

HERITAGE IN DANGER

THE ENDANGERED CITIES OF UKRAINE

A CHALLENGE TO THE INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION OF HERITAGE

In June 2022, UNESCO General Director, Audrey Azoulay warned that relentless attacks on Ukrainian cultural sites must cease. Yet, those have only further intensified since and as of early November 2022, according to the count made by her organization, 212 cultural sites had been totally or partially destroyed in Ukraine, among which 92 religious sites and 94 landmark buildings, monuments or historical sites, but also 16 museums and 10 libraries. To an organization founded in 1945 upon the rubble of WWII and whose mission notably consists in protecting world tangible and intangible heritage, the return of war in Europe represents a major challenge. Waged in flagrant violation of international legality, the aggression of Russia against Ukraine pursues eschatological, rather than military or geopolitical goals. Successively aimed at Ukraine's "de-Nazification" and "de-satanization", it hardly leaves any ground for peace talks, while encouraging war crimes. It also entails the systematic negation of Ukrainian cultural and historical specificities underpinning collective identity, therefore presenting troubling similarities with the historical circumstances that gave birth to UNESCO. Moreover, the sanctions regime imposed on Russia has triggered

unprecedented realignments since the Cold War, weakening collective security mechanisms and multilateral instances.

UNESCO itself has been engulfed in these heated tensions - as shown by the boycott of the 45th session of the World Heritage Committee (initially due to be held under Russian chairmanship and on Russian territory) upon the initiative of dozens of its member states. However, the Organization did not step back from its mandate, which primarily draws upon the 1954 Convention for the protection of cultural property in the event of armed conflict and the 1970 Convention on illicit trafficking of cultural property. These legal grounds eventually led in 2016 to the only sentence pronounced for the destruction of a World Heritage Site by the terrorist group Ansar Dine in Timbuktu, Mali. More broadly, it gives UNESCO a mandate for intervening in armed conflicts to map and document damage to cultural properties, to proceed to emergency listing and to prevent the illicit trafficking of spoliated properties. The second foundation of this action is technical and relies upon the mobilization of instruments such as satellite imaging by UNITAR and UNOSAT, allowing the mapping of affected sites, as currently in Kyiv or Kharkiv. This also entails coordinating networks to pool

available expertise, such as those provided by leading international museums such as the British Museum or the Louvre. Lastly, UNESCO developed a method of coordination among local, national and international stakeholders to respond to such situations, to avoid wasting efforts and resources, and answering the needs of affected states. UNESCO has thus deployed four missions in Ukraine since the start of Russia's aggression and recently appointed a liaison officer, now operational on-site. It also welcomed the official candidacy of Odessa to receive World Heritage status by President Zelensky during the Organization's Executive Board last October. Despite these attempts, the scale and scope of destruction inflicted to Ukrainian heritage by Russia remains catastrophic, and very little has been achieved so far in terms of international protection.

This is especially outrageous as Russia's deliberate objective is to cause massive destruction in the urban fabric, unapologetically targeting civil objectives in Ukrainian cities and their residential districts, as in Kharkiv, Mariupol, Mykolaiv, Chernihiv, Nikopol, Irpin and Borodianska, Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Lately, bombing and shelling by Russian forces and their proxies have primarily targeted energy and other critical infrastructures, with the clear intention to render large cities uninhabitable. Consequently, the extent of damage caused to cultural sites, compels us to reconsider their very definition. Beyond the seven Ukrainian sites, mostly religious, that are listed as World Heritage and those featuring on the tentative list, which have remained untouched so far, Russian bombs and missiles are mostly raining down on the 20th century heritage—the phase of heritage that benefits from the lowest protection degree, both nationally



01 The Derzhprom complex in Kharkiv (cropped). © Konstantin Brizhnychenko, 2020, CC-BY-SA 4.0.

and internationally, while being the most closely connected to the memory of crimes and conflicts of the past century that have shaped the contemporary Ukrainian society. It is thus to the preservation of those mundane sites—cultural centers, former official buildings, universities or microrayons (residential areas of the socialist period), often disputed due to real-estate interests and corruption, that many of the grass roots mobilizations have aimed at, and have contributed in the process, since the 2014 Maidan Revolution, to the democratization and Europeanization of Ukraine.

Four challenges deserve to be clarified, in order to allow international protection efforts to make a difference:

- First, it is of utmost importance to acknowledge the *real* extent of the destruction inflicted on what constitutes the urbanity of Ukrainian cities, by extending technical assistance to the mapping of the damage to the 20th century modernist heritage. This approach should also contribute to the enhancement of the international protection of those sites—during and after the war. It will be facilitated by the proliferation and professionalization of the Ukrainian grass roots initiatives devoted since 2014 to mapping and preserving this heritage.
- Second, international protection efforts should prioritize the most affected areas, where the heritage is under the most immediate threat, as in the cities of south-eastern Ukraine, where the largest portions of immovable tangible heritage are being destroyed—especially as, by an unfortunate coincidence, these are precisely the regions where the largest amount of modern architecture of the 20th century is concentrated. [FIGURE 01].
- Third, it will be crucial to this process to empower non-governmental actors that have this expertise: architects, independent researchers, and organisations that have developed innovative multidisciplinary practices through the involvement of designers, artists and citizens in heritage protection, in a way that could offer strong educational lessons to other practitioners abroad. Liaising with these non-governmental actors, and relying upon their independent, citizen-based

and often crowd-sourced expertise should therefore be a priority of any UNESCO mission carried out in Ukraine.

- Fourth, as month after month, more urban areas are left in rubble, fuelling the hubris of some internationally renowned architects who presume the right to participate in future reconstruction without prior empirical knowledge of the country and its cities, it is important to underline that there is no heritage but the one *lived* by its inhabitants, and that its preservation is essential from both cultural and social perspectives. Therefore, we call upon UNESCO to draw upon the diverse expertise available *within* Ukraine and among Ukrainian activists now scattered across the EU and the UK, to oversee planned reconstruction efforts and ensure the respect of *all* heritage sites.

Finally, we urgently wish to remind the international community of the considerable place held by Ukraine in the urban experiments of the 20th century, from Constructivism to Post-Modernism, and more generally, of its significance to European urban culture. If the preservation of Ukrainian cities must, in the first instance, depend on the weapons delivered to their defenders, then that process of defence will also provide invaluable experience in the type of war waged on this country, and facilitate us in deploying our best efforts to support local institutions, professionals and activists in preserving cultural properties in the broadest sense, and, when the time eventually comes, to hold accountable those responsible for their destruction and pillage.

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