment and building materials. After months of occupation – during which nearly all equipment was stolen or removed – these institutions face an urgent need for laptops, scanners, and other tools to document damage, compile evacuation lists, and digitally preserve fragile or at-risk collections.

Transporting museum exhibits is an extremely complex task – and often impossible – during active hostilities. Any evacuation must follow strict legal procedures, meaning cultural institutions depend heavily on state authorities and volunteer organisations capable of safely removing and preserving artefacts when danger becomes urgent.

Across Ukraine, countless architectural landmarks – many of them centuries old – have long served as the centre of communal life. Churches are particularly significant in this regard. At least 152 **religious sites** were

destroyed, damaged, or looted by the Russian military.

Their destruction raises a stark question about the supposed piety of Russians, who present themselves as a “spiritually driven nation” while systematically targeting religious heritage sites.

Cultural recovery in a time of crisis

Today, a wide range of projects dedicated to safeguarding Ukrainian heritage and securing UNESCO World Heritage status are being coordinated internationally.



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Dozens of countries are assisting Ukraine, recognising its cultural legacy as an integral part of global heritage.

The war has intensified global interest in Ukrainian culture, identity, and historical memory: exhibitions and cultural initiatives dedicated to Ukraine are now multiplying worldwide.

For the first time in history, a major international museum has presented a piece of Ukrainian heritage – the legendary sabre of Hetman Ivan Mazepa was on display in the White Tower of the Royal Armouries in the Tower of London.

What Ukraine's **cultural landscape** will look like after the war is difficult to imagine. Many objects taken during the Second World War had not been returned even in times of peace.

The financial and institutional burden of restoration will be enormous, and it remains uncertain whether cultural recovery can become a national priority when so many citizens lack basic living conditions and the economy is under severe strain.