

Ukraine's cultural casualties

THE RUSSIAN AGGRESSION against Ukraine is now in its fifth month. From the first days of the invasion, Russian troops have been destroying the country's cultural heritage. A common question has been: is this destruction deliberate? Some Ukrainian officials have accused Russia of 'cultural genocide'. On 7th May President Volodymyr Zelensky commented on the destruction of the museum in Skovorodynivka dedicated to the Cartesian philosopher Hryhoriy Skovoroda (1722–94) that not even terrorists would consider shooting rockets into museums. Even so, accusations of a calculated, tactical pattern of ruination are not grounded in hard evidence; such evidence is impossible to obtain without access to the deliberations of the Russian army's General Staff.

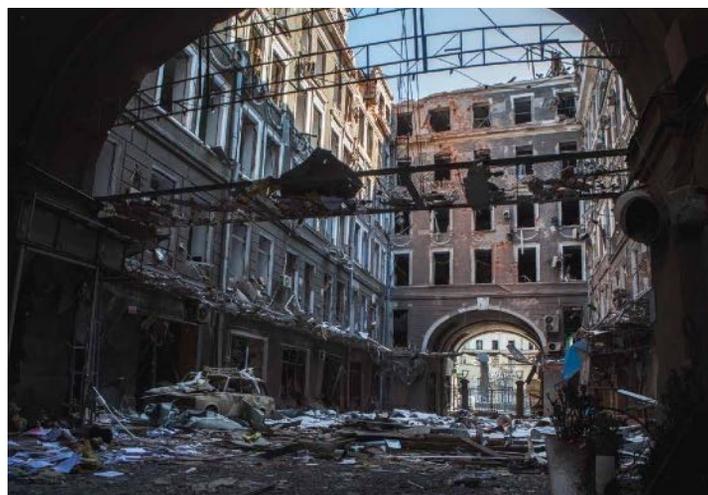
However, it is clear by now that Russian troops have violated a wide range of international laws, from the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (of which Russia is a signatory) to various UNESCO conventions, including the Second Protocol of 1999. In the first three months of the invasion, Russian troops have destroyed architectural monuments and museums and have been involved in both the organised removal of museum collections and random looting.

The advance on Kyiv in March looked especially dangerous for the country's cultural heritage. Russian troops practically surrounded the city of Chernihiv, in northeastern Ukraine, which is rich in early medieval monuments, such as the Cathedral of St Boris and St Gleb, built at the beginning of the twelfth century, and the St Paraskeva Church, built about a century later. Chernihiv was under more or less constant bombardment for almost two months, as was the ancient town of Ovruch in the Korosten district of the Zhytomyr region. Ovruch is the home of one of the oldest ecclesiastical buildings in Ukraine, the church of St Basil, erected in 1190 for Prince Rurik (d.1215). It was designed by Petr Miloneg, one of the very few architects of Kyivan Rus whose name was recorded in early medieval chronicles.

The potential storming of Kyiv, which looked possible at the end of March, made art historians shiver. Kyiv is the major museum centre of the country and the home of such architectural gems as the eleventh-century Cathedral of St Sophia and its contemporary, the Kyiv Monastery of the Caves, both of which are on the UNESCO list of World Cultural Heritage sites. This could have been a major disaster. Russian missiles were falling on the city, seemingly at random. No one could predict their targets.

Fortunately, Kyiv's most important monuments and collections escaped destruction. By April, Russian troops were starting to retreat from the city's outskirts, leaving behind mass graves and other evidence of appalling military crimes. The medieval churches of Chernihiv and Ovruch survived practically undamaged. However, other architectural treasures were not so lucky. For example, the nineteenth-century Gothic revival building housing the Tarnovsky Museum in Chernihiv was completely destroyed.

Although Russian troops failed to occupy big cities with outstanding museum collections, they succeeded in burning to the ground a symbolically important local museum in the village of Ivankiv. This museum had a substantial group of paintings by Maria Primachenko (1909–97), a celebrated naive painter. When they saw the museum on



1. The Palace of Labour, Kharkiv, designed by Ippolit Pretro and completed in 1916, which has largely been destroyed in the Russian bombardment of the city. (Photograph Stanislav Ostrous).

fire, villagers broke the windows and braved the flames to save most of these iconic paintings. The image of the conflagration has become a potent symbol of the fate of Ukrainian cultural heritage at the hands of the Russians.

Kyiv was mostly spared the destruction of its architectural monuments; however, Kharkiv, the second largest city in the country, was not. Kharkiv is known as the Ukrainian capital of Constructivist architecture and the city also has many significant Art Nouveau buildings from the beginning of the twentieth century. From 1918 to 1934 Kharkiv was the capital of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Ukraine and thus became the showcase of Soviet modernity. Some of the projects built there represent the most ambitious manifestations of Constructivist architecture anywhere. Perhaps the most significant is Derzhprom (the State Industry building), erected in 1928 on the city's central square. Designed by the architects Sergei Serafimov (1878–1939), Samuil Kravets (1891–1966) and Mark Felger (1881–1962), Derzhprom was at thirteen storeys the tallest building in the USSR at the time of its completion.

For nearly three months, from February to April, Kharkiv was under constant intensive Russian bombardment. Shelling is still continuing, albeit on a somewhat less extensive scale. Although the Derzhprom building has so far been spared from destruction, another gem of the city's modernist heritage, the Railroad Workers' Palace of Culture, designed by Aleksandr Dmitriev (1878–1959) and built in 1927–32, has not been as lucky. A Russian bomb exploded nearby at the beginning of April, causing severe damage to the back of the building and much of its interior.

Kharkiv has become an example of the kind of indiscriminate bombardment of densely populated cities that the Russians employed in Aleppo in 2016. It has resulted not only in extensive civilian casualties but also in the wanton destruction of the architectural texture of the city. Several of its Art Nouveau buildings have been severely damaged or destroyed. One of the saddest examples is the so-called 'Palace of Labour', which housed the offices of the Kharkiv City Council (Fig.1). This gigantic

Neo-classical edifice, completed in 1916, which was designed by Ippolit Pretro (1871–1938) as a tenement building for the insurance company Russia, has suffered terrible damage from the ongoing shelling.

In the central and northeastern parts of the country, the primary damage to cultural heritage has been caused by Russian bombardment. In the southeast, however, the illicit removal of museum collections has complemented – and in some cases, completed – the damage from high explosives. Some of the greatest treasures of the museum dedicated to the well-known nineteenth-century painter Arkhip Kuindzhi (1841–1910) were ‘transported’ from Melitopol to Donetsk by Russian troops. The loot included the first version of Kuindzhi’s masterpiece *Red sunset over the Dnieper* (1898–1908), of which a later version is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Russian agents also confiscated an array of golden Scythian artifacts from the Regional Museum in Melitopol. The whereabouts of the pilfered collection is unknown.

At the present moment a key concern is the fate of the museums in Kherson, which the Russian army has occupied. The Oleksandr Shovkunenko Kherson Regional Art Museum has approximately 10,000 pieces in its collection, including a small selection of European old masters. Among its Russian masterworks are three canvases by the seascape painter Ivan Aivazovsky (1817–1900). The Kherson Regional History Museum, established in 1890 to house the region’s archaeological collection, has rich holdings ranging from antiquities to precious manuscripts. There are more than 150,000 catalogued objects in its collection, including many priceless pieces of Scythian gold. According to some unverified reports by the Ukrainian Military Intelligence, the Russian occupiers have started to remove parts of these collections to Crimea.

The scale of these Russian crimes against Ukraine’s cultural heritage has not been seen in Europe since the Second World War. It has attracted attention and press coverage – not always reliable – from leading international news organisations. The outcry of Western art historians and museum directors has been loud, but it has not been matched by an equal outpouring from their Russian counterparts. Since the beginning of the war, no Russian museum director has expressed even lukewarm concern about the fate of Ukraine’s cultural heritage. This is somewhat ironic given the loud campaign in 2017 for the protection of Palmyra, which was championed by Mikhail Piotrovsky, the director of the State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg. Then, the director of Russia’s largest museum considered that saving the ancient Syrian city from the barbarity

of ISIS was a ‘matter of honour’. By contrast, today’s destruction of Ukrainian architectural monuments and museum collections provokes only a frosty silence.

This attitude is not surprising. The directors of Russia’s leading museums were long ago transformed into political components of Putin’s regime. In the late 1990s they rejected even the possibility of discussing the restitution of works of art looted by the Soviet Army at the end of the Second World War. It did not matter to them whether the art belonged to a German museum or to a victim of the Holocaust. In 2014 many Russian museum directors, starting with the late Irina Antonova of the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow, enthusiastically signed a joint letter supporting the annexation of Crimea. Soon after the annexation, the Russian Federation made public claims on certain Scythian archaeological objects that Ukraine had sent to an exhibition at the Allard Pierson Museum, Amsterdam.

At the time of the legal battle for ownership of the Scythian gold exhibited in Amsterdam, no one in the West seemed to want to notice another Crimean museum drama that was unfolding. In 2016 the Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, organised an exhibition dedicated to the two hundredth anniversary of Aivazovsky’s birth. It seemed that Aivazovsky’s canvases had a certain metaphorical resonance – the popular slogan of the day in Russian propaganda was ‘Crimea returns to its native harbour’. To express this metaphor to the public in the form of an art exhibition, the exhibition at the Tretyakov Gallery was meant to include every work by Aivazovsky in the museums of the occupied peninsula. Despite fierce letters of protest sent by Ukrainian officials to various international organisations, including the International Council of Museums (ICOM), the incident did not attract much media attention. It certainly did not seem to influence the cosy relationship between the Tretyakov Gallery and museums in Europe.

The war in Ukraine is far from its end. Russian missiles continue to rain down on Kyiv, Kharkiv, Odesa and even Lviv, near the Polish border. The cultural heritage of the country is in great peril. Given the destruction that has happened, and the destruction that is sure to come to light, it is not too early to start thinking about bringing the perpetrators to justice. The pressing task is not only to document the crimes of the men with their fingers on the triggers but to rethink relations with their silent accomplices.

KONSTANTIN AKSINHA

The provenance of ‘Het Steen’ and ‘The Rainbow Landscape’ by Rubens

Sir, I congratulate Lucy Davies and Natalia Munoz-Rojas on their important research and article ‘The provenance of “Het Steen” and “The Rainbow Landscape” by Rubens’ in the April issue (pp.333–41). I would, however, like to clarify their references (on p.337) to my documented article on the fate of part of the Castile collection, ‘From Madrid to Lisbon and Vienna: the journey of the celebrated paintings of Juan Tomás Enríquez de Cabrera, Almirante de Castilla.’¹

Firstly, Juan Tomás Enríquez de Cabrera was the 11th and last Admiral, not the 10th; secondly, I found no evidence that the around two hundred paintings he was allowed to take into exile in Portugal in September 1702 (travelling across the frontier in thirty-eight carts), were ever sold by auction following his death there in June 1705. Instead, all the paintings were viewed in Lisbon at this same date and all were acquired by the Habsburg Archduke Charles of Austria, claimant to the

Spanish throne in the war of the Spanish Succession and future Holy Roman Emperor (1711).

It is also documented that the same number of paintings then remained together in Lisbon in the care of the Jesuits and under crown protection until July 1715, and when, following the peace Treaty of Utrecht, they travelled by sea, via England, to Vienna to enter the imperial collection.

I have not found any reference that the two landscape paintings by Rubens ever went to Lisbon, and I agree with the authors that it is most likely they were sold in Madrid sometime after 1700 and from there began their rather different journey to Genoa.

ANGELA DELAFORCE

¹ A. Delaforce: ‘From Madrid to Lisbon and Vienna: the journey of the celebrated paintings of Juan Tomás Enríquez de Cabrera, Almirante de Castilla’, THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE 149 (2007), pp.246–55.