

Russia's war on Ukraine's cultural heritage

Russia's invasion of Ukraine aims to deny the sovereign country its right to a distinct identity. Indiscriminate shelling is seriously damaging Ukraine's cultural heritage. International law sets rules to limit civilian deaths and destruction of cultural heritage, both are war crimes that the international community will need to address.

War in Ukraine: Saving innocent lives, and cultural heritage as an identity factor

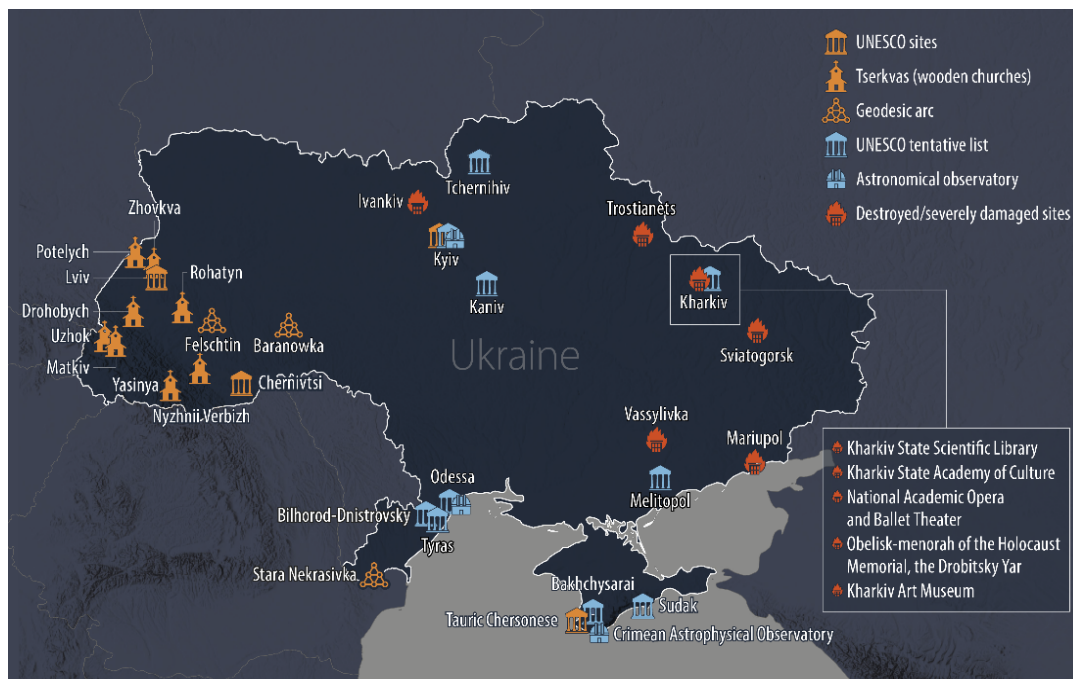
When Russia invaded sovereign Ukraine on 24 February 2022, it claimed [spiritual](#) and cultural justification. However, Russia had already invaded eastern parts of the country in 2014, resulting in the illegal annexation of Crimea. Since then, Ukraine has been striving to protect its United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) world cultural heritage site in occupied Crimea, the ancient city of [Tauric Chersonese](#) and its 5th century BC Chora. Ukraine's cultural heritage already suffered [huge losses](#) during World War II, when the [Nazis](#) carried out looting and destruction.

Cultural heritage in illegally annexed Crimea
The peninsula is rich in cultural heritage and has been subject to [politically motivated interventions](#) and russification of its history. There has been [unlawful transfer](#) of artefacts to Russia and illegal archaeological excavations, the findings of which have been exported to Russia or sold on the black market. The unique cultural heritage of Crimean Tatars has been destroyed and biased conservation works have obscured its origins.

Threat to UNESCO world cultural heritage sites and cultural institutions in Ukraine

For weeks, Russian troops targeted Kyiv, home to [UNESCO cultural heritage site](#) Pechersk Lavra and Saint Sophia Cathedral. Besides sites in Kyiv and Crimea, the UNESCO list includes Lviv's old town and three other sites (see map). Seventeen further sites are candidates for inclusion, featuring on [UNESCO's tentative list](#). Among them, the historic centre of Chernihiv, Kharkiv's skyscraper, Derzhprom, the archaeological 'Stone Tomb' site, have all been affected by [heavy fighting](#). As the frontline moves, other sites, such as the historic centre of Odesa and the Mykolayiv astronomical observatory, face serious danger of destruction.

Map: UNESCO cultural heritage sites, and cultural losses in Ukraine



Data source: [Ukrainian Cultural Foundation](#), consulted on 4 April 2022.

However, the destruction of cultural sites across the country provoked by the Russian war has so far spared the western regions. The international press [reports](#) UNESCO's preliminary list of cultural losses by the end of March 2022 included 29 religious sites, 16 historic buildings, 4 museums and 4 monuments. The [Holocaust Memorial Centre](#) in Drobitsky near Kharkiv, where the Nazis killed thousands of Jews, is among them. The [Ivankiv Historical-Cultural Museum](#), north of Kyiv, was destroyed on 28 February 2022. The fate of its collection of 25 paintings by Ukrainian folk artist [Maria Prymachenko](#), praised by Picasso and Chagall, is unknown.

International concerns and conventions

Crimes against human life and crimes against culture 'are simply [two different stages in the same violent process](#) of ethnic cleansing and genocide'. The [1954 Hague Convention](#) set rules for the protection of cultural property from destruction and looting during armed conflicts. Russia and Ukraine are both [parties](#) to the Convention. The text established a [blue shield](#) as an easily identifiable sign of immunity attributed to cultural property. The notion of intentional destruction of cultural property as a war crime is further developed in the 2017 UN Security Council [Resolution 2347](#). This text was a reaction to cultural destruction carried out by Islamic State.

International help to protect Ukrainian heritage

UNESCO's Director-General has stated that Ukraine's cultural heritage must be [safeguarded](#), 'as a testimony of the past but also as a catalyst for peace and cohesion for the future, which the international community has a duty to protect and preserve'. Its [Committee for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict](#) held an extraordinary meeting on 18 March 2022 to discuss the situation. The Committee granted preliminary financial assistance of US\$50 000 for emergency measures, such as *in situ* protection and the evacuation of cultural property. The committee also envisaged the potential inclusion of some of Ukraine's cultural heritage property on the International List of Cultural Property under Enhanced Protection, established by the 1999 [Second Protocol](#).

Efforts to duly display a [blue shield emblem](#), identify needs for material and skills support to shield buildings and statues from shelling, [protect artefacts](#) from damage and move them to museum cellars or safe havens have intensified. International bodies and specialists in cultural heritage preservation hold regular [online meetings](#) to [discuss technicalities](#). As a result, on 9 March 2022, an appeal from the newly established [Centre to Rescue Ukraine's Cultural Heritage](#) in Lviv enumerated material and financial needs.

Many countries and cultural institutions have answered the call for assistance. [Nemo](#), the Network of European Museum Organisations, provides information about available support from across Europe for Ukrainian museums and their professionals. The [Committee for Aid to Museums of Ukraine](#) was established by 26 Polish museums, to help secure their collections and provide support. The [Nordic Museum](#) in Stockholm has started a fund to provide finance for the National Museum of Ukrainian History in Kyiv. France, the Netherlands and Italy sent [tonnes of much needed materials](#).

The digitisation of collections is a way to preserve cultural works for the future. The Europeana platform issued a [statement of support](#) for Ukraine and displays digitised collections of Ukrainian cultural heritage. Saving Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Online ([SUCHO](#)), a group of more than 1 300 librarians, archivists, researchers and programmers, are working together to identify and archive at-risk sites, digital content, and data in Ukrainian cultural heritage institutions.

Under the [French Presidency of the Council](#) of the European Union, culture ministers, deeply concerned about preservation of cultural heritage, unanimously adopted a [declaration on the situation in Ukraine](#) on 7 March 2022. In June 2021, the [Council](#) recognised the role of cultural heritage for peace and called for its protection during armed conflicts and its integration into the [EU toolbox for conflicts and crises](#).

The European Parliament's [Culture and Education Committee](#) hosted a debate on 15 March 2022 on how Russia's [biased](#) interpretation of [history](#) denies Ukrainian identity.

War crimes against cultural property

Armed groups intentionally destroyed the mausoleums at [Timbuktu](#), a UNESCO cultural heritage site, and burned their manuscripts in 2012, during the occupation of northern Mali. Since then, the peacekeeping forces' mandate also includes the protection of cultural heritage. In 2016, the International Criminal Court (ICC) convicted the perpetrator, who recognised his responsibility, and sentenced him to nine years of imprisonment and €2.7 million in reparations. The EU contributed to the reconstruction of the mausoleums.

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