



Our Army, Our Protectors (1978)
by Maria Prymachenko.

Manuscripts do not burn. What about unwritten manuscripts?

by **Alla Marchenko**

Destruction of cultural heritage during war is a form of symbolic violence – especially when it comes to deliberate destruction. UNESCO defines cultural heritage as “artefacts, monuments, a group of buildings and sites, museums that have a diversity of values including symbolic, historic, artistic, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological, scientific and social significance”.¹ As cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker emphasized, acts of creativity deny death; in this regard, heritage is a tribute to creativity.

According to the databases of Ukrainian Cultural Foundation² and of Ministry of Culture and Information Politics in Ukraine,³ there were 389 crimes against cultural heritage on June 10, 2022. In the conditions of an ongoing war, it is impossible to be certain of any further damage; this general insecurity and vulnerability adds to general losses. In many towns in Ukraine people made efforts to secure their monuments, covering them physically and digitalizing them in databases.⁴

Among the first examples of the destruction of tangible heritage was the Museum of Mariia Prymachenko located in Ivankiv,

Kyiv region, although it is rumored that some her artworks from that museum were saved by some locals. Her works, in the Naive art style, have become a symbol of peace across the world since the tragedy.⁵ This illustrates the transformation of physical pieces of art into a message about the tragedy in Ukraine.

Thus, along with physical dimension of cultural heritage, I find its two other dimensions no less important (although underrepresented both in the UNESCO definition and many public discussions): symbolic and human. This underrepresentation is quite understandable – what is called tangible heritage is easier to measure, and this also refers to the calculation of losses, in contrast to intangible heritage.

HUMAN LOSSES, in this regard, are connected to losses of people as creators and keepers of cultural heritage. While common sense dictates that every human life is of the highest value, losses of well-known people are remembered in the first place. For example, the deaths of Artiom Datsyshyn, a top ballet dancer from Kyiv or Oxana Shvets, a famous actor, also have overall



These images were widely circulated in social media showing what was not destroyed in the Russian attacks. To the left: a ceramic rooster in a demolished kitchen cabinet in Borodianka. To the right: a sculpture of Hryhorii Skovoroda, by Ihor Iastrebov, in the Skovoroda museum.

symbolic meaning – killing some part of Ukrainian culture. Indirect human losses are connected with displacement and leaving Ukraine. On June 10, there were 4.8 million refugees that had fled from Ukraine to Europe, since February 24.⁶ This impressive number also holds a symbolic meaning – the biggest still-growing refugee influx in Europe since World War II. According to Liudmyla Denisova, the Ukrainian Parliament Commissioner for Human Rights, 1.4 million people, including over 240,000 children, were forcibly moved, ie deported, from Ukraine to Russia. Those figures were reported May 23, 2022.⁷

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) by June 10 recorded 9,585 civilian casualties in Ukraine since February 20: 4,339 killed and 5,246 injured.⁸

The human losses among Ukrainian soldiers are said to be 200 soldiers a day.⁹

SYMBOLIC LOSSES refer both to the present and the future and cannot always be measured during war. The most striking cases discussed in social media and mass media were those of bullets in the head of the monument to Taras Shevchenko in Borodianka (Kyiv region) and destruction of the museum of Hryhorii Skovoroda in Skovorodnyvka (Kharkiv region) by a Russian missile. Several photos of some preservations among mass destructions became viral exactly as symbols of resilience and hope for restorations. A good example here belongs to the photo with a ceramic rooster and a surviving kitchen cabinet, also in Borodianka - it brought many memes, such as "being as strong as the kitchen cabinet", and discussions about ethical boundaries of making a personal tragedy public without permission of the owners. In the case of Borodianka kitchen, however, the owner was found and interviewed by several mass media.

“Symbolic losses refer both to the present and the future and cannot always be measured during war.”

Physical damage to many objects that are not classified as cultural heritage may also be connected to symbolic losses, such as the destruction of the biggest aircraft in the world, Mriia (“Dream” in English). As Volodymyr Zelensky, President of Ukraine, mentioned in his speech to Australia:

Can we say that Russia has destroyed our dream? No. It burned the plane, it burned the iron. It destroyed matter, not soul. The shell, not the essence. Not freedom. Not dignity. Not independence.¹⁰

I would like to discuss two core themes directly connected to the loss of cultural heritage in Ukraine in its physical, human and symbolic aspects: Russia’s denial of Ukrainian identity and the devaluation of important concepts, caused by Russian propaganda and the ongoing war.

Denying Ukrainian identity

On February 21, 2022, a few days before the full-scale war started in Ukraine, Vladimir Putin, President of Russian Federation, mentioned that he aims “to correct a historical mistake” of letting Ukraine become an independent state. He also denied Ukraine’s

agency: “Ukraine never had a tradition of genuine statehood”, or “As a result of Bolshevik policy, Soviet Ukraine arose, which even today can with good reason be called ‘Vladimir Ilyich Lenin’s Ukraine’. He is its author and architect”.¹¹ Such theses paved the road to Russian war crimes, while the road of Russian imperialism and supremacy over Ukrainians was constructed for years in many fields in society. With the war developments, this denial was even sharpened: For instance, Dmitri Medvedev, ex-President of the

Russian Federation and Deputy Chairman of the Security Council of Russia, claimed in early April that “Ukrainianness, fed with anti-Russian poison and overall lies about its identity, is one big fake”.¹²

An illustrative example of this denial refers to books connected to Ukrainian identity and history. As reported by the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine on March 24, 2022, such books are being confiscated from the libraries in the occupied towns of Donetsk, Luhansk, Chernihiv and Kharkiv oblasts (regions).¹³ On the list of forbidden names one could find complex historical figures as Ivan Mazepa, Symon Petliura, Stepan Bandera, and Roman Shukhevych, as well as more recent names – for instance, Vasyl Stus, a poet, and Viacheslav Chornovil, a politician and former prisoner of the Soviet regime, both with articulated pro-Ukrainian positions. A marker of importance of erasing the Ukrainian identity for the invaders is seen in the immediate renaming of the occupied villages in towns in the Russian manner. An example with Mariupol, where one could observe a difference in just one letter - a Ukrainian “i” or Russian “ы”, shows the value of each and every detail in the war, and symbols belong to its weapon no less than tangible missiles.

THUS, IT IS NOT surprising that some Ukrainian artists and intellectuals decided to join the Armed Forces of Ukraine (for instance, Andrii Khlyvniuk, front man of Bumbox, a Ukrainian music band, Oleg Sentsov, a film director and former prisoner of Moscow regime, and Vakhtang Kipiani, a historian and journalist) or to resist in territorial defense units in their towns. Others chose to use their artistic methods to react to extreme symbolic violence imposed on Ukrainian symbols. An example of the united cultural response is the creation of a new version of a Ukrainian traditional song, “Oi u luzi chervona kalyna” [Oh, the Red Viburnum in the Meadow], written by the composer Stepan Charnetskii in 1914,¹⁴ which could be interpreted as a revival of Ukrainian patriotic march. It became a basis for a new Pink Floyd song: “Hey Hey Rise Up!” in support of Ukraine, made in cooperation with the above-mentioned Andrii Khlyvniuk.¹⁵ At a Grammy Awards ceremony, John Legend presented his new song, “Free”, as a tribute to Ukraine’s fight.¹⁶ Ukrainian artists spread information about the war with their pictures – for instance, Olga Wilson became known for her pictures of human souls wandering in devastated towns of Ukraine,¹⁷ and Oleksandr Grekhov for his sharp illustrations of daily news in time of war.¹⁸

In this regard, it is worth mentioning the extreme importance of Ukrainian state symbols – flag, anthem and emblem, in countering the denial of Ukrainian identity. For instance, a new mural of a Ukrainian flag being sewn together after being torn apart appeared in Kyiv in early April.¹⁹ A Ukrainian flag has not only become an important symbol of authorities in each unoccupied city, town and village of Ukraine, it has spread internationally as a symbol of Ukraine’s independence.

At the same time, one could find reactions of activists and local authorities to the denial of Ukrainian identity in the form of removing Russia-related associations in public spaces – objects or names. In Uzhhorod, local activists unofficially renamed a monument to the Russian poet Aleksandr Pushkin as a monu-



Change of the sign with name of "Mariupol" after the Russian occupation, May 2022.

ment to singer Joe Dassin,²⁰ while in Mukachevo and Ternopil similar monuments were removed from streets. Many unofficial debates were launched on the imperialistic nature of Russian culture and the necessity to at least make a pause to a dominant Russian voice of the region in order to reflect and analyze the deeply rooted sources of the current war. A Telegram channel “And what did Pushkin to you?” is a chatbot initiative to unveil the stance of historical personalities connected to Russia towards Ukraine – in their creative works or in articulated worldviews.²¹

The head of Kyiv underground stations suggested renaming several stations, such as the station “Druzhby Narodiv” (“Friendship of People”, implying friendship between Russia and Ukraine) and asked people about their opinion and ideas for new names. A public opinion poll conducted in April-May 2022, defined the variety of proposals for the new names (e.g., renaming “Minska” (Minsk) station into “Varshavska” (Warsaw) station), but the process was put on hold until consultations with experts. Oleksandr Tkachenko, Minister of Culture and Information Politics in Ukraine, confirmed the right of responsible local communities to do so; however he asked them to behave and not permit any acts of vandalism towards physical objects.²²

General devaluation of important concepts

The second theme refers to the devaluation of words and well-known concepts of the contemporary world. These are the concepts mostly connected to World War II: Fascism, Nazism, genocide, etc. Russia attacked Ukraine under the pretext of neo-Nazis there, using years of deliberate propaganda and staged performances of “violence on the Ukrainian side” connected to the Russian-occupied territories in Donbas since 2014. Its appeals to military rhetoric and the importance of “the great victory over fascism” (assigned by Russia exclusively to Russians) was used to justify contemporary war crimes against civilians in Ukraine. According to propaganda by Medvedev, “active Ukrainians prayed to the Third Reich during last 30 years”.²³ Various sociological polls confirm that the majority of inhabitants of Russia support

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



Ukrainian rescuers check the remains of a street in Cherniviv.

PHOTO: ALLA MARCHENKO, APRIL 6 2022



An exhibition dedicated to Mariia Prymachenko in Warsaw.

PHOTO: ALLA MARCHENKO, APRIL 6 2022



A mural of a Ukrainian flag with an international symbol of peace, Roundabout of United Nations, Warsaw.

Putin and the invasion in Ukraine; although declarations of certain numbers may be a point of methodological discussion, it is clear that propaganda has worked well.²⁴ The case of Russia must be an object of thorough research and developments of new terms connected to its aggression – possibly, Rashism is a better term than Putinism, because it emphasizes the overall nature of an existing phenomenon. The American historian Timothy Snyder defined the regime of Russia as the fascist one, insisting that the cult of Putin has played a fundamental role in the regime development. Lithuanian Parliament became the first parliament to condemn the military aggression of Russia as the act of genocide towards Ukrainian nation.²⁵

It deserves attention that the objects of cultural heritage damaged by the war represent various religious denominations and ethnic groups in Ukraine, including objects of Jewish cultural heritage. At least six objects had received direct hits by April 1: Babyn Yar in Kyiv, a place of mass murder and a Holocaust memorial; Drobytsky Yar in Kharkiv, a Holocaust memorial; a Jewish cemetery in Bila Tserkva; two synagogues in Kharkiv; and the territory of Anatevka, a special Jewish settlement created for people fleeing from Russia-fueled terror in Donbas since 2014.²⁶ Jewish cultural heritage is an immanent part of Ukraine's rich cultural heritage and, as one can see, it has also become a target of Russian military attacks.

ON MARCH 30, 2022, the Russian Ministry of Defense made a statement about one of Uman's synagogues: "an object of the Jewish cult in Uman is deliberately used by the Kyiv nationalist regime for military purposes. This is in order to provoke conflict and political pressure of Jewish religious organizations upon Russia in case of an attack".²⁷ In this regard, such an official statement has several functions: to link the Hasidim in Uman to Ukrainian nationalists, to justify possible attacks in Uman, and to condemn the Jews for hypothetical interference into Russia's affairs. Replies of several Jewish authorities in Ukraine (including the Moshe Reuven Azman, Chief Rabbi of Ukraine representing Chabad Hasidism²⁸) and their denial of alleged military support in a synagogue followed; however, in a war fueled by Russian propaganda one may state that the symbolic damage is already done.

The end of March unveiled the scale of Russian military violence and humiliation of Ukrainian civilians in various towns, either occupied (for instance, Bucha, Borodianka, Melitopol) or blocked from outside (for instance, Mariupol). The above-mentioned town names quickly became international symbols of atrocities. Such findings led to the search for parallels, most of which once again came from World War II. Comparisons to the tragedy of the Holocaust and the "final solution of the Jewish question" were made. For instance, Volodymyr Zelensky addressed the Knesset, Parliament of Israel, taking such parallels to a higher political level.²⁹ At the same time, the word "Holocaust" is also used by official Russia to describe the outcome of economic sanctions imposed, exaggerating Russian suffering.³⁰ Naming this war "a special operation" illustrates the will of official Russia to neglect Ukrainian suffering. Thus, the ongoing Russian war in Ukraine demands a rethinking of the conceptual framework and

existing ideas about military aggression and the decisive role of cultural dominance and symbolic appropriation in Russia's growing totalitarianism. In this regard, a trend of what is called "canceling Russian culture" (or rather, pausing its dominant voice in cultural sphere until the end of the war in Ukraine) is a radical reply to radical violence, understandable in a situation where Ukrainian cultural heritage is in deadly danger.³¹

Final word. We need to remember who uttered the phrase about manuscripts that do not burn – it was Volland, an embodiment of devil in the novel *The Master and Margarita* by Mikhail Bulgakov. Unfortunately, war atrocities demonstrate that everything can be burned down and devalued, once the silent majority permits. Unwritten manuscripts, as well as unspoken conversations, can never be digitalized. ❌

Alla Marchenko, PhD in Sociology, is affiliated to the Graduate School for Social Research, Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences (Warsaw).

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