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PRESERVING AND PLUNDERING: GERMAN CULTURAL POLICY IN OCCUPIED UKRAINE (1941–1944)

Abstract

The article discusses the plans of high-ranking Nazi leaders of the future cultural policy in the occupied Soviet Ukraine (*Reichskommissariat Ukraine*) and its implementation on the territory. The research aims to demonstrate the complexity of the German approach to the culture of the occupied Ukrainian territory through the activities of various cultural institutions, the involvement of the local population in cultural activities, and their attitudes toward material and non-material culture. The extensive use of archival materials, quantitative and qualitative methods, critical analysis, and categorization methods enables the author to present a detailed picture of cultural policy. In particular, the study shows the inconsistency of German occupational policy in the cultural sphere, discord among Nazi leadership regarding the fate of Soviet Ukraine and its population as well as failure to conceal the real intentions of occupants through half-hearted measures.

Keywords: cultural policy, German occupation, Soviet Ukraine, Second World War, theater

Introduction

The cultural policy of Nazi Germany in the occupied territories of Europe often remains overlooked by scholars. This aspect of public life is typically considered secondary to the activities of local administration, police forces, or the apparatus of terror. However, this paper aims to demonstrate that the cultural sphere under German occupation was an integral part of the regime established by the German administration in Soviet Ukraine. Moreover, many cultural institutions reopened by the occupying authorities served not only as venues of entertainment for the local population but also fulfilled propagandistic purposes and functioned as tools of distraction from the harsh realities of occupation.

Following a brief introduction to the topic, I examine the plans formulated by Nazi leaders for the cultural development of occupied Ukraine and, in the next section, provide an overview of cultural life in Soviet Ukraine during the 1920s and 1930s. The main body of the article focuses on the activities and functions of cultural institutions under occupation, categorized into four areas: theatre, musical and dance collectives, cinema, as well as museums and libraries. The concluding section identifies common trends across these institutions and evaluates the effectiveness of their activities.

This article may serve as a case study for analyzing cultural policy in other countries under Nazi control during the Second World War, both within the former Soviet Union and beyond.

Nazi authorities' intentions for the cultural development of the region

On the eve of the invasion of the Soviet Union, German officials were actively developing military and economic strategies for the forthcoming war. Intense debate continued over the political future of Soviet territories and their populations, particularly after the failure of the planned quick victory at the end of 1941. Unprepared for a prolonged conflict, the German leadership was forced to improvise at the front and in the administration of newly occupied areas – including in the realm of cultural policy.

Abandoning the earlier imperial concept of *Kulturträgetum*,¹ the Nazis leadership regarded the population of Eastern Europe as *Untermenschen* – inferior people with a primitive cultural heritage. Heinrich Himmler, the head of the German police and the SS (German: *Schutzstaffel*, Protection Squadron), stated: “*The principle line is obvious for us – these people should not be given any culture*”, referring to the intended cultural policy in occupied Soviet territories.² Erich Koch, the head of *Reichskommissariat Ukraine* (RKU), echoed this view in his speech delivered in Rivne in August 1942: “*As for culture, we have given the Ukrainians both churches.*³ *Further cultural work is out of the question*”.

Alongside the political discussions concerning intentions toward the Ukrainian population, Alfred Rosenberg, the head of the Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories, which controlled the Reichskommissariat Ukraine, held a distinct position regarding cultural development. In his decree of 10 April 1942, titled “On attitude toward the culture of Ukrainians”, he emphasized that:

The goal of our policy is to involve the Ukrainian population in voluntary work cooperation, and this requires a patient attitude toward their own culture. Excessive restriction of cultural manifestations of Ukrainians may not lead to a happy attitude toward work but an adverse attitude toward it. Instead of attracting the population to our side, it might result in passive resistance.⁴

Adopting a pragmatic approach, Rosenberg understood the importance of culture in propaganda and recognized its potential as a method for controlling the population.

¹ The spreading of German culture among less developed nations, popular during the late 19th – early 20th century; B. Wiaderny, *Hans Adolf von Moltke: eine politische Biographie*, Paderborn 2017, p. 80.

² V. Shaikan, *Колабораціонізм на території рейхскомісаріату “Україна” і військової зони в роки Другої світової війни*, Mineral: Kryvyi Rih 2005, p. 309.

³ Under the German occupation, two Orthodox churches operated. The first church received the name of the Ukrainian Orthodox church (the Autonomous church) while the second church was called the Orthodox Autocephalous Church (the Autocephalous church); K. C. Berkhoff, *Harvest of Despair*, Cambridge 2008, p. 167.

⁴ V. Shaikan, *Колабораціонізм на території рейхскомісаріату “Україна”*, Mineral: Kryvyi Rih 2005, p. 309–310.

The harsh stances of Hitler, Himmler, Koch, and others in the cultural sphere were coupled with a deep-seated fear of the literacy and education levels of the occupied populations. The German leader stated that, “*using the radio, the community would be given whatever is wholesome for it; music in unlimited quantity. ‘Brainwork’ was out, for it would merely produce the ‘most determined enemy’ of the Reich*”. He continued to warn of the potentially harmful outcomes of education for locals, emphasizing that:

Teaching the Russians, Ukrainians, and Kirghizs to read and write will eventually be to our own disadvantage; education will give the more intelligent among them an opportunity to study history, to acquire a historical sense, and hence to develop political ideas which cannot but be harmful to our interests.⁵

German authorities rejected not only the necessity of basic education beyond four years of schooling, but also the very idea of maintaining universities or specialized institutions. In this light, they demonstrated open hostility toward the Soviet intelligentsia, viewing them as a threat to the regime – bearers of political ideas and educated individuals. Intellectuals, along with communist activists and partisans, were to be eliminated, as they were regarded as the most dangerous enemies of the regime.

This extreme stance faced internal opposition from some of Alfred Rosenberg’s colleagues, who expressed differing views in a late 1942 report concerning the propaganda narrative in the East:

If our own people do not understand this theory but continue to speak cynically about the ‘natives,’ ‘half-monkeys,’ ‘colonial policy,’ ‘exploitation,’ ‘liquidation of the intelligentsia,’ ‘limitation of education,’ ‘the closing of universities,’ ‘suppression of artistic and cultural life,’ ‘sabotage of churches,’ etc. – then our propaganda will ultimately appear cynical and backfire.⁶

Thus, officials of Nazi Germany demonstrated an extreme level of brutality regarding the cultural development of newly occupied Soviet Ukraine. They emphasized the perceived inferiority of non-German cultural manifestations; therefore, the fate of local culture was effectively to be completely

⁵ A. Dallin, *German Rule in Russia 1941–1945: A Study of Occupation Policies*, 2nd ed., New York 1981, p. 458–459.

⁶ A. Dallin, *German Rule in Russia 1941–1945*, New York 1981, p. 158.

eradicated to prevent its spread and future development. Moreover, there was no intention to provide any substitute; the very idea of Germanizing the local population was seen as harmful to the long term plans of controlling these lands.

The Soviet background

Along with changes in the social and political environment of the Soviet state, the Bolshevik Party aimed to implement a so-called “cultural revolution”, which intended to foster a communist spirit among the population through active ideological propaganda. One of the major challenges they faced was the widespread illiteracy among the population of the former Russian Empire; during the last census in the Russian Empire in 1897, it was determined that only 24% of the total population could read and write.⁷

The mass educational campaign launched in 1923, called *likbez*⁸ (short for *likvidatsiya bezgramotnosti*), focused on all age groups. The initiative achieved significant results: by 1939, about 85% of the population aged nine and older were considered literate in Soviet Ukraine.⁹

At the same time, following the civil war, the Bolshevik authorities were highly concerned with the stability of the regime in the non-Russian populated territories, most of which had been forcibly annexed to the Soviet state. Operating within the framework of national self-determination, Vladimir Lenin recognized each ethnic group's right to its own territorial entity, language, and national culture. This policy, known as ‘indigenization’ or *korenization*, aimed primarily at creating a local communist elite and loyal cadres, thereby reducing the risk of future separatist movements. At the same time, indigenization had important secondary effects, such as promoting the spread and development of national cultures and languages.¹⁰

⁷ U. Poliakov. *Всероссийская перепись населения 1939 года. Основные итоги*, Moscow 1992, p. 39.

⁸ From Russian: elimination of illiteracy.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁰ V. Danylenko, *Коренизація in Енциклопедія історії України*, edited by V. A. Smoliiy, vol. 5, Kyiv 2009), p.152.

In the 1920s, under the policy of *korenizatsiya*, which in Ukraine was called ‘Ukrainization’, numerous theaters, libraries, and galleries were opened, and several new organizations of writers, artists, and performers were founded. These initiatives gave a strong impetus to the development of both Ukrainian national consciousness and an intellectual elite. In 1921, the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences was established, conducting research in various fields, including history, linguistics, mathematics, as well as the social and economic sciences. Despite strict censorship, there was a rapid increase in book and newspaper publishing; thousands of books and magazines were issued each year, filling library shelves in both cities and villages. In the late 1920s, two film production studios were established in Kyiv and Odesa, releasing about 180 movies of various genres between 1927 and 1939.¹¹

However, in 1928, with the rise of Joseph Stalin to power, the policies of indigenization and active cultural development were gradually curtailed and eventually replaced by a shift toward Russification. The period from 1928 to 1941 was characterized by widespread repression targeting cultural activists and institutions. This included the dissolution of artists’ and writers’ associations, the deportation and executions of intellectuals, and the sharp decline in publishing and performances, particularly in the non-Russian republics.

Despite the widespread suppression of cultural development in Soviet Ukraine in the 1930s,¹² cultural life remained diverse and influential among the local population, continuing to serve as a source of propaganda, entertainment, and education. When the German army conquered Soviet Ukraine in late autumn 1941, they found themselves in possession of hundreds of theaters, cinemas, museums, libraries, and other cultural institutions – most staffed by personnel who had either been unable or unwilling to evacuate to the Soviet rear.

Theatre

With the establishment of the German military administration in the occupied territory of Soviet Ukraine, active efforts began to reopen cultural

¹¹ G. O. Liber, *Soviet Nationality Policy, Urban Growth, and Identity Change in the Ukrainian SSR 1923–1934*, Cambridge 2002, pp. 105–121.

¹² Н. Костюк. Зустрічі і прощання: спогади кн 1, Edmonton 1987, pp. 487–617.

institutions. According to numerous archival materials and newspaper publications from October to November 1941, various theaters in cities such as Kyiv, Vinnytsia, Dnipropetrovsk, and others resumed operations. In Kyiv during this period, five theaters were either already operating or preparing to open:

- Taras Shevchenko Ukrainian City Drama Theatre
- Zatyркеvych-Karpynska Music Drama Theatre
- M. Sadovsky Kyiv Drama Theatre
- Ukrainian Comedy Theatre
- Kyiv Opera Theater.¹³

In Dnipropetrovsk, the local Ukrainian Music Drama Theatre held its first holiday concert on October 26,¹⁴ and in neighboring Zaporizhzhia, the Drama Theater was established on 1 November 1941.¹⁵

The new authority faced various challenges during the early stage of occupation, including the poor condition of buildings, many of which were seriously damaged by both the retreating Soviet forces and the advancing Germans. In addition, there was a severe shortage of personnel and equipment, caused by evacuations and displacement during the chaotic early months of the war. Furthermore, equipment and furniture belonging to these institutions were often looted or damaged by the local population or soldiers during military actions. For example, on 11 September 1941, after an inspection of the Dnipropetrovsk Opera and Ballet Theatre, inspectors reported destroyed musical instruments, interior damage, and the theft of the region's only music library.¹⁶

However, the Germans actively encouraged the reopening of theaters in the Reichskommissariat Ukraine (RKU) through the specialized departments in district and city administrations. Officials supported theater

¹³ I. Tarnavskyy and O. Salata, *Діяльність театральних колективів в умовах нацистської окупації 1941–1943 рр.: уявлення та реальність (за матеріалами часопису «Українська дійсність»)*, “Сторінки Історії: Колекція Наукових Робіт” 2009, issue 50, p. 212; M. Spudka, *Діяльність театральних колективів під час окупації*, “Колекція Наукових Робіт 6-ї Всеукраїнської Наукової і Практичної Конференції” 2009, p. 207.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ State Archives of Dnipropetrovsk Oblast (DADnO), Fond 2276, Folder 165, “Raport” from 27 October 1941, p. 23.

¹⁶ DADnO, Fond 2276, Folder 106, “Act” from 11 September 1941, p. 122.

staff by providing food, electricity, and heating, improving their living conditions, and allocating substantial financial resources to stimulate the reopening of cultural institutions. These measures enabled the reopening of approximately 30 theaters within the first year of occupation, not only in major cities like Kyiv, Kryvyi Rih, Zaporizhzhia, or Zhytomyr but also in smaller towns such as Bila Tserkva, Poltava, Kremenchuk, or Lutsk, Proskuriv, and Kamenetz-Podilskiy.

While theaters were primarily accessible to urban residents, rural inhabitants also had opportunities to attend performances. Many city theaters organized traveling performances within their districts or gave concerts for Ukrainian workers in Germany.¹⁷ According to one of Kyiv's newspapers, actors from local playhouses regularly gave concerts in towns and villages, visiting places such as Bila Tserkva, Vinnytsia, Tarashcha, Skvyra, and Popilnia.¹⁸ In the summer of 1943, the Berdyansk Variety Show Theater toured the neighboring Kherson and Mykolaiv.¹⁹ Additionally, numerous amateur performances or musical groups existed – sometimes made up of former theater professionals, but more often composed of local amateurs from rural communities. Media reports confirmed the existence of such groups in villages across Volhynia and Podillia, Kyiv, and Dnipropetrovsk districts.²⁰

However, it would be a mistake to assume that all theaters served only the local population. As the invasion of the Soviet Union continued, Ukrainian territories became a rare area of relative calm for Axis armies – a place of rest, recreation, and rotation for thousands of soldiers, many of whom sought entertainment. Thus, most theaters functioned for both civilian and military audiences. For instance, at the Dnipropetrovsk Ukrainian Musical-Drama Theatre, concerts were scheduled for civilians and then for

¹⁷ V. Shaikan, *Колабораціонізм на території рейхскомісаріату "Україна" і військової зони в роки Другої світової війни*, Mineral: Kryvyi Rih 2005, p. 326.

¹⁸ "Київська естрада" *Нове Українське слово*, 27 December 1941.

¹⁹ "Варьете", *Мелітопольський край*, 18 August 1943.

²⁰ "Виставка досягнень", Волинь, 19 February 1942; I. Tarnavskyy and O. Salata, *Діяльність театральних колективів в умовах нацистської окупації 1941–1943 рр.*, "Сторінки Історії: Колекція Наукових Робіт", 2009, issue 50, p. 219.

the military personnel from Wednesday to Saturday at the same venue. On Sunday, both groups had the opportunity to attend performances at different times.²¹

This separation was dictated by both language barriers and the authorities' desire to limit interaction between locals and German personnel. A decree issued by Erich Koch on 6 July 1942, institutionalized this policy and strictly prohibited German civil administration officials from attending any performances organized by locals – whether Ukrainian, Polish, or Russian – including theater productions, concerts, exhibitions, dances, or traditional events – unless they were organized by German authorities. This ban applied to both official and private visitors across all territories of the RKU.²²

According to available records, already in the summer of 1942, in the capital of the RKU, Rivne, a German Theatre (*Deutsches Theater*) began operations alongside the local Drama Theatre. Performances at the *Deutsches Theater* were exclusively for Wehrmacht soldiers, officers, and German civil officials.²³

Another important issue concerned the repertoire of theaters in RKU. Given the previous Soviet policies and the diverse audiences – including both newcomers and locals – the content of theatrical productions underwent significant changes. At the beginning of the occupation, the new authorities imposed strict censorship on available plays to eliminate any political or nationalistic themes. As a result, most performances focused on daily life or apolitical social issues. Violations of these restrictions were met with severe punishment, often applied to the entire troupe or institution. For example, at the beginning of 1942, the Gestapo²⁴ banned the play *Hetman Doroshenko* at the Kyiv Theatre named after M. Sadovsky and dissolved the troupe.

²¹ DADnO, Fond 2276, Folder 166, “План роботи театру на тиждень з 11 до 17 травня 1942” p. 14.

²² State Archives of Zhytomyr Oblast (DAZO), Fond 1151, Description 1, Folder 40 “Besuch künstlerischer Veranstaltungen der Ukrainer” p. 85, accessed through United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) Collections.

²³ State Archives of Rivne Oblast (DARO), Fond 33, Description 13, Folder 10, “Gastspiele des brester stadttheaters”, p. 11, accessed through USHMM Collections.

²⁴ Secret Police.

The second factor influencing the theater's repertoire and quality of performances was the composition of the theater staff. Most actors, singers, dancers, and directors chose not to evacuate with the Red Army and instead actively supported the reopening of cultural institutions. For many, collaborating with the German authorities was seen as the only means of survival. For example, in the Kyiv Opera Theatre, many professionals resumed work, including conductor and choirmaster M. Tarakanova, editors K. Zubov and V. Chistyakov, conductors M. Radziewsky and Y. Yanovsky, as well as singers I. Hrytsenko, I. Yuryeva, and K. Benediktova.²⁵ Around this professional core, amateurs and young actors were gathered to form a new troupe.

The number of actors and other auxiliary workers varied from city to city. For instance, the collective of the Dnipropetrovsk local theatre had 242 employees in March 1942,²⁶ while the Kyiv Var'yetе²⁷ could afford to hire up to 300 people.²⁸ In smaller towns, theater staff ranged from 30 to 150 workers, such as the playhouse in Kherson, with 55 employed actors,²⁹ or a troupe of 50 in Zaporizhzhya.³⁰ In rural areas, such collectives were organized more spontaneously by young amateur enthusiasts, sometimes even schoolchildren,³¹ often without a permanent building for rehearsals and performances.³²

Professional actors or musicians from the Reich were less common on the RKU stages and mostly performed for German civil and military officials. For instance, a poster of the *Deutschen Theatre* in Rivne showed that on 5 and 6 April 1943, performers from Hamburg State Playhouse and the Hamburg Opera held a concert.³³ Similar events occurred regularly; at the end of May

²⁵ I.Tarnavskyy, O. Salata, *Діяльність театральних колективів в умовах нацистської окупації 1941–1943*, "Сторінки Історії: Колекція Наукових Робіт", 2009, issue 50, p. 212.

²⁶ DADnO, Fond 2276, Folder 1159, „Список співробітників Українського Музично Драматичного Театру,” pp. 49–51.

²⁷ Variety show.

²⁸ “Київський театр Вар’єте”, *Останні новини*, 01 June 1942.

²⁹ “Культурно-мистецьке життя в Херсоні”, *Голос Дніпра*, 14 October 1941.

³⁰ “Реклама: Відкриття театру”, *Нове Запоріжжя*, 25 December 1941.

³¹ “Хроніка” Волинь, 14 December 1941.

³² “Хроніка” Волинь, 26 February 1942; “Хроніка” Волинь, 05 February 1942.

³³ DARO, Fond 33, Description 13 c, Folder 10, “Deutsches Theater Rowno Grosser Bunter Aben”, p. 21, Accessed through: USHMM Collections.

1943, the audience enjoyed a performance by singers from the Berlin State Opera.³⁴ Comparable performances took place in other cities – for example, in September 1942 in Kyiv, the first symphonic concert was conducted by “music intendant Brinker” from Königsberg.³⁵

Despite significant changes in cultural conditions, the most common plays remained Ukrainian, especially on the stages of villages and towns. Visitors could frequently watch well-known plays such as:

- *Natalka Poltavka* by I. Kotliarevsky
- *Zaporozhets za Dunayem* by S. Hulak-Artemovskiy
- H. Kvitka-Osnovianenko’s social comedy *Svatannya na Honcharivtsi*
- M. Starytsky’s drama *Oi ne khody, Hrytsiu, ta i na vechornytsi*, and *Marusia Bohuslavka*
- *Nazar Stodolia* by T. Shevchenko
- Karpenko-Karyi’s comedy *Martin Borulya*
- and many others.³⁶

The fact that local actors generally did not speak German required soldiers and officers of the *Wehrmacht* to watch performances in Ukrainian. For example, in the Dnipropetrovsk Drama Theater, Germans had the opportunity to watch T. Shevchenko’s drama *Kateryna* or *Viy* by N. Gogol. In Rivne, the poster advertised M. Starytsky’s drama *Hei, Gregor! Geh nicht zur Gesellschaftsfeier!...*, the German interpretation of the play *Oi ne khody, Hrytsiu, ta i na vechornytsi*.³⁷

A significant portion of the content in several playhouses featured works and operas by Russian authors, especially in cities in the east and south of RUK. Among them:

- Ostrovsky’s plays such as *Bez viny vinovatye* and *Beshenyye den’gi*
- P. Tchaikovsky’s operas *Yevgeniy Onegin* and *Pikovaya Dama*
- N. Solovyov’s *Zhenitba Belugina*

³⁴ DARO, Fond 33, Description 13 c, Folder 10, “Deutsches Theater Rowno Duette und Liederabend”, p. 27, Accessed through: USHMM Collections.

³⁵ “Перший симфонічний концерт у Києві” Волинь, 13 September 1942.

³⁶ DADnO, Fond 2276, Folder 166, “План роботи театру на тиждень з 11 до 17 травня 1942”, p. 14.

³⁷ DARO, Fond 33, Description 13 c, Folder 10, “Rovno City Theater in ‘De-Li’”, p. 12, Accessed through: USHMM Collections.

Additionally, works by foreign authors also gained popularity among local audiences, despite the limited professional skills or equipment in many playhouses. Larger cities, due to their greater resources, could include pieces such as:

- Giuseppe Verdi's *La Traviata*, *Aida*, *Otello*
- Giacomo Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* and *Tosca*
- Georges Bizet's *Carmen*

Plans were underway to add operas by Richard Wagner to the Kyiv Opera's repertoire.³⁸ Meanwhile, smaller theatres in towns like Kherson performed operettas such as *Der Zigeunerbaron* by J. Strauss or *Kabale und Liebe* by F. Schiller.³⁹

Musicians and Dancing collectives

Apart from an extensive network of theatres, numerous musicals and dance groups operated in dozens of settlements across the occupied territory. These groups operated either as part of existing playhouses or, increasingly, as independent units with their own venues, funding, and management. In RKU's cities and villages, male and female choirs, orchestras, bandurist chapels, and dance troupes were especially popular. These ensembles generally fulfilled the same functions as theatre troupes, entertaining both civilian and military audiences. For instance, during the second quarter of 1942, the "Dnipropetrovsk Bandurist Chapel" and "Lysenko's Chapel" together gave 59 concerts. Other ensembles from Kyiv, Kryvyi Rih, and Melitopol overtook similar activities, often visiting neighboring towns or districts.⁴⁰ By contrast, the Kyiv Chapel managed only 27 performances for the same period, which drew sharp criticism in the local press.⁴¹

³⁸ "Київська Велика Опера" *Волинь*, 08 October 1942.

³⁹ "Реклама: Укрдрамтеатр Прем'єра 'Коварства і Любов', *Голос Дніпра*, 16 June 1942.

⁴⁰ "Гастролі Криворізької капели" *Волинь*, 11 October 1942; "Ще про Київських гостей на Волині" *Волинь*, 25 June 1942; "Мелитопольские артисты в Ново-Николаевке", *Мелитопольский регион*, 03 July 1943.

⁴¹ "Хроніка" *Волинь*, 07 May 1942.

In the countryside, such collectives usually took the form of small choirs composed of amateurs, activists, or youth.⁴² They were particularly active in the Volyn and Podillia District, as evidenced by press reports. For example, in several villages near Dubno, local youth formed amateur ensembles; in one case, the group was led by a schoolteacher.⁴³ A similar self-organized collective appeared near Kowel, where the local choir had already been active.⁴⁴

According to various estimates, anywhere from several dozen to a few hundred such collectives existed during the occupation. Each group had to obtain special permission from the local authorities to perform, and officials enforced a strict ban on anyone with a Bolshevik Party background.⁴⁵ Drama troupes were often self-organized within the community, and their size depended largely on the financial capacity and needs of the town or village. Typically, between twenty and one hundred people participated.

During the occupation, German authorities sought to introduce new celebrations and symbolic dates, or to assign new meanings to traditional ones. For instance, they officially reinstated the commemoration of the 19th-century Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko, portraying him as an opponent of Bolshevik ideology.⁴⁶ Other marked dates included Hitler's birthday, the anniversary of composer Mykola Lysenko, the so-called day of "liberation from Soviet rule", and May 1.⁴⁷ Such commemorations were almost always accompanied by performances from local choirs, chapels, or amateur ensembles, along with speeches by local officials. However, these events were sporadic rather than systematic; they were staged only in selected cities, at the discretion of local authorities, rather than across the entire RKU.

⁴² "Хроніка" *Волинь*, 01 March 1942.

⁴³ "Хроніка" *Волинь*, 26 February 1942.

⁴⁴ "Хроніка" *Волинь*, 18 January 1942.

⁴⁵ "Про роботу драматургів", *Нове Запоріжжя*, 03 December 1941.

⁴⁶ DAZO, Fond 1151, Description 1, Folder 137, "Schewtschenko-Feiern", p. 10. Accessed through: USHMM Collections; "Хроніка" *Волинь*, 29 March 1942.

⁴⁷ "Урочисте засідання", *Дніпропетровська газета*, 20 April 1942; I. Krutko, "Перше травня - День Праці", *Дніпропетровська газета*, 04 May 1943.

Cinema

Given its importance as a propaganda tool, cinematography was actively developed by both totalitarian regimes. After occupying large portions of the Soviet Union, the German military administration established the Central Film Society in November 1941, with two branches: *Ostland-Film* (Ostland Film G.m.b.H) in Riga and *Ukraine-Film* (Ukraine Film G.m.b.H) in Kyiv. These organizations were tasked with overseeing film propaganda in their respective regions. Ukraine-Film, headquartered in Kyiv, was formed on the basis of the former Kyiv Film Studio – the largest filmmaking institution in Soviet Ukraine – utilizing non-evacuated equipment and local personnel, though Germans occupied key managerial positions.⁴⁸

Formally, *Ukraine-Film* held broad responsibilities: it oversaw all cinema-related activities, including film studios, distribution networks, copy facilities, and the production of film and video equipment. It also coordinated cinema schedules and provided cities and towns across the RKU with new film reels, while also being responsible – at least in theory – for producing new films. In practice, however, only one film studio operated in the RKU, located in Kyiv and managed by the local auxiliary council under the direction of I. Nikitin. The studio's main role was limited to the translation, subtitling, and distribution of German films, and only a few new films were shot during the occupation. These were mostly propaganda films about life in Kyiv and the RKU, or documentaries commissioned by private organizations.⁴⁹

On the local level, cinemas were administered by arts departments within the auxiliary administration. Newspaper reports and archival sources confirm that movie theatres operated primarily in cities. For example, Kyiv hosted nine cinemas – eight for civilians and one for military use,⁵⁰ – while Dnipropetrovsk had seven operational cinemas.⁵¹ Cinemas also functioned

⁴⁸ V. Hinda, *Культура, освіта та спорт під час окупації*, in *Україна в Другій Світовій Війні: Погляд з 21 Сторіччя* 2010, vol. 1, p. 705.

⁴⁹ V. Udovuk, *Київська кіностудія*, “З Архіву ВУЧК-ГПУ-НКВД-КГБ”, 2004, vol. 1/2 (22/23), p. 442.

⁵⁰ “В Українфільмі”, *Нове Українське слово*, 12 March 1942.

⁵¹ A. Bulakh, *Культурно-Розважальні заклади м. Дніпропетровська в період окупації (1941–1943)*, “*Борисфен*”, 2020, vol. 350, no. 6, pp. 19–23.

in cities such as Kherson,⁵² Melitopol,⁵³ Mykolaiv,⁵⁴ Rivne,⁵⁵ Lutsk,⁵⁶ Zaporizhzhya,⁵⁷ among others.

The total number of cinemas in the RKU remains unclear. A report from the occupational press dated 27 May 1942, claimed that “*in the territory of Ukraine*⁵⁸, around 50 movie theatres [were] already working”, while officials were “*planning to open up to 350 cinemas by this autumn*”.⁵⁹ Another article marking the anniversary of *Ukraine-film*, in the fall of 1942 stated that “*in RKU, about 300 permanent cinemas [were] operating yet*”.⁶⁰ However, these numbers appear exaggerated for propaganda purposes. A more conservative estimate by historian K. Berkhoff places the number of functioning cinemas at approximately 50, which aligns more realistically with the limited capacity of occupational authorities in terms of manpower and equipment.⁶¹

Due to the scarcity of suitable venues and film equipment, cinema audiences were typically mixed, though some screenings were reserved exclusively for military personnel. Still, local civilians comprised the majority of cinema-goers, aided by ticket discounts offered to soldiers. In early 1942, a pricing policy for cinema attendance was instituted by E. Koch, possibly as a response to growing problems with ticket profiteering. Newspapers reported that cinema-goers frequently encountered “Sold out” signs at ticket windows, only to see tickets reappear later – resold at double or triple the original price.⁶²

A typical screening in the RKU began with the German weekly newsreel, *Wochenschau*, often subtitled in Ukrainian or Russian. The lack of alterna-

⁵² “Релама: Кіно Глорія”, Голос Дніпра, 08 March 1942.

⁵³ “Реклама: Deutsche Lichtspiele” Melitopolski region, 08 May 1943.

⁵⁴ “Отрывается два новых кинотеатра”, Новая Мысль, 19 October 1943.

⁵⁵ “Хроніка” Волинь, 20 November 1942.

⁵⁶ State Archives of Volyn Oblast (DAVoO), Fond-P-2, Description 1, Delo 19, “Gebietsskommissar in Luck”, p. 51. Accessed through: USHMM Collections

⁵⁷ “В Кіно”, Нове Запоріжжя, 18 January 1942.

⁵⁸ They probably mean RKU and the zone of military administration.

⁵⁹ “50 Українських кіно працюють”, Нове Запоріжжя, 27 May 1942.

⁶⁰ “Рік Праці Фільмового Товариства в Україні”, Волинь, 26 November 1942.

⁶¹ K.C. Berkhoff, *Harvest of Despair* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 175.

⁶² “Всі Квитки Продано”, Нове Українське Слово, 11 January 1942.

tive information sources initially made these newsreels popular, to the point that some viewers left after the newsreel, skipping the feature film. However, their propaganda value declined over time as audiences became increasingly skeptical of their content. As one Kyiv resident, Dmytro Malakov, recalled:

Before the films, there was a film newsreel. It began with a bravura march, an eagle with a swastika, and then eloquent words: the great successes of the Wehrmacht in all theaters of war, a great victory at sea, new victories in the East, the weakness and helplessness of the enemies of the Reich... But our audience had long been trained to watch and read between the lines.⁶³

The content of *Wochenschau* did not differ significantly from that of the official newspapers, and over time, viewership waned due to repetitive or outdated news, poor film quality, and in some cases, missing subtitles. For instance, in August 1942, one of Dnipropetrovsk's cinemas continued screening a newsreel from the previous winter.⁶⁴

Following the *Wochenschau* newsreel, film screenings typically continued with a feature-length motion picture. The main repertoire of local cinemas in the RKU consisted predominantly of German-produced films across various genres. Interestingly, the most popular screenings were not political or overtly propagandistic, but rather 'light' entertainment films, including comedies⁶⁵ and dramas.⁶⁶ German adventure films, such as *The Indian Tomb* and its sequel of *Tiger Eshnapur*⁶⁷ enjoyed particular success among local audiences.

Nevertheless, propaganda films still made up a significant portion of the cinema schedule. These included productions designed to showcase the power, prosperity, and cultural superiority of the Third Reich, as exemplified in *Modern Germany*.⁶⁸ Films that glorified the German military, such as *Dive*

⁶³ М. Мухайлюк, "Нацистська пропаганда в окупованому Києві," *Український Історичний Журнал*, 2006, issue 1, p. 137.

⁶⁴ К. С. Berkhoff, *Harvest of Despair* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 175.

⁶⁵ "Німецька кіномайстерність," *Нове Українське Слово*, 23 January 1942.

⁶⁶ "В Киевских Кинотеатрах," *Последние новости*, 27 April 1942.

⁶⁷ "Реклама: «Индийская Гробница»," *Мелитопольский Регион*, 07 August 1943.

⁶⁸ "Фильм о Германии," *Мелитопольский Регион*, 07 August 1943.

Bomber or *Submariners to the West*⁶⁹ also featured prominently. In addition to direct propaganda, a more subtle ideological influence was exercised through films like *Jew Süss*, *The Last Blow*, and *With Your Own Eyes*,⁷⁰ which aimed to appeal to more discerning or skeptical viewers through covert messaging and moral framing.

Despite this focus on ideological content, the actual effectiveness of cinematic propaganda was increasingly questioned by German officials. In a report dated 31 May 1944, the General Commissar of the Kyiv District, W. Magunia, expressed his dissatisfaction:

I could not say anything good about film propaganda. Based on financial considerations, hackneyed films were shown, which could evoke anything from the audience, but not sympathy towards us. Unfortunately, this was often the case. Films were devoted to cultural issues, and educational pictures were used very rarely.⁷¹

This critical view was also echoed by other authorities. According to a report by Professor von Grünberg, who conducted an inspection tour across the RKU, the technical quality of the films was often substandard. He noted that tapes were frequently torn, poorly synchronized, or damaged, which resulted in viewers leaving the cinema mid-session. Furthermore, translations and subtitles – crucial for the local Ukrainian- and Russian-speaking populations – were often inadequate, adding to the dissatisfaction of both civilians and occupational administrators.⁷²

Museums and Libraries

Alongside other cultural institutions, museums and libraries throughout the RKU suffered extensive damage during the initial stages of the German invasion. While the Soviet authorities managed to evacuate a portion

⁶⁹ “Кіно ‘Підводники на Захід!’”, *Дніпропетровська Газета*, 23 March 1943.

⁷⁰ “Кіно ‘Жид Зюсс’”, *Дніпропетровська Газета*, 13 April 1943.

⁷¹ M. Mylhailiuk, *Нацистська пропаганда в окупованому Києві*, “Український Історичний Журнал” 2006, issue 1, p. 138.

⁷² TsDAVO, Fond 3206, Description 2, Folder 26, “Teilbericht Politik über die Bemessung des Reichskommissariats”, p. 32. Accessed through: USHMM Collections.

of valuable collections, the majority of books, artifacts, and equipment remained behind, vulnerable to destruction and looting. In the first months of occupation, wartime bombardment – particularly from air and artillery strikes – devastated many buildings. A report from the director of the *Kyiv Museum of Western European Art* in May 1942, for instance, described a shattered glass roof and missing windows, temporarily replaced with plywood. The improvised repairs proved inadequate: rain and snow entered freely throughout autumn and winter, causing irreparable damage to exhibits and paintings.⁷³

Looting posed an equally grave threat. Both soldiers and civilians, regardless of affiliation, plundered cultural institutions for materials, furniture, and supplies. After the *Kamianets-Podilskyi City Library* was struck by an aerial bomb that destroyed part of the structure and many of its catalogs, residents began stripping the ruins for usable paper. Similarly, after the *Dnipropetrovsk Art Museum* sustained a direct hit, the roof collapse forced museum staff to transfer exhibits to the nearby Historical Museum for safekeeping.⁷⁴

In some cases, occupying Wehrmacht troops themselves were responsible for the most damaging behavior. After taking Kyiv, German soldiers were quartered in the main building of the Academic Science Library, where they used library materials – including rare publications and indexes – for heating and domestic purposes. According to contemporary reports, over 7,000 documents were destroyed, including 5,000 volumes from the international book exchange section and a complete card catalog archive.⁷⁵

Yet it was not only physical destruction that hampered the reopening of cultural institutions. German censorship efforts created another major obstacle. Authorities compiled a list of ‘unwanted’ authors, banning the works of 246 writers, including many Ukrainian, Soviet, Jewish, and even German intellectuals. Under occupation, specialized libraries – including those affiliated with scientific institutions, churches, or academic bodies – were closed

⁷³ ДАКО, Fond 2411, Description 3, Folder 1, “До Генералкомісаріату м. Києва Відділ III”, p. 16. Accessed through: USHMM Collections.

⁷⁴ TsDAVO, Fond 3206, Description 5, Folder 11, “Bericht über die Stadtbibliothek in Kamenez-Podolsk”, p. 97. Accessed through: <https://err.tsdavo.gov.ua>.

⁷⁵ N. Maloletova and L. Dubrovina. *Нацистська бібліотечна політика в період окупації Києва, Рукописна та книжкова Спадщина України*, 2000, vol. 5, p. 148.

to the public and made accessible only to German officials and administrators. Only general-purpose libraries, such as city, public, and children's libraries, were eventually reopened for local use.⁷⁶

In addition to censorship, chronic underfunding and resource scarcity led to staff reductions and delayed reopenings. For example, while Zaporizhzhya's public library reopened relatively quickly, in November 1941, this was an exception.⁷⁷ More typically, reopenings occurred a year or more after occupation began. The *People's* and *Central Libraries* in Dnipropetrovsk, for instance, resumed operations only on 15 August and 23 September 1942, respectively⁷⁸. Even small-town libraries, such as the one in *Kremenets* (Volyn and Podillia District), only began serving the public in late 1942.⁷⁹

Museums faced even greater challenges. Because many Soviet-era exhibitions had been overtly propagandistic, the new authorities struggled to redesign them in line with German ideological goals. Creating new displays, developing acceptable narratives, and sourcing appropriate artifacts proved a daunting task. As a result, only a limited number of museums reopened, among them the *Kyiv Museum of Taras Shevchenko*,⁸⁰ the *Rivne City Museum*,⁸¹ the *Art and Historical Museum* in Dnipropetrovsk, etc.⁸²

While a handful of cultural institutions managed to reopen during the German occupation, most libraries and museums remained closed or were preserved in name only. The primary reason for this was the German administration's exploitative approach toward cultural and historical heritage, viewing such assets largely through the lens of plunder and repatriation to the Reich. The case of the *Kyiv Arts Museum* exemplifies this attitude. Before 22 June 1941, the city was home to two major art institutions: the *Kyiv*

⁷⁶ TsDAVO, Fond 3206, Description 5, Folder 7, "Liste Nr. 1 des unerwünschten sowjetischen schöngeistigen Schrifttums im Bereich der Prop.-Abt. U.", pp. 154–155. Accessed through: <https://err.tsdavo.gov.ua>.

⁷⁷ А. Тетеруна, "Про роботу міської бібліотеки", *Нове Запоріжжя*, 26 November 1941.

⁷⁸ DADnO, Fond 2276, Description 1, Folder 965, "Звіт про роботу управління культурних установ за III квартал 1942 року", p. 129.

⁷⁹ "Хроніка", *Волинь*, 01 October 1942.

⁸⁰ "Розвиток Української Культури", *Нове Українське Слово*, 19 September 1943.

⁸¹ "Музей в Рівному", *Волинь*, 03 December 1942.

⁸² DADnO, Fond 2567, Description 1, "Матеріали про стан Дніпропетровського Художнього Музею", p. 3.

Museum of West European Art and the *East European Art Museum*. Under German control, the two were merged into a single institution, which was soon closed to the public.

The new combined museum was subdivided into Ukrainian, Russian, and Western European art sections,⁸³ and the entire occupation period was spent on repair and restoration efforts – not for public display, but to prepare selected artworks for eventual transport to Germany.⁸⁴ Intact or restored items were secured in basements or auxiliary buildings. While the museum may have operated briefly in early 1942, it was shut down entirely by mid-August of that year, officially to allow uninterrupted restoration and cataloguing. In practice, this marked a shift from conservation toward systematic looting, as cultural preservation gave way to the extraction of art for German benefit.⁸⁵

In contrast, slightly more information exists on the operation of public libraries under occupation. One significant change was the introduction of user fees, including monthly and one-time subscription charges – policies foreign to Soviet-era practices.⁸⁶ As with museums, libraries reopened primarily in urban centers, with no confirmed evidence of access in rural areas. Archival and press sources confirm the operation of at least one public library in cities such as Kherson,⁸⁷ Mykolaiv,⁸⁸ Rivne,⁸⁹ Zaporizhzhya,⁹⁰

⁸³ DAKO, Fond 2411, Description 3, Folder 7, “Список №2 Рахунків по Головному музею – Київ – які належать оплатити на протязі травня 1943”, p. 25. Access through: USHMM.

⁸⁴ TsDAVO, Fond 3206, Description 5, Folder 12, “Отчет о деятельности отдела западноевропейского искусства”, pp. 176–184. Accessed through: <https://err.tsdavo.gov.ua>.

⁸⁵ DAKO, Fond 2411, Description 3, Folder 2, “An den Referent für Museen bei dem Generalkommissariat Kiew”, p. 6. USHMM collection.

⁸⁶ DADnO, Fond 2276, Description 1, Folder 1157, “Тариф на користування книжками Миської Центральної бібліотеки”, p. 15; TsDAVO, Fond 3206, Description 5, Folder 11, “Bericht über die Stadtbibliothek in Kamenez-Podolsk”, p. 97. Accessed through: <https://err.tsdavo.gov.ua>.

⁸⁷ К. Bilostotska, “Робота Центральної Миської бібліотеки”, *Голос Дніпра*, 31 May 1942. Accessed through: libraria.ua.

⁸⁸ R. Trakhov, “Библиотека города Николаев”, *Новая Мысль*, 31 October 1943.

⁸⁹ “Українська бібліотека в Рівному”, *Український голос (Луцьк)*, 06 August 1942.

⁹⁰ “В Бібліотеці”, *Нове Запоріжжя*, 01 March 1942.

Zhytomyr,⁹¹ and Kamianets-Podilskyi,⁹² while Dnipropetrovsk⁹³ and Kyiv⁹⁴ each hosted two.

Despite the overall decline in the number of functioning libraries, visitor rates were relatively high due to the limited availability of reading spaces. For instance, the *Kyiv State Library* reported an average of 6,500 readers per month, with 78,823 total visits recorded between 1 July 1942 and 20 July 1943.⁹⁵ Smaller institutions saw more modest figures: *Zaporizhzhya's Public Library* welcomed between 632 and 707 patrons in the early months of 1942.⁹⁶

Given these constraints, German authorities prioritized maintaining or repurposing existing institutions rather than founding new ones. However, one notable exception is worth mentioning. In the spring of 1942, the *Museum-Archive of the Transition Period* was established in Kyiv, a rare example of a cultural institution founded under occupation. Created at the initiative of the city commissar and supported by a group of local scholars, the museum fell under the Education and Art Department of the municipal administration. Its staff included professional academics, most notably Professor Olexsander Ogloblin, then head of the *Central Archive of Ancient Documents*, as well as other respected scientists. The museum aimed to document and interpret the 'transition' from Soviet to German rule, reflecting the occupiers' interest in shaping historical memory.⁹⁷

Among the few new institutions established during the German occupation of Reichskommissariat Ukraine, the Museum-Archive of the Transition Period, founded in *Kyiv* in late spring 1942, stands out as a singular

⁹¹ "Нове культурне надбання", *Волинь*, 10 December 1942.

⁹² TsDAVO, Fond 3206, Description 5, Folder 11, "Bericht über die Stadtbibliothek in Kamenez-Podolsk", p. 97. Accessed through: <https://err.tsdavo.gov.ua>.

⁹³ DADnO, Fond 2276, Description 1, Folder 965, "Звіт про роботу управління культурних установ за III квартал 1942 року", p. 129.

⁹⁴ TsDAVO, Fond 3206, Description 5, Folder 7, "Anlage III" pp. 131–137. Accessed through: <https://err.tsdavo.gov.ua>.

⁹⁵ TsDAVO, Fond 3206, Description 5, Folder 7, "Bericht der Stadtbibliothek, Korolenko 46", pp. 348–349. Accessed through: <https://err.tsdavo.gov.ua>.

⁹⁶ "В Бібліотеці", *Нове Запоріжжя*, 01 March 1942.

⁹⁷ V. Gedz, *Джерела до вивчення культурного життя в окупованому Києві*, "Спеціальні історичні дисципліни: питання теорії і методології", 2007, issue 15, pp. 188–189.

initiative reflecting both propagandistic ambition and administrative experimentation. The museum explicitly declared its mission as: “Through the collection, systematization, and preservation of various materials, to show the importance of the struggle of the German nation, guided by A. Hitler, on a worldwide historical scale”, with a parallel aim to illustrate the “liberation of Ukraine, and particularly the capital, Kyiv, by the heroic German army”.⁹⁸

To realize these goals, the museum staff, consisting of professional Ukrainian scholars under the leadership of Professor Oleksander Ogloblin, organized propagandistic exhibitions. The first and only known exhibition, titled *The Destruction of Kyiv’s Cultural Monuments by Bolsheviks*, opened on 15 July 1942, after months of preparation. It featured 700 artifacts, 16 display cases, and 17 stands, alongside screenings of a German-produced documentary film depicting the alleged destruction of the *Kyiv Pechersk Lavra* by Soviet forces.⁹⁹

Despite extensive promotion by the press and occupation authorities, public interest in the exhibition was minimal. Only 326 visitors attended between 15 and 31 July, a number that starkly contrasted with the effort invested and the intended impact.¹⁰⁰ Plans for further exhibitions, including one titled *The Liberation of Kyiv from the Jewish-Bolshevik Yoke*, were discussed in contemporary press outlets.¹⁰¹ However, archival records suggest that this second event never advanced beyond preparatory stages, hindered by logistical issues such as lack of funding and suitable premises.¹⁰²

Scholars remain divided on the reasons behind the museum’s apparent failure and closure. M. Koval and I. Verba suggest that German authorities grew dissatisfied with the institution’s emphasis on the role of the Ukrainian auxiliary administration in reconstruction efforts – an angle that arguably

⁹⁸ ДАКО, Fond-P-2412, Description 1, Folder 2, “Положення про Музей-Архів Перехідної доби м. Києва” pp. 1–2. Accessed through: opisi.dako.gov.ua.

⁹⁹ М. Мулхайлик, *Нацистська пропаганда в окупованому Києві*, “Український Історичний Журнал”, 2006, issue 1, p. 140.

¹⁰⁰ ДАКО, Fond-P-2412, Description 1, Folder 2, “Звіт про роботу про Музей-Архів Перехідної доби м. Києва” p. 23. Accessed through: opisi.dako.gov.ua.

¹⁰¹ М. Koval, *Доля української культури за нового порядку (1941–1944)*, “Український Історичний Журнал”, 1993, issue 12, p. 33.

¹⁰² ДАКО, Fond-P-2412, Description 1, Folder 4, “План наукової роботи Музей-Архів Перехідної доби м. Києва”, pp. 18–19. Accessed through: opisi.dako.gov.ua.

conflicted with the German-centric narrative.¹⁰³ Conversely, V. Gedz argues that the core reason was the museum's ineffectiveness as a propaganda tool, an interpretation that aligns more closely with the occupation's utilitarian view of culture.¹⁰⁴

Beyond the founding of new institutions, the German administration repeatedly repurposed cultural buildings for bureaucratic and military use, often with little regard for their original function. A particularly vivid expression of this utilitarianism was the appropriation of valuable cultural artifacts for decorative purposes by high-ranking Nazi officials and military officers. In late 1942, the *Kyiv Museum of West European Arts* compiled an inventory of items loaned to various German institutions and individuals. The list included paintings by Dutch, German, and Italian masters, Chinese porcelain, Turkish vases, Japanese plates, and ornamental clocks. A total of 87 prestigious items were distributed among the Reichskommissar of Ukraine, the Chief of SS and Police, the Wehrmacht high command, the Kyiv city and district administrations, and even private individuals.¹⁰⁵

While some items were formally returned, the majority disappeared – either lost, destroyed, or removed during the German retreat. The fate of many artifacts remains unknown. Kyiv was not unique in this respect. In Dnipropetrovsk, following extensive repairs, the premises of the city's Historical Museum were converted into the office of the City Commissar in February 1942.¹⁰⁶ From the *City Art Museum*, 62 valuable paintings were

¹⁰³ Verba, I. *Олександр Оглоблін: Життя і праця в Україні (До 100-річчя з дня народження)*. Kyiv: National Academy of Science of Ukraine. M.S. Hrushevsky Institute of Ukrainian Archaeography and Source Studies, 1999; M. Koval, *Доля української культури за нового порядку (1941–1944)*, "Український Історичний Журнал", 1993, issue 12, p. 33.

¹⁰⁴ V. Gedz, *Джерела до вивчення культурного життя в окупованому Києві*, "Спеціальні історичні дисципліни: питання теорії і методології", 2007, issue 15, pp. 190–191.

¹⁰⁵ Liste der entliehenen Bilder und Kunstgegenstände [List of Borrowed Pictures and Art Objects], Fond 3206, Description 5, Folder 20, pp. 297–301, Central State Archives of Supreme Bodies of Power and Government of Ukraine, Kyiv, Ukraine. Accessed through: err.tsdavo.gov.ua.

¹⁰⁶ DADnO, Fond 2567, Description 1, Folder 1, "До Дніпропетровської Міської Управи", p. 68.

handed over to the Wehrmacht and civilian officials,¹⁰⁷ while 11 additional works were used to decorate a German casino set up in the former Drama Theatre.¹⁰⁸

These examples illustrate the broader trend of systematic cultural appropriation under German occupation. Far from being incidental, such actions reflect a deliberate policy that subordinated local cultural heritage to propaganda, personal gain, and imperial ambition, undermining both the preservation and public accessibility of Ukrainian cultural institutions.

Summary

German cultural policy in occupied Soviet Ukraine formed a key component of the broader strategy to stabilize and control the population while awaiting a conclusive victory over the Soviet Union. Within the civil administration zone of the Reichskommissariat Ukraine (RKU), the Nazi authorities employed a variety of methods to suppress resistance and secure compliance, including repression, forced labor, deprivation, and pervasive propaganda. Cultural activity – particularly the carefully controlled reopening of theatres, cinemas, libraries, and museums – was part of this broader effort to maintain a fragile social order and mitigate unrest.

The Nazi administration recognized the profound significance of cultural institutions for the Ukrainian population, especially in light of the Soviet Union's prior emphasis on education, public literacy, and enlightenment. This recognition is evident in a report by Dr. G. Winter, Chief of the Territorial Administration of Archives, Libraries, and Museums under the Reichskommissar of Ukraine. Following his assignment to oversee cultural institutions in southern and eastern Ukraine in May 1943, Winter acknowledged:

It is the great interest of the German side in the healthy existence and activities of these institutions (City, People's and Children's libraries). The population, he continues, remember with great respect the extraordinary measures taken by the Soviet

¹⁰⁷ DADnO, Fond 2567, Description 1, Folder 1, "Начальнику управління в справах Мистецтва", р. 3.

¹⁰⁸ DADnO, Fond 2276, Description 1, Folder 1156, "Список", р. 3.

regime in the field of enlightenment and public education. With the current restriction of the Ukrainian school system and the cessation of almost all other educational opportunities, the German administration is doing wisely to give the people at least a way out into the entertainment libraries and supportive supervision...¹⁰⁹

Despite such insight, the actual implementation of cultural policy remained inconsistent and often contradictory. On the one hand, local German administrations made considerable efforts to reopen a number of cultural institutions, particularly cinemas, theatres, and libraries, in both urban centers and smaller towns. Within the first year of occupation, dozens of such venues resumed operations, providing a carefully curated mixture of entertainment and propaganda. Cinemas screened newsreels and German feature films, while holidays and anniversaries were repurposed to reinforce anti-Soviet and pro-German narratives – most notably the celebration of Ukraine’s so-called “liberation” from “Jewish-Bolshevik barbarism”.

On the other hand, substantial portions of the cultural infrastructure remained inaccessible. Many museums and libraries lie in ruins, with collections damaged or looted and premises appropriated for use as military headquarters and administrative offices. Even more troubling was the systematic plundering of cultural assets, which were either transferred to Germany, used to adorn the offices and residences of German officials, or lost entirely. Only a fraction of the recovered artifacts was displayed in reopened museums, which operated primarily to serve propagandistic functions.

The discrepancy between official rhetoric and actual policy – between the promise of liberation and the reality of occupation – undermined the credibility of the German administration in the eyes of the local population. The deliberate marginalization of Ukrainian cultural heritage, the closure of scientific and religious libraries for civilians, and the destruction or theft of priceless artworks contradicted the occupation’s claims of cultural respect and renewal.

In the absence of a swift military victory, the German leadership postponed the total suppression of cultural life, instead opting for a controlled and selective revival of cultural activities. This temporary strategy aimed to

¹⁰⁹ TsDAVO, Fond 3206, Description 5, Folder 10,” Dienstreise nach Nikolajew und Dnjepropetrowsk”, pp. 199–200. Accessed through: USHMM.

soften the brutality of the occupation and cultivate local support or passivity. However, the contradictory nature of this policy, marred by inadequate funding, administrative negligence, ideological inflexibility, and blatant exploitation, rendered it largely ineffective.

Ultimately, the German cultural policy in occupied Ukraine revealed a deep tension between utilitarian pragmatism and ideological zealotry. While cultural institutions were occasionally revived to serve the occupiers' strategic interests, they were never allowed to regain their former status as spaces for intellectual or national development. Instead, culture under occupation became a tool of control and misappropriation, reflecting the broader dynamics of domination, exploitation, and resistance that defined life in the Reichskommissariat Ukraine.

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