

Ukrainian Libraries in Wartime

by [Ulia Gosart](#)

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The Russo-Ukrainian War is more than a war between armies—it is a war between societies. Russia’s intention is not solely to defeat the Ukrainian military but to turn Ukraine into a gray zone by destroying it as a nation. Among the key casualties of the war are cultural heritage institutions, specifically those where ideas are preserved and exchanged: libraries.

At the start of the war, over 14,350 Ukrainian public libraries served as an interconnected network of institutions of differing sizes and capacities, determined by the community they served: village, city, district (rayon), or regional (oblast’). By the end of 2022, the number fell to 11,993, with close to one-fifth of the libraries (2,358) defunct. A [December 2022](#) report issued by the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy stated that the devastation of Ukrainian libraries constitutes close to 40 percent of all damage to the country’s cultural heritage infrastructure, including 155 fully destroyed libraries. This estimation excludes data from areas that are not fully controlled by Ukraine—the Crimea, the city of Sevastopol, and the libraries of the Donetsk, Lugansk, and Kherson regions. Given that over 2,600 schools were also affected, with 460 completely destroyed (as of December 2022, according to the [Ministry of Education and Science](#)), the number of affected libraries is actually in the thousands.

By the end of 2022, over 40 percent of Ukrainian library professionals, or more than 7,800 persons, lost their employment completely or were forced to work part-time. The shelling of the Kramatorsk region took the lives of two librarians, who were among the 62 people killed in the railway station shooting.



Chernihiv's Regional Library for Youth, before and after the March 11, 2022 bombing. The library was built in 1902 and is a cultural and historical landmark.

Photo courtesy of the Regional Library for the Youth.

AFFECTED REGIONS

Chernihiv and Chernihiv Oblast were among the most affected areas. Three libraries in the Chernihiv region were demolished: a public library in Ivanivsk, the Khreschatyk branch of the library of Kiptivka, and the main building of the Chernihiv Regional Library for Youth (pictured).

Marina Latamarchuk, Director of the Regional Library for Youth, remarked that “Our library functioned as a hub of the city’s cultural and intellectual life. We conducted literary and art events, hosted art exhibitions, poetry nights, and musical events. We provided legal education for the youth and offered English language classes. After winning a national competition on organization of online services in 2013, we bought computer equipment and started literacy classes for the elderly. The bombing damaged both buildings of our library and brought heavy damage to collections, which, prior to the attack, consisted of over 61,000 items.” Through collaboration between library staff and the community, the library was able to reopen. The surviving collections were moved to the library’s second building while the first undergoes reconstruction.

“In the Kharkiv region, all types of libraries have been affected,” said Liudmyla Glazunova, deputy director for research at the Korolenko State Scientific Library in Kharkiv. She continued, “At least seven public libraries are totally destroyed, including one in Lozova, one in Barvinkove, two in Izum, and a children's library in Dergachi. Twenty-six libraries suffered damage to their roofs and windows. In Kharkiv city, the two largest libraries in Ukraine and Europe were badly damaged: Korolenko State Science Library, whose collection accounts for over 7 million items in 244 languages, and the Central Scientific Library of the Karazin’s University in Kharkiv, with a collection of over 3,400,000 items. Both libraries represent cultural heritages of Ukraine, with each containing over 70,000 rare books. The damage includes shattered windows, broken doors, damage to the stained-glass windows, destroyed heating systems, damaged furniture, computers, and equipment.” The scale of destruction is truly heartbreaking.

The war has also produced libraries that are functioning in exile, such as the regional library of Luhansk. In July 2022, the main library staff settled temporarily in Cherkasy, Central Ukraine, a relatively safe location. As multiple libraries have evacuated from the affected regions, patrons have been served through online services. This is the second move for the Luhansk library, which was first forced to relocate in 2014, in response to the beginning of the Russo-Ukrainian war that commenced in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

Thus far no definitive data exist as to whether libraries have been deliberately targeted in attacks. However, given the war’s ethnocultural character and libraries’ role in cultural heritage preservation, it’s hard to imagine that intention is not at play. Libraries also contain powerful counterevidence to refute the logic deployed by the Russian government to legitimize its war against Ukraine. Their collections bear unequivocal testament to Ukrainians’ distinct history and character, separate from those of Russia.

Mass book removals in Ukraine’s temporarily occupied territories support the view that the destruction has been deliberate. Among the [affected territories](#) are regions of Kharkiv, Chernihiv, Donetsk, Luhansk and Symi, and the city of [Melitopol](#). Core targets have been books about post-Soviet Ukrainian history and volumes in the Ukrainian language. A local [Mariupol](#) authority commenting on textbook removal

in the Donetsk region said they have been targeted for their “extremist” content. While it is devastating to see books destroyed—like human life, they are vulnerable and irreplaceable—the reports of librarians contributing to their protection and preservation is inspiring.

LIBRARIES FIGHT BACK



“Children Draw War not Flowers” drawing contest, Cherkasy Regional Library.

Photos courtesy of Cherkasy Regional Library.

people took shelter during bombing raids.

“Since the Russian invasion, libraries across the Cherkasy region have been contributing to bringing the victory,” said Liudmyla Diadyk, director of the Taras Shevchenko Regional Library of Cherkasy, in a recent interview. “We weaved camouflage nets and sewed balaclava helmets for the soldiers. We cooked for the local territorial defense forces and sent food packages to the army with letters and drawings of children. We also support our community by remaining open and hosting events at the library. Among our most memorable events was a drawing contest for children from internally displaced communities. Our region is relatively safe, hosting over 250,000 persons who found their temporarily homes in our region. The contest helped the children to cope with uncertainty and provided support to those whose parents are fighting in the war. Now we are sending books to hospitals and the libraries that lost their collections. Over 90 percent of our regional library network or close to 600 libraries are functioning. We adapted to the war conditions because our patrons need us.”

The war has evoked a sense of camaraderie among library workers and advocates worldwide. The American Library Association opened a [Relief Fund](#), as did the [Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals](#) of the United Kingdom. A growing international initiative, [Saving Ukrainian Heritage Online](#) (SUCHO), has given digitization equipment to 34 libraries, providing them with technology to save

Since the beginning of the war, libraries have provided residents with credible, up-to-date information. Many of them serve internally displaced populations, or persons who have been forced to move to a different part of the country because of the war. Libraries hold events to help community members cope with trauma and use their premises to distribute clothes and food. Some libraries have been converted into volunteer headquarters to address the army’s needs. During Kharkiv’s occupation, librarians also provided services in the underground metro stations where

cultural heritage items and contribute to the development of the first National Digital Library of Ukraine. Close to [600,000 children's books](#) were sent to Ukrainian refugees from over 20 countries, including Ukraine. The Lesia Ukrainka Public Library in Kiev partnered with Ukrainians living abroad to send more than [6,500 books to more than 25 cities](#) across Europe, and to Cyprus, Israel, and Japan, to reach Ukrainian refugees ([also see the map](#) of this initiative). Old Lion Publishing in Lviv sent over [1,300 books](#) to refugees in Europe and Canada.

Svitlana Kravchenko, from the Yaroslav Mudryi National Library of Ukraine, sums up the spirit of these efforts: “Being professionals, we support our readers in all situations—whether it is occupation, shelling, staying in shelters, or in everyday life. Although our work is hard and dangerous, we are elated when we support our people and contribute to our mutual victory.”

Despite the hardships wrought by war, Ukrainian libraries continue to serve their communities. They offer relief and healing. They continue to explore new opportunities for outreach to serve the army and refugees. In times of peace, libraries aim to liberate individuals by providing knowledge for personal growth; during wartime, they help unite a nation in the common struggle for freedom.

Ulia Gosart was born in the former Soviet Union, and obtained her BA in librarianship from Kiev National University of Culture and Arts. Her scholarly work is related to her advocacy and human rights work. She teaches in the School of Information, San José State University.