

(Re)-Imagining Ukraine: Culture in times of Conflict

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<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-and-ukraine-sign-landmark-100-year-partnership-to-deepen-security-ties-and-strengthen-partnership-for-future-generations>



Outline of talk

- History and the distinctiveness of Ukrainian culture
- Culture and Heritage at Risk - Some examples from the UNESCO risk register damages sites in Ukraine.
- Reimagining Ukraine - selection of images from recent exhibition, future rebranding of Ukraine as a tourism / cultural destination
- Curatorial and Artistic responses to war/conflict — How have Ukrainian artists, filmmakers, performers, and curators/museums around the world responded
- Questions

The Ukrainian nation

History

- Prehistory
 - The earliest evidence of cultural artefacts in the Ukrainian lands can be traced to decorated mammoth tusks in the Neanderthal era
 - Later, the nomadic tribes of the southern lands of the 4th century BCE, like the Scythians, produced finely worked gold ornaments such as the pectoral found in the Tovsta Mohyla mound.
- Early History
 - The earliest records of human settlement in the territory of Ukraine date back to at least 4500 BCE.
 - The land was subsequently occupied by numerous peoples, including Ancient Greeks, Ancient Rome and the Byzantine Empire.
- Modern History
 - Ukraine's modern history begins in the ninth century when the East Slavs founded the state of Kievan Rus. This became the largest and most powerful nation in Europe but disintegrated in the twelfth century.
 - By the nineteenth century, Ukraine was partly part of the Russian Empire and partly under Austro–Hungarian control.
 - Following World War One and the Russian Civil War, Ukraine emerged in 1922 as one of the founding republics of the Soviet Union.

(Lewis, 2018)

Independence

- Ukraine became independent with the dissolution of the USSR. Nikita Khrushchev, himself a Ukrainian, transferred Crimea from Russia to Ukraine in 1954.
- In 2014, after political pressure by Vladimir Putin, Crimea was annexed by the Russian Federation.
- Indeed Ukraine is the epicentre of the confrontation between the Western democratic world and authoritarian, totalitarian states. After centuries of subjugation by outside powers, Ukraine's "national idea" is resistance to authority.
- A pluralistic society is one of her strengths, but the country is more often than not fragmented by competing regional and economic interests.
- Among the country's advantages are a highly-educated population, fertile farmland and a vibrant civil society.

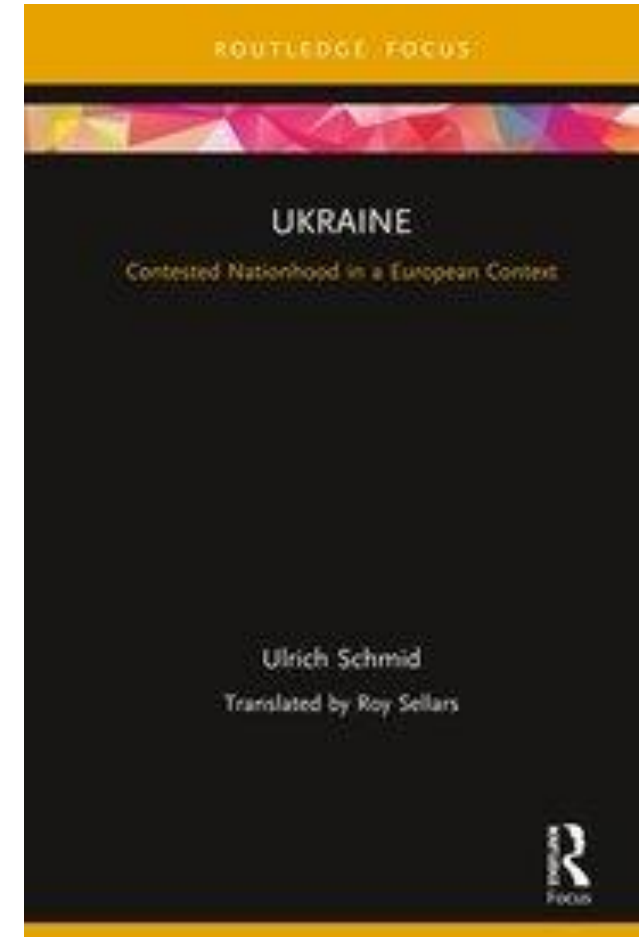
Ukraine: State and Nation Building (Kuzio, 1998)

- the transformation of Soviet Ukraine into an independent state
- the new elites and their role in the state building process
- attributes of the modern nation-state such as
- state building is an integral part of the transition process and cannot be divorced from democratisation and the establishment of a market economy.



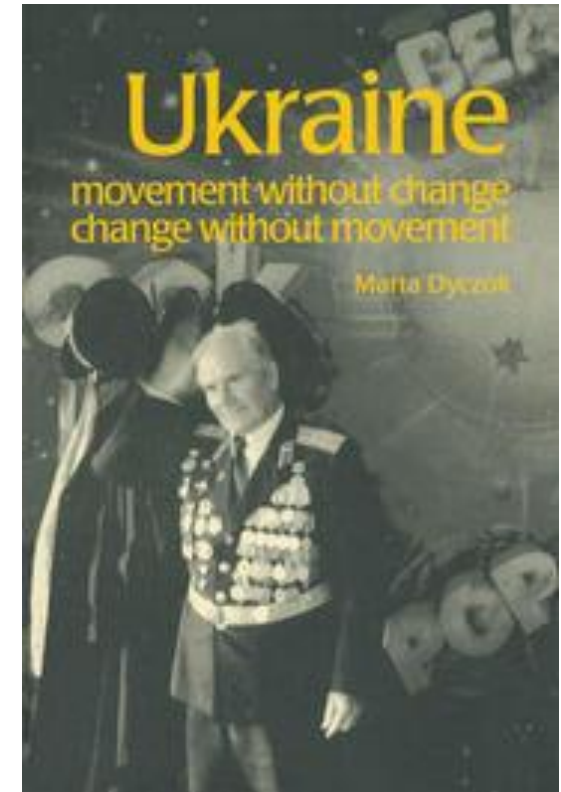
Ukraine: Contested Nationhood in a European Context (Schmid, 2019)

- Contesting the common view that Ukraine is a country split between a pro-European West and a pro-Russian East
- Complicated cultural history of Ukraine: the importance of regional traditions for an understanding of the current political situation.
- Politics of memory, such as the Soviet past being presented as either a foreign occupation or a benign socialist project.
- The pluralistic culture of Ukraine (in terms of languages, national legacies and religions) forms a nation that faces both internal and external challenges.
- Different interpretations of Ukrainian nationhood, such as the Habsburg past, the Polish connections, and the Russian influences.
- Ukraine's political and economic options for the future.
 - Can the desired integration into EU structures overcome the concentration of investment of power in the hands of a few oligarchs and a continuing widespread culture of corruption?
 - Will proposals to join NATO, which garnered robust support among the populace in the aftermath of the Russian aggression, materialise under the current circumstances?
 - Is the political culture in Ukraine sufficiently functional to guarantee democratic procedures and the rule of law?



Ukraine: Movement without Change, Change without Movement (Dyczok, 2000)

- Ukraine has surprised many international observers. Few anticipated its declaration of independence in 1991 or its determination to move out of Russia's shadow.
- A continuing dearth of information on the country.
- Government policies, and the social and cultural issues facing the new state within their historical, regional and global framework.
- In contrast with the generally bleak picture that international media reports, Ukraine has actually accomplished a great deal in a short time.
- In seven years, from 1991 to 1998, Ukraine went from being a little-known nation within a non-democratic state to an internationally recognized independent country.
- During this period of change, it contributed to the geopolitical shift which occurred with the implosion of the Soviet Union. As such, Ukraine has a role to play in the search for the new international order.



Ukraine: There's no going back (Gleason, 2016) <https://afsa.org/ukraine-2016-theres-no-going-back>

- For most of its history, Ukraine has been treated as a stateless borderland of scattered peoples wedged between competing civilizations— principally Poland and Russia.
- But over the past quarter-century, that perception has been replaced by a new orientation, a new identity that is Western in design and democratic in substance.
- Historic change is underway in their country, one that will not be reversed. And they have been instrumental in making it a reality.
- Youth especially are united in their determination to Europeanise their education and Ukraine's future.
- Young people have never lived under Soviet power. Almost two generations of students and young people, in general, have reached maturity since 1991, when the USSR imploded. Many now hold leadership positions in business and government.



As one student put it :

- “We are not hesitant. Our parents often hesitated and sometimes, even, our older brothers and sisters. We know that freedom must be earned and can disappear. It has to be fought for, sometimes. It is always fragile.”

Example: the Sherborne Guest House: a boutique hotel

- “Until 2014, 90 percent of our guests came from Russia—90 percent! But since the summer of 2014, zero guests from Russia. Not one Russian guest over the past 18 months. Not a single person. But our rooms are still full—full of Ukrainians and visitors from elsewhere.”
- “To me, that says it all. It tells me that Ukrainians and Russians are no longer members of an extended family. It also tells me that Ukraine may finally become a real country, a country more sure of itself, a country with its own identity.”
- (hotel manager)

Three Challenges (Gleason, 2016)

- Ukraine faces three major challenges that, if unresolved, could trump the passion of millions who stood on the Euromaidan in downtown Kyiv in 2013 and 2014.



The first challenge: the crushing burden of a corrupt economy

- Endemic corruption has threatened Ukraine's stability ever since the Soviet era, when bribes and kickbacks of all kinds were universal.
- Until recently, the country's economy was run by roughly a dozen oligarchs, who are unanswerable to consumers and even the Parliament (Verkovna Rada).
- State enterprises—more than 1,800 of them at last count and all overstaffed—lose money but continue to operate.
- As one student at The Kyiv-Mohyla Academy said: “When it comes to corruption, the clock is ticking. After all, both the Orange Revolution and the Euromaidan were driven by demands for justice. We may need a third Maidan.”

The second challenge: uncertainty that Western aid will continue to sustain the beleaguered Ukrainian economy.

- European and American assistance to Kyiv has made a real difference over the years.
- One example is academic and student exchanges

The third challenge: The Russian Bear

- Ukraine's biggest challenge, which can be summed up in two words: Vladimir Putin.
- Repeatedly the Russian president has refused to accept Ukraine's very existence, as when he told former President George W. Bush in 2008 that Ukraine was "not even a legitimate nation."
- No one held the Euromaidan or the Orange Revolution in greater contempt than Putin, perhaps for good reason. After all, a successful Ukraine, free and prosperous, would cast a long shadow over his increasingly authoritarian regime.
- The 2014 ouster of former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, a Putin loyalist who had attempted to bring Kyiv into the Russian-led Customs Union, only increased Putin's ire.

The reformist government is pro-European

- Though ministerial resignations over alleged backroom deals raised troubling questions.
- Putin took revenge by seizing the strategically vital Crimean Peninsula on the Black Sea and sponsoring a pro-Russia insurrection in south-eastern Ukraine.

Signs of Hope

- Parliament is moving to clean up the judiciary, a long overdue reform to a system where judges often act as political pawns.
- One detested group, the street police, underwent major change in 2015: friendly relations between police and pedestrians was , something unusually seen in previous (post-Soviet) years
- The illegal invasion and resentment of Russian President Vladimir Putin has translated into a feeling of unity among Ukrainians:
- A student at Kyiv-Mohyla said: *“Putin has done more to bring us together than any single individual I can recall. 1991 brought us independence, but not a new identity. The Maidan, and Putin’s behaviour following the Maidan, gave us what we needed: a sense of being Ukrainian.”*



The distinctive culture of Ukraine

The culture of Ukraine

- Material and spiritual values of the Ukrainian people that has formed throughout the history of Ukraine.
- Strong family values and religion, alongside the traditions of Ukraine
- Although the country has often struggled to preserve its independence its people have managed to retain their cultural possessions and are proud of the considerable cultural legacy they have created.
- Numerous writers have contributed to the country's literary history such as Ivan Kotliarevsky, Taras Shevchenko, and Ivan Franko.
- Ukrainian culture has experienced a significant resurgence since the establishment of independence in 1991.

Modern Ukrainian culture

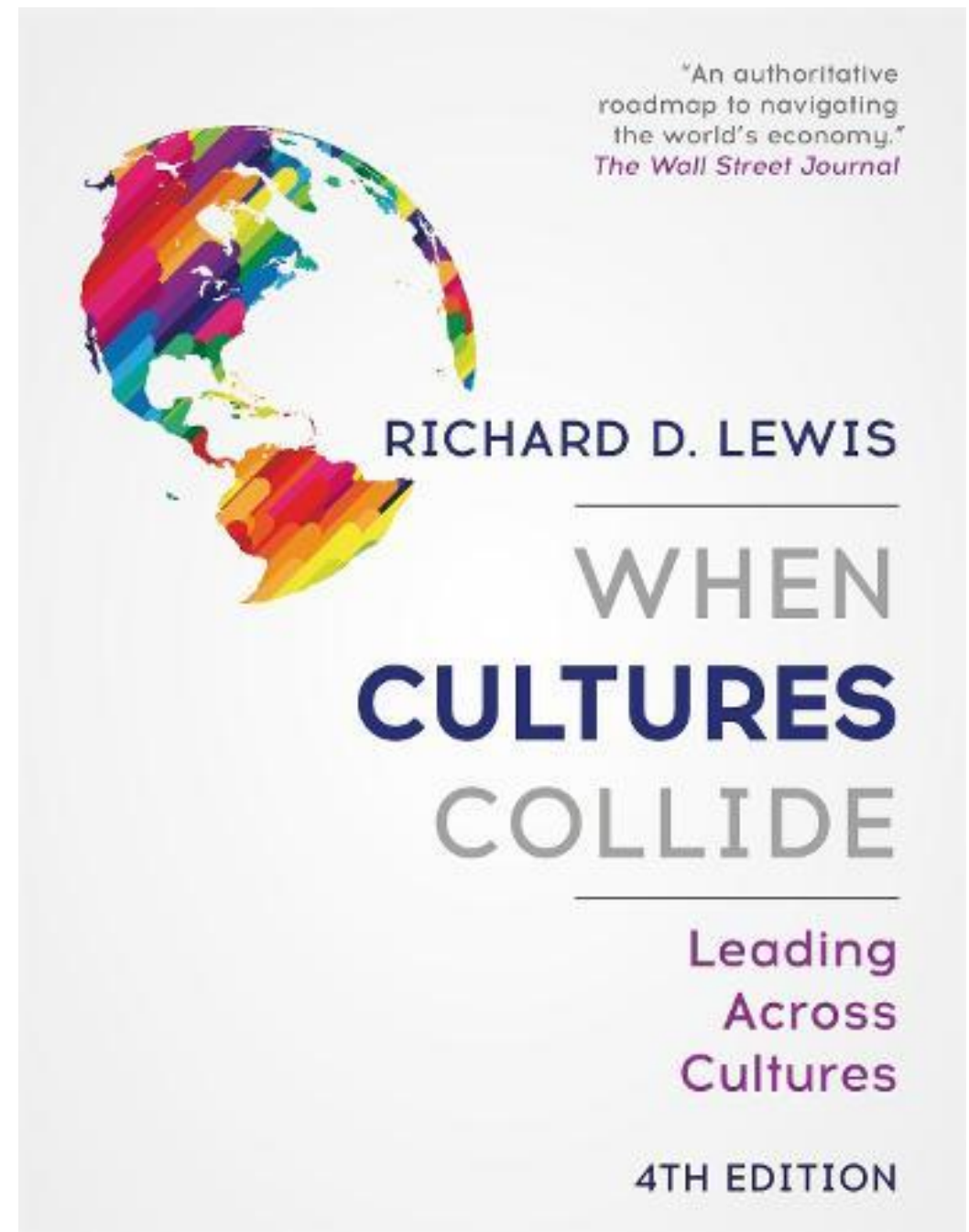
- Modern Ukrainian culture is as a descendant of the ancient state of Kievan Rus' centred in Kyiv as well the Kingdom of Galicia–Volhynia, both of which Ukrainians claim as their historical ancestors
- Traditional peasant folk art, embroidery and vernacular architecture are critical to Ukrainian culture, and its elements have often been determined by the resources available at the time. The country's strong tradition of folk art and embroidery continues to this day
- Ukrainian customs are heavily influenced by the
 - Ukrainian Greek Catholicism, Ruthenian Greek Catholicism and Eastern Orthodox Church, and
 - traditions from Slavic mythology.
- Prior to the Soviet Union, the Ukrainian culture has had heavy influence from other East Slavic cultures such as Russian and Belarusian culture.

Struggles to preserve Ukrainian Culture

- Ukrainian culture has had to overcome numerous obstacles in order to survive and retain its originality
- Foreign powers and empires who dominated the country and its people in the past often implemented policies aimed at assimilating the Ukrainian population into their own population, as well as trying to eradicate and purge elements of the culture.
 - For example, the policy of Russification posed significant obstacles to the development of the culture.
- Whilst progressing into modernity, Ukraine remains a highly traditional country, where the observance of certain customs and practices play a central role in its culture.

Ukraine (Lewis, 2018)

reference



Culture

- Ukrainians see themselves as brave, energetic, entrepreneurial, opportunistic people.
- They have a strong streak of independence and often show tenacity.
- They have strong historical consciousness.

Values

- Patriotic
 - intellectual
 - Emotional
 - Well-educated
 - Obstinate
 - Wordy
 - Collectivist
- Sentimental
 - Tenacious
 - Thrifty
 - Sometimes over-confident
 - Touchy (sensitive)
 - Grandparents important in child-rearing
 - Women prominent in politics and business



Concepts

- The word “Ukraine” means borderland and many races, both nomadic and settlers, have had their turn in dominating this region.
- In antiquity, Scythians ruled (700-200 BCE). The golden age of Kiev (Kievan Rus) was 800-1100 AD when Vladimir the Great turned Ukraine towards Byzantine Christianity.
- The rule of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth pushed the country towards Catholicism, though the peasants remained East Orthodox.
- Later, the Cossacks (fiercely Orthodox) pushed Ukraine towards Russia.
- Huge civilian losses in the World War Two and the Great Famine of 1946-47 (caused by the Soviets) led to the Declaration of Independence in 1991.
- Elderly people are generally more respected than younger.
- Well-educated people with doctors’ degrees and so on have considerable status, as have well-known artists, musicians and literary figures.
- Women are playing even greater roles in business and politics.

Space and Time

- The Ukrainians, are tactile to a considerable degree, though less in the west than in the east.
- In terms of living space, Ukraine was one of the most densely populated areas in the Soviet Union, with around 80 people per square kilometre
- West Ukrainian punctuality is similar to that of Polish—that is to say hardly on-the-dot time-keeping but making sure to be there when something important is at stake.
- In Eastern Ukraine, respect is shown for appointments in general, but occasional apathy may occur. Older people are usually not kept waiting.



Cultural Factors in Communication

Communication Pattern

- The Ukrainian communication pattern is rambling, wordy, emotional and somewhat unpredictable.
- Western Europeans and Americans may find un-usual reactions to their own advances.
- All Ukrainians, after an initial display of warmth and hospitality, pursue a tough negotiating style typified by caution, tenacity, obstinacy, and a win–lose mentality.



Listening Habits

- Ukrainians are patient listeners, eagerly seeking benefits, but react strongly to differences of political opinion.
- Ukrainian nationalism must be respected.
- Less political tendencies are listeners' expectations of emotional speech, animation, some humour and kindness toward older people.
- Suspicion is usually a factor.

How to Empathise with Ukrainians

- Stress their “Europeanness.”
- Praise their educational standards.
- Praise their artistry and aesthetic achievements.
- Respect older people.
- Be well-mannered at all times.
- Tolerate their sense of nationalism.
- Show camaraderie.
- Be humorous and drink with them when you can.

Summary (Lewis, 2018)

- Ukrainians are warm, generous, big-hearted people, who love eating, drinking, singing and dancing.
- They also are keen on all kinds of art— literature, poetry, architecture, folklore activities, painting and all visual arts.
- If you are epicurean by nature, you will enjoy the company of Ukrainians.

Learn about Ukraine

- <https://ukraine.ua/explore/>
- <https://ukraine.ua/regions-of-ukraine/>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=48OlqH0z7oU&t=57s>



War damages to Ukrainian
culture and heritage

War damages to Ukrainian culture and heritage

- During the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, damage was caused to 1,945 cultural infrastructure objects, according to Ukraine's Ministry of Culture and Information Policy.
- Cultural institutions that were damaged or destroyed by Russians military invasion and war include cultural clubs, libraries, museums, galleries, theatres, zoos, and art education institutions.
- It is estimated that rebuilding the damaged sites may take about 10 years.

<https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2022/03/europe/ukraine-war-before-after-photos-towns/index.html>





Ivan Kuznetsov provides a glimpse of Mariupol before the invasion. Credit: Ivan Kuznetsov



A damaged church shown on March 10 after shelling in a residential district. Credit: Evgeniy Maloletka/AP

Mariupol remains under siege — with recent reports showing the situation continues to deteriorate, as more residential buildings are destroyed, and debris piles up in the streets.

Culture and Heritage at Risk - Examples from the UNESCO risk register damaged sites in Ukraine.

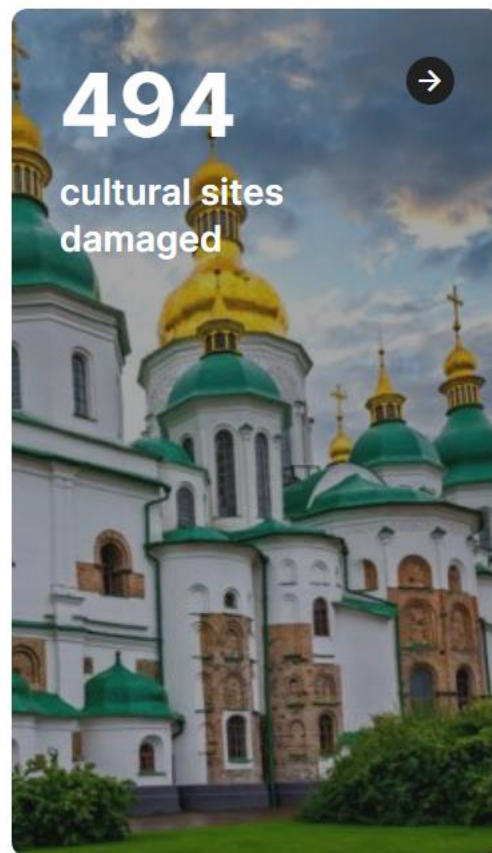
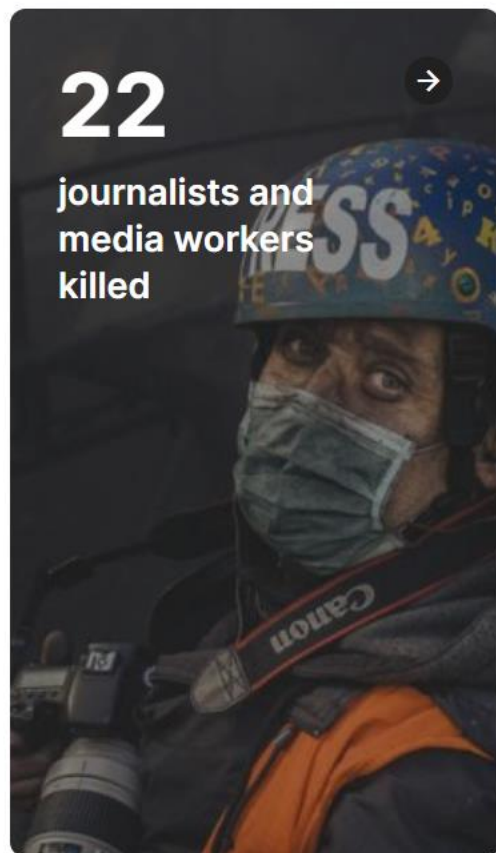
<https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/damaged-cultural-sites-ukraine-verified-unesco>

<https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/ukraine-over-150-cultural-sites-partially-or-totally-destroyed>

<https://www.unesco.org/en/ukraine-war/damages-and-victims>

Assessments undertaken by UNESCO

As of 16 April 2025



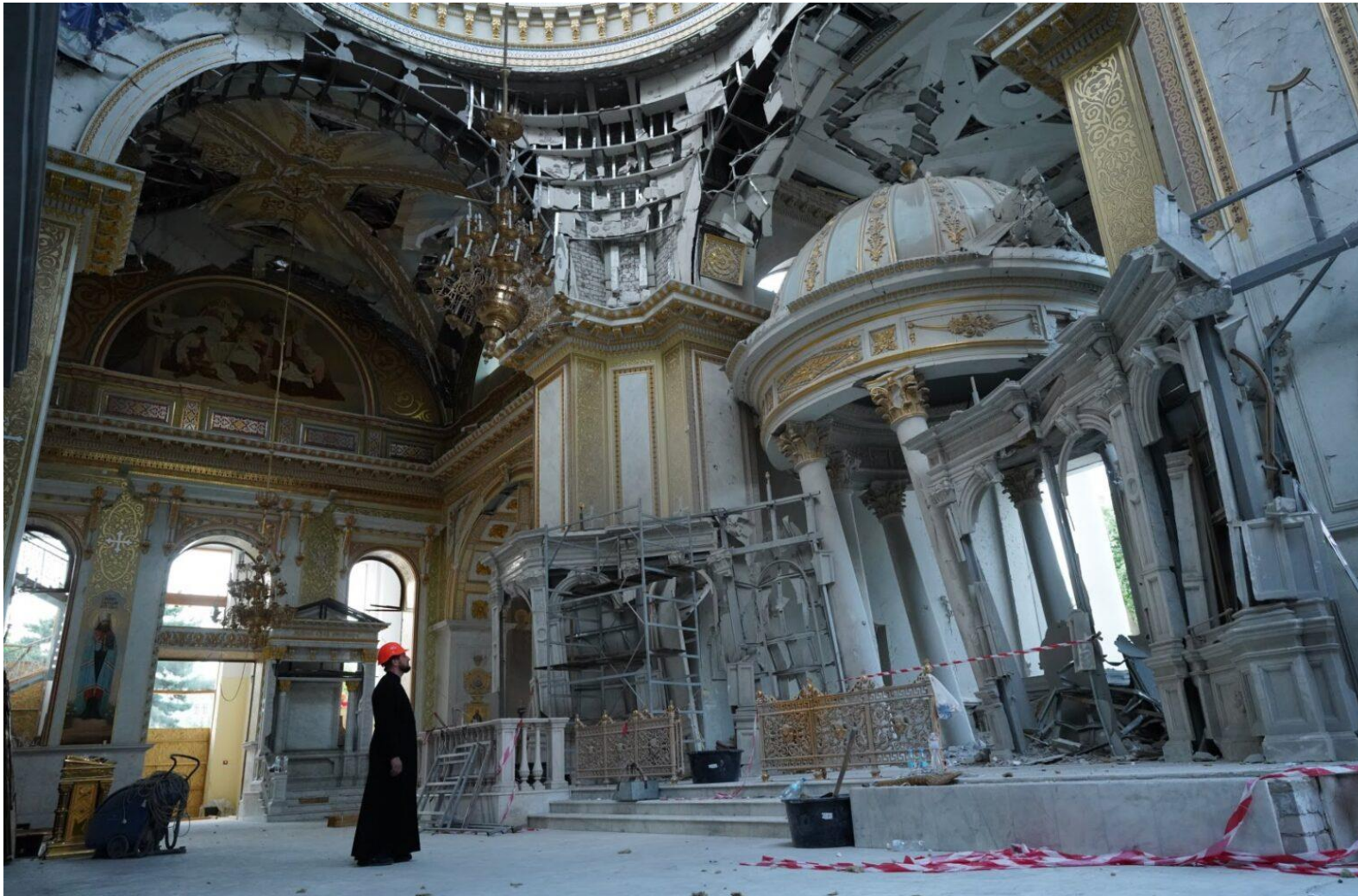
<https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/damaged-cultural-sites-ukraine-verified-unesco>

- UNESCO is conducting a preliminary damage assessment for cultural properties* by cross-checking the reported incidents with multiple credible sources.
- These published data which will be regularly updated do not commit the Organization.
- UNESCO is also developing, with its partner organizations, a mechanism for independent coordinated assessment of data in Ukraine, including satellite image analysis, in line with provisions of the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict.

**The term “cultural property” refers to immovable cultural property as defined under Article 1 of the 1954 Hague Convention, irrespective of its origin, ownership or status of registration in the national inventory, and facilities and monuments dedicated to culture, including memorials.*

War crimes: The destruction of Ukraine's cultural heritage

<https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/analysis/2025/02/war-crimes-the-destruction-of-ukraines-cultural-heritage/#>



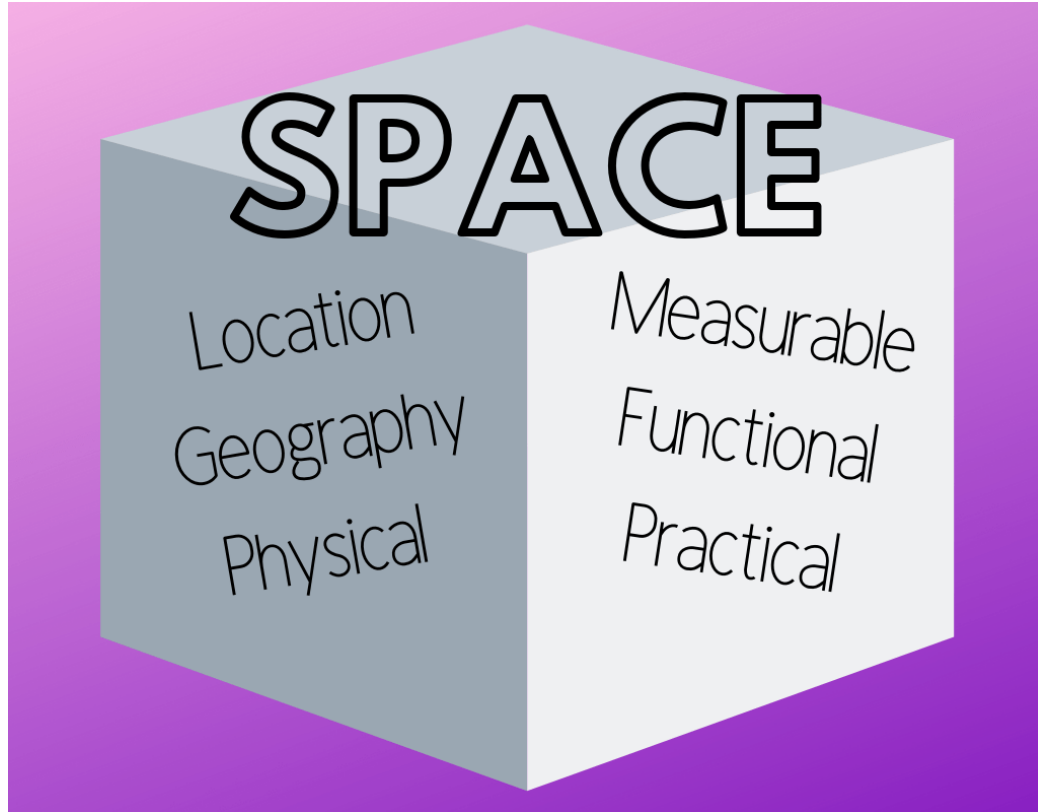
The Transfiguration Cathedral in Odesa was damaged by a Russian missile attack on 23 July 2023 Photo: Valentyn Kuzan

(Re)imagining Ukraine - selection of
images from recent exhibition, future
rebranding of Ukraine as a tourism /
cultural destination

“Imagining Ukraine: Past and Future”

- In March 2023, a year after the military invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces, academic staff, and students from six universities in Ukraine partnered with the University of Greenwich on an experimental online “Academic Exchange Project”.
- This inaugural international exchange was established to provide support to students and academic staff in Ukraine during these challenging times, as well as to offer British students the opportunity to gain understanding of the sufferings – and perseverance – of their counterparts in Ukraine.
- For a period of three weeks in March and early April 2023 we shared classes in the fields of hospitality, tourism, and live event management. It may seem odd to be focusing on these leisure-oriented studies, however we all felt that it was important to give hope and plan ahead for the future post-conflict reconstruction of Ukraine, including in the culture, leisure, and tourism industries in the longer-term future.
- Link to the exhibition catalogue: <https://tinyurl.com/UkraineAEPexhibition2025>

'space' vs 'place' (e.g. Henri Lefebvre; Dorothy Massey; Yi-Fu Tuan)



Graphics: Madeline Fink

Curatorial and Artistic responses to war/conflict



Finnish Museum Acknowledges Painter Ilya Repin, Long Classified Russian, as Ukrainian



BY **TESSA SOLOMON**

February 1, 2024 2:06pm



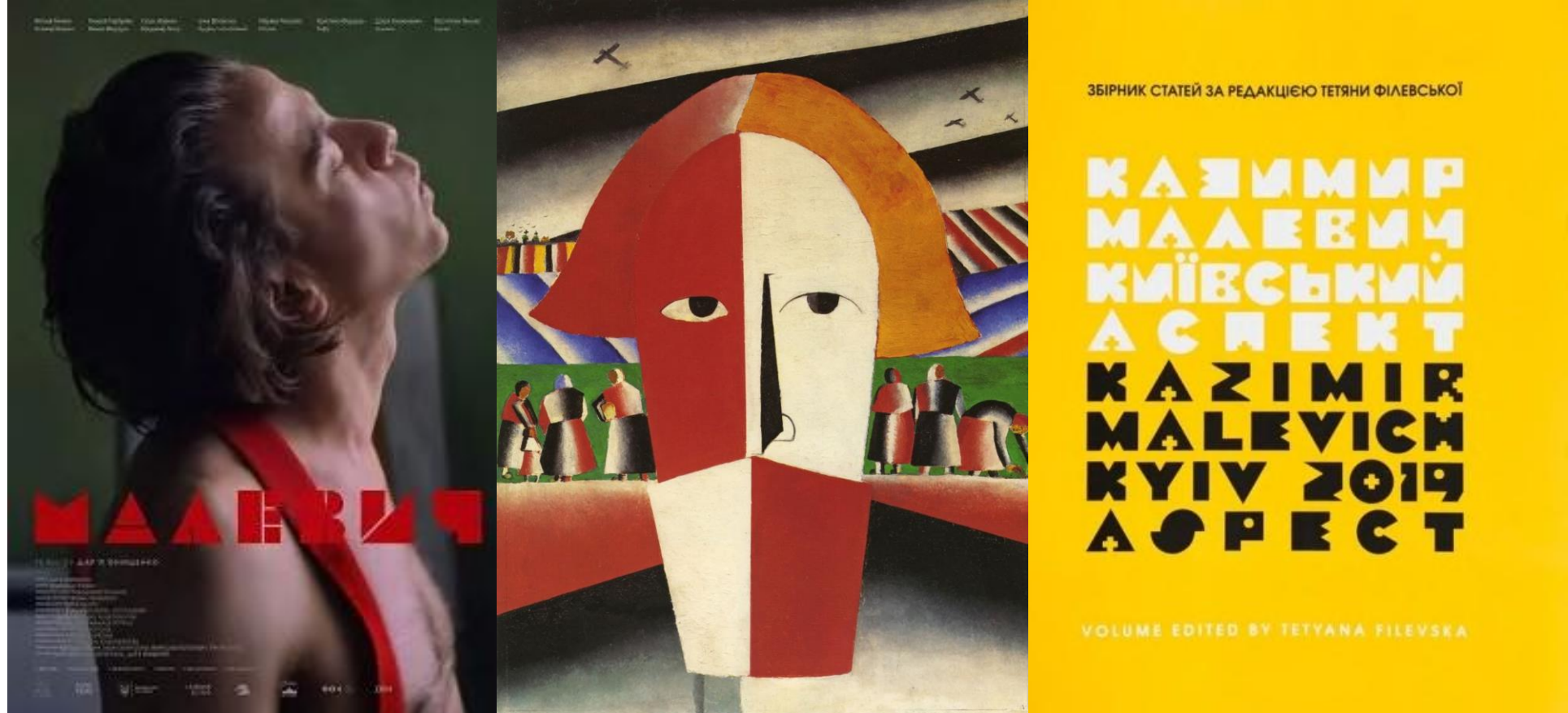


In New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art has quietly changed the name of an 1899 painting by the French impressionist Edgar Degas from Russian Dancer to Dancer in Ukrainian Dress.

The Met also holds works by Arkhyp Kuindzhi and Ilya Repin, a 19th-century painter who was born in what is now independent Ukraine. The artists were previously listed as Russian and are now categorized as Ukrainian.

Published to accompany the Royal Academy exhibition from 29 June to 13 October 2024, a major study of Ukrainian art from 1900 to the mid-1930s – with loans from major museums in Ukraine, elsewhere in Europe, the United States (including MoMA) and Israel





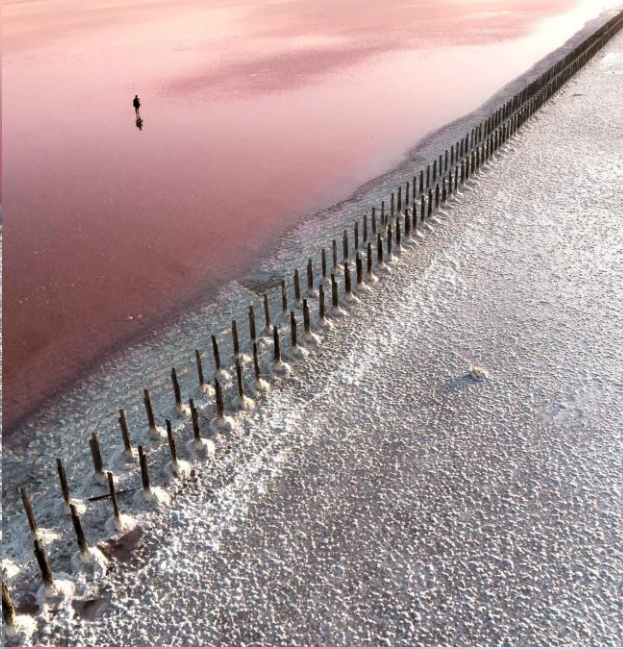
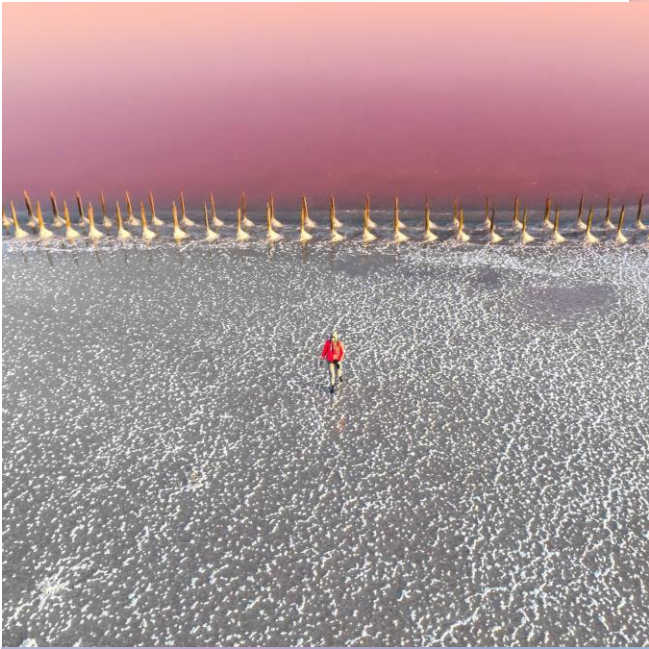
UKRAINE / SWITZERLAND / SERBIA / ITALY, November 2024
 FILM, Fiction, 90 min.

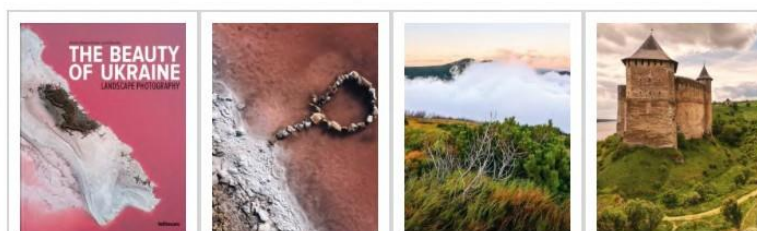
Ukraine war film 20 Days in Mariupol wins Oscar for best documentary

Eyewitness documentary shot by war reporter Mstyslav Chernov during the Russian siege of the Ukrainian city takes Academy Award - the country's first

- [Oscars 2024: full list of winners](#)
- [Full report: Oppenheimer wins best picture](#)









Installation I'm Fine at Burning Man 2024 (Photo: @пресслужба Український свідок)

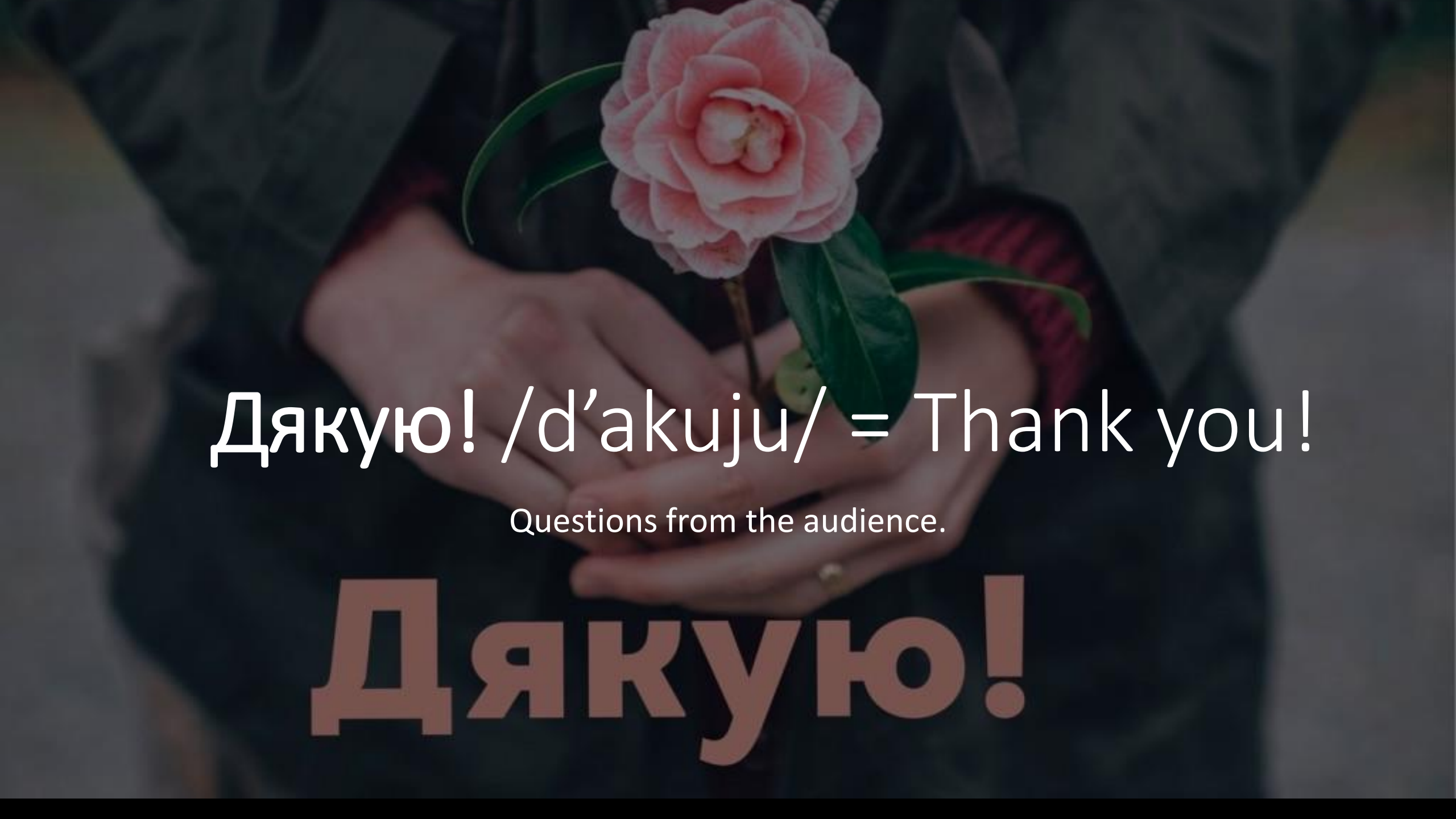
At the Burning Man 2024 festival in the Black Rock Desert, a striking Ukrainian installation titled "I'm Fine," created by sculptor Oleksii Sai, powerfully represents the impact of the ongoing war in Ukraine.





Збиті рими

FALLEN RHYMES

A person's hands are shown holding a single pink camellia flower with green leaves. The person is wearing a grey jacket and a red and black striped shirt. The background is blurred.

Дякую! /d'akuju/ = Thank you!

Questions from the audience.

Дякую!

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