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Care for Cultural Heritage in War

Siân Jones, University of Stirling



**MOBILISING CARE
FOR CULTURAL HERITAGE
IN RUSSIA'S WAR
AGAINST UKRAINE**

Diána Vonnák and Siân Jones
with contributions
by Josephine Munch Rasmussen
and Samuel Andrew Hardy



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Damaged cultural sites in Ukraine verified by UNESCO

As of 25 March 2026, there are 525 cultural sites that have been verified as damaged (153 religious sites, 275 buildings of historical and/or artistic interest, 39 museums, 33 monuments, 20 libraries, 4 archaeological sites, 1 archive).



UNESCO / Alexandre Larcen



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- In war, the values and meanings of cultural heritage are activated and aggravated in complex and conflicting ways.
- Heritage objects and sites can become targets of wilful destruction and collateral damage
- At the same time, they offer unifying, symbolic markers of cohesion and survival.
- Aid and capacity-building for cultural heritage protection, as well as post-war reconstruction, have become established activities
- But there is still a relatively poor knowledge and understanding of how these activities inform care for cultural heritage *on the ground*

DECOPE Research Project

Destructive Exploitation and Care of Cultural Objects: Professional/Public Education for sustainable heritage management (Feb 2023 – March 2025)

- Investigated how care for cultural heritage has been mobilised in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.
- Specifically, how international interventions framed as protection, rescue and care reach local heritage communities and mediate how care is enacted on the ground.
- The ultimate aim is to help bring about more effective and targeted support for the work of heritage/museum professionals and communities during armed conflict.

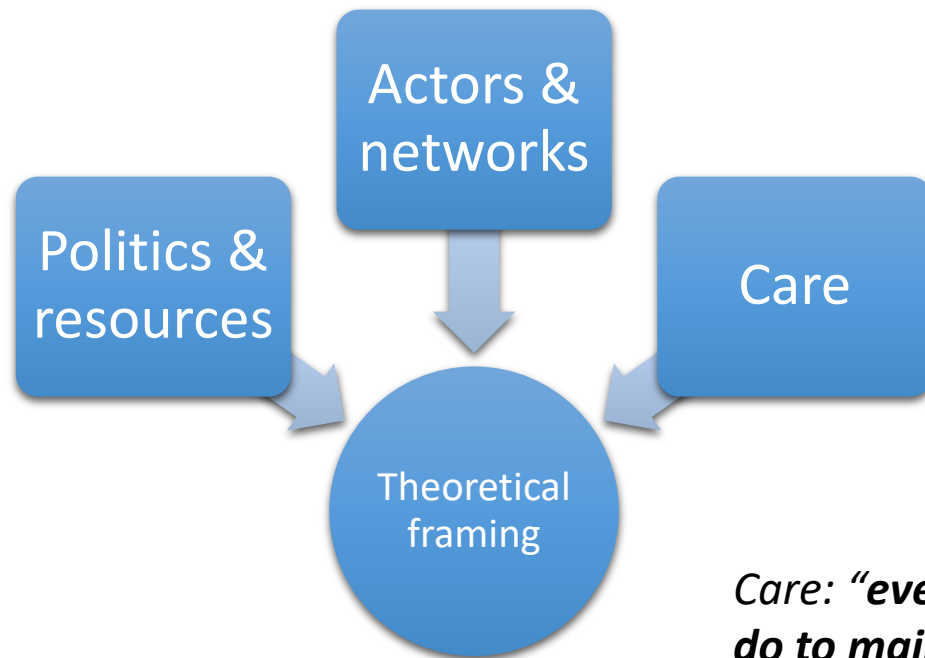
Project partners:

- Norwegian Institute for Cultural Heritage Research (Project Lead, Josephine Rasmussen);
- University of Stirling (PI Siân Jones and RA Diána Vonnák);
- Universidad Rey Juan Carlos (PI Ana Vico Belmonte and RA Sam Hardy).

Associate Partners:

- Norwegian Directorate for Cultural Heritage (Beate Strøm);
- Historic Environment Scotland (George Findlater);
- Museum Crisis Centre (Olha Honchar);
- Lviv Centre for Urban History (Iryna Sklokina)

Approach



Broad definition of heritage: tangible and intangible. Also, cross-cutting domains often treated separately, e.g. museums, built heritage and archaeological heritage

Care: “everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair ‘our world’ in order to live in it as well as possible” (Tronto 1993: 103)



“The original will be returned after victory”, Rynok Square, Lviv, August 2022. © D. Vonnák

Methods

- Interview-based fieldwork with elements of institutional ethnography, focusing on cultural heritage institutions, museums and state bodies.
- Countries we worked in (in person and online):
 - Austria; Estonia; Germany; Hungary; Latvia; Norway; Poland; UK; Ukraine
- Online research: media monitoring, emerging database of actors and networks, online interviews with Ukrainian professionals
- Complementary material: D. Vonnák spent 6 months in Ukraine since 2022 February as independent researcher, doing the same type of work.





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Overlapping arenas of intervention

- **Officially recognized heritage** (especially World Heritage, national monuments, national museums)
 - dedicated international organisations and national bodies (UNESCO, ICOM, ICCROM, Ministries etc.), focus on rescue, documentation, damage monitoring etc.
- **Local, unofficial and everyday heritage** – newer, community-oriented policy regimes like those of the European Commission where emphasis is on civil society, social cohesion and sustainability.
- **Heritage and grassroots humanitarian response** – social focus, heritage/culture as part of infrastructures of care, e.g. social services, refugee support, aid distribution.

Everyday Heritage workshop, Lublin, Feb 2024

- Workshop hosted by Brama Grodzka – an arts performance and memory institution focusing on Lublin's lost Jewish community
- The aim was to share experiences, exchange ideas, and work together to strengthen practical skills for working with everyday heritage at times of conflict
- 13 Ukrainian heritage and museum professionals, from smaller-scale organisations in the East of Ukraine, e.g Avdiivka, Kharkiv, Kramatorsk, Dnipro
- Everyday heritage was conceived as objects, places, practices embedded in people's daily lives, as well as intangible meanings, stories, and traditions



Everyday infrastructures of care and grassroots humanitarianism

- The everyday lives and livelihoods of heritage and museum workers are transformed by war. They can find themselves in occupied areas and/or displaced; experience loss of (access to) collections and damage to built heritage; collapse in funding
- Heritage and memory work becomes intertwined with other forms of care work:
 - social and humanitarian support through the distribution of humanitarian aid
 - psycho-social support through commemorative events
 - peer-professional care work in the form of fundraising and institutional support for displaced colleagues
- Role of 'centaur initiatives', e.g. Museum Crisis Centre



Our activities in "dry" figures from March 3, 2022 to August 2023

UAH 5,557,073.00 (EUR 139,652.00) raised and distributed as financial aid
UAH 317,208.90 (EUR 8068.79) provided to museums with basic equipment
1796+ heritage guardians supported
1612 kg of humanitarian aid and 117+ parcels distributed
190 museums from 18 regions supported as of August 2023

With the financial support and assistance of:
Partner network of institutions 29+.

© Museum Crisis Centre

Diverse forms of everyday heritage



Podil district, Kyiv. Photo © A. Bubnova



Destroyed Russian tanks, Kyiv. Photos © D. Vonnák

- Recovering everyday folk culture
- Local vernacular buildings
- Intangible cultural heritage, e.g food heritage
- Contested everyday heritage
- Everyday heritage of war itself



© Old Khata project



© UNESCO Culture of Ukrainian borscht

Care for everyday heritage in wartime: themes and challenges

- Increased attention to / significance of everyday heritage in response to dislocation/threat/destruction of war.
- The value of working with heritage to support community cohesion and resilience – participants stressed the need to do this work *in order to continue to exist* in various ways.
- Lots of questions about how to work with everyday heritage and what to do with the things people bring to the museum.
- How to deal with the emotional burden of this work, particularly around testimonial and commemoration work? Whether to keep emotions separate from professional practice
- Relatedly, the need for resources, training and support – importance of networks was stressed in the face of lack of help from the state.



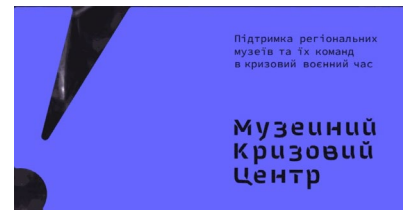
Conclusions: the nexus of heritage and socio-cultural care in war

- Museum and heritage infrastructures became **key for socio-cultural care in war**— e.g. by supporting volunteering, humanitarian aid distribution, and commemoration of war dead.
- The new relevance of heritage and museums in the context of war leads to **a boom in unofficial, everyday heritage projects.**
- **Emerging heritage of war itself**, including testimonies, documentation and collecting, is spearheaded by museum and heritage workers in response to societal demand.
- Everyday heritage and socio-cultural care work becomes important for **community resilience and belonging.** But it also comes with **challenges and emotional labour of care.**
- One of our key recommendations: this **complex care work needs to be recognised, resourced and supported** to facilitate heritage-centred community resilience and recovery already in the context of ongoing war.



Thank you

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