

New Research Project: Sweden and Ukraine in the History of Museum Collections and Exhibition Narratives

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Background

The Russian invasion and occupation of Ukraine in February 2022 has raised public concern not only about the independency of Ukraine, but also about the stability and future of the democratic world order. Cultural heritage has been part of these concerns. The protection of heritage assets has become an issue of national and international security, and political uses of historical narratives and collections have led to a highly politicized conflict over cultural property. According to UNESCO's verification of 1 March 2023, 247 historical sites in Ukraine were damaged during the first year of the war, including 107 religious sites, 20 museums, 89 historical buildings, 19 monuments and 12 libraries (UNESCO 2023). In his essay 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians' from July 2021, Vladimir Putin claimed that Ukraine belongs to 'historically Russian lands' (The Ukrainian Research Institute [HURI] 2021). According to the current regime, all Ukrainian museums can potentially be considered as Russian cultural property, and therefore be targets for the transferral of collections to Russia. For instance, it was reported that on October 26, 2022, Russian forces transferred Grygory Potemkin's monument and his burial in Kherson across the border to Russia (Santora 2022). Looting of collections has also been reported from regional museums in Kherson, Melitopol and Mariupol (Human Rights Watch 2022).

Aside from immediate war time destruction and looting, long-term political strategies involving heritage can be identified. Since the 1990s, Rus-

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sian museum collections have become an important structural element in efforts to expand the influence of Russian culture on the international arena (e.g. Plets & van der Pol 2022). A major exhibition, ‘Holy Russia – Russian Art from the Beginning to Peter the Great’, opened in 2010 in the Louvre, France (Pyatnitsky 2012). This was two years after the so-called Russo-Georgian war and became a manifestation of the influence of Russia’s ‘soft power’ in the Western world. In the exhibition, ‘the long history of Christian Russia’ is counted from Prince Volodymyr and the Christianization of Kyiv. Many objects in the exhibition have been found in Ukraine but ended up in Russian museums in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Another example at the national level is the exhibition ‘Ordinary Nazism’, which opened in Moscow on April 19, 2022, and highlights Russia’s offensive in Ukraine against ‘Ukrainian nationalism’. The exhibition supports and explains to the public reasons for the country’s invasion of Ukraine.

Today, when Russian museums are used as an important instrument of offensive state propaganda, it is extremely important to examine the role of museums in the shaping of local, regional and national identities, and to study the multicultural contexts in which they are defined and negotiated.

New research project

A new project, called ‘Sweden and Ukraine in the history of museum collections and exhibition narratives’, funded by Torsten Söderberg’s foundation, will explore the ideas behind the collecting and exhibition of Ukrainian objects in Sweden and Swedish objects in Ukraine, and their roles in shaping national identities in both countries. The project’s overall purpose is to deliver new knowledge on the history of the establishment of museum collections in Sweden and in Ukraine. A number of Swedish museums and archives have a selection of archaeological and historical objects and documents that have been brought from Ukraine (for instance in the Antiquarian Topographical Archive and the Swedish National Archives), such as visual art and maps, war banners, and archaeological finds. Some of the items came to Sweden during the Viking Age, others during the early Middle Ages or early Modern time. Together they constitute material evidence of the contacts between both countries during these periods.

The project’s main focus is history of collections with a starting point in Ukrainian objects in Swedish museums and Swedish (or broader Scandinavian) objects in Ukrainian museum collections. How and why were they brought to museum? What place do they take in historical narratives of these countries? The aim is to highlight this material and examine how knowledge about the memorabilia can influence national narratives

in both countries. Another task is to develop theoretical and methodological points that can help Swedish and Ukrainian museums identify influence campaigns. This project aims to overcome traditional national narratives of Swedish and Ukrainian historical museums, and provide ground for a common transnational history. By highlighting the history of Ukrainian museum collections it will be possible to understand their roles in the shaping of national identity, and equally the importance of a collective responsibility to protect cultural heritage in the current Russian-Ukrainian war.

The project runs for 2 years. It started in 2023, and its results will be presented in the form of a book in Swedish, and a book chapter in Ukrainian.

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