

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing
on
Erasing Ukrainian Identity and Culture

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2247 Rayburn House Office Building

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Thank you for the opportunity to speak about the Russian Federation's ongoing efforts to erase Ukrainian culture and identity in its war of aggression against Ukraine. Unfortunately, it is now clear that Russia's efforts are systematic and widespread. From the body of evidence before us, we must conclude that Russia's efforts are intentional.

Cultural targeting should concern us greatly. We should remember that efforts to erase Jewish religious and cultural identity were integral to the Holocaust, a fact that Representative Tom Lantos, this Commission's namesake, understood all too well.

I am the Director of Research and Programs for the Penn Cultural Heritage Center at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. I am also the First Vice-President (President-Elect) of the Archaeological Institute of America, which Congress established in 1906 to advise on the protection of archaeological sites. For more than a decade, I have studied the motivations of perpetrators to erase cultural identity, methods of documenting wartime damage to cultural sites, and mechanisms that the United States and the international community can employ to protect cultural institutions and their collections, which are placed at risk during conflict.

In this work I am not alone. Dr. Katharyn Hanson, my colleague at the Smithsonian Institution, and Dr. Hayden Bassett and Dr. Madeleine Gunter Bassett, at the Virginia Museum of Natural History, publish rapid reports on damaged cultural heritage sites in Ukraine using high-resolution geospatial imagery. Dr. Deniz Cil and Dr. Jacob Aronson, at the University of Maryland, conduct statistical analysis to rule out random targeting. Corine Wegener, also at the Smithsonian Institution, and I developed a process for collecting consistent, legally relevant information about damaged cultural sites, which was tested at the Mosul Cultural Museum in Iraq.

Through careful research, our knowledge about cultural destruction has fundamentally transformed. It used to be said that the destruction of cultural heritage in war was an old problem in human history—a tragic accident or collateral damage. What we now know is much more unsettling. We see cultural sites looted as a funding source for conflict actors. We see intentional destruction employed as a signal of intended population displacement, as a recruitment strategy, and as a strategy to coerce civilian compliance. While cultural sites enjoy some measure of protection under international law, these protections have been abandoned by countries such as Russia.

Culture *is* the intended target to achieve unlawful military aims. And cultural workers—museum staff, librarians, and archivists—who are the custodians of our collective cultural memory, are themselves at urgent risk.

In Ukraine, this cultural targeting is devastatingly apparent. The Ukrainian Heritage Monitoring Lab has inspected 1,114 sites by implementing the protocols employed at the Mosul Cultural Museum in their documentation efforts. Because of their extraordinary and brave efforts at documenting the damage to their country and its heritage, we can apply our research and identify instances that point to systematic and widespread targeting by Russia. I now turn to examples of such cases.

Among buildings dedicated to religion:

At the Odesa Transfiguration Cathedral, a reconstructed masterpiece and an historic monument within the UNESCO World Heritage Site, high-resolution satellite imagery showed conflict-related damage on 23 July 2023. On-the-ground documentation showed extensive interior damage; and

At the Melitopol Christian Church, high-resolution satellite imagery showed the removal of the large church cross between 24 March 2022 and 7 April 2024 at the beginning of Russia's occupation. The surrounding grounds were damaged in extensive military earthmoving activities.

Among buildings dedicated to art:

- At the Kherson Regional Art Museum, while the city was occupied by Russia, high-resolution satellite imagery captured cargo trucks lined up at the museum in early November 2022, with ground photographs and video documenting the transport of artworks away from the building;
- At the Odesa Theater Center, an historic monument within the UNESCO World Heritage Site, high-resolution satellite imagery showed conflict-related damage beginning on 24 July 2023. On-the-ground documentation showed extensive exterior and interior damage. This attack also damaged the House of Scientists, another historic monument; and

- At the Hryhorii Skovoroda Literary Memorial Museum, high-resolution satellite imagery showed damage consistent with intentional targeting between 5 May 2022 and 7 May 2022. On-the-ground documentation showed near-total damage and no other potential civilian or military targets in the near vicinity.

Among buildings dedicated to charitable purposes such as education:

- At the Kharkiv Boiko Music School, a music school for children as well as a former kindergarten, high-resolution satellite imagery showed damage consistent with intentional targeting after 27 February 2022, with no visible damage to surrounding buildings or structures; and
- At the Central Bakhmut Library, high-resolution satellite imagery showed damage consistent with intentional targeting beginning by 12 October 2022, months before the general bombardment that would ultimately level the city.

I note that these apparently targeted attacks on buildings dedicated to religion, art, and education seem to violate the Article 27 Regulations of the 1907 Hague Convention and therefore also the War Crimes Act of 1996. Given Russia's specific posture toward Ukraine and the country's heritage, what steps might Congress be able to take?

First, U.S.-Ukraine cultural exchange can be facilitated and amplified through the auspices of the interagency Cultural Heritage Coordinating Committee. In 2016, Congress encouraged the Department of State to stand up this committee in the bipartisan Protect and Preserve International Property Act, co-sponsored by Co-Chair Smith. Because the threats to culture are now so great, it is time to formally establish this committee in law with a strong, forward-looking mandate.

Second, what our careful documentation cannot do is identify the specific perpetrators who issued the orders and carried out these attacks to Ukraine's cultural heritage. That step requires a commitment to investigating Russia's actions by competent legal authorities. To facilitate this work, Congress should encourage and support the development of strong connections between the Ukrainian Prosecutor General's Office and the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation's Art Crime Team, which has demonstrated strong international leadership in addressing cultural crimes. Their respective offices have already established a working rapport that is poised to flourish.

Finally, the Armed Forces of Ukraine have demonstrated a strong fidelity to the principles of cultural preservation under international law and have cross-trained with the U.S. Army Reserve Civil Affairs' 38G Military Government Specialist 6V Heritage and Preservation Officer Program. These U.S. officers are the fabled "Monuments Men and Women" of the present-day Army. Congress should take a strong look to this program to encourage its future

success in supporting Ukraine and other NATO and allied militaries in safeguarding threatened cultural sites.