

Ukrainian libraries in the time of war: Losses and challenges

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Tetiana Chorna 

University Librarian, Scientific Library, National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, Kyiv, Ukraine

Abstract

The Russian-Ukrainian War has had a significant impact on Ukrainian libraries, particularly in the Eastern regions of Ukraine that have been directly affected by the conflict. The Russian aggression has caused significant damage to library infrastructure, collections, and services, and has disrupted the overall functioning of the library system in Ukraine. In this paper, we provide an overview of the situation with the Ukrainian libraries during the Russian-Ukrainian War, as well as a review of the risks Ukrainian librarians face on a daily basis.

Keywords

War, library, archive, museum, russian aggression

Introduction

Many libraries in the war-affected regions have been damaged or destroyed as a result of the hostilities, either directly or indirectly. This includes libraries located in areas that have been shelled or bombed, as well as libraries that have been damaged due to people displacement and the resulting chaos. The conflict has also disrupted the delivery of library services to communities in the affected regions. Many libraries have had to close temporarily or reduce their services due to safety concerns, lack of resources, or difficulties in accessing their collections. In some cases, libraries have had to move their collections to safer locations to protect them from damage or looting. For example, the Donetsk Regional Universal Research Library, which was one of the largest and most significant libraries in the region, was severely damaged during fighting in 2014 and had to be relocated to a new building. This large-scale displacement of people within and

Corresponding author:

Tetiana Chorna, Department of Library, National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, str. 2, Skovorody, Kyiv 04070, Ukraine.

Email: chornatv@ukma.edu.ua

across borders has had profound humanitarian, social, and economic implications. The magnitude of the crisis is evident in the staggering numbers, which highlight the urgent need for effective strategies to mitigate the risks faced by individuals and communities in their daily lives. As Ukrainian journalist Serhii Hladkevych states:

“It’s flying. You are drinking coffee and planning your current day. But this day has already finished. Because it’s flying... But you don’t know about it and continue drinking coffee by observing the beauty of your city. And someone is eating breakfast with family. The last time because it’s flying... And the baby does not want to eat porridge and mom is showing him a favourite toy. The last time because it’s flying... And someone is saying goodbye and rushes to work. The last time... Yes, exactly, because it’s flying... It’s flying to kill them. It’s flying to take their lives because of other languages, other thoughts, their resistance and love of freedom. Books will be written and films will be made after that. But it will be in the future. The pain feels different over time. The pain goes away after a while. But time is different now... Time is in every second now. From missile arrivals to missile arrivals. From the air alarm to the next one. From life to death” (Gladkevich, 2022) (*translation from Ukrainian is made by the author of the article*).

The typical Air Raid Alert Map of Ukraine, with its crimson hue, serves as a vivid representation of the constant threat posed by the Russian attacks. Serhii Hladkevych’s words underscore the gravity of the situation, emphasizing the absence of safe zones in the face of this persistent threat (See [Figure 1](#)).

Ukrainian educational and cultural institutions after Russian invasion

The date of 24 February 2022, remains tragically acute in the collective memory of the Ukrainian people as a sombre reminder of the day when the full-scale invasion by Russia started, characterized by extensive air and missile strikes coming from multiple directions. The devastating impact of this hostile aggression is palpable in the staggering number of displaced individuals, with millions of refugees seeking asylum in neighboring countries and a significant number forcibly uprooted within Ukraine itself. Recent data from the United Nations reveals a staggering tally of 14 million displaced Ukrainians, underscoring the enormous scale of the humanitarian crisis unfolding in the region ([Operation Data Portal](#)).

It is estimated that over 9000 civilians, including 461 children, have been killed ([Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2023](#); [Barsukova, 2023](#)). According to the [Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine](#), as of February 1, over 1500 cultural heritage and cultural infrastructure objects have been damaged or destroyed ([Destroyed Cultural Heritage Of Ukraine](#)).

The Ukrainian Cultural Foundation has launched an interactive “Map of Cultural Losses” to demonstrate the scale of the cultural damage Ukraine has suffered as a result of the Russian invasion ([Ukrainian Cultural Foundation, 2022](#)).

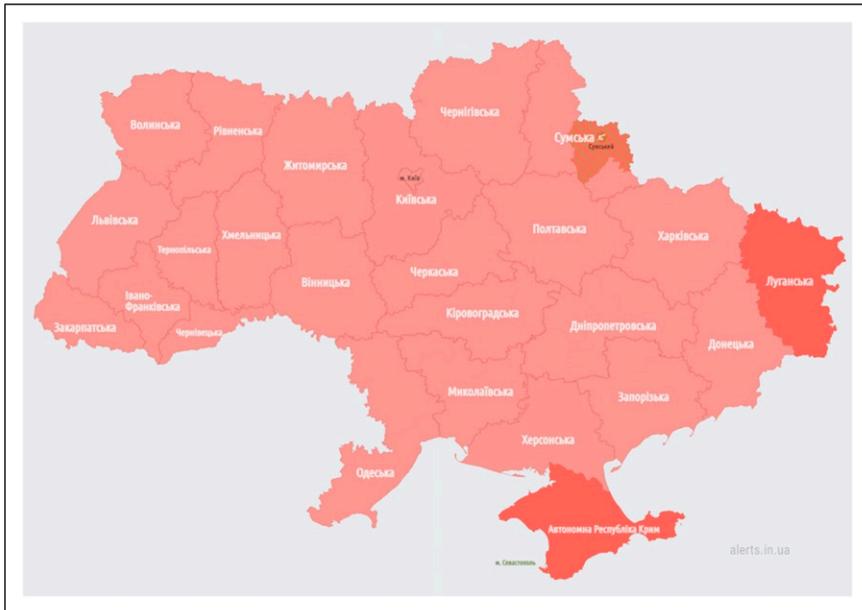


Figure 1. The air raid alert map of Ukraine. Source: <https://alerts.in.ua>.

According to the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2789 educational institutions and schools were damaged by bombings and shelling, 337 of them were completely destroyed. And since every school has a library, we can correlate these numbers with school libraries (Ministerstvo osvity i nauky Ukrainy, 2022; (Ministerstvo osvity i nauky Ukrainy Osvita pod zahrozoiu, n.d.)).

There are a number of libraries, archives, and museums that have suffered physical damage to their buildings by missile bombardment or have been under potential threat. Here are the tiny part of the consequences of the war for Ukrainian libraries:

- more than 434 public libraries were partially destroyed or suffered minor damage;
- 79 libraries have already restarted their activities after renovation;
- 42 Public Libraries lost all library collections;
- three national and state libraries were damaged (Bruj, 2022).

The Maksymovych Research Library can be seen in the picture. It is the main scientific library of Kyiv Taras Shevchenko National University. Fortunately, the library collection itself remains unscathed, as it has not suffered damage. At present, it is still difficult to assess accurately the damages suffered by university libraries. Nevertheless, reports reveal substantial destruction inflicted upon libraries in several universities across various regions, including Kharkiv, Mykolaiv, Kherson, Mariupol, and some university libraries in Kyiv, Irpin, and Chernihiv cities (See Figure 2).

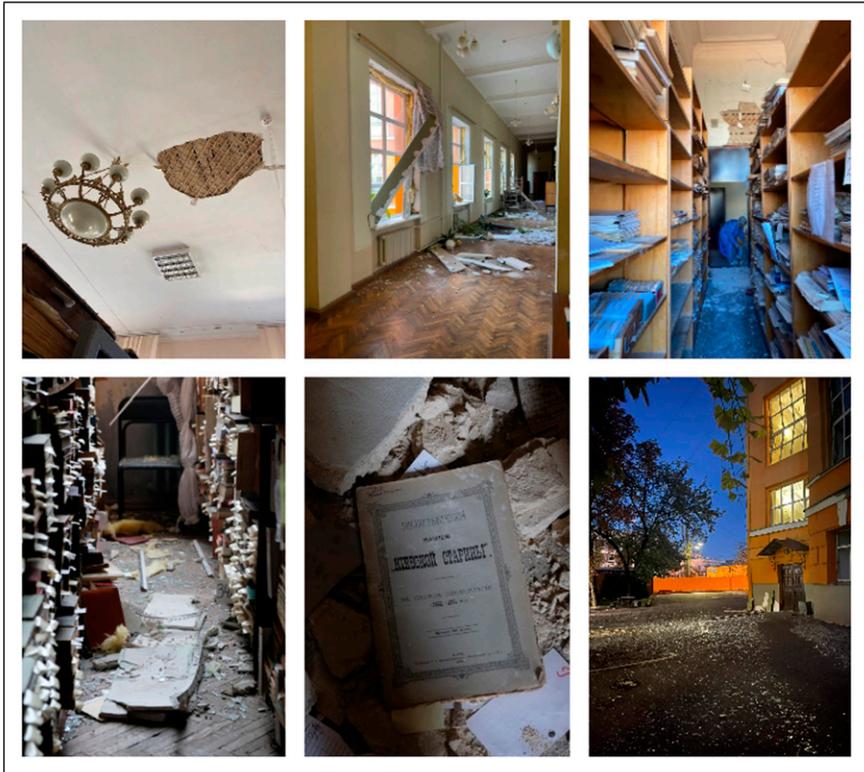


Figure 2. Maksymovych Research Library of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv. Source: Destroyed cultural heritage of Ukraine Web site / <https://culturecrimes.mkip.gov.ua/?p=3879>.

Ukrainian books have been forcibly removed from library shelves in the cities that have fallen under Russian occupation, and were shipped to unknown locations for incineration. As a result of this alarming trend, it is clear that Russia is conducting a systematic effort to eradicate Ukrainian identity at multiple levels of society.

In the image below, Ukrainian soldiers are rescuing five tonnes of books from the Sieversk's libraries that have been destroyed by the Russians (see [Figure 3](#)).

It is necessary to highlight that efforts have been made to safeguard rare books from Ukraine's unoccupied territories by relocating them to secure locations. However, regrettably, some library collections have been irreversibly lost. As the situation progresses, the restoration of these lost collections will become a vital task. In the meantime, several libraries are taking proactive measures by creating additional collections to be transferred to damaged or destroyed libraries. These libraries will be reconstructed after a successful resolution of the war.



Figure 3. Ukrainian soldiers save 5 tonnes of books from Sieversk's libraries destroyed by Russians. Source: General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine / Facebook.

The national University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy Library

A closer look at the experience of the NaUKMA's Library allows us to highlight the following points:

- For Ukraine in general and for the university community in particular, 2022 was a real test of sustainability.
- During the past 6 months, some of our librarians have provided online services to users from safer places. However, other librarians were furloughed being paid a minimum salary.
- Reading rooms have been open since September 2022, and services provided by the library can continue to be used.

The National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (NaUKMA) library holds more than 750,000 books, including 90,000 rare books and 72 collections from famous Ukrainian authors. Fortunately, NaUKMA Library's book collection has been preserved safe so far.

Notwithstanding the many challenges and obstacles, our institution remains steadfastly committed to the ongoing process of digitizing rare books. As a result of these efforts, over 1000 books, newspapers, and archives have been made accessible online. This exemplifies our dedication to preserving and disseminating valuable cultural and historical resources in digital format.

Despite encountering formidable challenges including the impact of Russian missile attacks, network shutdowns, blackouts, and disruptions to essential utility services such as heat and water supply, our institution remains steadfast in its unwavering commitment to delivering a broad spectrum of services to our users. These services are based on both online and offline modalities, underscoring our resolute determination to fulfill our mission despite adverse circumstances.

Ukrainians always find a way out of any situation. We have organized the "Unbreakable Point" in the Library, where we provide all the conveniences our users may require. As part of our safety plan, we have organized bomb shelters for library staff and students, and when an air alarm sounds, we should all proceed to the shelter to stay alive.

Throughout the ongoing war, Ukrainian libraries have assumed expanded roles beyond their traditional functions. In addition to their traditional roles, libraries have emerged as critical hubs for displaced persons, providing vital services such as psychological support. Furthermore, libraries have become spaces for art therapy, with reading rooms opened to foster a sense of normalcy and resilience in the midst of adversity. In this way, libraries continue to play a pivotal role in the gradual rebuilding and preservation of Ukrainian culture, despite the challenges posed by the war.

This photo shows how the Russians threw away the Azov University Library's books in the occupied Mariupol. Russian war invasion in Ukraine caused extensive damage throughout the whole country. Thus, we understand that there is an urgent need to safeguard valuable documentary heritage in Ukraine and its digital data (See [Figure 4](#)).

The national digital library of Ukraine project

In 2022, UNESCO initiated a project to safeguard documentary heritage in danger, including digitization and the development of a National Digital Library of Ukraine ([UNESDOC, 2022](#)). In June, UNESCO organized an initial partners' meeting at which a



Figure 4. The occupiers threw away books from the University Library in Mariupol. Source: Mariupol City Council on Telegram.

project concept note was presented on safeguarding documentary heritage to Ukrainian and international partners, in the context of the Memory of the World Programme. A key outcome was the setting up of a technical working group located in the Ukrainian Library Association and to begin groundwork on the setting up of the National Digital Library of Ukraine. The Project partners are UNESCO, the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), Ukrainian Library Association, Memory institutions in Ukraine and the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine (UNESCO) ([Government Portal, 2023](#)).

On February 14, a coordination meeting of the initiators of the National Digital Library of Ukraine (NDLU) project was held, and the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine issued an order on the formation of an official working group. This group includes specialists from various libraries, archives, and museums of Ukraine.

The National Digital Library of Ukraine is envisioned to:

- Provide fast and user-friendly ability to search, find and download documents of cultural heritage from the digital library for future use.
- Provide free, fast and location-independent access to documentary heritage with restricted access (e.g., rare editions, manuscripts, old prints, archives, etc.).
- Enable preservation of original materials of documentary heritage in the collections of libraries, archives and museums (the digital copies eliminate the need for physical access to rare and valuable documents).

- Enable preservation of digital copies of documentary heritage for future generations (physical copies may be lost).
- Present the documentary heritage of Ukraine and make it accessible to the world.

Currently, we have the list of libraries that hold the largest number of cultural heritage collections: the data on already digitized books by these libraries and the list of the books that need to be digitized.

Moreover, it is crucial to develop a comprehensive framework of regulations and guidelines for the National Digital Library of Ukraine. This should include the acquisition of suitable software and equipment to facilitate the digitization process. Furthermore, digitized books must be meticulously reviewed and corrected to conform to international standards. Additionally, training programs should be conducted for library staff to enhance their proficiency in managing the digital library efficiently.

The Ukrainian library community is firmly convinced that the establishment of the National Digital Library of Ukraine is of the utmost importance in safeguarding Ukraine's invaluable cultural heritage and making it accessible to a broader audience, including future generations.

It is worth mentioning that the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine developed the project "Save Ukrainian culture." This project aims to draw attention to the war crimes of the Russian aggressor country in Ukraine, to restore and preserve the objects of the cultural heritage of Ukraine that suffered from Russian military aggression. A special account was created to collect funds for the reconstruction of destroyed cultural objects ([Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine](#)).

New role of the Ukrainian libraries

Overall, Ukrainian libraries during the Russian-Ukrainian War were deeply affected by the conflict, with significant damage to infrastructure and disruptions to services. However, libraries have also demonstrated their resilience and their importance in responding to the crisis and supporting their communities during this difficult time. They have provided essential support and resources to those affected, including displaced individuals, by offering internet access, disseminating information on humanitarian assistance, and hosting cultural events to promote community cohesion.

The Ukrainian Library Association and the [American Library Association](#) established the "Ukrainian Library Support Fund," which accumulates charitable contributions to help Ukrainian librarians. American colleagues help the Ukrainian library community preserve libraries and library collections, provide ongoing services, and provide financial assistance to librarians impacted by the Russian invasion (Ukraine Library Relief Fund).

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ORCID iD

Tetiana Chorna  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0227-4545>

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Author biography

Tetiana Chorna, National University of Kyiv Mohyla Academy, Skovorody str. 2, Kyiv, Ukraine, 04070.