

# Ukraine's Libraries under Russian Fire: The First Fifty Days of Aggression

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**ABSTRACT:** The unprovoked Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, has turned into a bloody war with no end in sight. Towns have been brought to ruins by heavy shelling that destroyed the infrastructure. The country's cultural heritage, along with its own national identity, is under threat. Libraries, archives, museums, and monuments have become war casualties. This article examines the destruction of libraries during the first fifty days of conflict based on articles, press releases, and statements published in international media outlets and on librarians' accounts posted on social media. The loss of human lives is ongoing while millions are already in exile in neighboring countries, with no end of the conflict in sight.

**KEYWORDS:** Ukraine war, libraries at wartime (Ukraine), Russia invasion Ukraine, librarians (Ukraine) during war, Ukrainian Library Association, solidarity with Ukrainian libraries

Until very recently Ukrainians lived a safe, stable, and secure life. But that changed abruptly when, over the course of a few weeks, they witnessed their country being circled by Russia, armed by one of the world's most lethal armies, directed by an unpredictable authoritarian leader. The fear and uncertainty were followed by direct threats to their lives and their loved ones when the full Russian invasion began on February 24, 2022. As Ukrainian cities came under attack, civilians saw explosions and death firsthand. With Ukrainians facing continued shelling from Russian forces, all elements of cultural heritage that form their national identity were also under siege. While it is painful to see the direct impact of this war on human lives and livelihoods, it is also heart-breaking to see entire cities with their institutions and monuments exposed to intentional collateral damage.

This article will provide an overview on how libraries, one of the most emblematic cultural institutions in Ukraine, along with their personnel have been affected

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by the war. In addition, I will examine the prompt reaction of international institutions, professional associations, and organizations in their solidarity with their Ukrainian counterparts while seeking solutions to safeguard the country's cultural heritage under threat of destruction. The article is based on articles, press releases, and statements published in international media outlets and on international organizations websites during the first fifty days of the conflict.

### Brief Post-Independence Historical Overview

Although Ukraine has been independent since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, its transition from the Soviet-era dictatorship to democracy and freedom did not go smoothly. Disputes over security issues coupled with political instability marred Ukraine's efforts toward progress. Its intention to join NATO conflicted with Russia's objection to NATO's eastern expansion. Pro-Russia forces in eastern Ukraine opposed the country's priority of getting closer to the European Union. All frictions culminated with Russia's seizing control of Crimea, a Ukrainian peninsula where the majority of residents are ethnically Russian, ultimately leading to the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Protecting ethnic Russians allegedly threatened by violence from Kyiv was a pretext to justify the abusive annexation.

In the fall of 2021 Russia started to mobilize troops along the border with Ukraine while the Putin government demanded a set of security guarantees from the United States and NATO that Ukraine would never join the alliance. In February 2022 Putin deployed Russian forces to Ukraine's separatist regions of Luhansk and Donetsk in eastern Ukraine after the Kremlin recognized them as independent.<sup>1</sup> On February 22, 2022, the Russian president ordered military forces to enter the breakaway Ukrainian republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, calling the act a "peacekeeping mission."<sup>2</sup> In the early hours of February 24 Putin announced a "special military operation" to "demilitarize and de-Nazify" Ukraine and launched a large-scale invasion of the country.<sup>3</sup> Five weeks into Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it appeared that early Russian predictions for a quick victory in Ukraine had proved unsuccessful, with Ukrainian counteroffensives pushing back Russian front lines around Kyiv. However, with regrouped forces, the incursion of the Russian military escalated into a bloodshed, killings of tens of thousands of innocent civilians, millions of refugees, and US \$100 billion in infrastructure damage.<sup>4</sup> An economic war deepens as the armed conflict escalates and innocent civilian casualties rise. A new Iron Curtain is grinding into place.

## Libraries in Ukraine

The Russians aren't attacking just Ukraine as a country and its people, they are attacking its national cultural identity. In two months' time targeted attacks against libraries, archives, museums, monuments, archaeological sites, historical buildings, and places of worship have led to the destruction and damaging of 242 cultural heritage sites.<sup>5</sup> Ukrainian library holdings consist of collections of books published in Ukraine's territory under Austrian, Polish, or Russian rule, in independence or in refugee centers, and offer a perspective on Ukraine's distinct history that sets it apart from Vladimir Putin's belief that Ukraine was "entirely created by Russia."<sup>6</sup> Destruction of libraries leads to cultural cleansing that ultimately results in the annihilation of a country's identity.

According to the Library Map of the World the latest statistical data reported by Ukraine are from 2018, when the total number of libraries in the country amounted to 35,076, with the following distribution: 14 national libraries, 1,843 academic libraries, 18,261 public libraries, 14,662 school libraries, and 296 listed as "other" types of libraries, most probably special libraries.<sup>7</sup>

**Table 1** Ukraine: Libraries, Staff, Users, and Collections in 2018

	Library Type					
	National	Academic	Public	School	Special	Total
Number of Libraries	14	1,843	18,261	14,662	296	35,076
Libraries with Internet Access	8	257	4,725	4,868	244	10,102
Full-time Staff	1,687	4,773	20,678	5,299	2,143	34,580
Registered Users	327,541	1.6M	11.6M	4.4M	692,919	18.6M
Physical Visits	1.3M	54.1M	94.1M	147.5M	8.9M	305.9M
Physical Loans	7.0M	67.9M	260.8M	200.0M	21.9M	557.6M
Electronic Loans	26.4M	44.4M	282.6M	—	334,484	353.7M

In 1996 the Ukrainian government granted national status to fourteen major libraries in the country. Located in Kyiv, in a twenty-seven-floor building opened in 1989, the most prominent “all-Ukrainian book collection” is the V. I. Vernadsky National Library of Ukraine, which is under the supervision of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, Department of History, Philosophy and Law, and stands as the leading institution engaged in scientific research, including the field of library and information science.<sup>8</sup> Established in 1918, the library is the successor of the National Library of the Ukrainian State in Kyiv. The library, an institution with deep cultural and scientific significance in Ukraine, harbors some 16 million volumes in many languages. The library’s collections are considered “national cultural heritage of the Ukrainian people, an integral part of the cultural heritage and is under state protection.” The special collections include Slavic manuscripts dating back to the tenth



**Figure 1** V. I. National Library of Ukraine, Kyiv. *Source:* Wikimedia Commons, Photo: Maksym Kozlenko, CC0.

century and collections of historical documents in Greek, Latin, Polish, and oriental languages. At the beginning of 2020 the institution employed more than 800 people, including 60 percent librarians, 25 percent researchers, and 15 percent auxiliary staff.<sup>9</sup>

The library's website continues to remain operational as of mid-April 2022. The "To the Readers" announcement on the library's landing page carries the following distressing message

Due to the imposition of martial law throughout Ukraine, the library remains closed to readers. . . . During the war, many Ukrainian scientists were denied access to jobs and research tools. The international scientific community strongly condemns Russia's military aggression and gives Ukrainian researchers the opportunity to remotely use overpaid databases of scientific information, as well as open free access to new information resources.<sup>10</sup>

In his entry "Memory of a Nation—The Vernadsky National Library of Ukraine" on the British Library blog, Roly Keating, chief executive of the British Library, traces the historical development of the National Library of Ukraine and he cautions that the institution "has never been in greater danger, with Russian forces outside Kyiv and the violence and casualties reaching awful new heights. As the onslaught continues, the library faces the increasing risk of catastrophic damage—whether through indiscriminate bombardment or targeted attack."<sup>11</sup>

Another library of national significance is the National Parliamentary Library, which is the successor of the former Yaroslav the Wise National Library of Ukraine, established by the order of the tsarist government in 1866 as the Kyiv Public Library. During World War II the library continued to operate in the occupied city and it suffered severe damage. The library building was set on fire by retreating Nazi troops in November 1943, and during only one night of burning, the library lost more than 300,000 items, including 7,000 manuscripts, rare books, and pre-revolutionary periodicals.<sup>12</sup> After the devastating fire the building was restored and reopened in 1954. In 1957 the library became the State Republican Library of the USSR. By presidential decree, in 1994 it was designated as the National Parliamentary Library of Ukraine. The word "Parliamentary" in its naming reflects additional special services the library offers to deputies and their assistants. The library's collections amount to 4 million volumes.

Currently, the website message to the public reads:

Under the martial law imposed on February 24, 2022, in connection with the military aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine,



**Figure 2** National Parliamentary Library of Ukraine, Kyiv. Source: Wikimedia Commons, Photo: Xsandriel, CC BY-SA 3.0.

the Yaroslav the Wise National Library of Ukraine does not serve users and hold any events with a real presence in its reading rooms. We have taken this step to ensure the lives of library staff, users and visitors and to preserve for posterity the historic building of the library and its book collection, as our library has experienced many wars over 156 years of history and knows how priceless book rarities can be lost.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to the national and government-serving libraries, Ukraine has a wide network of public libraries consisting of main and branch libraries serving local communities throughout the country.

After Ukraine declared its independence from the Soviet Union, its library system continued to carry the legacy of the Soviet era, where the focus was on developing collections rather than providing unrestricted access to information. During the Soviet period libraries had served as propaganda tools that supported the communist ideology. Their collections abounded in Marxist literature, and censorship was the norm. Western literature was scarce and access to foreign information sources was under strict government control. Card catalogs represented the only access point to library collections. Modern information technologies were unavailable. Slowly, access to the Internet became available in large cities.

According to the 2018 statistical data presented above, almost three decades after the collapse of communism, less than one-third, only 28.8 percent, of the libraries in the country were connected to the Internet. To reduce this deficit, in 2008 Ukraine was among the eight Eastern and Central European countries of the former Soviet bloc<sup>14</sup> to receive a multiyear grant from the Global Libraries program funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation with US \$25 million.<sup>15</sup> In addition, Microsoft donated software worth US \$9 million. The *Bibliomist* program, administered by IREX (International Research and Exchanges Board) and the USAID (United States Agency for International Development), over a period of six years (2008–15), “fostered the development of a modern public library system in Ukraine to improve socioeconomic conditions.”<sup>16</sup>

The program equipped 1,963 libraries with technology and free public access to the Internet and trained 4,000 librarians in the use of computer technology, which enabled them to provide twenty-first-century services and to improve computer literacy among their patrons, thus helping these libraries become modern community and information centers.<sup>17</sup> Another goal of the *Bibliomist* program was to strengthen the capacity of the Ukrainian Library Association (ULA) to advocate on behalf of libraries and librarians. ULA was founded in 1995 with thirteen chapters nationwide.<sup>18</sup>

In addition, the *Bibliomist* program aimed at fostering government support for recognition of the essential role of libraries in a democratic society. The local partners of the program were the ULA, the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine (the body overseeing the work of Ukrainian libraries and of the national information network), and the National Parliamentary Library in Ukraine, which is the key Ukrainian institution serving as the methodological and coordination center for library science, bibliography, and records management in the country.<sup>19</sup> It also participates in developing and implementing library-related policies at the national level.<sup>20</sup> In any country, libraries are places that shelter universal and national cultural values, placed advance knowledge, and promote education. They exhibit unique local treasures that are part of each nation's cultural identity.

As Russian troops advance, libraries of all sizes have fallen prey. As of April 27 six libraries in the cities of in Kharkiv, Sumy, Chernihiv, Starobilsk, Severodonetsk have become victims of war, among them the Kazarin University Library and the Korolenko State Scientific Library, both located in Kharkiv.<sup>21</sup> The stained-glass windows of the building of Korolenko Library were smashed; two book storage areas, the main building and the grand piano

where Russian composer Sergei Rachmaninoff had played, were damaged. During the shelling, librarians remained inside to take valuable collections to safer areas. A department head placed a public appeal to the citizens of Kharkiv: “Korolenko library is currently looking for volunteers to bring food to those who stayed inside.”<sup>22</sup> The Korolenko Kharkiv State Scientific Library is the largest library in Kharkiv and the second largest in Ukraine, after the Vernadskyi National Library. It was founded in 1830 as the Kharkiv Provincial Public Library. After the Soviet takeover, it acquired the status of a state library and was renamed as Korolenko Kharkiv State Library of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. In October 1941, during World War II, the library was bombed by German forces.

In less than three weeks since the invasion of Ukraine, Russian troops had already destroyed or damaged 280 educational institutions with 211 schools among them, reported Serhii Shkarlet, the Minister of Education and Science of Ukraine, on March 12.<sup>23</sup> Needless to say, many of these schools had book collections inside.

Russian strikes against the city of Chernihiv in northern Ukraine have left a Gothic revival building, formerly a history museum, now a regional youth library, almost destroyed by the bombing of March 11.<sup>24</sup> In a Facebook posting the library’s director, Serhiy Laevsky, comments: “It survived shelling by the Bolsheviks in 1918 and 1919. It survived the Second World War under the bombs of German Nazis. The Moscow Nazi horde came and ruined a very beautiful and cozy building of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century—a monument of local history.”<sup>25</sup>

As Russian bomb raids continue to hit Ukraine, families have been able to seek refuge and find a sense of community in surviving libraries. Libraries across the country have been used as bomb shelters, volunteer sites, camouflage-net-making facilities, and for other war effort–related needs. The president of the Ukrainian Library Association (ULA), Oksana Brui, told NPR that libraries are “buzzing like hives” with people looking to offer help or find safe shelter.<sup>26</sup>

Even in peacetime, Ukraine’s libraries were making efforts to counteract the influence of disinformation by training people in media and information literacy. In wartime this effort has become more important than ever. Ukrainian libraries are actively engaged in fighting misinformation and teaching people about the spread of fake news. A message from ULA’s president praises librarians from Ukraine and from all over the world for their continuing fight against disinformation: “We are at the forefront of the fight against fakes,



misinformation, and cyber threats.” She calls libraries a “strategic weapon” of this war.<sup>27</sup>

Libraries continue to make sure communities have access to books and other educational materials. They collect books in Ukrainian to be transferred to libraries in neighboring countries that have received Ukrainian refugees. Poland's Universal Reading Foundation has set up a book-related fundraiser that is focusing on printing books by Ukrainian authors and sending them to refugee children. This way, they are able to support both Ukrainian writers and Ukrainian children in need of the comfort of a book.<sup>28</sup>

The young Ukrainian publishing industry has also been affected by the Russian invasion. Kharkiv served as the center of the book industry after the country's breakaway from the USSR. For many years big Russian publishers dominated the publishing business in Ukraine, ensuring that books in Russian would flood the market, thus limiting the production and distribution of Ukrainian literature. The 2013 Russian invasion of Crimea unleashed a proliferation of Ukrainian writing. When Russia began raining bombs down on the city in February, many of its burgeoning publishers were forced to flee.<sup>29</sup>

People across Ukraine have been working tirelessly to save the country's cultural heritage. Outdoor monuments and statues across the country and the interior of historic churches have been braced with sandbags to prevent damage from attacks, museum staffers have stored works of art underground or moved them for safekeeping, librarians carefully wrapped old and rare books and stored them in safer places away from the unlawful attacks of the invading army.

### Ukrainian Library Association Appeal

In addition to their prompt intervention to protect their collections, Ukrainian librarians have maintained an active presence on social media, providing updates on their stride, sharing personal stories, and asking for assistance and support from the international library community.

On February 28, the fifth day of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, three elected officials, the president and two vice presidents, and the executive director of the Ukrainian Library Association (ULA) contacted the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), demanding sanctions against Russian library associations and the exclusion of their members from international organizations. Their appeal was firm and explicit:

Economic and other sanctions are being imposed on Russia to stop this bloody war. We believe that sanctions in the cultural sphere are no less important and will accelerate the collapse of the Putin regime in the Russian Federation. Therefore, we appeal to the President and the IFLA Board to support Ukrainian librarians and to exclude the Russian Library Association and all institutions of the aggressor country from the IFLA members, and their representatives from all IFLA governing bodies.<sup>30</sup>

They conclude their address with:

Today, Ukraine is fighting not only for its independence and the future of its children. We are fighting for the future of the whole world! Ukrainians are dying for European values! By supporting Ukraine, you support the democratic future of all countries!<sup>31</sup>

The Ukrainian Library Association's appeal also contains accounts about Ukrainian librarians' dedication to serving their communities: "In these challenging times Ukrainian librarians are together with all the people. Where it is possible, libraries continue to provide their services to users, including online services. Libraries are working in cyberspace against disinformation. Libraries are holding classes in emergency medical assistance. They are shelters for displaced persons who are accommodated in libraries."

IFLA's response came almost a month later, on March 21, after the board members convened: "IFLA stands in solidarity with our colleagues in Ukraine and joins the international community in an urgent call for a ceasefire. Our thoughts and sympathy are with the victims and our colleagues, the library and information workers in Ukraine, who with their communities are suffering from a humanitarian and human rights catastrophe."<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately, all IFLA came up with was thoughts and prayers, no concrete material assistance was offered, no professional guidance was promised. IFLA's response continued by addressing ULA's request for banning Russian librarians from its events and activities:

IFLA believes that librarians and information professionals around the world share the same intrinsic values. Therefore, it cannot be the intention to exclude libraries and librarians on the basis of their nationality,

or to isolate them. This is particularly important when the exercise of individual freedom of expression comes at great personal risk.

The Governing Board of IFLA has discussed the correspondence and demands for the exclusion of the Russian Members of IFLA. According to the Statutes, the conditions for exclusion are currently not met and the necessary proof is lacking that Members are behaving in a way that would constitute a valid reason to exclude them. This decision was taken unanimously at an extraordinary Governing Board meeting on Friday, 18 March 2022. The Governing Board decided also that IFLA will not participate in any events, virtual or physical, held in the Russian Federation until the situation is peacefully resolved.<sup>33</sup>

IFLA vaguely reiterated its engagement in collaborative efforts regarding threats to cultural heritage, library buildings, collections and the people who staff them:

Acting not alone, IFLA is working with Blue Shield International and UNESCO on plans and actions to safeguard documentary heritage and library collections. This has been in coordination with fellow founding organizations of the Blue Shield, ICOM, ICA, and ICOMOS, as well as with the Ukrainian Library Association. An IFLA task force has been established involving experts from a range of IFLA committees to work on practical tasks which leverage IFLA's strengths and, by communicating with stakeholders on the ground, can support our colleagues in Ukraine.

Cultural heritage belongs to all of humanity and IFLA appeals to libraries and librarians all over the world to call for a ceasefire and to stand in solidarity with our colleagues in Ukraine.<sup>34</sup>

Once the statement was posted on the IFLA website, the IFLA listserv was flooded with messages where members from all over the world expressed pro and con views regarding banning Russian librarians and library associations from holding positions at IFLA and attending IFLA events. Many list subscribers weighed in and engaged in the debate with sociopolitical, historical, and humanitarian arguments.

In an attempt to provide historical context and nuance, Alex Byrne, state librarian at State Library of New South Wales in Sydney and former IFLA president (2005–7), stated:

On the eve of the Second World War, IFLA failed to speak out strongly against Nazi aggression despite the occupation of Sudetenland and Austria and the resultant closure of the Austria and Czechoslovakian library associations which had previously been IFLA members. President Godet spoke for libraries as places of free inquiry and against subordination to “the objectives identified by the Leader.” But IFLA reaffirmed its decision to hold its congress in Germany in 1940 to celebrate the five hundredth jubilee of Gutenberg, a congress that didn’t happen.<sup>35</sup>

The crux of Bryne’s statement is a reflection of the fact that words do not suffice and that practical action is needed. The approach used during World War II proved inefficient and more concrete action is necessary:

Condemnation is not enough. Not only must we issue unequivocal statements, but we must take practical action including refusing to support or participate in conferences such as the “World Professional Forum,” supported by the Russian state and held in occupied Crimea since 2014. Sanctions against Russia and Russian organizations must include library and information goods and services and participation in collaborative ventures. As professionals committed to freedom of information, free inquiry and community welfare, we have to join the international efforts to make Russia cease its attacks and withdraw from Ukraine. . . .

We should also remember that many Russians have bravely protested against the war and many have been arrested. We should recall the brave Russian librarians who acted subversively against the brutal Soviet regime by collecting samizdat and fostering free inquiry as fully as they could. In remembering that bravery, we should continue to welcome dialogue with Russian colleagues and continue to include them in our professional forums including the World Library and Information Congress and IFLA’s professional activities. As we know from the Soviet era, this dialogue strengthens the resolve of those opposed to the current regime and provides a foundation for collaboration in a more positive future.<sup>36</sup>

In his response to the list, Peter Lor, South Africa’s first National Librarian (2000–2003) and IFLA secretary general (2005–8), reminded us of the political environment librarians live in Russia:

With respect, I feel it is unrealistic to expect Russian librarians to make “statements, comments, etc. of support” relating to Ukraine. Please bear in mind that the Russian government denies that it has invaded Ukraine, does not want its actions there to be called a war, and that in terms of a law passed yesterday anyone in Russia who makes what the authorities consider to be false statements about the conflict will be guilty of a crime that carries a penalty of up to fifteen years in jail. The relative freedom of expression enjoyed in the USA and many other countries is by no means universal, not even in the West.

After the second World War IFLA took the initiative (at a time when not everyone felt ready for that) to re-admit German library associations. Throughout the Cold War, IFLA maintained a difficult and sometimes unappreciated balance to keep the former Soviet Union and its satellite countries in the fold. After the Iron Curtain came down, Russian librarians testified how much this has meant to them.

Sanctioning Russian colleagues would take us down a slippery slope. Should we then also expel librarians from Myanmar, China, Syria, Venezuela, etc. etc. because their governments are thought to be committing human rights violations? Libraries are about communication. We believe that the free flow of information and knowledge promotes understanding, tolerance, and, ultimately, peace. Maybe that's naive and foolish, but that's worth holding onto. It motivates my own long-term commitment to international librarianship.<sup>37</sup>

Unlike IFLA, the International Council on Archives (ICA) Executive Board was prompt in passing a firm resolution to suspend relations with four Russian and Belarusian public archival institutions that are members of the ICA. “ICA is explicit in its call on the government of Russia to not harm any documentary or cultural heritage professionals that remain in country, as well as to refrain from destroying documentary and cultural heritage in respect of the 1954 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict.”<sup>38</sup> Attacks against a country's cultural heritage may constitute a war crime under international law. IFLA's slow and soft stance as opposed to ICA's swift and firm stand can be explained by the current vacuum at IFLA's top leadership with the recent firing of the Association's secretary general and the resignation of some of its governing board members.<sup>39</sup> IFLA's own internal crisis prevented it from reacting as the international library community would have expected it to. IFLA's failing to adopt a firm position on

the Russian attack on Ukraine's libraries will become a dark page in the book of its approaching centennial anniversary.

In protest against IFLA's decision, there are institutional and personal members who have decided to terminate their membership in the association. In her message posted on the IFLA listserv, Sue Gardner, chair and scholarly communications librarian at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, writes:

My individual IFLA membership is due for renewal soon. This gave me the chance to [. . .] reconsider whether I want to continue aligning with this body. . . . I feel that I must step away from a group whose leadership does not have the clarity to take unambiguous action in support of our Ukrainian colleagues whose country is currently being terrorized, unprovoked. In my opinion, the Russian librarians should be barred from this group until the massacre has ceased. Part of why I have taken this stance is that I spoke recently with a Russian colleague who has been persuaded by the misinformation. Due to the onslaught of propaganda she is being subjected to, I don't blame her. But I think that it is misguided for a body like IFLA to enable her coerced complicity. I think that IFLA taking a stand against her and her colleagues at this time could be a clue to her that she may not be getting the whole story about what is happening.<sup>40</sup>

The conversation about IFLA's weak stand and about libraries as war casualties in Ukraine continues in the open on Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, and other social media platforms. Contributors illustrate their comments with heartbreaking photos that speak for the damage to library buildings and collections.

### **Solidarity with Libraries in Ukraine**

Unlike IFLA, national library associations and federations of library associations in Europe reacted promptly in siding with ULA's appeal to IFLA. The breakaway Baltic countries that share a common past as former Soviet republics perceive Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a threat to their own recently acquired independence. Their close professional collaborative ties with librarians in Ukraine became even stronger within the Global Libraries program funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Each country was recipient of a grant that contributed to the development and modernization of their public library network.

In response to the Ukrainian Library Association's appeal, the national libraries of the Baltic countries (Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia) made an appeal to the international library community to condemn the war in Ukraine and to cancel membership of libraries of the Russian Federation in international organizations. They declared that "though the tragedy in Ukraine challenges us in many ways that are hard to imagine, we continue to believe in our potential to strengthen democratic processes and win information wars by using all available instruments. Libraries mean freedom. Libraries are the gateway to the future."<sup>41</sup> Lithuanian librarians and the general public demonstrated in front of the National Library of Lithuania and joined forces to carry a huge Ukrainian flag unfolded on the boulevard in front of the library in Vilnius.

The Nordic national libraries (Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Iceland) also highlighted the role of libraries, which are "fundamental and indispensable part of society's democratic infrastructure," currently under attack in Ukraine. The statement continues: "Libraries are also the custodians of significant parts of the nation's cultural heritage. The importance of history is specially highlighted in these difficult and dangerous times when both physical and digital source materials are at risk of being destroyed."<sup>42</sup> The message is displayed on each of the signatory libraries' website.

The American Library Association's (ALA) succinct, dry, and mild statement that it is working with libraries worldwide to "answer the appeal from the Ukrainian Library Association to provide accurate information as a means to support democracy and freedom of expression"<sup>43</sup> comes as a surprise as it doesn't express any further engagement or support. More assertive, in an open letter, members of CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals), the UK Library and Information Association, express their concern regarding the impact of Russia's military action against "the Ukrainian people, their heritage and identity, as well as to the security of our professional colleagues." They all adhere to the basic principles of democracy: "The integrity of the public record as well as the safety and intellectual freedom of the civilian population are pre-requisites of any Nation State that aspires to legitimacy or credibility within the international community."<sup>44</sup> CILIP's open letter has been signed by nearly 400 library leaders.<sup>45</sup>

National librarians also reacted in their capacity of leaders of the top library in every nation. In her message Carla Hayden, Librarian of Congress, expresses her heartfelt high esteem toward Ukrainian librarians and their dedication:

We at the Library of Congress, in our role as the national library of the United States, are inspired and deeply moved by the role libraries and librarians are playing in Ukraine. We wholeheartedly support and admire their work. Librarians across Ukraine are still working, when possible, to carry out their daily tasks of providing information, supporting community events, and providing children with books and programs. But they are also using their valued public spaces for life-saving bomb shelters. For first-aid training classes. For refugee meeting points. For protection of cultural treasures. By their courage and commitment, Ukrainian librarians are proving their role as part of the national backbone. No nation exists without its culture, and no culture can long survive without keepers of that heritage. Those cultural attendants are often in libraries, they are the librarians.<sup>46</sup>

In her statement Librarian and Archivist of Canada Leslie Weir deplors Russia's attack on Ukraine while expressing her concerns at "the serious threat that the ongoing hostilities present to the country's rich literary and cultural heritage," which is a threat to democracy itself: "It is often said that the first casualty of war is truth. Whether for today or tomorrow, a nation's public record held by institutions like libraries and archives is an essential pillar of democracy, human rights and the rule of law."<sup>47</sup>

All solidarity statements call on political leaders everywhere to do all in their power to find a way to end the violence. Many encourage political leaders in Canada, the United States, and the international community to work together to restore peace and safety, and to adhere to international agreements and accords, including compliance with the international obligations under the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property and Its Protocols.

Numerous other statements of solidarity with colleagues from Ukraine continue to come from the Canadian library and GLAM (Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museums) community. The Librarianship.ca blog maintains an updated list with all of these statements as they are released.<sup>48</sup> A similar growing list with such messages of support from library associations, publishers, database producers, national and international information agencies is maintained by Gary Price on InfoDocket, a supplement of the *Library Journal*.<sup>49</sup>

The Facebook account of the Ukrainian Library Association contains statements of solidarity with Ukrainian librarians posted by librarians from all over the world.<sup>50</sup> Most of them are translated into Ukrainian. The site also includes



first-hand accounts from Ukrainian librarians who share their personal experience since the war broke. A school librarian, Olena, from Mariupol writes:

On Wednesday, February 23, everything was fine. And so it came February 24. Panic broke out in the school group in the morning. The administration left all the staff and children at home, but the teachers still came to the school because they decided that there was still a lot to do. It was the last day we saw each other. . . . everyone was hoping to come out on Monday 28th February. . . . The long and painful days of the war began. . . . A shell hit our school. Colleagues said she was burned. The school had 1,200 students and 100 staff members. There were 2 librarians at the school, the second librarian, according to the latest data, died.

Once all utilities were cut off, Olena, took refuge along with her neighbors driving into the unknown. She continues to reflect on the sudden turn of her personal and professional life:

I had only documents and a cat with me. We left in several cars at our own risk. We traveled to Zaporizhia for two days. The column consisted of 3–4 thousand cars. That's how we became homeless. Yesterday I still had a job, a house, and for about 20 days everything was taken away from me. I worked as the head of the school library (20 years of experience). Today I am out of work and without means of subsistence, like all my colleagues.<sup>51</sup>

Olena's account is one of two many depicting disrupted lives and the impact of the war on those who have been forced to flee.

Yana, librarian at Scientific Library of Mariupol State University, writes:

In the first days of the war, February 24–26 was somehow strange and scary, but not very much. In Mariupol we are not used to being afraid, we are a very patient people. These days there was no panic, people bought food just in case, two or three packs of pasta, flour, sugar. Some even bought only beer and chips. Nobody knew that there would be nothing in Mariupol very soon—no water, no food, no light, no gas. . . . On March 5, to the sounds of falling shells, we got into the car, to the sounds of shells, we left our yard—to which I will not return. . . .

We went to the main street and I prayed. Outside the windows I saw the “new” Mariupol. I saw a devastated city, houses without windows, burning cars, blown up shops, and most importantly—any living soul. . . . March 8 in the morning [planes] began to fly very close again. They dropped bombs, and our military tried to shoot them down. Every day. Every night. People tried to calm each other down. We cooked soups on the fire. We ate once a day. We learned from different people that you can leave the city. It was March 16. And we left. In two days we got to Poltava region, here we have a grandmother. But. There is a very big But. Part of me, my parents, stayed in Mariupol. All this time I know nothing about them. We have been cut off from each other since the beginning of hostilities. And I did not have time to take them out. I don’t know where they are or whether their hearts are beating. It hurts. I cry like a little child. My son hugs me and says, “Don’t be afraid, Mom, everything will be fine.” And I’m not afraid anymore.<sup>52</sup>

Heartbreaking stories of ruined lives, of disconnected families, of people who don’t know if they’ll see their relatives again. . . . stories of people whose future is so uncertain and unpredictable.

Svetlana, a librarian at the children and youth section, Nova Kakhovka City Library (Kherson region), took the time to share her story on the Ukrainian Library Association’s Facebook page. She writes in English to let the world know what Ukrainians are going through:

Hello. My name is Svetlana. I am 38 years old. On February 24, I was wake up by “thunder.” . . . Our occupation is not filled with the blood of civilians, but with fear. They are trying to take away our freedom and faith. The children of the occupying cities look like a flock of sparrow. Anxious, timid and loud. Relatives hold their hands tightly and do not leave them alone for even 1 minute. They enjoy short walks and dream of the sea. . . . Life in the occupation is every night when you putt [*sic*] your daughter to bed, you answer the question: “Mom, will they not come to our home?”, “And if they come, what will happen?”.

And you lose words . . . You hug a child and say something infinitely good. Life in the occupied city is a morning that asks in your child’s voice: “Mom, what do Russian children dream of? Probably cartoons. . . . And I dreamed of tanks again. . . .” And you want to cry, but the sun

shines sharply through the window and a pair of dearest eyes looks at you. Life under occupation is an infinite faith. Because praying through your window is always calmer. And the prayers are so simple: that every person on our planet has a native window for conversations with God.<sup>53</sup>

Svetlana, like many others, hasn't lost hope. She needs to stay strong, she needs to protect her daughter from the vicissitudes of war, she needs to find a way out.

Many Ukrainian librarians found refuge in neighboring Poland where libraries welcome them with a clear message: "In any unclear situation, contact the library!" Polish libraries provide special space arrangement to meet refugees' basic needs, such as charge their cell phones, relax and read literature in Ukrainian by offering them a large selection of books for children and adults, use a computer with a keyboard with Ukrainian letters, photocopying and printing services. Polish librarians organize in their libraries' recreation areas for refugee children. Board games, coloring books, toys, Lego cubes, beds and pillows are also available. When a large number of refugees reach the train station in Wrocław, the public library sets up places for mothers and children to spend the night and a food court provides nourishment. Volunteers, policemen, and medics know about this aid point at the station and they direct Ukrainian refugees there.

The Wrocław Public Library offers counseling services for refugees. When the first refugees reached the city, the library's website was quickly redesigned to provide relevant information for Ukrainian citizens on various issues, in Polish, English, and Ukrainian. Refugees can get advice on procedures related to the stay in Poland, on social and public assistance to foreigners, where to be treated and receive medical care, education institutions, public transportation, and many other items of interest to a newcomer. The library disseminates information about the activities of various charitable foundations that can support Ukrainians during their transition and settlement period. The Library of the Wrocław University of Science and Technology can accommodate those willing to continue their education in Poland and need access to library services and resources.<sup>54</sup>

Librarianship is a universal profession. Librarians know no borders. They will always find common grounds for communication. Librarians are peaceful workers. Even if in exile librarians think of the workplace they left behind

and they seek a library wherever life takes them. Libraries are supposed to be places of peace that signify safety and open sharing of knowledge. Ukrainian libraries house collections of national and international significance, relating to the development of Ukrainian history, culture, identity, and language. It is critical that these collections are protected for the benefit and knowledge of all Ukrainians, future generations, and people across the world. Today Ukrainian libraries are under attack and their future is uncertain. Today Ukrainian librarians see themselves forced to leave their workplace seeking refuge into the unknown.

For libraries “to face such a direct threat of destruction is, sadly, not without precedent in recent times. The shelling of the National Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992, and the burning and looting of the National Library of Iraq in 2003 were moments of incalculable loss to the world’s shared cultural heritage and to the peoples of those countries in particular,” states Roly Keating, the chief executive of the British Library.<sup>55</sup>

Unfortunately, Rebecca Knuth’s book titled *Libricide: The Regime-Sponsored Destruction of Books and Libraries in the Twentieth Century*, published in 2003, is due for updates (plural!) as the world is witnessing a new conflict, when Ukrainian libraries are being bombed and their collections burned to ashes.<sup>56</sup> Ukrainian library history is changing by the day as the country’s libraries are falling victims of the aggression and as librarians are seeking refuge from Russian attacks.

## Epilogue

The unprovoked assault by Russian president Vladimir Putin’s army on the sovereign nation of Ukraine has left the world in disbelief. It has affected a country of almost 44 million people, with millions already in exile, with hundreds of innocent people killed every day, with millions of others taking shelter in underground bunkers risking their lives each time they emerge to attend to basic needs, with an economy and infrastructure in ruins.<sup>57</sup> During their invasion, the Russian armies have shelled densely populated cities where both people and iconic buildings and institutions have become war casualties.

Unfortunately, the human and cultural massacre continues in Ukraine. Lives continue to be lost, people continue their exodus to safer places, and the list of damaged emblematic cultural assets continues to grow. “When we lose irreplaceable history and culture, it is a profound loss to us all,” states

Smithsonian Secretary Lonnie G. Bunch III. "If we instead work together to celebrate, share, and protect cultural heritage, we are ensuring the triumph of our humanity."<sup>58</sup> We can only hope the Russian aggression stops soon to put an end to human and cultural loss in Ukraine.

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