



Protecting Cultural Heritage – Learning from Ukraine

Specific lessons learned with actions and questions

Results from one-day symposium, 29th april 2026 in Bern (CH)

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Context

On 29 April 2026, the Bern History Museum hosted a half-day expert workshop on the protection of cultural heritage in times of war. Three Ukrainian experts — from the Kharkiv Literary Museum, the Odesa Fine Arts Museum, and the digitisation initiative Skeiron — shared first-hand accounts of their experiences with emergency planning, evacuation, and documentation during the ongoing war. In discussions, around 20 professionals from Swiss museums, the Federal Office for Cultural Property Protection, civil protection authorities, and other institutions exchanged practical challenges and approaches. The goal of the workshop was to turn the insights gained into concrete improvements to existing emergency plans.

Learnings	To continue	To start	Further questions
1 The Role of Culture in War			
Culture gives meaning and stability to people in crisis. It helps communities stay connected to their identity.	- Communicate about culture to public	- Keep message for communication in crisis - Plan to reopen your institution as soon as possible after attacks. - Create exhibitions that link history to current events. - Organize cultural events. Continue collecting new items if possible	- How can we communicate publicly about protecting our own culture without appearing to overshadow the human suffering caused by the war?
The protection of cultural property depends heavily on political and military priorities. Human life always comes first.	- Build relationships with local authorities and explain the worth of your collection.	- Maybe add to priority objects a short explanation of its cultural value and its value for community identity	- Who decides how to balance human life, political relationships, and cultural property protection when these priorities conflict — and is

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		- Establish contact with the military and raise awareness. Conduct joint exercises and training sessions (military/FOCP/institutions)	that decision documented in advance?
Civil society and individual commitment matter enormously. Dedicated people on the ground make a real difference — often more than formal structures.	- Valorize your team and your partners	- Identify 3 key people inside and outside your institution who would act in a crisis regardless of their formal role. - Support and recognize informal leadership.	- How can informal leadership be reconciled with the institution's formal structure and organisation chart?
Cultural heritage becomes a deliberate target in war, not only a collateral loss.	- Document damage systematically	- Raise awareness about intentional destruction of culture	- How do we ensure damage documentation is rigorous enough to support later legal action or advocacy, such as war crimes accountability?
Digital access to culture becomes essential when physical access is impossible.	- Continue digitisation efforts	- Ensure remote access to collections and archives	- Where should digital backups be stored so they remain accessible even if local infrastructure or the institution itself is destroyed?
State coordination may fail at the start of a crisis.	- Practise not relying too rigidly on plans — be ready to im-	- Familiarise the whole team with the concept of self-organisation, and practise it — cen-	

Learnings	To continue	To start	Further questions
	provide when they no longer work.	tral coordination may fail in an emergency.	
The institution's mission changes radically when a crisis starts.		- Know your wartime priorities: evacuate objects, reduce damage, stabilize the building, upgrade security (fire extinguishers, generators), and document what happens.	- Who has the authority to declare that the institution has shifted into crisis mode, and how is that communicated to staff?
International agreements may not protect your collection.		- Do not rely on international law alone. - Know who can realistically protect your objects and how.	
2 What We Learn for Preparedness			
War is personally devastating. Responders lose sleep night after night. We must not underestimate the human toll.		- Include psychological support in your emergency plan. Name a contact person (intern or extern) for staff wellbeing. - Run realistic exercises that acknowledge emotional stress, not just logistics	

Learnings	To continue	To start	Further questions
It is hard to predict how people will react under extreme stress. Expect the unexpected.	- Run regular exercises that also focus on this aspect. - Identify who is likely to stay under pressure. - Plan for reduced staff capacity from day one.	- Assign clear, simple roles. Reduce the number of decisions people must make under pressure.	
Wars last long — often without a clear end. Building and maintaining resilience is essential.		- Plan for the long term: rotations, rest periods, and replacements for key roles. - Check in with your team regularly during a prolonged crisis — not just at the beginning.	- What is the backup plan if the staff designated for rotation become unavailable during a prolonged crisis?
Prepare and evacuate before conflict begins. Once fighting starts, you can only salvage, not evacuate safely.	- Prioritise your collection - Regularly check evacuated objects for completeness and storage conditions. - Make sure someone is responsible for this — name them in your emergency plan.	- Define clear trigger points: When exactly do we start evacuating? Do not wait for certainty. - Pack priority items in such a way that they can be evacuated and transported quickly even in peacetime (using suitable crates, on castors, etc.). Store them using this packaging. Evacuation is then very simple and quick. Store im-	- How can the need for everyday accessibility of a collection be reconciled with the need to prepare it for emergency evacuation?

Learnings	To continue	To start	Further questions
		portant items in strategically sensible locations. - Seek contact with political decision-makers and raise their awareness even in peacetime. This is to ensure that evacuation remains a possibility and is not prohibited.	
Established systems break down fast. Informal networks become critical during the chaos phase when normal suppliers and services fail.	- Keep a contact list with people (not only institutions)	- Add informal contacts, community members who could provide practical help. - If the crisis comes to a head, print out all important documents (addresses, evacuation plans, etc.) on A3 paper and laminate them (it must be possible to work using paper copies).	- Who exactly should be part of this informal contact network?
Work is built on trust — and secrecy at the same time. Sensitive information about cultural property locations must be carefully managed.	-	- Emphasize the balance of trust and secrecy in your preparedness work	- How do we reconcile the need for secrecy about cultural property locations with sharing evacuation plans broadly enough for informal networks to act quickly?

Learnings	To continue	To start	Further questions
Be aware that other actors (including governments) may have their own interest in cultural property — whether it is evacuated or not.	- Keep contact with your stakeholders	- Know your legal framework: what protects your objects under national and international law?	- How do we respond if another actor — state or non-state — tries to claim, seize, or misuse evacuated cultural property?
Communication chains must function even during infrastructure failures.	- Maintain emergency contact lists	- Prepare alternative communication channels	- Which communication channels should be tested first?
Preparedness is not a one-time project but a continuous process.	- Regularly review plans, run exercises, and keep preparedness present in everyday work.	- Embed preparedness into institutional strategy and governance	
3. International Support			
Fast and simple international support is vital — but it works best through personal contacts.	-	- Identify international contacts in your field - Attend international meetings not just to learn, but to build personal relationships.	- What role should our local, cantonal, or federal authorities play in this?
This confirms a key crisis principle: know the right people before the crisis hits.	- Keep a contact list with people (not only institutions)	- Practice reaching out: a short message or visit goes a long way before a crisis.	

Learnings	To continue	To start	Further questions
Peer-to-peer exchange between practitioners is extremely valuable. Shared experience builds trust and practical knowledge faster than formal training.	- Organize regular exchanges with colleagues from other museums or heritage agencies - Share your own emergency plans and invite feedback. Do not wait until everything is perfect.		- How coordinate and maintain this peer-to-peer network in the long term?
A Note on Ukraine			
Ukraine has become one of the most digitally advanced countries in the world. This has supported documentation, communication, and coordination of cultural property protection — even under war conditions.		- Digitize your collection - Use standardized formats - It is still possible to store records on microfilm, with storage at the archive in Heimiswil (please contact the Federal Office for Civil Protection and Disaster Management)	