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WAR IN UKRAINE

THEOLOGICAL, ETHICAL AND HISTORICAL REFLECTIONS

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The Tools of Modern Russian Colonization: The Case of the Bakhchysarai Khan's Palace[1]

Elmira Ablialimova-Chyihoz

This article examines the strategies of cultural eradication employed by Russia in Crimea, focusing on the destructive renovation of the Bakhchysarai Khan's Palace. The study is based on findings from two projects by the Crimean Institute for Strategic Studies which investigate violations of international humanitarian law in Crimea and other occupied Ukrainian territories. The article highlights three main areas: Russia's violations of Ukraine's cultural property in general, a detailed analysis of these violations in Crimea, and the implications of the targeted renovation of the Khan's Palace. Mrs. Ablyalimova argues that these actions are part of a broader imperialistic agenda aimed at erasing Crimean Tatar cultural heritage and asserts the importance of international attention to prevent the destruction of this unique cultural site.

1. Introduction

This article summarizes the findings of two projects that have been implemented by the non-governmental organization Crimean Institute for Strategic Studies (CISS)[2] on the protection of Ukraine's cultural property in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine, including the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol, and the investigation of the crimes against it. The first project – "Violations of the Rules of International Humanitarian Law in Armed Conflict: Protection of Cultural Property" that was realized with

1 See also: Elmira Ablyalimova-Chyihoz/Denys Yashnyi, Colonization Through Destruction and Distortion: The Case of the Bakhchisaray Khan's Palace, in: Baltic Rim Economies 2 (2022) 60 f.

2 CISS. URL: https://ciss.org.ua/en/home.html. All internet links in this article were last accessed on 5 April 2024.

the financial support from the International Renaissance Foundation (IRF) – was conducted throughout most of 2019.[3] It combined the efforts of cultural heritage protection professionals, archaeologists, museum top management and lawyers. The project investigated the principal violations against Ukraine's cultural property in occupied Crimea, the policy lacunas in the field and the possible steps Ukraine can take now to document Russia's violations and hold it accountable based on state and individual criminal responsibility.

The second project – "Spreading Activities and Relaunching the Documentation of Violations: Cultural Heritage of Ukraine in Wartime" – was realized with the financial support from USAID/ENGAGE (Enhance Non-Governmental Actors and Grassroots Engagement) and began in April 2023.[4] It sustains and strengthens the efforts of the first project and extends its activity to the Ukrainian territories occupied since February 2022: the regions of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia.

The article focuses on three principal aspects of the projects:

1. overviewing Russia's main violations against Ukraine's cultural property in general
2. analyzing Russia's violations against Ukraine's cultural property in Crimea
3. exploring the destructive renovation of the Bakhchysarai Khan's Palace, the one-of-a-kind remaining architectural heritage of the Crimean Tatars, Ukraine's indigenous people, as the most striking example of Russia's impe-

3 Cf. Ukrinform, У Києві презентували дослідження про стан пам'яток в окупованому Криму [A Study of the State of Monuments in Occupied Crimea Was Presented in Kyiv] (10 December 2019). URL: https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-crimea/2835305-u-kievi-prezentuvali-doslidzenna-pro-stan-pamatok-v-okupovanomu-krimu.html; Пам'ятки археології, які потрапили під будівництво траси Керч – Севастополь [Archaeological monuments that are endangered due to the construction of the Tavrida highway (Sevastopol – Kerch)] (1 December 2019). URL: https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/embed?mid=1vBo1tHfZCKDe1Bgx6qdL9DVKf-Xn-_LP&ll=45.14520975696858%2C34.73769979726836&z=9; Elmira Ablialimova/Maksym Levada, Методичні рекомендації з моніторингу культурної спадщини, яка залишилась на території тимчасово окупованого Криму [Guidelines for Monitoring the Cultural Heritage that Remains in the Temporarily Occupied Territory of Crimea], Kyiv 2019, 8–12. URL: https://ciss.org.ua/files/site/page_file//tfilece2f3495010cc3e3570041c72815af42.pdf.

4 Cf. Mariia Kabatsii, Росія вчинила 534 злочини проти культурної спадщини України [Russia Has Committed 534 Crimes Against the Cultural Heritage of Ukraine] (28 September 2023). URL: https://life.pravda.com.ua/culture/2023/09/28/256787; UNESCO, In the Face of War. UNESCO's Action in Ukraine (CPE-2023/WS/6 Rev. 6), 6. URL: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000384454.

rialistic policy of cultural erasure in Crimea, which should not recede from the attention of the international community.

2. Overview of Russia's Main Violations Against Ukraine's Cultural Property

As of 5 January 2023, Ukraine's Ministry of Culture reported 1,189 destroyed or damaged cultural institutions or objects of cultural heritage.[5] UNESCO has been assessing the damage to cultural sites in Ukraine since the full-scale invasion. As of 27 March 2024, the organisation has verified damage to 349 sites since 24 February 2022.[6] The latter include "127 religious sites, 157 buildings of historical and/or artistic interest, 31 museums, 19 monuments, 14 libraries, 1 archive"[7]. However, the actual difference between the official data and the real damage is probably large.

Since late 2017, the group of experts of the NGO CISS has been engaged in documenting activities that have helped identify some types of violations of international humanitarian law according to the 1954 Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and its two Protocols (1954 and 1999). These are bombardments, damage, destruction, use for military purposes, illegal archaeological excavations, items/artifacts removed during illegal archaeological excavations, illicit removal or export of museum items/collections, alteration/reconstruction/construction works on cultural heritage sites, illegal underwater archaeological explorations, and the misappropriation of cultural property/cultural heritage and cultural institutions.[8]

5 Cf. Yaroslav Pryshchepa, Через війну в Україні пошкоджено 1189 об'єктів культурної інфраструктури – Мінкульт [As a Result of the War in Ukraine, 1,189 objects of Cultural Infrastructure Were Damaged – Ministry of Culture] (5 January 2023). URL: https://suspilne.media/353110-cerez-vijnu-v-ukraini-poskodzeno-1189-obektiv-kulturnoi-infrastrukturi-minkult/; Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine, 1,373 Objects of Cultural Infrastructure Have Already been Damaged Because of Russian Aggression in Ukraine (4 April 2023). URL: https://mcip.gov.ua/en/news/1-373-objects-of-cultural-infrastructure-have-already-been-damaged-because-of-russian-aggression-in-ukraine/.

6 Cf. UNESCO, Damaged Cultural Sites in Ukraine Verified by UNESCO (2 April 2024). URL: https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/damaged-cultural-sites-ukraine-verified-unesco.

7 Ibidem.

8 Cf. CISS, Register of Objects Affected by Russian Aggression. URL: https://ciss.org.ua/en/reestr-obektiv-postrajdalih-vid-rosiskoii-agresiii.html.

UNESCO also reports damage to 3,793 educational institutions across Ukraine and the killings of 14 journalists.[9] These killings add up to the legacy of persecution of civil society activists in Donbas and occupied Crimea, including representatives of the indigenous people – the Crimean Tatars[10], whose heritage has been under particular threat in the occupied peninsula since the beginning of Russia's aggression in 2014[11].

3. Analysis of Russia's Violations Against Ukraine's Cultural Property in Crimea

From the beginning of the occupation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in February – March 2014, human rights champions have been consistently detecting gross violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, including sham trials, persecution, deportation[12], discrimination against the use of the Crimean Tatar and Ukrainian languages, violations of the right to education in mother tongue and to study the history of Crimean Tatars and Ukrainians, restrictions on the development of Crimean Tatar and Ukrainian culture[13], and more.

Against this background, cultural heritage has proved to be one of the most vulnerable areas. This is manifested on many levels, namely the degree of attention from international governments and non-government agencies (crimes against persons, such as torture, persecution, enforced disappearances, and sham trials, are usually in the spotlight), the easiness and depth of documenta-

9 Cf. UNESCO, In the Face of War, 13. See also: Reporters Without Borders, More than 100 Journalists Victims of Russian Crimes During Two Years of Covering War in Ukraine (12 February 2024). URL: https://rsf.org/en/more-100-journalists-victims-russian-crimes-during-two-years-covering-war-ukraine.

10 Cf. UNESCO, Follow-up to Decisions and Resolutions Adopted by the Executive Board and the General Conference at their Previous Sessions, Part 1: Programme Issues, C. Follow-up of the Situation in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea (Ukraine) (207 EX/5.I.C) (13 September 2019), 7. URL: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000370522.

11 Cf. Centre for Defense Strategies, Cultural Heritage as an Element of National Security: the Crimea Lens, Kyiv 2021. URL: https://defence.org.ua/en/cultural-heritage-as-an-element-of-national-security-the-crimea-lens.

12 Cf. U. S. Department of State, 2019 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Ukraine – Crimea. URL: https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/ukraine/crimea/.

13 Cf. Virtual Museum of Russian Aggression, Events of the Occupation. URL: https://rusaggression.gov.ua/en/events.html.

tion and the priority of legal and political action on such violations in Ukraine and internationally.[14]

Despite the aforementioned, the documentation of violations suggests that Russia commits the following violations of international humanitarian law – the law of armed conflict – in relation to Ukraine's cultural property in Crimea[15]:

1. Illegal relocation of cultural property from the temporarily occupied territory of Crimea to the Russian Federation. Experts from the NGO CISS have been able to trace more than 700 museum items from Crimea that were exhibited in Russia from 2014 to 2020[16];
2. Illegal archeological research on the territory of temporarily occupied Crimea. The Russian authorities have unilaterally supported unlawful archaeological excavations in occupied Crimea. In 2014–2020, according to information from the NGO CISS, 410 permits for such activities were issued.[17] Many excavations 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[18];
3. Appropriation of cultural property and cultural institutions by Russia. More than 150,000 items from the Crimean Museum have been included in the State Catalogue of the Museum Fund of the Russian Federation and more than 8,000 monuments of the history and culture of Crimea have been added to the State Register of Objects of the Cultural Heritage of the Russian Federation[19];

14 Cf. Elmira Ablialimova-Chyihoz et al., Російська агресія проти України: культурна спадщина, неоімперіалізм і міжнародне право [Russian Aggression Against Ukraine: Cultural Heritage, Neoimperialism and International Law], Kyiv 2023, 5–12. URL: https://ciss.org.ua/files/site/page_file/tfilee105fec62c46a58e1f59c3512c6e1363.pdf.

15 Cf. CISS, Register of Objects Affected by Russian Aggression. Autonomous Republic of Crimea. URL: http://surl.li/uirtw.

16 Cf. idem, Register of Objects Affected by Russian Aggression. Autonomous Republic of Crimea. Illicit Removal or Export of Museum Items. URL: http://surl.li/uirvj.

17 Cf. idem, Register of Objects Affected by Russian Aggression. Autonomous Republic of Crimea. Illegal Archaeological Excavations. Items/Artifacts Removed During Illegal Archaeological Excavations. Illegal Underwater Archaeological Explorations. URL: http://surl.li/ujpol.

18 Cf. Пам'ятки археології.

19 Cf. Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, Сведения из Единого государственного реестра объектов культурного наследия (памятников истории и культуры) народов Российской Федерации. Республика Крым [Information from the Unified State Register of Cultural Heritage Objects (Historical and Cultural Mon-

4. Loss of individual elements which violates the authenticity (genuineness) of the item or object (including restructuring, adding superstructures, etc.). The most glaring example of this violation is the so-called restoration of the Bakhchysarai Khan's Palace.

4. Exploration of the Destructive Renovation of the Bakhchysarai Khan's Palace

Humanitarian aggression is one of the modern methods of the war that the Russian Federation has been waging against Ukraine. While the goal of the military aggression is the enemy's physical extermination, the aim of the humanitarian aggression is the destruction of its identity[20].

To achieve this goal, the occupying authorities:

1. conduct activities against the language, culture and historical memory
2. carry out campaigns to spread propaganda
3. make use of religious differences in order to ignite ethnic conflicts.[21]

Since Russia's occupation of the Crimean Peninsula in February 2014, human rights organizations have also reported about the "Russification"[22] of the educational process (kindergartens, schools, universities) in the occupied territory. In combination with the questioning of the Ukrainian identity and history by

uments) of the Peoples of the Russian Federation. Republic of Crimea]. URL: https://opendata.mkrf.ru/opendata/7705851331-egrkn/; idem, Государственный каталог Музейного фонда Российской Федерации [State Catalogue of the Museum Fund of the Russian Federation]. URL: https://opendata.mkrf.ru/opendata/7705851331-museum-exhibits.

20 Cf. Iryna Saienko, Інформаційна та гуманітарна агресія як визначальна сучасна загроза українській державності [Informational and Humanitarian Aggression as a Defining Contemporary Threat to Ukrainian Statehood], in: Перспективи 66 (2015) 103–109. URL: http://dspace.pdpu.edu.ua/handle/123456789/9846; Valery Leonov et al., Війни XXI століття: технології "гібридної війни" [Wars of the XXIth Century: Technologies of "Hybrid Warfare"], in: Збірник наукових праць Центру воєнно-стратегічних досліджень 53 (2015) 24–30.

21 Cf. Gregory H. Stanton, The Ten Stages of Genocide (2013). URL: http://www.genocide-watch.com/genocide/tenstagesofgenocide.html.

22 "Окупанти проводять агресивну політику русифікації та колонізації Криму […]" (Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union, 9 років окупації та спротиву в Криму: 180 громадян України досі перебувають за ґратами [9 Years of Occupation and Resistance in Crimea: 180 Ukrainian Citizens Are Still Imprisoned] (28 February 2023). URL: https://www.helsinki.org.ua/articles/9-rokiv-okupatsii-ta-sprotyvu-v-krymu-180-hromadian-ukrainy-dosi-perebuvaiut-za-gratamy).

Russia[23], this illustrates that the destruction and plunder of cultural heritage in wartime far exceeds casual damage. Indeed, cultural heritage can be a means to pursue and fuel a war.

As President Putin has declared, "Crimea, ancient Korsun, Khersones, Sevastopol – all of them bear an enormous civilizational and sacral meaning for Russia, just as the Temple Mount of Jerusalem does for those who profess Islam and Judaism"[24]. Such an attitude highlights the crucial role of cultural heritage, history, religion, education and academia as, depending on the context, tools or victims in Russia's encroachment on Ukraine's territorial and existential sovereignty. Furthermore, certain neo-imperialist assertions – such as that the people of Ukraine, Belarus and Russia are allegedly one nation or that Crimea has allegedly always been Russian – have been inherent in the Kremlin's policy towards Ukraine throughout the years.[25]

Geographically, Crimea and Russia are neighbors. Throughout their history, they have neighbored each other as independent entities for a long time. Although the names of these neighbors have changed (from the Grand Duchy of Moscow to the Russian Empire, then the Soviet Union and, finally, the Russian Federation; from the Crimean Ulus of the Golden Horde to the Crimean Khanate (until 1783), from Tavrida province of the Russian Empire to the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol of Ukraine), belligerent Russian foreign policy has remained intact and has been aimed at incorporating the neighboring lands into the empire. The official Russian policy towards the Crimean, and later Ukrainian, lands has gone through several stages with different pacing, forms, methods, intensity and effectiveness in the imperial colonial expansion; but the aim of incorporation and the process of pursuing it has constantly been maintained.[26]

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23 Cf. National Academy of the Security Service of Ukraine, Технологія русифікації Криму: імперські уроки [Technology of Russification of Crimea: Imperial Lessons] (3 April 2023). URL: https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-crimea/3446656-tehnologia-rusifikacii-krimu-imperski-uroki.html.

24 Cited in: Carl Schreck, Crimea Is A 'Sacred' Land. But for Whom? (4 December 2014). URL: https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-crimea-orthodox-vladimir-great-religion-ukraine-russia/26725761.html.

25 Cf. Duncan Allan et al., Myths and Misconceptions in the Debate on Russia. How They Affect Western Policy, and What Can be Done (13 May 2021). URL: https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/05/myths-and-misconceptions-debate-russia, especially myths 11 and 12.

26 Cf. Hulnara Abdulaieva, Кримські татари. Від етногенезу до державності [Crimean Tatars. From Ethnogenesis to Statehood], Kyiv 2021, 234–262; Serhii Plokhy, Gates of Europe. A History of Ukraine, New York City 2021, 181–247.

In 1783, the Crimean Khanate was annexed by the Russian Empire in violation of a treaty signed just a few years before. The years following this annexation were characterized by progressive restrictions on the Crimean Tatars' rights and freedoms, increasing landlessness contributing to the emigration of the indigenous people, growing tendencies of assimilation and Russification; purposeful division of the Crimean Tatar society, and predatory exploitation of the citizens and material resources of Crimea[27].

The policy of the USSR toward the Crimean Tatar people was exactly the same as that of the previous regime, culminating in the 1944 deportation of all Crimean Tatars from Crimea to different parts of the USSR.[28] Terror against its own population was the most notable trait of the Soviet Union. Inhumane conditions during the weeks-long transportation, the lack of accommodation facilities and food, the inability of Crimean Tatars to adapt to the new climate conditions and the rapid spread of diseases had an enormous demographic impact during the first years of the Crimean Tatars' exile. 46 % of the total number of the deportees died between 1 July 1944 and 1 January 1947 due to starvation and disease. All Crimean Tatars were forced to work in large-scale projects implemented by the Soviet GULAG system.

Then the Soviet regime began relocating people from Ukraine and Russia to Crimea. "Toponymic repressions" were carried out in the peninsula: most towns, villages, mountains and rivers, which had had indigenous Crimean Tatar names, were assigned new Russian names. There were some exceptions, which include Bakhchysarai and a few other towns. The Soviet authorities opened cinemas and shops in mosques, destroyed our monuments, and burned manuscripts and ancient books.[29] Nothing remained of the Crimean Tatars in Soviet Crimea, except for the Bakhchysarai Khan Palace and the ruins of some monuments from the period of the Golden Horde.

27 Cf. Hakan Kırımlı, National Movements and National Identity Among the Crimean Tatars (1905–1916) (Ottoman Empire and Its Heritage 7), Leiden et al. 1996, 1–32.

28 Cf. BBC News Ukraine, Депортація кримських татар у запитаннях і відповідях [Deportation of Crimean Tatars in Questions and Answers] (18 May 2015). URL: https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/society/2015/05/150514_tatars_deportation_ko; Gulnara Bekirova, Пів століття опору. Кримські татари від вигнання до повернення (1941–1991 рр.). Нарис політичної історії [Half a Century of Resistance: Crimean Tatars from Exile to Return (1941–1991): An Outline of Political History], Kyiv 2017, 89–131.

29 Cf. Oleh Bazhan et al. (ed.), Крим в умовах суспільно-політичних трансформацій (1940–2015) [Crimea in the Conditions of Socio-Political Transformations (1940–2015)], Kyiv 2016, 7–79.

Soviet historical records falsified Crimean Tatars' history beyond recognition.[30] Although the first steps of mythologizing the history of Crimea began to form at the end of the 18th century, the large-scale falsification of the history of the peninsula, which gave rise to many of the current myths, began after (and because of) the deportation of the Crimean Tatars in 1944. The reason for these falsifications was always the same: the need to justify the capture of new territories. Just before and immediately after the liquidation of the Crimean Khanate and the annexation of its territory by the Russian Empire at the end of 18th century, "such a policy was presented as a triumph of 'civilization' over 'barbarism'". This falsification of the history of the peninsula by the Soviet regime after the deportation of the Crimean Tatars in 1944 "justified" that deportation.[31]

The Crimean Tatars, led by the Crimean Tatar National Movement, were not allowed to return to Crimea from exile until the beginning of Perestroika in the mid-1980s. As a result, in the early 1990s, the Crimean Tatars were the third largest ethnic group in their homeland. Now the Russian Federation is continuing its former policy towards the Crimean Tatars, which consists of the obvious colonial and ideological tactics intended to modify the historical and cultural narrative of Crimea and Russify the past, present and future of the peninsula as deeply as possible.

That historical background information explains the occupying authorities' intentions in the case of the so-called restoration works in the Bakhchysarai Khan Palace. As the only surviving object of 300 years of statehood and the representative political and administrative center of the Crimean Tatar state during the 16th-18th centuries[32], the Bakhchysarai Khan's Palace has great spiritual value for the Crimean Tatars[33], who were historically formed and emerged as the indigenous people in Crimea and in the Northern Black Sea region[34].

30 Cf. Serhii Hromenko, 250 Years of Falsehoods: Russian Myths about the History of Crimea, Kyiv 2019.

31 Idem, #CrimeaIsOurs. History of the Russian Myth, Kyiv 2017, 8, URL: https://shron1.chtyvo.org.ua/Hromenko_Serhii/CrimeaIsOurs_History_of_the_Russian_Myth_anhl.pdf?PHPSESSID=iujuf8etnemr6851d3i61rq2e0.

32 Cf. Aliye Ibraghimova, Бахчисарайский ханский дворец XVI-XVIII вв. [Bakhchisaray Khan's Palace 16–18 Cent.], Simferopol' 2013, 97–176. URL: https://ciss.org.ua/site_source/strategy/sites/ibragimova.pdf.

33 Cf. UNESCO, Tentative Lists. The Historical Surroundings of Crimean Khans' Capital in Bakhchysarai. Description (24 September 2012). URL: https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5774/.

34 Cf. Abdulaieva, Кримські татари, 234–262; Plokhy, Gates of Europe, 12–150.

The complex was originally built in the 16th century as the main residence of the monarchs of the Crimean Khanate – the state of the Crimean Tatar people – and served as the political, administrative, religious and cultural center of the Crimean Tatar community. It was here that the first Qurultay (congress) of the Crimean Tatar people was held in 1917[35], and it was here that the contemporary delegates of the Qurultay swore an oath of allegiance to their people before the illegal occupation in 2014.[36]

Russia's destruction of the Khan's Palace in Bakhchysarai has reached tragic proportions, with the monument being stripped of its authenticity and turned into a shoddily renovated "new build".[37] The key factors to consider when restoring historic buildings include maintaining the building's original character and structure, and ensuring that the materials and methods used are true to the time period.[38]

The following two factors play a decisive role here:

- Applying basic scientific principles when carrying out the restoration work; compliance with the correct criteria for choosing the appropriate restoration method, and taking into account the reversibility of the works conducted.
- Use of authentic building materials and technologies, which allow for the preserving of the object's authenticity as much as possible.[34]

These factors are of utmost importance because authenticity is fundamental in many respects. 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.[39]

35 Cf. Andrii Ivanets, First Kurultai: from the Crimean Tatar Constituent Assembly to the National Parliament (1917–1918), Kyiv, 2018, 65–88.

36 Cf. Gulnara Bekirova et al., Історія Криму та кримськотатарського народу. Навчальний посібник [History of Crimea and the Crimean Tatar people. Textbook], Kyiv 2020, 181. URL: https://shron1.chtyvo.org.ua/Bekirova_Hulnara/Istoriia_Krymu_ta_krymskotatarskoho_narodu.pdf.

37 Cf. CISS, Об'єкти руйнівної реставрації. Бахчисарайський Ханський палац [Objects of Destructive Restoration. Bakhchysarai Khan Palace]. URL: https://ciss.org.ua/ua/sk_page.html?object_code=69423987d1a204e0bf9198f3e4a1fe51.

38 Cf. UNESCO, Preserving and Restoring Monuments and Historic Buildings, Paris 1972, 18–30, 49–62.

39 Cf. ICOMOS, The NARA Document on Authenticity (1994). URL: https://www.icomos.org/fr/accueil-home/179-articles-en-francais/ressources/charters-and-standards/386-the-nara-document-on-authenticity-1994.

The work carried out since 2016 has had nothing in common with restoration and its aforementioned principles. The scale of destruction is truly appalling. All the works that have been carried out since 2016 have been conducted without any thorough and comprehensive archeological surveys and structural inspections that must be done prior to the restoration works and be the rationale for any restorative interferences[40].

The Great Khan's Mosque, the oldest monument of the complex (dated 1533), was the one which the occupation authorities began to work on which not only caused the outrage of Crimean activists, but also became the subject of relevant reports of UNESCO. The 18th – 19th century roof complex of the mosque was destroyed in Autumn 2016 – Winter 2017. The authentic oak beams of the roofing were dismantled and sawn; they were then replaced with modern building materials, namely composite beams, made using OSB technology with a reinforced concrete belt. According to the information CISS received from locals, 100 % of the artisan old roof tiles were replaced with Spanish factory-made antique-stylized tiles. At the same time, the ancient technology of putting the tiles on clay was completely disregarded and modern mounts were used instead.

The works are carried out using heavy construction equipment, such as jackhammers, which led to vibrations that caused the loss of part of the decoration and damage to the paintings on the walls.

As a rule, work dismantling roofs should not be done during the autumn-winter season when precipitation levels are higher. This was unfortunately not the procedure followed by the Russian agencies working on the complex. Due to the lack of measures taken to protect the buildings from the precipitation, moisture was able to seep in and damage the monuments.

All the aforementioned damages and the additional load on the walls and the base of the buildings have already led to deformations. As a result, in 2018, the stained-glass windows shattered and numerous gaps and cracks appeared on the northern facade of the Mosque and the facade of the Retinue Building. There is also a crack on the tilted East Minaret. In 2018, a steel canopy was installed over the Khan Palace's main building without any necessary research, such as a geological survey.

40 Cf. CISS, Об'єкти руйнівної реставрації. Бахчисарайський Ханський палац. Додаткові файли [Objects of Destructive Restoration. Bakhchysarai Khan Palace. Additional files]. URL: https://ciss.org.ua/en/sk_page.html?object_code=-69423987d1a204e0bf9198f3e4a1fe51.

At the beginning of February 2022, the aforesaid actions, and the dismantling of the asphalt and soil that was being carried out in the immediate proximity to the ancient buildings, led to the subsidence and shifting of the soils. As a result, the north-eastern corner of the Retinue Building broke off from the complex wall, which led to deformation and the appearance of wide and deep cracks. To date, the so-called "restoration work" has targeted almost all the structures within the complex.

At present, the Khan Palace is a complex of architectural and historical monuments and archeological objects. As an archeological site, the Khan Palace can cover a larger area than that of the museum, which was founded as a place to display architectural and historical monuments. However, the existence of the archaeological heritage of the complex is not recognized by the occupation authorities. This has led to the carrying out of the construction works without archeological excavation, causing the loss of cultural treasures that are hidden in the soil and thrown away without any care or research[41].

The latest information received this year reveals that the roof of the famous Golden Cabinet of the Khan's Palace has been dismantled, together with the stained-glass windows.

> "The damage caused to the Palace, a religious site as well as a unique repository for Crimean Tatar history and culture, is irreversible. Such damage denudes the site of its value as a site of cultural heritage, and infringes on the ability of the Crimean Tatars, and indeed members of the world community, to enjoy the authenticity of a unique piece of this indigenous people's cultural heritage of outstanding, unique and universal value. Ukraine's human rights lawyers and prosecutors have argued that such encroachment by Russia on Crimean Tatar cultural heritage is indicative of the group's persecution on political grounds, as a crime against humanity."[42]

The Bakhchysarai Palace complex was inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage Tentative List back in 2003[43]; however, Ukraine had not yet managed to finish

41 Cf. CISS, Objects of Destructive Restoration. Bakhchysarai Khan Palace. URL: https://ciss.org.ua/en/sk_page.html?object_code=69423987d1a204e0bf9198f3e4a1fe51.

42 Evelien Campfens et al., Protecting Cultural Heritage from Armed Conflicts in Ukraine and Beyond. Study Requested by the CULT Committee, Brussels 2023, 98. URL: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/733120/IPOL_STU(2023)733120_EN.pdf.

43 Cf. UNESCO, Tentative Lists. The Historical Surroundings of Crimean Khans' Capital in Bakhchysarai. Description (24 September 2012). URL: https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5774.

the follow-up work before Russia's invasion. Russia has probably caused such irreversible damage to the site to end any likelihood of the World Heritage status.

The destruction of monuments is always carried out for an ideological purpose. The Crimean Tatar people, who do not recognize the illegal annexation and do not accept the Russian occupation, simply "do not fit" into Moscow's "Crimea-is-Russia" ideology. The answer to the question whom Crimea belongs to lies in the history of the indigenous people, in their historical memory, the memory of the native people of the peninsula and their right to self-determination in the territory of Crimea. The truthful answer to the question whom Crimea belongs to destroys all the myths that the Russian Federation is actively sowing in the Crimean society. By destroying monuments, the occupiers undermine the foundations of the purposes of cultural inheritance and continuity in the territory.

In addition, the cultural potential of heritage is vital in the identity-building process. It manifests itself in the value of heritage sites that are inseparable from their environment. Only in connection with its environment does the heritage truly survive and allow descendants to remember the cultural meanings embedded in it and realize its values in connection with important historical and cultural events.

The Russian Federation, as the successor of the former USSR and the Russian Empire, has once again resorted to manipulation and outright lies, seeking to justify the occupation with allegedly "historical arguments," most of which are disinformation and propaganda. The policy of Modern Russia in the occupied territory aims to destroy the historical and cultural ties between the peninsula and mainland Ukraine and include Crimea in its ideological paradigm. The Russian Federation uses the Crimea-related cultural and historical heritage to justify the occupation of the territory, creates new historical myths, decontextualizes the cultural heritage of the peninsula and creates a new cultural identification through forced acculturation[44].

5. Conclusions

Assaults on cultural heritage exhibit a detrimental impact on a nation's health, akin to any physical harm inflicted on its populace. These actions serve to bolster the hegemony of select nations while concurrently distorting the historical importance of others, occasionally resulting in their utter eradication. The

44 Cf. Hromenko, #CrimeaIsOurs, 8.

ongoing conflict in Ukraine serves as an illustrative example of the enduring nature of cultural property violations beyond periods of colonization, and it is often manifested in complex configurations. Despite the delayed manifestation of their repercussions, such assaults possess the potential to pose a profound threat to a nation's continuity, as evidenced prominently by the unfolding events in Crimea.[45]

The destruction of immovable heritage undermines the foundations of the processes of cultural inheritance and cultural continuity of the territory. Erasing and rewriting the history for the sake of a political agenda changes the cultural meanings embodied in historical events and monuments. The heritage of an object is preserved not only when it is physically preserved, but also when the people living in that territory retain the memory of the cultural meanings embedded in it and are aware of its value in connection with their shared history.

Therefore, by devaluing (even by means of rebuilding) the historical significance of the Bakhchysarai Khan's Palace, which is the primary symbol for the entire Crimean Tatar people, the occupying authorities are implementing a long-term plan of action aimed at destroying historical memory, changing the worldview, and assimilating the Crimean Tatars, with the intention to ignore the exclusive rights of the indigenous peoples (in this case, the Crimean Tatar people, who for the most part ignored the so-called "referendum" for self-determination in Crimea).

The tragic fate of cultural heritage in the occupied territories shows that, while protecting cultural monuments and historical places, it is necessary to concentrate not only on combating the destruction of cultural monuments, but also on preventing historical falsifications aimed at colonizing history and creating false narratives. These processes also prove the need to look for new approaches to preserve cultural heritage in the occupied territories.

45 Cf. Kateryna Busol, Crimea's Occupation Exemplifies the Threat of Attacks on Cultural Heritage (4 February 2020). URL: https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/02/crimeas-occupation-exemplifies-threat-attacks-cultural-heritage.