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UN agencies, Geneva heritage fund mobilise to protect Ukrainian cultural sites

By Liv Martin

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has reduced entire neighbourhoods to rubble and rendered its people traumatised. And though millions of Ukrainians have already fled the country, what they are leaving behind – precious cultural markers and monuments that make Ukraine what it is – could be lost forever.

In light of the emerging conflict, the International alliance for the protection of heritage in conflict areas (ALIPH) has initiated a new effort to preserve and protect Ukrainian cultural heritage sites and professionals in the field. The Geneva-based heritage fund last week committed $2 million in funding and said it may allocate more as needed.

"This crisis is the first time that there's been an active conflict we've been lending our support to," Sandra Bialystok, communications and partnerships manager at ALIPH, told Geneva Solutions. "What's happening in Ukraine is evolving so quickly… A crisis doesn't wait."

Since ALIPH's conception in 2017, it has funded over 150 projects across 30 countries, mainly in the Middle East and Africa, regions which have experienced considerable destruction of cultural heritage over the past decade.

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In Ukraine, ALIPH is moving quickly, because for some of the country's cultural monuments and artefacts, it is already too late. In the northeastern city of Kharkiv – which has been targeted by devastating bombs – its Baroque-style main Orthodox church, the Assumption Cathedral, was seriously damaged.

In western Ukraine, a 19th-century wooden church was demolished by Russian forces in the village of Viazivka. The expansive Holocaust memorial Babyn Yar in the country's capital was also damaged, leading to public backlash. The Ukrainian Foreign Ministry reported via Twitter that about 25 works by the famed Ukrainian artist Maria Prymachenko were destroyed at Ivankiv Museum near Kyiv 28 February.

A race against time

On the ground, Ukraine has reached a critical hour for preserving historic monuments and precious artefacts. In Lviv, bracing for invasion, locals and art conservators alike have taken it upon themselves to protect stone statues and board up stained-glass windows of a church, reported CNN.

ALIPH is collaborating with a host of Ukrainian heritage professionals, archaeologists, curators, academics and museum directors. Out of a growing list of more than 20 projects, the organisation's main focuses now are to protect museum collections and those working in the sector.

This means providing the funding for items like boxes, packing materials and fireproof blankets to keep art safe, and creating inventories of museum collections as concerns of looting mount.

ALIPH is also working with international partners including UNESCO, The International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), International Council of Museums (ICOM), Europa Nostra and others to provide assistance to Ukrainians.

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Before the Human Rights Council on 8 March, Alexandra Xanthaki, the new UN special rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, underlined how preserving cultural sites and artefacts protects people's cultural rights. "The justification of any war must step away from rhetoric that denies the identity and the history of a nation," she said.

Ukraine is home to six UNESCO cultural sites, including Kyiv's Saint-Sophia Cathedral and nearby monastic buildings. The 11th-century cathedral, in the Ukrainian capital's historic centre, is known for its precious interiors and for having the biggest preserved collection of mosaics and frescoes from that period.

Another site is the medieval city of Lviv, whose historic city centre and castle dating to the fifth century are mostly preserved. Kharkiv, a shell of its former self after air strikes, is part of the UNESCO creative cities network.

In a statement earlier this month, UNESCO urgently called for the "protection of Ukrainian cultural heritage" – specifically regarding its seven world heritage sites, members of the UNESCO creative cities network and Holocaust memorials.

"We must safeguard this cultural heritage, as a testimony of the past but also as a vector of peace for the future, which the international community has a duty to protect and preserve for future generations," said UNESCO director-general Audrey Azoulay in a statement.

The UN agency indicated specific concerns for the cities Kharkiv and Chernihiv, both of which were targeted by Russian artillery and are on Ukraine's "tentative list" for potential nomination to world heritage status.

In a televised speech on 3 March, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky said he was committed to rebuilding Ukraine, as long as Russia fronts the costs of the damage it has caused.

"We will make sure to restore everything, to erase all traces of war," he said. "You could destroy all of our Ukrainian cathedrals and churches, [but] you will not destroy our faith."

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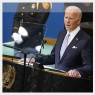

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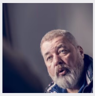

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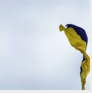

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