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V. I. VERNADSKYI NATIONAL LIBRARY OF UKRAINE IN THE SOCIAL CATASTROPHES OF THE 20TH AND 21ST CENTURIES: EXPERIENCE IN COPING WITH DISASTERS

Dear Mr. Scholze, dear members of CENL,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak at this Conference meeting and to present our views on the security status of libraries in Ukraine and tell about our experience in confronting emergency situations.

The example of V. I. Vernadskyi National Library of Ukraine deserves special attention. Knowledge of its history is crucial for appreciating the current state of preservation of historical heritage and the possibilities for its study. In the context of ongoing underfunding, and especially now during the Russian aggression, this understanding is vital for assessing risks and prioritizing tasks regarding the security measures for the historical cultural heritage remaining in Ukrainian libraries after the cataclysms of the 20th century.

The first social catastrophe for Vernadskyi National Library was the First World War and the revolutions in Russia and Ukraine. It was created in a very difficult time of the destruction of all state foundations.

It was established in 1918 by the first Ukrainian government, under the directive of its leader, Hetman Pavlo Skoropadskyi, and the Minister of Education, Mykola Vasylenko, as the National Library of the Ukrainian State. It became the first Ukrainian national institution, alongside the National Academy of Sciences and the National Opera Theater, following the declaration of independence from the Russian Empire during the Ukrainian Revolution of 1917–1920.

The bloody struggle for power and the change of governments was accompanied by the destruction of cultural values, including a huge number of private and state library collections of the previous tsarist time. Our library became the main center for accumulating derelict collections.

There were only three such centers in the country, primarily in cities of regional significance, including Kharkiv and Odesa, which are currently under fire from Russian shells. Our library conducted in-depth research on the history of libraries in the 20th century, published many works on the history of historical and cultural collections, and issued many special reference books, which first appeared only during the period of independence.

In 1919, with the Bolsheviks coming to power, the word "national" in the name of our library was replaced with "all-people's," as Soviet ideology declared international upbringing and renounced national identity as one of its tenets. In its early years, the library was led by renowned scholars who worked at the National Academy of Sciences and developed its activities across all dimensions of a public and scientific library. The significance of establishing such a library cannot be overstated, because until then, Ukraine, being a part of the Russian Empire, lacked its own national institutions. However, many scholars were repressed and numerous were executed in the late 1920s to 1930s. The library was left bereft of its intellectual potential. It was only at the end of the 1980s that this cadre began to be revived. The establishment of Soviet power diminished the national functions of libraries, and until the 1990s, no Ukrainian library held the status of a national library. In the late 1920s and mid-1930s, Soviet authorities completely eliminated the libraries' national functions

regarding the preservation and research of historical cultural heritage. Only those manuscripts and printed books approved by the authorities remained accessible.

Although the Soviet authorities announced a policy of opening a large number of mass and public libraries for the education of the populace, the collections of these libraries began to be supplemented with political and ideological literature. This literature was aimed at strengthening the new government and shaping mass consciousness based on Bolshevik ideology.

The annexation of Western Ukraine before World War II also involved the nationalization of many valuable private collections from this region, which became part of the library established in Lviv under the auspices of the National Academy of Sciences. After the war, this institution gained independent status as a separate library, now known as the Vasyl Stefanyk Lviv National Scientific Library.

The Second World War played a fatal role, as did the activities of the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg, which exported valuable collections of literature for study by ideologues who were enemies of National Socialism and cultural heritage funds, which only partially returned to Ukraine. Meanwhile, during the war, VNLU gathered all the collections of scientific libraries in Kiev. After the war, for almost 20 years, until the mid-1960s, the library became the main public library in Ukraine.

But it wasn't only wars that damaged the collections. In 1964, the library suffered from a fire that destroyed 10% of its holdings, mostly from the Soviet period, although, fortunately, the historical collections and bibliographic compilations were not affected. From 1965, the library once again came under the full jurisdiction of the Academy of Sciences, which began to process these holdings very slowly and to make some of them accessible. In 1968, another fire occurred in one of the buildings where the preserved newspaper collections were stored, but most were also saved. The government allocated special funding to save library collections and carry out repairs. The library was restored for several years after this, the collections and catalogues were checked, and additional premises were built for the library.

Other accidents also occurred, such as in October 2002, when a hot water heating system failure resulted in several floors of the book storage area being flooded where valuable collections were kept. Only the heroic efforts of the librarians and city authorities minimized the damage. We are the only national library of Ukraine that has suffered so much from wars, revolutions, fires and floods.

Thus, gaining independence opened a new path for both large and small libraries towards self-development and fulfilling the functions of libraries in a democratic society. Starting in the 1990s, several leading libraries were granted national status, including the National Parliamentary Library (now The Yaroslav Mudryi National Library of Ukraine (The Yaroslav the Wise National Library of Ukraine)), the National Historical Library, the National Library of Ukraine for Children, the Vasyl Stefanyk Lviv National Scientific Library, the Odesa National Scientific Library, and a number of scientific libraries of sectoral academies of sciences (medical, pedagogical, agricultural). The National Law Library was established at VNLU.

Despite difficulties, the sense of freedom and the remarkably active effort to fill historical and cultural gaps, the initiation of a national bibliography, and the integration of true spiritual values of the native culture and historical knowledge into the building of a new society became the most important motivation for librarians and library scholars. Colossal work was undertaken to reintegrate the book heritage and names of "forgotten" figures into the free scientific and cultural circulation, enabling the formation of a new generation of citizens free from the ideological constraints of the previous mentality. The libraries themselves published numerous historical works, reports on their activities, bibliographies, and catalogs.

Today, the collective holdings of Ukraine's national libraries is a shared asset not only for Ukraine but for global culture as well. These libraries form the modern national library book collection, among which two libraries-ours and the Lviv National Library - hold the majority of the cultural heritage from the earliest times to the present day.

This period of free development and expansion of libraries continued until the early 2020s.

The onset of Russian aggression plunged libraries once again into a state of destruction and suffering. Over two years of war, 131 regional public libraries have been destroyed and more than 746 libraries have sustained various degrees of damage and require extensive repairs. The total losses to library collections exceed 1.5 million volumes. Although these library holdings contain a significant amount of materials that can mostly be restored with the same books (duplicates) from other libraries, for national libraries with historical cultural heritage, this could be a disaster.

Therefore, the issues of safety and protection of cultural heritage have taken on new dimensions and significance. However, there are other threats that directly affect the preservation of libraries, arising from the consequences of the ongoing war. The support for maintaining library buildings has been left without funding, as they suffer damage from falling debris from shells and blast waves, unfortunately also affecting roofs, which have started to leak and require significant repair costs that the state currently does not have. We feel the consequences of the destruction of library and urban communications, fire protection systems, and the danger of man-made floods, for example from the destruction of large dams, power stations, etc. We feel the lack of heating and electricity. The possibility of terrorist acts and cyberattacks cannot be dismissed. We continuously back up resources thanks to your help.

There are issues with shelters and their equipment capabilities. We are working to improve safety measures. We have relevant instructions from the government and other authorities, but the main work focuses on engaging with the library team, analyzing the library's condition, and conducting training sessions. Special instructors and psychologists are invited to help staff cope with the heavy burden of the daily consequences of war and provide moral support. These measures are carried out strictly on a voluntary basis by the specialists.

In addition to professional security services, our library has a team of young people who voluntarily assist the security staff by maintaining the library's safety during times of danger, standing guard around the clock both inside the building and on its surrounding premises. They have experience from the winter and spring of 2022 and have prepared special instructions to prevent unauthorized access to the buildings. For our library, which has two large buildings in strategic areas of Kyiv, this is crucial. They already have relevant experience from the period when Russian troops were near Kyiv.

Significant damage is caused by emergency power outages, both during the night and day, resulting from daily air raids when all transport is halted, affecting the efficiency of library operations. There is also a reduction in funding for specialist salaries, which undermines the professional library staff. Under these conditions, the majority of national libraries are forced to reduce salaries, impacting the ability to properly support library technologies. We also perceive this as a catastrophe.

Historically, V. I. Vernadskyi National Library of Ukraine, as the country's largest library, has always played a crucial role in collecting, preserving, and disseminating scientific, cultural, and historical knowledge. However, it is important to note that throughout the 20th century, there were significant irreparable losses to the historical heritage during periods of revolution and World War II, as well as fires and other disasters. It is difficult to comprehend how much was lost during these times of trial. According to our data, nearly half of the collections that existed before 1920 were lost.

V. I. Vernadskyi National Library of Ukraine also plays a key role in developing and implementing strategies for preserving cultural heritage, incorporating cutting-edge technologies into library practice, and creating resilient electronic resources while ensuring access to them.

The library's current initiatives include international collaboration and exchange of experience in the protection of cultural values. It is crucial to also have financial support to enhance the effectiveness of security measures aimed at protecting Ukraine's cultural heritage. However, the financial situation does not allow us to resolve all the issues of risk reduction.

However, it is important to realize that war, in addition to its social consequences, significantly exacerbates possible environmental disasters, and there is a close connection between them.

Thousands of people gave their lives to save these collections that remained after all the catastrophes of the 20th century. And we are making all our efforts to save them.

Thank you for your attention.