

A r o l s e n
A r c h i v e s

International Center
on Nazi Persecution

The preservation of cultural heritage in Ukraine

**Needs Assessment Report
on Ukrainian Archives**
Short Version

June 2023

Background and Objective of the Report

We conducted this needs assessment because we recognize the importance of the archival collections in Ukraine that are currently at risk. We are aware of the destruction and looting that has taken place, and we understand that the Russian invader is using history as a weapon. Against this background, we see it as our responsibility to help ensure that these collections are preserved.

Specifically, we are most interested in preserving collections related to World War II, the persecution perpetrated by the National Socialist government, and the history of the immediate post-war period, when many people faced a second round of victimization, this time at the hands of the Soviet authorities in Ukraine.

In the past, we have provided ad hoc support to colleagues in Ukraine who were in need. However, we wanted to explore the possibility of doing more in a systematic and evidence-based way and consider the options of contributing to existing initiatives or helping to coordinate efforts to protect archives.

To achieve this, we initiated a limited Needs Assessment Mission in March 2023. The project involved one of our archivists – a Ukrainian citizen – and a freelancer who is familiar with NAM methodologies in the area of human rights. The project had a limited duration due to the urgency of the situation and our limited resources.

The structure of the report is as follows: We initially describe the methodology and our key recommendation. We then describe our main findings, providing an overview of the situation in Ukrainian archives that includes reports on the amount of damage incurred and on work in progress on the physical conservation, digitization, cataloguing, and indexing of archival



Card index from State Archives of Vinnytsia Region
Photo: Hanna Lahun, June 2023

materials. The section on findings is followed by conclusions and recommendations. We also provide an overview of major initiatives and cooperative projects that support Ukrainian archives and finish with a summary of the main needs of the Ukrainian archives and a short description of the situation in each of the archives included in the needs assessment.

Methodology

We interviewed 23 people between 9th March and 4th April, including representatives from nine Ukrainian state regional archives and 11 experts. These experts come from archives, museums, and civil society organizations in Germany, Ukraine, and Poland. Additionally, we gathered and studied relevant literature on the subject. You can find the names of the interviewees and the list of the documents we consulted in the annex.



District archive in Velyka Oleksandrivka
Photo: Vladyslav Litkevych, March 2023

Key Recommendation

Our main recommendation is that Ukrainian archives be given help with digitization. Since there is a high demand for support, we advise donors to prioritize and coordinate their efforts. Archives operate under different conditions depending on their proximity to the front line. Therefore, any projects or initiatives should be tailored to the specific needs of each archive; their security, safety, interests, and capacity for collaboration and implementation also need to be taken into account. While we understand that coordination may take time, the people we spoke to emphasized that any help would be highly appreciated.

Findings

Overview of the Situation – Physical Destruction

Even prior to the invasion, the situation of Ukrainian archives was dire. Our interlocutors highlighted the following problems: insufficient funding for preserving their collections and undertaking new projects, a shortage of human resources for maintaining their materials, and bureaucratic obstacles.

The war brought large-scale destruction, impacting infrastructure, buildings, and archival materials; it also led to the loss of staff. In April 2023, the UNESCO verified damage to 251 cultural sites, including 22 museums, 12 libraries, and 1 archive.

Ukrainian archives are facing difficult situations, including shelling and physical destruction, as well as a lack of equipment, basic preservation tools, and qualified staff. There is a significant shortage of tools and materials for physically preserving documents.

Representatives from archives in Chernihiv, Mykolaiv, and Kherson confirmed that their buildings have been damaged. The representative from the Archival Administration of Beryslav District informed us that the archival building in Vysokopillya has been mined. The archive in Kherson was occupied, leading to looting and the destruction of documents and equipment. In archives whose buildings have been damaged or destroyed, documents are left unprotected, causing them to deteriorate even further due to harsh weather conditions like rain and snow.

Due to their proximity to the front lines, some archives had to move their collections very quickly, causing them to become disorganized. The archives that received these materials had to allocate resources (such as staff and space) to accommodate the newly arrived collections. This put an additional burden on their own insufficient resources.



District archive in Velyka Oleksandrivka
Photo: Vladyslav Litkevych, March 2023

Regional state archives have started working again after a short break when the war began. Most archives are facing the problem of not having enough skilled staff, as they have lost up to half of their employees. As a result, they are prioritizing their work and focusing on the most important tasks.

Physical Conservation

Preserving physical documents is challenging because not enough equipment, people, or money is available. The authorities are focusing on giving shelter to people who have lost their homes, so repairing the archives is not their main priority.

Even basic supplies like stationery are hard to get, and the documents are already delicate, making their conservation difficult. Moving the documents could make things worse, so archives whose buildings have been damaged or affected by shelling need special equipment for preservation like dehumidifiers, archival boxes, shelves, battery-powered LED lamps, thermometers with humidity readers, quartz lamps for disinfection, and other necessary items.

In addition, there is a general lack of technical equipment. For example, the State Archives of Kherson Region had no printers or computers because they were stolen along with other equipment. Although some organizations have stepped in to provide fire protection equipment and to help with preserving physical documents, many of the archive's needs remain unfulfilled, and much more support is required.

Institutions such as the German Federal Archives, Museum Berlin-Karlsborst, the Pilecki Institute in Poland, and Saving Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Online have provided support to Ukrainian archives.

Digitization

Many archives we spoke to are focusing on scanning, preserving, and storing their documents digitally. Our interlocutors emphasized that digitization is the most important way to preserve Ukraine's cultural heritage. In regional state archives from Vinnytsia, Kropyvnytskyi, and Poltava, the entire workforce is busy digitizing and preserving documents.

Our interlocutors complained of not having enough scanning equipment in order to be able to produce high-quality scans of their docu-

District archive
in Vysokopillya
Photo: Dina Shelest,
July 2023



ments. Archival specialists receive brief training in preparing documents for scanning. The large volume of materials combined with limited resources and the lack of a systematic plan with clear priorities and success indicators makes it hard to assess progress.

Each archive has its own guidelines and priorities for digitizing documents. Once digitized, the documents are often published on the archives' websites. However, searching for specific documents, people, or locations is difficult or even impossible due to the lack of metadata and technical search capabilities. Archives create search guides that provide descriptions of the documents and enable some thematic research. There is also an interest in sharing best practices for digitization and exploring solutions for indexing, such as digital cataloguing and deeper indexing methods.

To improve search results, software support would be beneficial. Specialized archival software for Ukrainian archives is available, but it is expensive for archives to buy. Open-source programs have limited cataloguing features and do not meet the needs of the archives.

Many archives face challenges regarding the storage of digital documents. Some archives have received servers or storage space because the storage available to them was insufficient. There is still a risk that some archives might run out of capacity, especially in view of the increased efforts going into digitization. Additionally, we were not able to confirm whether all the archives have backups of their materials. Currently, there is no general solution for backup copies or measures to protect against unexpected power outages.

Cataloguing and Indexing

Indexing is crucial for comprehensive and user-friendly access to archives. To carry out indexing, it may be necessary to involve specialists who are familiar with the local language and geographical specifics, as archives may not have enough staff to do everything themselves. One option is to collaborate with companies that have experience in indexing archival data. Another option is to establish small indexing hubs in partnership with NGOs, fostering close information exchange with the archives. This could be particularly helpful for complex geographical and topographic names, where archives can provide information on old names and administrative structures. In this case, support from German experts or the Arolsen Archives may be required for geographical data and for the names of facilities related to the Third Reich. Further discussions with the regional state archives should address this issue.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Ukrainian archives are facing difficult situations, including shelling, and physical destruction as well as a lack of equipment, basic preservation tools, and qualified staff. There was looting in the archive in Kherson and in other smaller archives and institutions that survived occupation, and documents were destroyed. There is a significant shortage of tools and materials for physically preserving documents.



Kalinindorf museum, Kalynivske
 Photo: Kobets Viktor, May 2023

- Archives operate under different conditions depending on their proximity to the front line.
- Despite the challenges, Ukrainian archives continue to receive new documents and answer citizens' inquiries. However, the process is slow, and prioritization of tasks is necessary. Scanning and digitization are considered a priority for the preservation of Ukrainian cultural heritage.
- Obstacles encountered in connection with scanning and digitization include a lack of equipment and staff, the different quality, condition and formats of the materials to be scanned, and the decrease in available resources due to the war. All archives reported that they need scanning equipment and materials for physically preserving the documents after scanning.
- Given the vast quantity of documents, digitization is a long-term process. The focus of digitization activities for the Arolsen Archives should be determined in collaboration with the archives, potentially prioritizing documents from the period of Nazi persecution or other relevant collections. The archives should have the flexibility to choose documents for scanning based on their own priorities and use the equipment for their own purposes as well.
- Indexing should be a priority alongside scanning and digitization to enhance the usability of documents for the public and for researchers. Options for indexing include engaging external companies or local initiatives. Further discussions on indexing can take place with the regional state archives.
- Careful consideration should be given to the need for cloud storage, servers, and software, taking into account costs and sustainability. Equipment donations or long-term free usage are preferred over direct fund transfers to the archives.
- There seems to be no overlap with the activities of other organizations, as they focus on specific areas such as genealogical research (Family Search) or Jewish heritage (Babyn Yar).
- The archives expressed an interest in exchanging best practices and collaborating with the Arolsen Archives. Many archives appreciated the opportunity to discuss their challenges and seek support.
- All archives recommend donations of equipment or goods instead of direct fund transfers to them.

Initiatives / Cooperation and Support for Ukrainian Archives

- In 2022, the German Federal Archives donated some equipment to the archives.
- The State Archival Service and the National Archives of the United Kingdom signed an agreement to transfer backup copies of digital materials to the National Archives of the United Kingdom for safekeeping.
- Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge (the War Graves Commission) has started collaborating with Ukrainian archives. They are currently seeking permission from the state archival service, and confirmation of available funding is pending. In 2022, they supported archives in Kropyvnytskyi and Kharkiv.
- The Museum Berlin-Karlshorst initiative, which is funded by the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, has provided 390,000 euros worth of equipment to support museums, archives, libraries, and research institutions.
- SUCHO (Saving Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Online) has received equipment from the National Library of Sweden and the Society of Archives and Records Management.
- Ukrainische Archive Retten (Saving Ukrainian Archives) is a fundraising campaign led by the Pilecki Institute Berlin and RAZAM (Belarussian opposition activists) in collaboration with the Alliance of Ukrainian Organizations and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church Community, with support from the Federal Archives.
- The Arolsen Archives have supported digitization projects in the regional archives in Vinnytsia and Kropyvnytskyi. In general, they were able to support five big and five small archives by providing both scanners and first-aid equipment.
- The State Archival Service of Ukraine is working together with a company called Family Search, based in the US, to digitize genealogical documents. In 2020, the state archives of Ukraine, along with the central state archives and 12 regional state archives, signed a Memorandum of Cooperation with Family Search.
- The State Archival Service is collaborating with a local foundation called Babyn Yar, which focuses on digitizing documents related to Jewish heritage.



Workers archive in Vysokopillya
Photo: Vladyslav Litkevych, March 2023

Summary of Main Needs and Interest in Working with the Arolsen Archives

1. Equipment to mitigate the impact of the war – “first aid”

- Fire protection system
 - Generators
 - LED lights
 - Dehumidifiers
 - Archival boxes
 - Shelves
 - Quartz lamps
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2. Equipment to preserve and digitize documents:

- Micalent paper
 - Archival adhesives
 - Scanners
 - Photo cameras
 - Computers
 - Servers
 - Digital storage
 - Uninterruptable power supply units
 - Network equipment
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3. Support for indexing:

- Assistance in how to index documents
(guidance)
 - Provision of training
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Status of digitization

All archives:

- Ukrainian archives contain a large number of documents related to the Second World War: filtration files, letters written by forced laborers, press articles, photographic documents, “trophy fonds” (Nazi documents seized by the Red Army during the war), documents on prisoners of war, occupation administration, etc. Documents can be made public 75 years after the date of their creation.
- All archives are working intensively on digitization, and archive staff have to perform more tasks than the regulations prescribe.
- Compilation of guides so that specific topics in the collection can be found is ongoing. Existing guides are available online.

State Archives of Chernihiv Region survived the fighting in the city and sustained partial damage. The archive is engaged in digitizing documents and is working to ensure the safety of information on the servers. Some documents have been scanned with the help of Family Search and Babyn Yar. The scans and digitization reports are available on the archive’s server: <http://91.225.197.22/> and on the Babyn Yar website <https://babynyar.org/ua/archive/32>.

State Archives of Poltava Region is using its own resources to scan information from the 1990s and 2000s due to the high demand; it also has joint projects with partners. The volume of documents in the archive is 1 460 000 cases from 1690 to the present day. Currently, about 10% of the cases – about 6 million pages – have been scanned. Family Search has almost completely scanned the metric books (1693-1945). The archive also plans to join the Archium platform. Digitized documents can be viewed at <http://poltava.archives.gov.ua/arkhivni-dokumenty/otsyfrovani-arkhivni-dokumenty>.

State Archives of Dnipropetrovsk Region (in Dnipro) focuses its work on inquiries submitted by members of the public, most of which are related to genealogy, the events of the Second World War, or academic research. Digitization is carried out upon request using the archive’s own resources. Preparations are underway for the first systematic scanning project with Family Search. The scanned documents are available on the website <https://dp.archives.gov.ua/index.php/digitized-documents> in the sections „Inventories,“ „Card files,“ „Metric books,“ and „Famine of 1921-1923.“

State Archives of Mykolaiv Region was in the area that suffered the heaviest shelling in the city, the premises were damaged, and all work was suspended. The laboratory has now been restored, and the digitization process has also been resumed. The documents are being scanned systematically, in collaboration with Family Search. The documents in the archive date from 1887 to the present day, there are more than 6,000 fonds. More than 1.5 million documents have been digitized, including all the photographic documents. They also have experience in compiling alphabetical indexes (indexing). The digitized materials are available on the website: <https://mk.archives.gov.ua/tsi-frovyi-arhiv-metrychni-knygy.html>

State Archives of Kherson Region was under occupation for 9 months and resumed its work in December 2022 after the building was demined. The main work is focused on restoring the facilities and technical equipment and on accounting for stolen fonds. About 500 thousand cases containing millions of documents have been stolen – around half of all the documents in archive. Some documents were hidden or rescued by employees. It is known that documents from the fonds before 1917 and some before 1941 have been preserved. Digitization work was resumed and 150 new cases from 1945-46 were accepted for storage. The



digitized fonds are available at <https://kherson.archives.gov.ua/fondy-ta-dovidkovyj-aparat/oczyfrovani-dokumenty/>. A large part of the work today consists of communicating with other institutions in the city and region in connection with looting and loss of documents.

State Archives of Sumy Region systematically scans and publishes documents. They have digitized postcards from forced laborers and index cards, and they have started cooperation with Babyn Yar. They plan to work with Family Search. The electronic archive duplicates the structure of the archival guide. The documents are scanned in TIFF format and in accordance with the state standard and are available at <https://daso.archives.gov.ua/wp-content/earchives/index.php>. They have a wide range of WWII documents, for example, there are almost 80,000 filtration cases, and it is not yet possible for them to scan them themselves.

State Archives of Vinnytsia Region has been systematically scanning its collections since 2009, but only about 2% of the available cases have been scanned by the institution so far. This archive has a long-standing lack of space; they cannot accept new records or evacuated archives, and they lack equipment for digitization and storage. There is a need for backup capabilities, and priority for digitization is given to files that are in poor condition, such as the index cards of forced laborers. They use the functions on Synology Drive software to make

all the documents available to the public; they can be accessed here: https://davio.gov.ua/page/elektronniy_arhiv. Currently, the speed of scanning is 200 to 250 thousand documents per year. The format and quality are in accordance with international standards, but sometimes technical shortages force them to prioritize the quantity of information preserved over the quality. For the same reasons, the archive has almost completely abandoned document restoration for two years now, concentrating its resources on digitization.

State Archives of Kirovohrad Region (in Kropyvnytskyi) has been working on the issue of backups in the cloud storage and has faced a number of technical problems. The documents are scanned both systematically and upon request. On request of the Arolsen Archives, 25,000 letters from forced laborers were scanned in cooperation with Family Search; almost 2500 pages are being scanned per working day. The archive is very interested in exchanging knowledge and experience in scanning, storing, and indexing data. They are interested in non-commercial open source software. Digitized collections, descriptions, and metrics are available at <https://dakiro-dig.vercel.app/index.html>.