

Museum Diplomacy in Ukraine During the Russian Full-scale Invasion¹

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This article explores museum diplomacy during armed conflict, focusing on the international cooperation of Ukrainian museums amid Russia's full-scale invasion. It highlights the expanding role of museums as diplomatic and political actors, balancing state-led objectives with independent cultural initiatives. A case study of the War Museum in Kyiv analyses its international exhibitions as instruments of museum diplomacy, demonstrating their role in shaping global perceptions of the war and mobilising solidarity with Ukraine.

Keywords: museum diplomacy, war, Ukraine, Russian invasion, war museum

Introduction

This article examines the role of museum diplomacy during armed conflict, focusing on the international activities of the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War in Kyiv amid Russia's full-scale invasion. It explores how Ukrainian museums employ transnational cooperation not only to protect cultural heritage but also to shape international perceptions of the ongoing war through exhibitions and curatorial narratives.

The study builds upon the expanding scholarship on museum diplomacy and situates it within the context of contemporary Ukrainian museology. In recent years, scholars have emphasised that museums have increasingly emerged as modern-day diplomats, leveraging international collaboration to foster relationships between nations and communities.² While the concept of museum diplomacy has been widely examined in the context of peacetime cultural exchange, its function under wartime conditions remains insufficiently explored. The Ukrainian case offers a unique opportunity to analyse how museums operate simultaneously as extensions of state cultural policy and as autonomous actors of international communication, engaging in the construction of narratives of resistance, justice, and decolonisation. Since 2022, Ukrainian

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² PRIEWE, Sascha. *Museum Diplomacy: Parsing the Global Engagement of Museums*. Los Angeles: Figueroa Press, 2021; GÖRGEN, Andreas. Museums are the diplomats of the 21st century, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2016/11/16/museums-are-the-diplomats-of-the-21st-century>

museums have become key participants in cultural resilience and international advocacy. Their activities, ranging from the protection of collections to the organisation of global exhibitions, illustrate how museum diplomacy can mobilise empathy, solidarity and soft power in times of war.

The article is structured into four main sections. The first outlines the theoretical framework and research methodology, drawing on key scholarship in the field of museum diplomacy. The second section contextualises the phenomenon of museum diplomacy in wartime Ukraine, situating it within the broader processes of decolonisation, identity formation and cultural resilience. The third presents a detailed case study of the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War, focusing on its international exhibitions and partnerships between 2022 and 2024. The conclusion discusses the broader implications for understanding museums as diplomatic actors under crisis conditions.

By analysing the activities of Ukrainian museums during the ongoing war, the article contributes to wider debates on the role of museums in international relations. It argues that museums, through their curatorial and communicative practices, not only respond to geopolitical challenges but also participate in shaping the moral and cultural narratives of contemporary global politics.

Museum diplomacy in wartime: Theoretical framework and research methodology

Building upon the growing academic interest in the intersection between museum studies and international relations, this section outlines the theoretical framework and research methodology underpinning the present study. It draws primarily on the works of Natalia Grincheva,³ Da Kong⁴ and Sascha Priewe,⁵ who conceptualise museums as diplomatic actors within the broader system of global cultural communication. Their research highlights fundamental transformations in the model of diplomatic interaction, stemming from the erosion of nation-states' monopoly on diplomacy and the rise of "network diplomacy". In this model, "the state is simply one of many actors in a networked environment",⁶ while cultural organisations, artists, academics and other non-state entities increasingly influence international relations.

As Grincheva observes, these actors often establish closer and more trustworthy connections with the public than governmental institutions, thus acquiring socially legitimised credibility. This dynamic is crucial in today's globalised and highly mediated environment, where "international communication is becoming more transparent and more exposed to global

³ GRINCHEVA, Natalia. *Global Trends in Museum Diplomacy. Post-Guggenheim Developments*. New York: Routledge, 2020; GRINCHEVA, Natalia (2021). *Museum Diplomacy in the Digital Age*. London: Routledge.

⁴ KONG, Da. Diplomacy: Museums and International Exhibitions. In: KNELL, Simon (ed.). *The Contemporary Museum: Shaping Museums for the Global Now*. London and New York: Routledge, 2019, pp. 88–101; KONG, Da. *Museums, International Exhibitions and China's Cultural Diplomacy*. London and New York: Routledge, 2021.

⁵ PRIEWE, Museum...; PRIEWE, Sascha. Museums as Diplomatic Sites. In: SMITH, Sarah E.K. and PRIEWE, Sascha (eds.). *Museum Diplomacy. How Cultural Institutions Shape Global Engagement*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing/American Alliance of Museums, 2023.

⁶ SMITH, Sarah E.K. and PRIEWE, Sascha. Introduction. In: SMITH, Sarah E.K. and PRIEWE, Sascha (eds.). *Museum Diplomacy. How Cultural Institutions Shape Global Engagement*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing/American Alliance of Museums, 2023, p. 2.

publics”.⁷ Museums, situated at the intersection of culture, politics and collective memory, have become particularly significant participants in this evolving diplomatic landscape.

National museums, in particular, have historically served as key instruments of state cultural policy and nation-building. By curating exhibitions and heritage projects, they help to define what is remembered and what is forgotten, thereby influencing cultural policy and the politics of memory. As Tony Bennett⁸ and Sharon Macdonald⁹ argue, museums not only preserve and present cultural artefacts but also construct ideological frameworks through which societies interpret their pasts. In postcolonial and post-totalitarian contexts, such as Central and Eastern Europe, museums are essential for renegotiating historical narratives and fostering cultural decolonisation.¹⁰ They are institutions of power that rely on giving meaning to the past and present while producing official versions of history. At the same time, they provide a foundation for legitimacy and representation of the nation, both domestically and internationally.¹¹

Beyond their domestic function as sites of memory and identity, museums also operate on the international stage. They participate in shaping how nations present themselves to the world, translating national histories, traumas and values into globally comprehensible forms. This outward-facing activity lies at the heart of museum diplomacy, conducted through exhibitions, curatorial collaborations and international partnerships. As Wang notes, national museums have become “political platforms to extend domestic political ideology to international relations.”¹² Through activities aimed at foreign audiences, they promote national cultural values abroad, serving broader geopolitical or economic goals.¹³ Governments, therefore, actively endorse museum exchanges and touring exhibitions to strengthen international support, while museums themselves frequently act as venues for diplomatic receptions, cultural events and state visits.¹⁴

At the same time, museums are able to cultivate international visibility and influence by attracting global audiences through compelling exhibitions. Their capacity to transform complex national narratives into accessible visual and emotional experiences grants them unique soft power potential.¹⁵ Well-designed international exhibitions not only communicate artistic or historical achievements but also foster empathy, understanding and political sympathy

⁷ GRINCHEVA, Global..., p. 14.

⁸ BENNET, Tony. *The Birth of the Museum. History, Theory, Politics*. London: Routledge, 1995.

⁹ MACDONALD, Sharon. *Memorylands: Heritage and Identity in Europe today*. London: Routledge, 2013.

¹⁰ VERBYTSKA, Polina. Historical memory problems reflected in the tasks of museum. In: *Museologica Brunensia*, 3(4), 2014, pp. 4–7; LEHRER, Erica and WAWRZYNIAK, Joanna. Decolonial Museology in East-Central Europe: A Preliminary To-Do List, accessed 15 October 2025, <https://www.europenowjournal.org/2023/02/24/decolonial-museology-in-east-central-europe-a-preliminary-to-do-list/>

¹¹ KNELL, Simon J. National Museums and the National Imagination. In: KNELL, Simon J., ARONSONN, Peter & AMUNDSEN Arne Bugge (eds.). *National Museums: New Studies from Around the World*. New York: Routledge, 2011, pp. 3–28.

¹² WANG, Shuchen. Museum diplomacy: exploring the Sino-German Museum Forum and beyond. In: *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 24(6), 2018, p. 726.

¹³ GRINCHEVA, Global..., p. 1.

¹⁴ PRIEWE, Museums..., p. 22.

¹⁵ SYLVESTER, Christine. *Art/Museums: International Relations Where We Least Expect It*. New York: Routledge, 2016.

among foreign publics.¹⁶ As such, museums can serve as subtle yet persuasive instruments of diplomacy, shaping how nations are perceived and how their cultural legitimacy is constructed in the global arena.

Within this transnational dimension, museums thus act as both interpreters and mediators of national identity, translating local histories into global narratives that resonate across political and cultural boundaries. Yet, as contemporary scholarship emphasises, they also possess a degree of agency that allows them to transcend purely governmental agendas. Grincheva emphasises that museums and art institutions “earn their diplomatic legitimacy not through their official status, like governmental players, but rather through their capabilities to raise their own budget to go global, to offer professional expertise in addressing international issues, and to earn credibility in the eyes of the global publics.”¹⁷ In the same vein, Kong underlines that “museums are no longer passive cultural diplomacy tools waiting to be called upon by the government,”¹⁸ while Priewe defines museum diplomacy as “a practice in its own right, which can occasionally, and at times deliberately, be aligned with foreign policy priorities of nation-states, but one that is deeply rooted in the principles, values, and interests of the museums themselves.”¹⁹

Moreover, as Grincheva argues, “the most powerful museum diplomacy does not happen on display” but rather “exists behind the scenes when communities, artists, and museum professionals come together to share their cultures and values.”²⁰ Effective museum diplomacy thus requires sustained cross-cultural collaboration that often unfolds independently of government control. The Chinese experience described by Kong shows that even “a close relationship between museums and governments does not mean that international exhibitions automatically become propagandistic tools.”²¹ Instead, the effectiveness of museum diplomacy depends on balancing institutional autonomy with state support and maintaining professional integrity in the representation of culture.

This article focuses on the under-researched phenomenon of museum diplomacy during armed conflict, with particular attention to the case of the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War in Kyiv (hereafter: the War Museum). Since the outbreak of Russia’s full-scale invasion, this government-funded institution has taken a leading role in establishing what its curators describe as a “museum front”, disseminating information about Russian aggression and mobilising both domestic and international publics in support of Ukraine.²² While my previous research examined the museum’s online activities during the first year of the invasion, the present study concentrates on its international exhibition projects.

¹⁶ A striking example of this phenomenon can be found in memorial museums established at sites of crimes against humanity, such as Holocaust museums, the Kigali Genocide Memorial in Rwanda or the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Cambodia, which attract large international audiences and serve as spaces of global moral education and empathy building. See: WILLIAMS, Paul. *Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities*. Oxford: Berg, 2007; SODARO, Amy. *Exhibiting Atrocity: Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence*. Newark: Rutgers University Press, 2018.

¹⁷ GRINCHEVA, Global..., pp. 9–10.

¹⁸ KONG, Diplomacy..., p. 97.

¹⁹ PRIEWE, Museum..., p. 7.

²⁰ GRINCHEVA, Global..., p. 23.

²¹ KONG, Museums..., p. 178.

²² OLZACKA, Elżbieta. War and “museum front” in a digital era: The Ukrainian War Museum during the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In: *Media, War & Conflict*, 17(1), 2024, pp. 98–115.

The analysis covers the War Museum's on-site international exhibitions between February 2022 and February 2024, drawing on materials published on the museum's official website, as well as on the websites and press releases of its foreign partners.²³ The study deliberately excludes online initiatives, which, while significant, constitute a separate dimension of contemporary museum diplomacy. The primary aim is to explore how the War Museum employs international exhibitions to shape global perceptions of Ukraine's history, influence discourses on war and justice, and mobilise international solidarity.

Methodologically, the research is grounded in qualitative analysis. The data were examined in light of three guiding questions: (1) What kinds of international exhibitions on the Russian invasion were organised by the War Museum? (2) Who were their initiators, partners and co-organisers? (3) Who were the target publics of these exhibitions? While the present study does not involve fieldwork conducted during wartime, the interpretation and contextualisation of the material were informed by ethnographic and netnographic research conducted at the War Museum in 2018 and 2019 which provided deeper insight into the institution's strategies and evolving public role.

Museum policy and museum diplomacy in wartime Ukraine

Under the conditions of Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukrainian museums have become key centres of resistance and resilience within Ukrainian society. Since Russia's goal is not only to destroy Ukrainian statehood but also to erase its national identity and culture, museums and other cultural institutions have been directly targeted by destruction and looting. This has led to immense losses of cultural heritage and has significantly weakened Ukraine's professional museum community.²⁴ Yet, in response to the invasion, Ukrainian museum professionals have taken on responsibilities far beyond their traditional roles. They have led efforts to rescue and protect cultural assets threatened by war, documented Russian cultural crimes, collected artefacts and testimonies related to the ongoing invasion, and launched projects to support societal psychological resilience.²⁵ Additionally, they have provided humanitarian aid to internally displaced persons and conducted training sessions to help communities adapt to wartime conditions.²⁶

²³ The official website of the War Museum was radically redesigned in October 2024, and there is currently no archive documenting the museum's activities in 2022-2024. Therefore, in the article, I primarily use references to the websites of foreign museums cooperating with the museum in Kyiv and press releases.

²⁴ LEVIN, Amy. Introduction: Voices from Ukrainian Museums. In: *Museum & Society*, 21(2), 2023, pp. 1-3; KO-MOVA, Olena. Preservation of the museum heritage of Ukraine in the context of emphasizing national identity. In: *Visnyk Kyivskoho nacionalnoho linivistychnoho universytetu. Seriya Istorija, ekonomika, filozofija*, 29, 2024, pp. 134-143.

²⁵ VERBYTSKA, Polina and MURAVSKA, Svitlana. Museum Activists as Agents of Social Change in War. In: *Museum & Society*, 21(2), 2023, pp. 52-54.

²⁶ MURAVSKA, Svitlana and HNIDYK, Iryna. Ukrainian Museums' Exhibitions and Educational Programmes During the First Six Months of War. In: *Museum & Society*, 21(2), 2023, pp. 33-39; ZHURUNOVA, Tetyana. Exhibition Projects of the Vinnytsya Regional Museum during the Critical Phase of Russia's War in Ukraine. In: *Museum & Society*, 21(2), 2023, pp. 40-43.

At the same time, Ukrainian museums continue to play a vital role in the country's internal politics of memory and cultural decolonisation.²⁷ Following the Revolution of Dignity in 2014, and especially after Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, Ukraine's memory politics underwent a profound anti-colonial transformation.²⁸ Recent scholarship has described this process as a "third war of independence", characterised by the accelerated decommunisation, derussification and decolonisation of Ukraine's symbolic and memorial landscape.²⁹

Importantly, the foundations of a new policy of war memorialisation were already emerging before the full-scale invasion. Initiatives by the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance (UINP), such as the 2021 workshop "How to Tell about the Russo-Ukrainian War in Museums", began to define curatorial approaches to representing the ongoing conflict in public institutions.³⁰ Since 2022, these discussions have evolved into a coordinated state policy linking heritage protection, commemoration and decolonisation. In 2023–2024, the UINP, in cooperation with the War Museum and the Museum of the Revolution of Dignity, issued methodological recommendations for local governments and cultural institutions on preserving and commemorating participants, victims and events of the Russo-Ukrainian war.³¹ These guidelines, developed jointly with museum professionals, NGOs and regional authorities, now serve as a framework for shaping exhibition practices and public memorial initiatives across Ukraine.

A legislative milestone in this process was the adoption of the Law of Ukraine "On the Condemnation and Prohibition of Propaganda of Russian Imperial Policy in Ukraine and the Decolonisation of Toponymy" (March 21, 2023), which established principles for removing imperial symbols and reframing historical narratives. Within this framework, museums have emerged as central actors in reinterpreting history, redefining the categories of victimhood and heroism, and creating new forms of real-time memorialisation and warring memory.³² These are dynamic, ongoing processes of remembrance that combine documentation, testimony, mourning and civic mobilisation while the war is still unfolding.

²⁷ See more: VERBYTSKA, Polina and Roman KUZMYN. Between amnesia and the "war of memories": politics of memory in the museum narratives of Ukraine. In: *Muzeológia a kultúrne dedičstvo*, 7(2), 2019, pp. 23–34; VERBYTSKA, Polina, KUZMYN, Roman and BANAKH, Vasyl. Decolonization of museum narratives of Donbas. In: *Museologica Brunensia*, 10(2), 2021, pp. 12–26; BURAKOV, Yurii, PYTLOVANA, Liliya and TERSKY, Sviatoslav. Military museums of the Armed Forces of Ukraine during the Russian-Ukrainian war of 2014–2022. In: *Museologica Brunensia*, 11(2), 2022, pp. 34–42.

²⁸ BETTLI, Olena. The Identity Politics of Heritage: Decommunization, Decolonization, and Derussification of Kyiv Monuments after Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine. In: *Journal of Applied History*, 4(1–2), 2022, pp. 149–169; STRYJEK, Tomasz and KONIECZNA-SALAMATIN, Joanna (eds), *The Politics of Memory in Poland and Ukraine. From Reconciliation to De-Conciliation*. London and New York: Routledge, 2022.

²⁹ STRYJEK, Tomasz, MARKOWSKA-MARCZAK, Barbara and KONIECZNA-SALAMATIN, Joanna. Third War of Independence? The Anti-Colonial Dynamics of Ukraine's Politics of Memory after 2014 on the Example of the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War in Kyiv. In: *Acta Poloniae Historica*, 128, 2024, pp. 151–179.

³⁰ See more:

<https://uinp.gov.ua/pres-centr/novyny/yak-rozpozvidaty-pro-rosiysko-ukrayinsku-viynu-u-muzeyah-uinp-proviv-vorkshop-dlya-pracivnykiv-kultury-ta-osvity>

³¹ Available at: <https://uinp.gov.ua/elektronni-vydannya/metodychni-rekomendaciyi-dlya-miscevyh-gromad-shcho-do-zberezheniya-i-vshanuvannya-pamyati-uchasnykiv-zhertv-i-podiy-rosiysko-ukrayinskoyi-viyny>

³² KHARKHUN, Valentyna. Warring Memory: Exhibiting the Russo-Ukrainian War in Ukraine's National Museums. In: *Nationalities Papers*. Published online 2025.

Alongside these internal transformations, Ukrainian museums have increasingly acted as cultural diplomats on the international stage. During Russia's war against Ukraine, museum diplomacy has fostered unprecedented cooperation between Ukrainian and foreign museums, leading to international exhibitions showcasing Ukrainian artists and cultural heritage. These exhibitions aim to deepen foreign audiences' understanding of Ukraine's unique identity, history and culture while challenging the perception of Ukraine as merely part of Russia's political and cultural sphere. In this way, museums have directly engaged in the information war, actively promoting narratives of decolonisation and framing the Russian invasion as a neo-colonial war waged by a resurgent empire.

A notable example is the exhibition project "In the Eye of the Storm: Modernism in Ukraine, 1900–1930s", a collaboration between Ukrainian and European museums, supported by the Office of the President of Ukraine, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, and the Ukrainian Institute. This project showcases the finest works of Ukrainian modernism, presenting them as an integral part of the broader European avant-garde movement to audiences in major European museums. The inaugural exhibition opened in November 2022 at the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid.³³ Its success led to further presentations in 2023 and 2024 at prestigious venues such as the Royal Academy of Arts in London,³⁴ the Belvedere in Vienna,³⁵ and the Slovak National Gallery in Bratislava.³⁶ As Francesca Thyssen-Bornemisza, the initiator of the international "Museums for Ukraine" initiative that helped organise these exhibitions, emphasised: "We celebrate the return of early twentieth-century Ukrainian art to its rightful place at the heart of European art."³⁷

At the same time, organising such exhibitions during wartime serves as a form of "covert evacuation", ensuring the safety of artworks at risk of destruction or looting by Russian forces. Thanks to the "Museums for Ukraine" initiative, invaluable works of Ukrainian modernism were transported out of museums directly threatened by Russian attacks, such as the National Art Museum of Ukraine in Kyiv, the Andrey Sheptytsky National Museum in Lviv, the Dnipro Art Museum, and the Mykola Yaroshenko Art Museum in Poltava. This also applies to the collection of the Bohdan and Varvara Khanenko National Museum of Arts in Kyiv, which faced imminent danger after a missile strike near the museum building in October 2022. Thanks to cooperation with the Louvre Museum in Paris³⁸ and the Royal Castle in Warsaw,³⁹ part of this collection was transported out of Ukraine and made accessible to international audiences. Similar initiatives include temporary exhibitions of Ukrainian art abroad, such as the presentation of Jacek Malczewski's works in the National Museum in Poznań.⁴⁰ Alongside

³³ THYSSEN-BORNEMISZA NATIONAL MUSEUM, <https://www.museothyssen.org/en/exhibitions/eye-storm-modernism-ukraine-1900-1930s>

³⁴ ROYAL ACADEMY, <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/exhibition/eye-of-the-storm>

³⁵ GALERIE BELVEDERE, <https://www.belvedere.at/en/eye-storm>

³⁶ SLOVAK NATIONAL GALLERY, <https://sng.sk/en/slovak-national-gallery/events/in-the-eye-of-the-storm-secession-in-ukraine>

³⁷ THYSSEN-BORNEMISZA, Francesca. Foreword. In: AKINSHA, Konstantin, DENYSOVA, Katia and KASHUBA-VOLVACH, Olena (eds.). *In the Eye of the Storm. Modernism in Ukraine, 1900–1930s*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2022, p. 9.

³⁸ LOUVRE, <https://presse.louvre.fr/the-origins-of-the-sacred-image/>

³⁹ ZAMEK KRÓLEWSKI, <https://biuroprasowe.zamek-krolewski.pl/en/releases/cabinet-of-european-art-masterpieces-from-the-bohdan-and-varvara-khanenko-national-museum-of-art-in-kiiv>

⁴⁰ MUZEUM NARODOWE W POZNANIU, <https://mnp.art.pl/event/ide-w-swiat-i-trwam-obrazy-jacka-malczewskiego-z-lwowskiej-narodowej-galerii-sztuki>

promoting Ukraine's cultural heritage, these exhibitions also highlight the threats faced by world-class artworks due to Russia's invasion and demonstrate the solidarity and strong support of museum professionals across Europe and beyond.

Moreover, collaboration between Ukrainian and foreign museums, as well as museum organisations, plays a crucial role in safeguarding cultural heritage. Since February 2022, museums worldwide have engaged in efforts to preserve Ukraine's cultural legacy and support Ukrainian museums and their staff.⁴¹ These efforts include not only the evacuation of collections but also material and financial aid necessary for securing and protecting endangered artefacts, as well as assistance in digitalisation efforts. Effective cooperation has emerged both through direct partnerships between institutions and collective initiatives carried out by informal networks, such as the Polish Committee for Ukrainian Museums,⁴² and formal organisations like national branches of ICOM. Additionally, ICOM swiftly issued an "Emergency Red List of Cultural Objects at Risk – Ukraine" thanks to successful collaboration with ICOM Ukraine and Ukrainian museum professionals.⁴³ This marked the first time in history that such a list was compiled not after the end of a military conflict but during an ongoing large-scale war, an essential step in countering the illegal trade of cultural artefacts amid Russia's invasion.⁴⁴

Finally, a crucial aspect of wartime museum diplomacy is raising global awareness of Russia's brutal aggression against Ukraine. Cooperation between Ukrainian museums and their foreign counterparts has led to the organisation of various meetings and conferences where the threats facing Ukraine's cultural heritage, as well as the dangers confronting those working in the country's cultural sector, are being increasingly and openly discussed.⁴⁵

This integrated framework of protection and cooperation has already attracted significant scholarly attention. Researchers have extensively examined both the internal operations of Ukrainian museums – focusing on heritage protection, collection management and educational activities – and their international partnerships oriented toward safeguarding cultural property.⁴⁶ What remains less explored, however, is how Ukrainian museums engage internationally not only to protect heritage but to shape narratives about the war itself: to influence global perceptions, generate empathy and mobilise moral and political support through exhibitions. In the following section of this article, I will further explore this aspect of museum diplomacy, using the example of international exhibitions organised by the War Museum in Kyiv.

⁴¹ ICOM, One year of supporting Ukrainian museums and their professionals, <https://icom.museum/en/news/1-year-of-supporting-ukrainian-museums-and-their-professionals/>

⁴² See: <https://www.1944.pl/en/article/the-committee-for-ukrainian-museums,5252.html>

⁴³ ICOM, ICOM launches the Emergency Red List of Cultural Objects at Risk – Ukraine, <https://icom.museum/en/news/launch-icom-red-list-ukraine/>

⁴⁴ CHEREDNYCHENKO, Anastasiia. Emergency Red List for Ukraine. In: *Santander Art and Culture Law Review*, 9(1), 2023, pp. 131–134.

⁴⁵ VERBYTSKA and MURAVSKA. Museum..., pp. 54–55. See also the activities of the OBMN Foundation: <https://obmin.eu/conferences.php>

⁴⁶ In addition to the works cited earlier in the text, see also: IVASHKO, Yulia et al. Preparing for the post-war reconstruction of historical monuments in Ukraine: Considerations in regard of the ongoing Polish post-WWII experience and international law on the protection and conservation of historical monuments. In: *Muzeológia a kultúrne dedičstvo*, 11(1), 2023, pp. 53–71; HUDOSHNYK, Oksana and KRUPSKYI (2023). Practices of using Rapid Response Collecting by Ukrainian museums in wartime In: *Muzeológia a kultúrne dedičstvo*, 11(2), pp. 5–16; IVASHKO, Yulia, PAWŁOWSKA, Aneta, KUŚNIERZ-KRUPA, Dominika and DMYTRENKO, Andrii. Problems of replacing museum exhibitions during the Russian-Ukrainian war. In: *Museologica Brunensia*, 13(2), 2024, pp. 38–45; MURAVSKA, Svitlana and HODOVANSKA, Oksana. Organization of museums of western Ukraine after the full-scale invasion of the Russian Federation. In: *Museologica Brunensia*, 12(2), 2023, pp. 12–19.

The War Museum as an actor of museum diplomacy

The National Museum of History of Ukraine in the Second World War is the largest Ukrainian war museum. The institution is funded by the state budget and formally operates under the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy, though it retains considerable autonomy in curating exhibitions and presenting its collections.⁴⁷ Prior to the full-scale Russian invasion, the museum attracted significant traffic from local and international tourists and maintained an extensive network of international collaborations. Following the outbreak of a full-scale invasion, this institution has taken the lead in establishing an impressive “museum front”, disseminating information about Russian aggression against Ukraine to both the local population and international communities and mobilising them to support the war effort.⁴⁸

International photo exhibitions: Informing and evoking empathy through photography

During the first months of the invasion, the War Museum initiated two photographic projects which became the foundation for international exhibitions. The first, titled “Kyiv: One Day Report: March 8, 2022”, showcased photographs taken during the museum employees’ expedition to the besieged city of Kyiv. The exhibition was first presented at the World Centre for Peace, Freedom, and Human Rights in Verdun, France, precisely one month after the commencement of the full-scale invasion.⁴⁹ This partnership facilitated the organisation of subsequent exhibitions in various European and non-European cities. These powerful photographs, depicting scenes of destroyed buildings, roadblocks, boarded-up shops and restaurant windows, as well as the faces of volunteer defenders, were displayed during the first two years of the full-scale war in 11 countries, including France, the Republic of Korea, Germany, Montenegro, the Czech Republic, Poland and the USA. They informed foreign audiences about the war while raising awareness of the harrowing experiences endured by residents of one of Europe’s capitals. Moreover, the exhibition was adapted to a video format in English, expanding its accessibility through online platforms and social media channels.⁵⁰

The second project, titled “Meanwhile in Mariupol”, was based on a photographic collection compiled by journalist Vyacheslav Tverdokhlib, a native of Mariupol who lived in underground shelters during the blockade, meticulously documenting the daily life of a city devastated by Russian forces. Tverdokhlib, departing from Mariupol on March 22, 2022 clandestinely concealed the memory card containing the documentation within a candy and transported it at great personal risk through Russian security checkpoints. This project is a result of collaboration between the War Museum and the National Swedish Museums of Military History, the Nordic Ukraine Forum, and the Ukrainian Association of Östergötland. In 2023, two exhibitions were held at the Armé Museum in Stockholm and the Swedish Air Force Museum in Linköping,⁵¹

⁴⁷ KHARKHUN, Warring...; OLZACKA, Elżbieta. The Role of Museums in Creating National Community in Wartime Ukraine. In: *Nationalities Papers*, 49(6), 2021, pp. 1028–1044;

⁴⁸ OLZACKA, War...

⁴⁹ CENTRE MONDIAL DE LA PAIX, <https://cmpaix.eu/fr/kiiv-rapport-dune-journee-le-8-mars-2022/>

⁵⁰ See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_r8MC8xukaI

⁵¹ ARMÉMUSEUM, <https://armemuseum.se/utställning/meanwhile-in-mariupol/>; MARITIMAN, <https://stage.maritiman.se/en/exhibitions/current-exhibitions/meanwhile-mariupol>

and in 2024 at the Maritiman Museum in Gothenburg.⁵² Through Tverdokhlib's photographs, viewers gained insight into the struggles of the civilian population living in an occupied, ruined city. The photographs were accompanied by Swedish and Ukrainian captions, while an animated film based on nine-year-old Egor's diary from the Mariupol siege served as the exhibition's soundtrack.

Furthermore, the exhibition featured the accounts of six women from Mariupol who had fled the city and are currently residing in Sweden. They shared their first-hand experiences of the siege of Mariupol in 2022. Each selected a photograph from Tverdokhlib's collection and used it as a basis to recount their own experiences through texts and photographs. These materials were organised into six themes: Life and Death, Chaos, Survival, Grey Zones, Difficult Choices and Escape. Incorporating these emotional first-hand narratives into the exhibition has the potential to foster relationships based on comprehension and empathy between the Swedish community and Ukrainian refugees who sought shelter from the war in Sweden. The National Swedish Museum of Military History established a dedicated webpage containing the photos, videos and stories showcased during the exhibition to reinforce this message and make this content accessible to a wider audience.⁵³

Both projects demonstrate the power of wartime photographs in fostering empathy, raising global awareness about the human cost of war, and deepening understanding of the impact of the Russian invasion on Ukrainian society. The exhibitions, prepared in collaboration with local museums, hold the potential to reach diverse and broad audiences, amplifying their message globally. However, while photography is a powerful medium that museums use to create narratives about war, artefacts offer a unique opportunity to convey the material and "authentic" dimensions of war experiences, engaging audiences in a more tangible way.⁵⁴

"Ukraine- Crucifixion": An exhibit as a witness and evidence of war crimes

On May 8, 2022, just over two months after the commencement of the full-scale invasion, the War Museum inaugurated the on-site exhibition "Ukraine-Crucifixion". The exhibition was assembled using items sourced from war zones and territories temporarily occupied by Russian forces.⁵⁵ The exhibition sought to present the "reality of war" and furnish tangible evidence for Russian war crimes. Among the exhibits were weapons, equipment, and personal items of Russian soldiers who had perished on the frontlines. These included cluster bombs used by Russian forces to decimate settlements and inflict significant harm on civilians. Other objects showcase the extent of war-related destruction, impacting not only residential buildings, schools, hospitals and railway stations but also Ukraine's cultural and religious heritage. The exhibition also featured a reconstructed makeshift shelter from the town of Hostomel near

⁵² In addition, exhibitions based on Tverdokhlib's collection were organized in Poland in collaboration with the Museum of Gdańsk (see: MUZEUM GDAŃSKA, <https://muzeumgdansk.pl/wydarzenia/szczegoly/news/mariupol-bohaterskie-miasto/>), and in Slovakia, in partnership with the Slovak National Museum in Bratislava (see: BRATISLAVSKÉ NOVINY, <https://www.bratislavskenoviny.sk/aktuality/stare-mesto/72692-pozeraj-sa-mariupol-na-bratislavskom-hrade-otvorili-vystavu-fotografii-ukrajinskeho-novinaru>).

⁵³ Available at: <https://sfhm.se/verksamhet/utstallningar/introduction-meanwhile-in-mariupol/>

⁵⁴ DOYLE, Siobhán. The Bullet in the Brick: The Materiality of Conflict in Museum Objects. In: *Arms & Armour*, 16(1), 2019, pp. 105–116.

⁵⁵ The museum's expeditions to areas recently liberated from Russian occupation, the collection of new war-related cultural heritage and the organization of exhibitions during the war are discussed by the museum director, Yuri Savchuk, in an interview: UKRINFORM, <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-society/3703040-urij-savcuk-istorik-gendirektor-nacionalnogo-muzeu-istorii-ukraini-u-drugij-svitovij-vijni.html>

Kyiv, which was seized by Russian forces during the initial days of the conflict. The painstaking reconstruction allowed visitors to empathise with the harrowing experiences of the individuals who sought refuge there.

The “Ukraine-Crucifixion” exhibition is an important diplomatic tool, serving both as a venue for official delegations visiting Kyiv and as a travelling museum project. In Kyiv, the exhibition is visited by foreign journalists, international military delegations, members of the diplomatic corps and officials from various countries. Many foreign diplomatic missions in Kyiv include a visit to the War Museum as part of their routines.

During these visits, international guests learn about the destructive actions of the Russian army in Ukraine, the loss of Ukrainian cultural heritage, and the suffering endured by the civilian population. The inclusion of artefacts that directly showcase evidence of war crimes committed by Russian forces make these visits particularly impactful, as they provide visitors with a rare opportunity to witness tangible proof of the atrocities. This experience not only deepens their understanding of the war’s realities but also has the potential to influence their perception of the conflict and decisions regarding support for Ukraine.

Temporary exhibitions abroad, organised with the cooperation of foreign museums and cultural institutions, fulfil a similar purpose. Furthermore, the War Museum receives assistance from the Office of the President of Ukraine and the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine to enable the promotion of exhibitions at a prestigious diplomatic level. The first international exhibition featuring authentic artefacts from the war zone was launched on February 24, 2023, the anniversary of the full-scale invasion, at the Latvian War Museum in Riga. The opening of the exhibition, titled “Battle for Ukraine”, was attended by Latvia’s Minister of Defence, the Commander of the National Armed Forces, diplomats from 22 countries, media representatives, and prominent figures from Latvian public and cultural life. In their opening remarks, the director of the War Museum, Yurii Savchuk, and the director of the Latvian War Museum, Kristine Skrivere, underscored the significance of the collaboration between both museums as a pivotal component of the “information and cultural front in the fight against Russian aggression.”⁵⁶

Subsequent exhibitions, “Ukraine-Crucifixion. 365...” in Tallinn (February 2023) and “The Battle for Ukraine: The Face of the Enemy” in Bratislava (October 2023), were also held with the participation of high-ranking officials and public figures. The Tallinn exhibition was made possible through collaboration with the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Estonian Institute of Historical Memory,⁵⁷ while the Bratislava project was realised in partnership with the Slovak National Museum.⁵⁸ These exhibitions sought to illuminate “the true nature of the Russian army”, while also highlighting the global impact of the conflict in Ukraine and the broader mission of the Ukrainian army beyond the defence of its homeland. These joint exhibitions thus became essential tools for shaping the narrative about Russian aggression and its global consequences. By featuring authentic objects, the exhibitions made this narrative more

⁵⁶ ZAHREBELNYJ, Volodymyr. U Latvijskomu vjjskovomu muzeyi prezentovano vystavku «Bytva za Ukrayinu» [The Latvian Military Museum presented the exhibition “Battle for Ukraine”], <https://armyinform.com.ua/2023/02/26/u-latvijskomu-vjjskovomu-muzeyi-prezentovano-vystavku-bytva-za-ukrayinu/>

⁵⁷ ESTONIAN INSTITUTE OF HISTORICAL MEMORY, <https://mnemosyne.ee/en/exhibition-ukraine-crucifixion-365>

⁵⁸ UKRINFORM, <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-culture/3767180-u-bratislavi-vidkrili-vistavku-pro-agresivnu-vijnu-rf-proti-ukraini.html>

impactful and relatable. Moreover, they provided European audiences with an opportunity to express solidarity with Ukraine and offer symbolic support by visiting the museum.

A particularly significant event within the “Ukraine-Crucifixion” exhibition project was the opening of the “Ukraine. Crucifixion. Tribunal” exhibition on March 31, 2023 in New York. It coincided with the eve of a UN vote on the resolution to establish an International Tribunal to hold Russia’s supreme political leadership accountable for the crime of aggression.⁵⁹ The exhibition was organised by the War Museum in collaboration with the Bogdan Gubsky Foundation “Ukraine – 21st Century”, with support from the Office of the President of Ukraine and the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine.

The exhibition featured over 1,000 museum exhibits organised into thematic displays. Similar to the original Kyiv exhibition, Anton Logov’s installation, comprising Russian soldiers’ shoes arranged on a red star on the floor, symbolically represents Russian aggression. This installation greeted visitors in a shocking and evocative manner, immediately confronting them with the brutal reality of the war and setting the tone for the harrowing exhibits that followed. One particularly poignant exhibit providing evidence of Russian war crimes was a door from the school basement in the village of Yahidne (Chernihiv region), which displayed a calendar marking the days of imprisonment alongside lists of residents who were shot or died due to ill-treatment. This artefact documented the tragic reality of over 360 people detained by the Russians for nearly a month without electricity, food or medicine. Additionally, photographs, audio recordings and video testimonials conveyed the narrative of Russian invasion.

The opening event in New York was a major diplomatic occasion, drawing over 50 UN ambassadors, politicians, representatives of the Ukrainian diaspora, business leaders, experts and journalists. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy addressed the attendees via a video message, underscoring the significance of the exhibition. During the event, the Museum’s director, Yuriï Savchuk, personally guided visitors through the displays, joined by Yuliya Payevska, also known as “Taira”, a paramedic and volunteer who had defended Mariupol and endured Russian captivity. Her personal accounts reinforced the authenticity of the artefacts and the stories behind them. The exhibition’s aim was to deliver a powerful message, calling for an international investigation into Russia’s crimes in Ukraine and underscoring the importance of global justice.

Creating a common European heritage through exhibitions

While most of the War Museum’s current diplomatic activities are directly tied to the ongoing Russian invasion, the museum also aims to use international projects to integrate Ukraine’s history into a broader European narrative. One of the most significant projects it has undertaken is the international museum exhibition “Crossroads: Sweden – Ukraine (1000 Years)”, which commenced in February 2024. Hosted by the Army Museum (Armémuseum) in Stockholm, this exhibition was developed in collaboration with the Swedish National Museums of Military History and the National Archives of Sweden. The exhibition is the result of a long-term collaboration between Ukrainian and Swedish historians, researchers and museum professionals and has been one of Ukraine’s largest international historical projects since its

⁵⁹ BOGDAN GUBSKY FOUNDATION. <https://ukraine-21century.com/en/projects/4111>

independence. This extensive partnership has seen contributions from nearly 30 museums, archives and libraries in both countries.⁶⁰

The exhibition features a diverse array of unique items from both Sweden and Ukraine, spanning a millennium of shared history. Visitors can view objects ranging from a gold alliance ring from the Viking Age to Ukraine's first constitution, as well as weapons from contemporary war zones. Divided into four sections – 'The Viking Age', 'The Cossack Era', 'Ukrainian-Swedish Cultural Meridians', and 'The Period of Full-Scale Russian Invasion' – the exhibition highlights the complex history of Ukrainian-Swedish relations through preserved artefacts and historical documents.⁶¹

In the current geopolitical situation, the "Crossroads: Sweden-Ukraine (1000 Years)" exhibition has important political significance. Its grand opening on February 15, 2024 highlighted the contemporary struggle "for European democratic and humanistic values and global security", led by Ukraine and supported by Europe, including Sweden.⁶² The opening ceremony, officiated by King Carl Gustaf and Queen Silvia, was attended by the Ukrainian and Swedish Ministers of Culture, parliamentarians from across Europe, representatives of the Swedish Army's General Staff, and directors of major museums in Western Europe and Ukraine. Addressing the audience via video message, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy emphasised the enduring ties between the two nations:

Together, Ukrainians and Swedes have had a common history for over a thousand years, preserving our culture and way of life, learning to value peace. And we will overcome these current challenges with dignity, courage, and cooperation.⁶³

By highlighting this shared history, the exhibition helps foreign audiences perceive Ukraine as an integral part of Europe, rather than a former Soviet republic. Its multilingual format, including versions in Ukrainian, Swedish and English, ensures accessibility for Stockholm's diverse international audience and reflects its aim of reaching a broad spectrum of visitors. According to the War Museum, the exhibition also plays a crucial role in shaping Ukraine's image in the context of EU accession talks. It illustrates Ukraine's rich and diverse history within the framework of European civilisation, shedding light on the cultural and historical ties that bind Ukraine to Western Europe.⁶⁴ Thus, the "Crossroads: Sweden-Ukraine (1000 Years)" exhibition becomes a platform for reframing perceptions of Ukraine and reinforcing its identity as a European nation.

Conclusions

The activities of the War Museum in Kyiv discussed in this article highlight the pivotal role of museums in wartime diplomacy. Since the onset of the Russian invasion, the War Museum has relied on both state support and international partnerships to engage political, cultural and public audiences abroad. Between 2022 and 2024, its international exhibitions served as powerful instruments of cultural diplomacy, combining emotional storytelling with documentary evidence from the frontlines. Through photographs, artefacts and testimonies,

⁶⁰ MKSK, <https://mcs.gov.ua/news/u-shvecziyi-vidkrylas-znakova-vystavka-perhrestya-1000-rokiv-spilnoyi-istoriyi-shvecziyi-ta-ukrayiny/>

⁶¹ ARMÉMUSEUM, <https://armemuseum.se/utställning/crossroads/>

⁶² MKSK...

⁶³ PRESIDENT OF UKRAINE, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/mi-mayemo-zmicniti-nashi-soyuzi-ta-al-yansi-shob-voni-buli-re-88977>

⁶⁴ MKSK...

these displays provide compelling proof of war crimes while mobilising global empathy and solidarity.

The success of these initiatives depended on close cooperation between the War Museum and its foreign partners, as well as coordination with Ukrainian state institutions. The resulting exhibitions and events often served dual purposes: they functioned as diplomatic spaces advancing Ukraine's political interests and, simultaneously, as arenas for cross-cultural dialogue and solidarity.⁶⁵ At the same time, museums themselves became part of a broader international battle over legitimisation, aligning with Ukraine's cause and expressing their support for its struggle. Yet this duality exposes a central tension within wartime museum diplomacy: the balance between autonomy and state control.

As previous studies on Central European museums, such as the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk, have shown, top-down strategies of heritage communication risk transforming complex historical narratives into nationalising or exclusionary narratives.⁶⁶ In democratic contexts, this tendency may weaken the credibility of cultural diplomacy by substituting emotional identification for critical reflection. A similar danger exists in wartime Ukraine: the legitimate need to mobilise unity and resistance can easily slide into the militarisation of personal histories and the simplification of memory. Exhibitions that foreground the heroism of defenders may, unintentionally, marginalise alternative voices, such as civilians, minorities or those affected indirectly by the war.

To mitigate these risks, greater collaboration with non-state and independent actors – such as curators, artists, NGOs, academics and diaspora representatives – is essential. Their involvement introduces pluralistic perspectives, enriching the narrative and avoiding overly one-sided representations. Moreover, the participation of independent actors enhances the credibility of exhibitions among diverse audiences.⁶⁷ In this respect, museum diplomacy should not merely transmit official narratives but cultivate dialogue and critical reflection. This approach aligns with the vision of museums as spaces for practicing empathy, as advocated by Gokcigdem⁶⁸ and Priewe.⁶⁹

By incorporating photographs, evocative artefacts and personal testimonies, exhibitions co-organised by War Museum can effectively shape public perceptions of Ukraine's challenges, building solidarity with both those who remain in the country and those displaced abroad. Moreover, including different perspectives – such as those of foreign volunteers who have contributed to aiding the Ukrainian military, civilians, and the non-human and natural environment affected by the war – can deepen this dialogical dimension and foster more inclusive representations of wartime reality.

Equally significant are the less visible dimensions of museum diplomacy: the informal networks and professional collaborations that have emerged between Ukrainian and foreign heritage experts during the war.⁷⁰ These transnational exchanges have built lasting channels of trust, contributed to democratic practices in cultural governance, and embedded inclusive values within Ukrainian museology. Moreover, the experiences of Ukrainian museum professionals

⁶⁵ Cf. PRIEWE, *Museums...*, pp. 22–24.

⁶⁶ CLARKE, David and DUBER, Paweł. Polish Cultural Diplomacy and Historical Memory: The Case of the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk. In: *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 33, 2020, pp. 49–66.

⁶⁷ GRINCHEVA, Global..., pp. 17–18.

⁶⁸ GOKCIGDEM, Elif M. (ed). *Fostering Empathy through Museums*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016.

⁶⁹ PRIEWE, *Museums...*, pp. 27–28.

⁷⁰ Cf. GRINCHEVA, Global..., p. 23.

working under wartime conditions provide valuable lessons for the global museum community on resilience, crisis management and ethical responsibility.

Finally, the case of the War Museum illustrates both the transformative potential and the internal contradictions of museum diplomacy in times of crisis. It demonstrates how museums can function simultaneously as instruments of state soft power and as autonomous actors of civic communication. Yet it also reveals how easily this balance can tilt toward instrumentalisation. Recognising these tensions is vital if wartime museum diplomacy is to remain credible and genuinely dialogical, capable not only of safeguarding heritage, but also of shaping reflective narratives of war and resistance.

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