



The Museum of Geology, which was located in the building of the State Exploration and Geological Enterprise “Donbas Geology” in Bakhmut was destroyed in February 2023. Left: the building in 2014.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS (LEFT), COURTESY OF MAYOR OLEKSIY REVA (RIGHT)

RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR:

The tragedy of the cultural heritage of Ukraine

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abstract

This article exposes the extent of Russian cultural aggression: the looting of museums and appropriation of items of the Ukrainian museum foundation, the damage to and demolition of archaeological sites of Ukraine, the explosion of the Kakhovka dam and the consequences of this disaster for Ukrainian cultural heritage, and the cultural erasure of Crimean Tatars.

KEYWORDS: Cultural heritage, museums, Crimea.

The war that Russia launched against Ukraine in 2014 also targets cultural heritage institutions such as museums, nature, historical and cultural features, as well as archaeological reserves and archaeological sites. One of the main goals of the Russian aggressors is the destruction of Ukrainian cultural heritage which, we argue, is part of the ongoing genocide of the Ukrainian people. The non-governmental organization Crimean Institute for Strategic Studies (CISS)¹ collects

data and publishes reports in Ukrainian about the violations against cultural heritage in the temporarily occupied territories. This article is based on the findings by CISS, that we authors have been involved in collecting and writing reports on.²

Overview of the extent of destruction to Ukrainian museums

During the 10 years of the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war the total losses of the museum foundation of Ukraine, reported to CISS, amounted to approx. 2 million items. Human loss has also been reported. The main curator of the Luhansk regional local history museum died during the shelling. In 2014 Mykola Khudobin, director of the Pele Museum (Luhansk), was imprisoned by pro-Russian militants for three days and tortured for his pro-Ukrainian position.³

The shelling in the territories of Luhansk and Donetsk regions during 2014–2015 caused severe damage to the buildings of the



PHOTO: YGORU

The Kherson Regional History Museum was emptied by Russian officials when withdrawing from Kherson. November 2022.



PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

"View of Odessa on a moonlit night" by 19th century Russian-Armenian painter Ivan Aivazovsky was stolen from Kherson Art Museum.

Donetsk Regional Museum of Local Lore, the Museum of the History of the City of Luhansk, the Luhansk Regional Museum of Local Lore and the Stanychno-Luhansk Museum.

Before 2014 there were approximately 90 museums in the Luhansk region (38 belonging to the State Museum Fund of Ukraine, while the rest had various forms of ownership). During the occupation 2014–2015 about 48 museums remained on the Russian controlled territory. Today, 2.5 years after the full-scale invasion in February 2022, all museums of the Luhansk region are under occupation.

In the Donetsk region, there were 100 museums in 2014 (45 belonging to the State Museum Fund of Ukraine) whereas, after the start of the war 2014, approximately 87 museums remained on the occupied territory. Ten of these museum buildings (among them for instance museums in Lyman, the Geological Museum in Bakhmut, the Archaeological Museum of Mariupol State University) have been completely destroyed.

In the Zaporizhzhia region, 18 museums are on occupied territory. The museums of Melitopol and Mariupol were plundered. Accurate data on losses can appear only after the de-occupation of the territory.

The "merger" of the Kamiana Mohyla National Historical and Archaeological Preserve with the occupation administration of the Tauric Chersonese Preserve in Sevastopol can be seen as the introduction of the modus operandi after February 24, 2022, for illegal appropriation of property and collections from Ukrainian museum to Russian entities. This merger method is seen as a way for the occupation administration to seemingly comply with internal Russian procedures for moving items for display between different regions, which the Russian Federation declared as its territories.

In the Kherson region, 11 museums are on occupied territory.

The collections of unique artifacts discovered on the territory of the Kherson region are kept in the museums of the cities Kherson, Kakhovka, Skadovsk, and Genichesk. When leaving Kherson, the withdrawing Russian forces robbed the Kherson Museum of Local Lore. There are suspicions that the director Tetyana Bratchenko and some staff became collaborators with the Russian invaders.⁴

The entire exhibition and part of the storage collection were stolen. All gold and silver jewelry, Greek black-lacquered and Roman red-slip pottery, amphorae, bronze items (fibulae, bracelets, tools), a mass of beads, numismatic finds, a collection of weapons and Greek and Roman tombstones and sculptures from the lapidarium have disappeared. The Kherson Art Museum was also robbed, and 80% of the collection of paintings, icons and sculptures were taken. These items were moved to Simferopol, to the Museum of the History of Taurida. The Beryslav Museum was also robbed by Russian troops while leaving the occupied territory.

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Kakhovka city is still occupied, so it is difficult to say exactly what was stolen from the archaeological collection in the Kakhovka Museum. What we do know is that almost the entire museum collection was stolen.

According to the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine, the number of damaged or destroyed museums as a result of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine is now 116 (September 2024). The full picture of the impact of the war on museum institutions will become available after its end, but we can already assume that the number of museums affected by the war is much greater than the official 116.

THE ANALYSIS of information about the museums of Ukraine in the battle zone or in the occupied territories gathered by CISS allows us to distinguish the following categories:

- a. Completely destroyed museums;
- b. Partially damaged and looted museums;
- c. Museums and historical-archaeological reserves in the occupied territories, the collections of which are threatened with displacement;
- d. Museums or historical and cultural reserves that have lost their authenticity or have been damaged due to barbaric restoration or construction;
- e. Museums used for military purposes;
- f. A large number of university museums (archaeological, zoological, geological, and others), as well as school museums, should be included in a separate category.

IN SUM THE CONSEQUENCES of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine for the museums in Ukraine, for their workers and their collections, can be listed as follows:

- A. Those museum workers who remained in the occupied territories⁵ and did not cooperate with the occupiers were removed from their positions and replaced by people loyal to the occupiers;
- B. Hundreds of museum workers lost their jobs and migrated within the country or abroad;
- C. Known cases of pressure and torture as well as deaths of museum staff as a result of shelling;
- D. Dozens of museums in various forms of ownership, which ended up in the war zone, were damaged or destroyed;
- E. Repeatedly recorded facts of theft and transfer of museum valuables from museums that ended up in the occupied territories;
- F. Hundreds of artifacts from museum collections were lost forever;⁶
- G. In the occupied territories, museums are used for propagandistic anti-Ukrainian and military purposes, aimed at promoting the ideas of the “Russian world”. For this purpose, the Russian Military-Historical Society, which is managed by Putin’s aide Volodymyr Medinsky and controlled by Russia Security Service, has taken patronage over some museums in Luhansk and Donetsk Region;
- H. From March 23, 2023, all museum institutions in the territories occupied by Russia are recognized as objects of federal importance and included in the state register of cultural heritage of Russia.

CURRENTLY, IN THE OCCUPIED territories of Ukraine, the employees of the largest federal museums of Russia are actively promoting the ideas of the “Russian world” within the framework of the so-called “taking over the patronage”. These include: the State Historical Museum (Moscow); State Museum-Reserve “Peterhof” (St. Petersburg); State Historical Museum-Reserve “Gorky Leninsky” (Moscow); State Memorial Museum of Suvorov (St. Petersburg); Russian Ethnographic Museum (St. Petersburg); Victory Museum (Moscow); State Hlinka Central

Museum of Musical Culture (Moscow); State Dahl Literary Museum (Moscow).

The case of Crimea

When Crimea was annexed (illegally) in 2014–2015 numerous Cultural Heritage Sites remained on the territory, including Tauric Chersonese, a UNESCO World Culture Heritage Site (official name “Ancient City of Tauric Chersonese and its Chora”. The appropriation by the Russian Federation of immovable monuments on the territory of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol (these administrative units are located in the Crimean peninsula) began on May 21, 2014, with the resolution of the so-called occupying institution State Council of the Republic of Crimea titled “On measures aimed at preserving objects of cultural heritage on the territory of the Republic of Crimea in the transition period”. This resolution proclaimed that objects included in accordance with the legislation of the Ukrainian SSR and Ukraine in the lists of monuments of history and culture (cultural heritage) and the State Register of Immovable Monuments of Ukraine and located in the Republic of Crimea,

are subject to state protection in accordance with the requirements of the legislation of the Russian Federation. This was only the beginning of the largest appropriation of immovable heritage in Europe since World War II.

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THE NEXT STEP was to inscribe the immovable monuments of Ukraine located in Crimea, including one object from the World Heritage List and six objects nominated thereto, on the State Register of Cultural Heritage Objects of the Russian Federation.

Given major differences between Ukrainian and Russian monument protection legislation, the State Duma of the Russian Federation adopted Federal Law No. 9-FZ dated February 12, 2015 “On the peculiarities of legal regulation of relations in the field of culture and tourism”. This obliged the local occupying institutions of Crimea for a certain period to fill the State Register of Cultural Heritage Objects of the Russian Federation with documents prepared after 1991. After all, most of the records were stored there.

In this manner, a precedent was created whereby the UNESCO object “Ancient City of Chersonese and its Chora”, which before the occupation enjoyed the status of a cultural heritage object of national significance of Ukraine, came under the management of the occupation administration of the city of Sevastopol between 2014 and 2016.

Where Moscow’s direct management immediately gained full swing was the control over works at archaeological sites. From 2014 to 2023, the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation issued more than 900 permits for excavations in the occupied territories of the ARC and the city of Sevastopol. Russian-initiated excavations for the construction of infrastructure projects (roads, energy facilities, airfields, tourist complexes) became



PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Flooding in Kherson after the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam on June 6, 2023. Large areas along the Kakhovka reservoir were inundated following the explosion.



PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

the greatest threat to archaeological sites: more than 150 of them were destroyed to create such objects, including the Southern Suburbs of Chersonese, the Frontove 3 necropolis and the Kirk-Azizler Muslim cemetery. The excavations in Chersonese are illegal as they ignore that the artifacts and the sites were protected by being given UNESCO cultural heritage status.

UNTIL 2020, the so-called State Committee for the Protection of Cultural Heritage of the Republic of Crimea (an occupying institution), created on the basis of the Republican Committee for the Protection of Cultural Heritage of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, carried out an inventory of the objects retrieved from excavations on the territory of Crimea. As part of the “unification” of occupation institutions with the all-Russian cultural heritage management system, the committee was dissolved. From 2014 to 2020, the annual reports of the occupiers’ “State Committee...” stated that more than 45,000 objects were handed over to the Russian administrations of Crimean museums. However, artifacts did not end up only in Crimean collections. In 2016, the State Hermitage Museum appropriated elements of a ceramic water pipe from the excavations of the medieval city of Solkhat. These were all protected artifacts from illegal excavations during the ongoing occupation of Crimea.

Kakhovka dam explosion: A threat to immovable heritage

The Kakhovka dam break by the occupiers on June 6, 2023, became an economic, ecological, and cultural disaster on an unprecedented scale.

The destruction of the Kakhovka dam and the subsequent flooding of the territory caused the destruction, damage, and threat of disappearance of objects that are permanent markers of the development of the region’s population in certain historical periods. According to a recent survey of the Institute of Archaeology of National Academy of Sciences, 95 archaeological sites are known in the Kakhovka Reservoir area alone. Including

the Dnipro-Bug and Berezan estuaries, the number of potentially affected sites is almost 200.

Sharp fluctuations in the water level, caused by the Kakhovka disaster, led to the intensification of coastal erosion processes. Landslides destroyed thousands of square meters of archaeological sites. The Late Scythian hill-forts and their burial grounds located on the banks of the reservoir suffered considerable destruction. On the banks of the Dnipro-Bug estuary, the settlements and necropolises of the Olbian Chora found themselves in the same condition. Sites downstream from the dam, including Bronze Age settlements, barrows, and medieval settlements (such as the Lithuanian fortress Tyahin or Oleshkivska Sich) were simply flooded.

According to the Kherson Regional Inspection for the Protection of Historical and Cultural Monuments, 78 monuments of history and monumental art as well as archaeological sites were completely flooded, including the historic center of the city of Nova Kakhovka, a monument of urban planning and monumental art of national importance and an architectural site of local importance.

The city’s historical core, a unique urban complex built in 1951–1956, was inundated. The ensemble of buildings on the Central Square of Nova Kakhovka, the complex of buildings of the riverside zone, and the buildings of blocks No. 8, 9, 24, 25, 26, 27 along Dniprovska Avenue (according to preliminary information, more than 40 buildings) were flooded. Due to flooding, elements of decoration are falling from the facades and collapsing.

The unique archaeological and architectural monument of the Great Lithuanian Princely epoch – Vitautas tower – found itself just in the center of war operations. Whether this site of great historical importance survived the battle is still unknown.

IN ADDITION TO natural negative consequences, a significant threat is posed by the growing occurrence of treasure hunters, so-called “black diggers”, showing no regard for the protection of the cultural heritage. They operate in front-line zones from



The ancient city of Tauric Chersonese, Crimea, was listed as a Unesco World Heritage site in 2013.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



The so-called "New Chersonesos Historical and Archaeological Park" is built on the territory of Tauric Chersonesos, destroying an archaeological site of world significance. It opened for visitors this summer.

the side of the Ukrainian line of control and from the side of the Russian control zone. They are not stopped either by military patrols or by the threat to their lives under the shelling. The fight against them is complicated by the fact that the coastal zones are closed by the military to everyone. Yet the hunters succeed in trespassing as the military control zone is not continuous; there are separate observation points and control zones, and there are low control zones between them.

Demolition of archaeological sites

Archaeological sites in Ukraine have been destroyed and eliminated since the Russian aggression started in 2014. The damage or destruction of the cultural layer, the remains of ancient buildings or burials, are irreversible losses.

Hostilities are taking place in the east and south of Ukraine, just where some of the most valuable archaeological sites are located – such as the barrows, tombs of ancient herders of different epochs who inhabited the steppes of Ukraine. Barrows are protected by law and are the property of the state. The oldest barrows date to the 4th millennium BC and are older than the Egyptian pyramids. During the Eneolithic–Bronze Age from the 4th to the 2nd millennium BC, the first herders of the Eurasian steppes – the people of corded pottery cultures, whose self-names are unknown, buried their dead in the barrows. In the early Iron Age, mound burial rites were used by the Cimmerians (9th–8th centuries BC), Scythians (7th–3rd centuries BC), Sarmatians (2nd century BC–4th century AD), Huns (5th century), and medieval nomads – the Avars, Bulgars, Hungarians, Pechenegs, Turks, Cumans (6th–13th centuries). Burials of all these peoples, sometimes with precious finds, occurred in the barrows in the south of Ukraine.

In addition, endemic plants, representing flora of the steppe,

which has disappeared almost everywhere due to the anthropogenic factor, survive on the unplowed mounds.

And now these barrows found themselves at the epicenter of the occupation. In most barrow mounds the Russian arranged emplacements, for which deep pits were dug on the tops. The ancient burials, which could be located at any depth, risk being destroyed or looted. Deep trenches are dug in the mounds in different directions, which violate the integrity of the site stratigraphy and distort the information about the stages and techniques of mound construction. Trenches and other fortifications have been dug in the protective zone (surrounding the mound), which can destroy invisible burials or ritual memorial structures of the

ancient people, which are also part of the barrow complex. The edges of the mounds were cut during the construction of the military fortification, and thus the data on the original dimensions of the barrow were lost. Fuel and lubricants are spilled on the surface of the mound; at the same time, endemic plants that survived on the unplowed mounds for centuries have now been eliminated. The mounds are mined in various and unknown places, which has made their research and restoration im-

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possible before demining, whenever this can be finalized.

The barrow group (register No. 1779) near the Hladke village in Zaporizhzhia region can serve as an example. The occupation administration of the city of Vasylivka (Zaporizhzhia region) authorized the construction of defensive structures. The surface of the barrow is deformed and looks completely perforated; there is no turf cover. The constructed complex is surrounded by numerous trenches and underground shelters for equipment.

ANOTHER DESTROYED barrow is located 2.4 km to the southwest from Sontseve village in Luhansk region. In the period after 2015



PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The Khan's Palace in Bakhchisaray, Crimea, is an important monument related to Crimean Tatar's history.



PHOTO: RUSSIAN AUTHORITIES

Images from the renovation of the Khan's Palace show destroyed original masonry and authentic ornaments.

the representatives of the so-called DPR used this area for training shooting. The archaeological complex was totally and deliberately destroyed by artillery fire without any urgent military necessity. The so-called DPR also organized and conducted excavations of the Obryv settlement in Donetsk region. According to remote monitoring data, the total loss of the illegally excavated cultural layer of Obryv settlement is at least 150 square meters. According to satellite images, on some sites (such as Hornostaevka, Lyubymivka) the invaders set up tank training grounds, trenches and dugouts which caused irreparable damage to the cultural layer.

After the liberation of the Dnipro right-bank part of the Kherson region the scale of the damage to archaeological sites could be documented. The ancient settlements of Bilozerk, Zoloty Mys, and Skelka are hopelessly damaged, their surface is covered with craters from bombs and missiles, trenches, and dugouts. Late Scythian hill-forts and burial grounds are located along both banks of the Dnipro river. The right bank in the Kherson region is still suffering shelling from the occupied left bank. Late Scythian sites – hill-forts and burial grounds – are located on the very shore of the former Kakhovka reservoir and therefore suffer from missiles and artillery fire.

THE FIRST YEARS of the Russia-Ukraine armed conflict from 2014 through 2023 were marked by massive unsanctioned archaeological excavations. For instance, in 2014-2023, according to official information, the Russian authorities issued 900 permits for such activities. Some of them were conducted with the sole purpose of facilitating the construction of the Tavrida highway connecting the Kerch Bridge with Sevastopol, which is important in military-strategic terms.

Another illustrative fact is that cultural sites which do not play a pivotal role for the Kremlin and its political ideology are facing a high risk of damage and destruction. As an example: within the framework of construction of this highway, the occupied authorities have conducted more than 114 archeological excava-

tions. Only 3 of them were added to the category of museum objects. These were; 2 barrows of the Bosporan Kingdom (period of antiquity on the historical map of Crimea), and the bridge that was built in honor of the Empress Catherine the Second's visit to Crimea after it was annexed in 1783.

Crimean Tatars affairs

After 2014, Crimea became a platform for the establishment of a direct management of cultural heritage by the Russian Federation in the occupied territories. However, the attempt to extend these mechanisms to all the territories captured in 2022 turned out to be extremely ineffective. Moreover, it is ineffective in Crimea itself, which makes the heritage of Ukraine on the peninsula dependent on the further actions of the Russian Federation in the war. In other words, this puts Ukraine's heritage under threat and leads to an increased incidence of its use and destruction for military purposes.

It is important to understand the present situation in Crimea in the context of the erasure of the cultural identity of Crimean Tatars as an Indigenous people of Ukraine and we will therefore elaborate on the scale of the discrimination targeting Crimean Tatars.

THREE TYPES of encroachments of the Russian occupying authorities on the Crimean Tatar cultural heritage can be identified, which build up into the larger policy of persecution of this Indigenous people.

- 1) the demolition of the Crimean Tatar cemeteries and settlements that were found during archaeological excavations from 2014 through 2022;
- 2) the destructive renovation of the Khan's Palace and other monuments related to Crimean Tatar's history.
- 3) the (re-)naming practices in occupied Crimea.

111 ARCHEOLOGICAL SITES were illegally excavated "for demolition" during the construction of the Kerch-Sevastopol highway.



Excavation work at the Kosh-Kuyu settlement near Kerch in November 2017. PHOTO: INSTITUTE OF ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE RUSSIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES.



A relief with Demeter and Cora from the collection of the Kerch Historical and Cultural Preserve is now shown in a Russian museum.

Among them our team at CISS has identified more than 30 settlements and necropolises related to Crimean Tatar history. We show two prime examples of this demolition.

The Kosh-Kuyu I settlement (see image) is a historical Crimean Tatar village of the same name. Against a differing background, it is distinguished by a long tradition of functioning and development horizons of the Mesolithic, Bronze and Early Iron Ages, Antiquity, Golden Horde and Khan periods, the Modern period and contemporary history. The existence of this settlement once again proves the continuity and succession of ancient cities and villages of Crimea throughout the existence of homo sapiens on the peninsula from ancient to modern times.

The Kosh-Kuyu I settlement has several interrupted building horizons (see image). The Crimean Tatar village of Kosh-Kuyu is connected with a cemetery built at the same time. The settlement ceased to exist as a result of the deportation of the Crimean Tatar people in 1944.

In 2015 and 2017–2018, the Kosh-Kuyu I settlement was excavated during the construction of the Russian Federation – Crimean Peninsula power grid bridge (2015) and the Kerch-Sevastopol highway (2017–2018). Works using construction equipment were carried out on an area of approximately 3.1 hectares, where the site was completely destroyed. As we have pointed out before, these excavations carried out by the Russians in Crimea are illegal.

THE DEMOLITION of the Kirk-Azizler cemetery is the second most illustrative example of discriminatory attacks on the cultural heritage of Crimean Tatars.

Kirk-Azizler translates from Crimean Tatar as “Forty Saints”, which in itself expresses the significance of the place to the Crimean Tatars. The particular cultural significance of the cem-

etry is connected with the complex of epitaphs on tombstones. Many of them contain the surnames “Kyrymly,” which means “Crimean,” or “resident of Crimea.” The majority of tombstones are from the 14th–15th centuries. However, importantly, two of them date back to the 13th century and one to the 12th century. Thus, on a personal level, these tombstones record the long and unique history of the Crimean Tatar people as they record the deaths of Crimean ancestry dating back centuries – and these are the people who self-identify as Crimeans and are exclusively connected with human habitation of the peninsula. But besides that,

on a sociological level, the tombstones clearly document the ethnogenesis of Crimean Tatars from the local population and their uninterrupted residence in the peninsula, which considerably predates both the Golden Horde invasion in 1239 and the mass settlement of the Russians and other Slavic ethnic groups in Crimea starting from 1783. Such evidence is unfavorable for Russia’s imperial, Soviet and current narrative of an exclusively Russian history of Crimea and renders it manifestly untrue.

“THE KIRK-AZIZLER CEMETERY WAS DELIBERATELY DESTROYED DURING THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE KERCH-SEVASTOPOL HIGHWAY.”

LET US RECALL in this respect that parts of this allegedly Russian history, according to President Putin, are “foundational to Russia’s statehood”.

The Kirk-Azizler cemetery was deliberately destroyed during the construction of the Kerch-Sevastopol highway. To prepare the area for the large-scale infrastructure project, the occupying authorities of the Russian Federation ordered archaeological excavations, which were subsequently carried out in 2016–2018. In 2018, archaeologists discovered a cemetery of the settlement of the late 13th – mid/late 14th centuries. The occupation authorities excavated the centuries-old graves with backhoes and heavy machinery, destroying culturally significant layers of the site and leaving the



Illegal excavations of the Kyrk-Azizler necropolis.

PHOTO: INSTITUTE OF ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE RUSSIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

bones of Crimean Tatar ancestors bare to the elements. In total, the occupation authorities destroyed more than 153 graves – an area totaling more than one hectare – a crucial testament to the long history of Crimean Tatar culture on the peninsula, which predated the first major Russian settlements there.

For comparison, look at the bridge, built in honor of Catherine the Second's visit to Crimea after its annexation in 1783. The object dates back to the late 18th century. Due to the fact that the monument is the earliest evidence of Russian colonial development of Crimea, it has been preserved and is now open to visitors.

THE SECOND TYPE of the Russian occupying authorities' encroachment on the Crimean Tatar cultural heritage is the destructive renovation of the Khan's Palace and other monuments related to Crimean Tatar history.

It is a fact that well-known restoration rules and principles have been grossly violated by the Russian occupying authorities. The Khan's Palace in Bakhchysarai has been stripped of its authenticity and turned into a shoddily renovated "new-build", losing its scientific and historical value.

The factor of authenticity is of fundamental importance in many ways. An ancient building, replaced by a new copy, loses its value as a historical witness of the past, retaining only the value of a visual illustration. It no longer exists as a monument of material culture. Even the visual function, which is allegedly preserved, shows this monument from the point of view of Russia – the country that took away its statehood and that throughout that time (from 1783 up to now) has been seeking to destroy the Ukrainian identity, to assimilate and to erase even the memory of the non Russian-people living here.

THE SECOND CASE is the Akmejitsarai Palace of Kalga Sultan and Cultural Layer of the Ancient City of Akmejit archaeological site.

In the late 15th century, Khan Mengli I Giray established the post of kalga sultan – the commander of the Crimean Khanate army, the first heir to the khan's throne. On the territory of modern Simferopol, named by Crimean Tatar Akmejit, the kalga sultan palace was built. The archaeological site "Akmejitsarai Palace of Kalga Sultan and Cultural Layer of the Ancient City of Akmejit" also includes the Kebir Jami mosque complex of 1502 and the urban buildings of the Old City of the late 15th – early 20th centuries.

After the annexation of Crimea in 1783, Akmejit also lost its main architectural and political role – the palace of the kalga sultan Akmedjitsaray fell into disrepair at the end of the 18th century, when Russian troops were stationed there.

It is necessary to understand that the historical part of Akmejit did not perish; it was simply renamed by the Russians first to Simferopol and then separated within the Old Town district. At the same time, the colonizers, without any doubt, still believe that the history of Akmedjit-Simferopol is a little over 200 years old and that before them it was nothing but a "scorched desert".

One can hardly invent a more complete and vivid metaphor for the modern fate and state of Crimea than the story of Akmedjitsaray. At present, the location of the kalga sultan's palace is called the "Dog's creek" and is partly used as a natural landfill. In the formerly famous gardens of Akmedjitsaray, a Russian Orthodox church is being built – this is an illegal action even from the point of view of the occupation "laws". The main problem is

the direct ignoring of the historical and cultural layer of the Crimean Khanate era by the occupation authorities and the population of the city of Simferopol (Autonomous Republic of Crimea, Ukraine). Instead of strengthening the activities related to the protection and preservation of archaeological sites in the old part of Akmedjit-Simferopol, the occupation authorities opened a new niche for making profit from "expertise" and illegal archaeological excavations "for demolition", which began in the city as early as 2019.

“AN ANCIENT BUILDING, REPLACED BY A NEW COPY, LOSES ITS VALUE AS A HISTORICAL WITNESS OF THE PAST, RETAINING ONLY THE VALUE OF A VISUAL ILLUSTRATION.”

ANOTHER ACT of the occupying authorities to dilute the essence of the Crimean Tatar Indigenous people's cultural identity is renaming archaeological sites with the intention of erasing the pre-Russian history of the peninsula. While it might not constitute the crime of persecution on its own, such renaming is a testament to the deterioration of the cultural environment in Crimea under Article 7 of the 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, as well as further evidence of the discriminatory intent inherent in the crime of persecution.

The "renaming games" did not start with the occupation but were practiced by the Soviet Union in the middle of the 20th cen-

ture after the deportation of Crimean Tatars from Crimea. The town of Ayserez, whose name means “moonlight” in Crimean Tatar, was renamed to “Mezhdurechie” (literally “interfluvium”) in 1945. After the occupation of Crimea in 2014, a significant number of sites were named without any regard to their Crimean Tatar history. The Nyzhnya Dzharzhava barrow group on the southern outskirts of Kerch was named “the Cement Suburb” by Russian archaeologists after an abandoned industrial zone. The settlement Aip-Eli North-West 2 was discovered in 2016 during archaeological surveys on the construction of the Kerch-Sevastopol highway. Instead of the Crimean Tatar name “Aip-Eli” the settlement was named “Lugovoe” (literally “meadow”). Many more objects were named in a way that disguises the connection of the archaeological and historical sites with the Crimean Tatar people. New names are devoid of specific reference to their historical affiliation. Their usage is aimed solely at erasing the memory of the Indigenous people of the peninsula from the historical landscape of Crimea and expelling the historical and cultural associations of Crimean Tatars with Crimea.

The Russian colonial policy, wherever it takes place, always uses three basic principles: oblivion, denying the obvious, and marginalization.

The demolition of a culture

UNESCO identifies four causes of destruction related to armed conflicts: intentional damage, collateral damage, forced neglect, and organized looting and illicit trafficking. Such damage may include attacks on culture by virtue of their inherent value to a population (such as places of worship or cemeteries), or attacks on strategic infrastructure that has cultural value (as was the case in Bosnia-Herzegovina during the 1992-95 war – and here we can point to the example of the historic and architecturally unique bridge in Mostar).

DELIBERATE ATTACKS on culture for culture’s sake in wars consist of two categories, and both constitute strategic cultural cleansing.

- 1) Attacks on antiquity as a form of cultural erasure, usually in the service of a competing historical narrative and as part of a strategic calculation, once again to solidify the post-battle position of the victors;
- 2) Attacks on the cultural institutions of current populations. By destroying monuments, the occupants undermine the foundations of the territory’s processes of cultural inheritance and continuity.

The Crimean Tatars’ distinct culture – Indigenous, unique, and vulnerable in its meager remaining tangible and intangible remnants – and religion, Islam, as opposed to Russians’ Orthodox Christianity, are the people’s striking defining features. The occupying authority deliberately targets them with discriminatory practices.

However, Russia’s mistreatment of Crimean Tatar cultural heritage, including the above-mentioned demolition of ancient Crimean Tatar cemeteries, the destructive renovation of the last remaining Khan’s Palace that erases its historical and cultural

features, and the neo-imperial replacement of Crimean Tatar toponyms, has a much deeper and more lasting corrosive effect than the initial intention to suppress political dissatisfaction with the occupation. Such discriminatory practices undermine the long-lived historical connection of the Indigenous people with the peninsula, devalue the relevance of its culture and are gradually changing the identity of Crimean Tatars and the peninsula’s cultural identity. ✖

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references

- 1 Read more about the non-governmental organization Crimean Institute for Strategic Studies (CISS) at Crimean Institute for Strategic Studies (ciss.org.ua).
- 2 Ibid. See also the report for EU CULT Committee: Kateryna Busol, Elmira ABLYALIMOVA-Chyihoz, Dmytro Koval & Denys Yashny in, eds., Evelien Campfens, Andrzej Jakubowski, Kristin Hausler & Elke Selter, *Protecting cultural heritage from armed conflicts in Ukraine and beyond*, (EU CULT Committee, 2023). Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/IPOL_STU\(2023\)733120](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/IPOL_STU(2023)733120)
- 3 “Власник унікального музею Пеле у Луганську Микола Худобін: ‘Три дні тримали в підвалі, катували, обіцяли вбити. Мене врятував музей’”, [“The owner of the unique museum of Pele in Lugansk, Mykola Khudobin: ‘Three days spent in the basement, tortured, threatened with death. Me saved the museum’”], *football24.ua*, March 2, 2016. Available at: https://football24.ua/vlasnik_unikalnogo_muzeju_pele_u_lugansku_mikola_hudobin_tri_dni_trimali_v_pidvali_katuvali_obitsyali_vbiti_mene_vryatuvav_muzey_n305362/
- 4 At the date of publication, there is an official indictment and a summons for questioning from the Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine.
- 5 There is no general information about museum workers who suffered from the Russian occupation. There is information about individual museum workers, but such information is very sensitive, due to the fact that many of them are still under occupation and furthermore the restrictions on safe communication.
- 6 This term refers to lost artifacts that are part of an ongoing investigation by the Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine, and details cannot therefore be made public yet.