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**Open Freedom to Publish Meeting: The impact of war on the freedom to publish -**  
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**Presentation**  
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It is obvious that ongoing Russia's war is not a war against Ukrainian government, or so called "Kyiv regime" as Russian authorities claim, but a **war against Ukrainian identity**, Ukrainian mental and cultural independence. This is a typical colonial war aimed at destroying the culture of the conquered territories, merging it with the culture of the metropolis.

In the first days of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a missile struck the Ivankiv local history museum, setting it on fire. Among the exhibits of the museum were the works of Maria Prymachenko, a unique folk artist, recognized by Pablo Picasso and Marc Chagall. It was the only building in the village to be struck. Later, in May, as a result of artillery shelling, the memorial museum of Hryhoriy Skovoroda, an outstanding Ukrainian philosopher and writer, was completely destroyed. The shot was accurate. There were no military targets or important infrastructure objects nearby.

One of the first things that the invaders do after occupying Ukrainian territories is a fight against language: they replace road signs, remove advertisements and information boards. They erase all traces of the Ukrainian language. Acts of destruction of Ukrainian books took place in many occupied towns. In the eyes of adherents of Russian aggressive nationalism, this has its motivation: they consider the Ukrainian language to be "fictional", and the culture to be one that simply does not exist. I'll remind the phrase said by Putin during a 2008 NATO Summit: *"Ukraine is not even a state! What is Ukraine? Part of its territory is Eastern Europe, and part – a significant one – was donated by us."*

One of the Russian propagandists, in an article published on the website of Russian state news agency, wrote directly, without false diplomacy: *"Ukrainians should be punished for understanding that they exist as a separate people, and for participating in Ukrainian cultural life, including by death, imprisonment, or sentences in labor camps."*

Deliberate attacks on culture during wartime are not new. The bombing of Guernica, a Basque town in northern Spain, by the German air force during the Spanish Civil War; the systematic destruction of Polish libraries and archives by the Nazis during World War II; attacks on cultural heritage sites in Syria by ISIS are among the better-known efforts to erase culture of the attacked territories.

The occupation and war have wrought an incalculable toll on Ukraine's writers, artists and culture workers. They are amongst the thousands killed and injured by Russian attacks,

or detained and threatened by Russian forces. Many have fled their homes and communities to reach safety; they have lost loved ones, homes, and precious possessions. They have been cut off from their creative communities and colleagues, and they have seen their studios, galleries, and exhibition spaces destroyed, damaged, and closed. Others have given up their cultural work and joined the military forces to defend Ukraine.

**PEN Ukraine** collects information about Ukrainian cultural figures who became victims of the war on its constantly updated webpage “**People of Culture Taken Away by the War**” (the latest update: February 4, 2023). (<https://pen.org.ua/en/lyudy-kultury-yakyh-zabrala-vijina> ) Not all names are listed here, but only those whose deaths have been officially confirmed. The names of those who are considered missing or those with whom there is no contact, could make a separate long list.

As of today, there are **44 people** here: writers, artists, theater and film directors, actors, cinematographers, musicians, translators, culture managers.

It’s impossible to pay attention to each of them, or at least to many of them, although each was a bright personality, a separate artistic world. I will focus only on one case – a case of children's writer **Volodymyr Vakulenko**, whose fate seems to be a vivid illustration of the brutality of this war and the defenselessness of a person against the arbitrariness of the Russian invaders.

The news that Volodymyr Vakulenko had been abducted near the town of Izyum in the occupied Kharkiv region, together with his son, first emerged in April. The details became known after the liberation of Izyum by the Ukrainian army in September. The Russian occupiers first entered the home of Volodymyr Vakulenko on March 22, seizing phones, documents, and Ukrainian books ‘for checking’. Volodymyr who never hid his pro-Ukrainian position, was aware that they would come again. Preparing for their next visit Vakulenko buried his war diary under a cherry tree in the garden. Two days later, a bus marked with Russian army’s Z-sign drove up to the Vakulenko’s house. The occupiers shoved him into the bus and took off in the direction of the town. None of Vakulenko’s relatives had seen him or heard from him since. All the time there was hope that the occupiers were holding him somewhere as a prisoner. After the liberation of the town, a body was found, which in the records of the occupiers was indicated as the body of Vakulenko. But a DNA expertise was needed. It was only at the end of November that it was confirmed that the civilian children's writer had been killed by armed Russian soldiers.

**Journalists and reporters** are the important target for Russian war criminals. In ten months of the full-scale war, Russia has committed **470 crimes** against journalists and media in Ukraine.

Starting from February 24, 2022:

- 43 journalists have been killed, 8 of them – while performing their professional duties;

- 15 journalists have been wounded;

- 14 journalists are officially considered missing, the fate of two journalists still remains unknown.

Apart from the brutal persecution of journalists, Russian attacks have been targeted against the **media as institutions**. Editorial offices have been bombarded with hacker attacks and threats of reprisals against personnel. In the temporarily occupied territories, entire media outlets have been silenced and transformed into Russian propaganda mouthpieces.

The **material losses** of culture are what we usually talk about last, but they are also colossal, often irreparable. As of October 31, UNESCO has verified damage to **210** sites, including **91** religious sites, **15** museums, **76** buildings of historic or artistic significance, **18** monuments, and **10** libraries. Tens of museums and archives in occupied territories have been looted.

[These photos](#) show the consequences of bombing of the Regional Library for Youth in the northern city of Chernihiv, also known as Tarnovsky House. Erected at the end of the 18th century, the building survived the shelling by Red Army in 1918-1919 and the Second World War. But it was destroyed as a result of an airstrike by Russian troops in March 2022. The Russians dropped three high-explosive 500-kilogram bombs on the courtyard of the library and the stadium near it.

Nothing but hatred for Ukrainian culture can explain the deliberate destruction by the occupiers of the [monument to Taras Shevchenko](#) in the town of Borodyanka. Shevchenko is a symbolic figure, a romantic poet who was one of the first to elaborate the formula of Ukrainian national identity in the middle of the 19th century. This monument will remain a symbol of the barbaric Russian attack on Ukrainian culture.

I believe that translators and publishers around the world can do a lot not only to explain the reasons behind the brutal Russian attack on Ukraine, the roots of Russia's so-called 'continental imperialism', where the imperial center exists only by absorbing the cultures of its nearest neighbors. But also to show the diversity and self-sufficiency of Ukrainian culture, which is not limited to confronting external threats, is not reduced to the key words "aggression", "war", "migration" or "crisis". To move from alarming reports about the war to a positive presentation of Ukrainian culture in a broad historical and geographical context – that's what seems very important to me now. **Ukraine is important not because it was attacked by Russia, but Russia attacked Ukraine because it is important.** It is important as an eastern outpost of European civilization, as a space where, apparently, the future history of Europe is being written, as historian Timothy Snyder claims.

A lot of important books about Ukraine have already been translated and published, many of them – during the last decade. PEN Ukraine presented a list of **30 books to understand Ukraine** on its page dedicated to the war (<http://war.pen.org.ua>). Here you can find books by Ukrainian and foreign authors in English: novels and poems, historical and cultural studies.

But, of course, far from everything important has been translated. And here another project of the Ukrainian PEN in cooperation with media initiative Ukrainer will be helpful – **100 Notable Books in Ukrainian** (<https://pen.org.ua/en/100-znakovyh-tvoriv-ukrayinskoyu-movoyu> > <https://pen.theukrainians.org>). The list contains works that created Ukrainian literature and culture as it is, and at the same time are part of world culture. Here you can find both works of the 18th century and books written few years ago. Books that are already somewhat known to the world audience, and works that remain completely unknown.

Separately, we have prepared a list of **10 literary reportage books** (<https://war.pen.org.ua>) that will help better understand what and why is happening in Ukraine. As you can see, there is a lot that has not yet been translated, so this can be taken as our wish list for foreign translators and publishers.

The **Ukrainian Book Institute** (<https://book-institute.org.ua>) also works a lot in this direction, preparing annual catalogs of the best Ukrainian books worth translating.

Although I don't believe that books can stop wars and mass crimes – because dictators mostly don't read books, except those they wrote themselves – I trust that by trying to do our best, we can make this world at least a little bit happier.