



## Guest Editorial: The War in Ukraine – a Librarian’s Perspective

Ulia Gosart, an assistant professor at the School of Information, San Jose State University interviewed Tetyana Svatula, a librarian from Kherson, southern Ukraine, about the war’s impact on libraries and librarians. Despite the liberation of Kherson in the fall of 2022, the city residents are regularly shelled. Interruptions of Internet, water and electricity services are frequent. The interview was conducted in late 2023. Tetyana and her family celebrated New Year in the bomb shelter.

**Ulia:** Could we please start from the beginning of the full-time invasion of Russia to Ukraine? Where were you at the time?

**Tetyana:** Like most of my colleagues, I was in Kherson (a city located in the southern part of Ukraine). On February 24, 2023, the Russians began the intensive shelling of the city and its outskirts. On March 1, 2022, Russian forces seized the city and the entire Kherson region then fell under occupation. Opportunities for the evacuation of civilians practically did not exist; like most of my colleagues, I remained in the city. Soon food disappeared from the store shelves; there were severe shortages of bread. Incidents of looting increased, with locals defending themselves against looters. But the worst part was always being in danger: at any moment, you could be stopped, your phone checked, your home invaded, and you could be taken to the “basement,” as the Russians call the torture chambers. Until the end of April, it was possible to listen to Ukrainian radio and use Ukrainian Internet. Later, people had to buy Russian SIM cards to stay in touch with relatives and learned to use VPNs to access Ukrainian Internet.

With each passing month, the pressure on the city’s residents increased: patrols on the streets, constant apartment searches, the impossibility of withdrawing cash from Ukrainian bank cards, and the illegal referendum on the annexation of Kherson to Russia. From the beginning of November 2022, there was a complete lack of electricity, water, heat, and communication. Nevertheless, Kherson residents resisted, with numerous protest actions.

**Ulia:** What was happening at your library since the war had started?

**Tetyana:** Our library - the Kherson Regional Universal Scientific Library named after Oles Honchar, was the one of the largest in southern Ukraine. When the war started, almost everyone from our library - remained in the city: out of 155 employees, only 46 left. The library closed, and we transitioned to remote work. On February 25, when the fighting was taking place on the Antonivsky Bridge, the library basement became a shelter for women with children from nearby villages. For almost a week, over 70 people lived in the library including children from 2 to 10 years old. The library asked nearby restaurants and cafes to leave food for the children and asked the municipal clinical hospital to help if needed.

The male members of the team guarded the building from looters and occupiers during these months. They hid the equipment in the basement, including 150 computers, as it was impossible and risky to hid them in a private apartment, as transport across the city in vehicles were checked.

On May 7th, the Russians ousted all the security personnel and locked themselves inside to celebrate the Russian Victory Day, - tells Tetiana. Only on May 10<sup>th</sup> the library staff was allowed back. It was a horror: the building was in absolute chaos, all the doors of the departments on four floors were open, sometimes broken, cabinets and shelves were smashed on the floor. Spoons, plates, cups, kettles, coffee, tea, sugar – everything was stolen. The entire floor was covered with paper, and in one of the departments, the glass was shattered. The library team spent the next 2–3 days cleaning the mess.

On June 21, 2022, the occupiers took over the library building. Only 19 people out of 155 library staff members continued working under occupation, including three librarians, and almost the entire technical staff. The library director Nadiia Korotun refused any form of cooperation with the occupiers; most of the staff followed her example. As a result, she was threatened by the occupants and after hiding outside of the city eventually was forced to leave.

The library was looted; pre-revolutionary publications, periodicals, and books published in the Kherson Governorate (prior to 1921) which included, besides Kherson, publications from the regions of Dnipropetrovsk, Kirovohrad, Odesa, and Mykolaiv. Equipment and state-of-the-art computers also were stolen and collections severely damaged.

**Ulia:** You remained in the city during the occupation and afterwards?

**Tetiana:** Yes. Along with my colleagues, I choose to stay. We are needed here. This is our land. Our home.

**Ulia:** Kherson was freed on November 11, 2022. How did you feel when it happened?

**Tetyana:** Like many Kherson residents, I learned about the liberation of the city from friends. At first, it felt like that it might be a provocation. However, upon seeing our wonderful “cats” as we call Ukrainian soldiers in Kherson, I felt it: we have returned home. The emotions were overwhelming. We are HOME.

Though a week later, on November 19, during the preparations to raise the national flag of Ukraine, the Russians shelled the flagpole near the library and destroyed over 1,000 meters of the library windows.

We were allowed inside only at the end of December, after the sappers concluded checking the library premises for the explosive devices.

**Ulia -** Right bank of Kherson and the city were liberated in November of 2022, yet the left bank remains under occupation.

**Tetyana:** Yes. Also, shelling and attacks on the city of Kherson continue until this day.

**Ulia:** How did the war affect your library?

**Tetyana:** On August 3, 2023, the library suffered another heavy shelling attack. It damaged the 2nd to 4th floors on the south side facing the Dnipro River that had large panoramic windows. These windows were blown away, destroying a reading room and several departments, and also creating an over one square meter hole on the roof. A week later, the heavy rain further damaged the building.

On October 30, 2023, Russian invaders once again shelled the building. This time a fire broke out on the top floor, though the firefighters promptly arrived and extinguished the blaze. On November 12, 2023, the library again was subjected to Russian shelling, this time with devastating consequences. The entire building was demolished from the inside.

Today our librarians are scattered throughout Ukraine and Europe, working online. Among core activities are documenting and providing access to all available sources and eyewitness accounts of the full-scale invasion of Russia into Ukraine. Some of these projects include “Ukraine in the Flames of the

War for Freedom: A Chronicle,” that documents major time-periods of the war and emphasizes courage, and endurance of Ukrainian people; “Unconquered Kherson Region,” that focusing on the key events of our region, narrating civilian resistance courage and sacrifice. A project “Ecology in War Settings,” which gained prominence after destruction of the Kakhovka Dam in June 2023, documents the destructive impact of the war on the environmental situation in Ukraine. Other projects include events supporting the study of history, literary evenings, art and art therapy workshops.

### ***Information war***

**Ulia:** Can you speak about the significance of information in this war? How and by what means do the Russians employ information as a weapon?

**Tetyana:** Occupiers extensively use information as a propaganda tool, in addition to using it for military campaigns. The key slogan is the expression: “Russia is here forever.” They spread narratives about Nazi supporters in Ukraine; fakes about the war and distort history to claim the greatness of Russia, and deny existence of Ukraine as a separate state. This is particularly prominent on the occupied Ukrainian territories. The occupiers promote Russian holidays especially with a militaristic bias. They also increasingly engage children in “patriotic” events and contests making them promote and support information warfare on the occupied territories. For example, they are opening School of Blogger on the Kherson left bank (occupied) to make children promote Russian informational narratives.

**Ulia:** Can you tell me about the role of libraries in this war? How do Russians use them, and how do librarians resist information attacks?

**Tetyana:** Occupiers understand that libraries are crucial during a full-scale invasion, as they are the most effective and extensive means of propaganda. Through libraries, Russian occupiers seek to persuade the integration, primarily of Ukrainian children, into the Russian environment. That’s why libraries opened by the occupiers on the left bank of Kherson have become outposts of Russian imperial propaganda.

Librarians working on the right liberated bank of Kherson region understand the possibilities of information attacks during wartime. Therefore, information security is one of the main directions of their activities. Our library - the Kherson Regional Universal Scientific Library named after Oles Honchar - has

always addressed the issues of meeting the information needs of the region's residents. Today, skills in critical thinking when working with information are more relevant than ever. Our library conducts information literacy within the scope of a project termed, the School of Information Comfort. The project is online, and engages people who are not only residents of our city of Kherson. Training within the project allows people to understand the notion of information immunity and how to acquire it; how to recognize false information; how to avoid falling into information bubbles; how to watch television safely and other topics.

Similar training sessions are conducted by other working libraries in the liberated Kherson region.

We also began collecting information, photos, and memories from librarians about the libraries in Kherson region, starting from February 24, 2022. This work continued through occupation, and until today, with plans to create a virtual museum called "Irrefutable Witnesses of Crimes."

### **Kherson region libraries during the occupation**

**Ulia:** Can we talk about the libraries in the occupied territories of Kherson region? Do you interact with librarians in these areas?

Right bank of Kherson was occupied between March 2022 and November 2022. In March, when the Russians took control over the city of Kherson, most librarians removed and hid Ukrainian political and cultural items and books, and those about history of Ukraine when the city fell under occupation. On their own initiative, some librarians continued discreetly distributing books, though no one forced them to do so using small private family libraries. A librarian of the Kherson Centralized Library System hung yellow ribbons – a symbol of resistance to Russian occupation that originated in Kherson – throughout her district in the city. Not a single neighbor reported her. She had no contacts with the organizers of the "Yellow Ribbon" resistance movement of Kherson, and did it on her own initiative. Businesses and social institutions closed, and volunteers came to the aid. Some worked with librarians using libraries to provide humanitarian aid and distribute food; some prepared meals to help large families, and elderly. Same was happening in some villages. A librarian from Engineerne, a village in Kherson region established a volunteer assistance center, purchased groceries, coordinated with volunteers and personally procured medicines for the residents.

Russian military personnel were often stationed in the premises in village libraries, often turning them into dumpsites or vandalizing them. Some windows were shot from the inside. The book collections were mostly destroyed. Computers, DVDs, heaters, kettles, even discs with movies and cartoons often were stolen, and so were necklaces, embroideries and other

items of cultural collections. In some libraries, sniper positions were set up, one library was used as a torture chamber.

Interaction with librarians during the occupation period, and even now with the librarians of the left-bank of Kherson, is practically impossible. Firstly, it is very dangerous, as the occupiers constantly check phones. They also inspect laptops, and computers during home searches. Secondly, Ukrainian sources of communication or Internet are completely blocked on the occupied territories. Additionally, most employees of public libraries in the region have left its borders.

*Using materials from the Telegram channel controlled by the Ministry of Culture of the Kherson region (a Russian governing entity established during the occupation).*

Tetiana - Russia controls the entire left-bank part of the region since February 24, 2022, actively imposing the “Russian Mir” (“mir” can be translated as *world* or *peace*). Until mid of June 2022, the occupying authorities showed no interest in the libraries. By the end of June, as recalled the director of the Nova Kahovka Centralized Library System (CLS), they summoned leaders of cultural institutions and proposed cooperation, including salaries.

During this meeting the Russian authorizes noted that all Ukrainian books published after 2014 would need to be removed; and the guidance on what to do with the rest would come later. The decision had to be made within 3 days. From July 4, 2022, they issued a decree that forbade pro-Ukrainian employees to be employed. Most library staff refused to cooperate; yet the Russians were able to find a new director of CLS and a small number of those who agreed to collaborate. For those who refused to collaborate, to stay in the city became dangerous; they were threatened to be imprisoned or tortured; and some managed to leave the city.

Since then libraries have been re-registered under Russian laws. Russia wants to use public libraries as spaces that promote Russification across cultural and educational spheres and spends enormous funds on public libraries in the left-bank of Kherson.

According to available information, 200 million rubles (over 2 million U.S. dollars) have been allocated to replenish the library collections with Russian literature. An additional 40 million rubles have been allocated for funding libraries under the control of the occupiers. In November alone, over 73,000 copies were sent to 87 public libraries under the orders of the Russian president.

It's worth noting that the occupiers have not succeeded in reopening all public libraries in the occupied territory, with only 15% of libraries operating. A very small number of librarians collaborate with the occupiers. Those who chose to collaborate are spreading Russian propaganda regarding the suppression of Russian culture and language in Ukraine, and working with children and youth,



as most schools are closed. They conduct propagandist events celebrating significant Russian historical dates and spread sources that fabricated history of Ukraine.

The destruction of Ukrainian collections on the occupied Kherson region is comparable to cultural-ethnographic genocide. Current administration, overseen by members the “United Russia” party is conducting inspections of library collections to identify what is termed “literature of extremist nature.” This includes publications on the history and culture of Ukraine in the Ukrainian language, books about the Anti-Terrorist Operation, and the national liberation movement, among others. In the Skadovsk district, during one raid searching “prohibited” books, religious literature was taken along with books about the Ukrainian national liberation movement during World War II. Books published by the religious organization “Jehovah’s Witnesses,” officially registered in Ukraine, were labeled as “extremist” and “prohibited” by the Russians.

### ***Damage and how to help***

**Ulia:** Could we talk about losses and damage done to the libraries?

**Tetyana:** When it comes to the left-bank, public libraries have not suffered the same level of destruction as in the right-bank part, according to the Ukrainian military administrations on region. Only a few libraries of territorial communities have been destroyed because of provocations by Russian military shelling. The destruction of the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Station, led to the flooding of 6 rural libraries of Hola Prystan, 6 rural libraries of Oleshky, and 2 libraries of Novo Kakhovska territorial communities.

When it comes to the right-bank, a total of 25 libraries have been destroyed as of October 1, 2023, or 23% of their total number on the right-bank part. Partially ruined or damaged and requiring major repair/reconstruction are 49 libraries (45%), while 16 (14%) have suffered minor damage and need repairs such as replacement of windows, doors, partial roof repair, facade. Only 18% of libraries as of October 1, 2023, have remained undamaged. However, the figures continue changing drastically. In November 2023, our library (the Kherson Regional Universal Scientific Library), the Kherson Regional Library named after Dniprovoyi Chaiki, and a public library in the Berislavsky district were destroyed.

Over one quarter of public libraries - 28 in total - lost all material-technical means due to military aggression; 25 completely lost their collections. Close to 60% of public libraries (63 in total) - partially lost their material-technical

means (computers, copying-reproducing equipment, multimedia devices, furniture) and portions of their collections.

In our library, valuable pre-revolutionary editions were stolen, and over 70% of the Braille book collection (which was the second most significant in the country after Rivne) has been destroyed, among other losses.

**Ulia:** What are the possible ways to help the libraries in the Kherson region, including your library, at the moment?

**Tetyana:** The majority of public libraries, due lack of premises, of financial resources, collections, and staff, will not be able to resume their operations, even in the future. Our library will not be able to fully restore its activities, given current damages to the building and collections.

To provide library services in the Kherson and the region requires a modern bookmobile with a full range of technical facilities. The use of the bookmobile will enable to serve people using collections of the libraries that lost their buildings, and also provide services to residents of communities in the liberated parts of the region. Additionally, boxes similar to the French IdeaBox projects, may allow recreate library spaces.

Our library requires an automation system based on RFID technology for inventory purposes that will help to determine damage. Collections that had been saved require digitization. For this purpose, a planetary scanner from the Zeuschel-OS series, equipped with automatic operation mode, is needed. Some collections are preserved on microfilms, so a device for reading microfilms like “Microphot” 5PO-1 can be helpful. Working libraries of Kherson region require laptops to provide services both online and offline, as well as to organize training for librarians in territorial communities.

Some libraries, mostly those supported by benefactors, are renewing their services. After the liberation of heroic Chornobaivska, libraries of this community have been gradually recovering thanks to the support of caring people from all over Ukraine – publishing houses, organizations, private persons. The libraries of the Novovorontsovka, Velikooleksandrivka, and Myliv communities have also resumed their activities functioning as places for social interaction and sources of psychological and emotional support.

In Kherson city, nine branch libraries operate lending books, organizing reading activities, cultural and educational events, offering free access to the Internet, and book delivery to users with limited mobility.

Kherson librarians are working tirelessly for Victory, despite constant shelling. We believe in the Armed Forces of Ukraine and believe that our sunny Kherson region will be liberated, as well as the entire Ukraine.



**Ulia:** Thank you very much Tetyana. We pray for the war to end soon and for Ukraine to be free.

**Tetyana Svatula** is a professional librarian who has been working at the Kherson Regional Universal Scientific Library named after Oles Gonchar since 1983. In her current position of Head of the Scientific and Methodological Department, she oversees functioning of the network of public libraries of the Kherson region which includes in addition to consulting and servicing communities of the region, training and professional development. She also is engaged in grant writing, implementation and publishing. Tetyana is honored with the title of “Honored Worker of Culture of Ukraine” and serves as a member of the board of the Public Organization “Kherson Regional Library Society.”

**Ulia Gosart**, is an assistant professor at the School of Information, San Jose State University.

Joseph Matthews

 [joe@joemathews.org](mailto:joe@joemathews.org)

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4957-9853>