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How to Live with Our Past – How to Build Our Future:

10 Thoughts from Ukrainian Museums on Decolonization and Their Future Work

1. History is who we are today; the future is what we can create today.

History is complex, both in our personal lives and in the life of a nation. Museums of all kinds play a crucial role in helping us understand where we came from, who we are, and who we want to become. What we place in a museum reflects our vision of the past, what we wish to discuss today, and what we want to preserve for future generations. This connects museums with seemingly different themes: local, regional, and national museums with historical aspects, museums of cultural heritage, art, natural science, technology, literature, poets, and writers.

We cannot choose our history, but it's up to us how we reflect it and whether we allow it to hold us captive or use our experience to build a better future. Today, history has become one of the key tools in the fight for independence and the preservation of national identity. It not only inspires but also empowers society with confidence. Ukrainians are now creating their history on the battlefield, and it's the museums' mission to preserve and tell that story. Museums are called to explain where we came from, who we are, why we must protect our heritage, and how we can use our past to build our future.

The significance of museums goes beyond merely preserving artifacts: they shape our national memory by showing how history impacts contemporary self-awareness processes. Reflecting history in local museums is essential for a nation's self-perception and influences how visitors from other regions and countries perceive the country. Culture, especially in times of war, must support people, give them hope, and embody the values we cherish today and want to pass on to future generations. Museums also provide a critical dialogue with the past. They offer space for rethinking and creative analysis, as history is not a set of unchangeable facts but a living memory that shapes our perceptions and guides actions. However, many museum workers still lack awareness of the need for a critical view of the museum narrative, which requires renewal to meet contemporary challenges. This is especially vital in the context of ongoing decolonization, where museums can help reveal a true history, free from Soviet influence.

Today, museum work requires courage to present not only achievements but also difficult, even unpleasant pages of the past. Only a society that can honestly acknowledge its mistakes can create a stable foundation for the future. Museums become a place where society learns not to avoid challenges but to accept history as it is—with complex questions and important lessons.

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Museums are also places where everyone can feel a connection to the past, understand their place in history, and find inspiration. They allow us to appreciate cultural and historical achievements, form critical thinking, and participate in the creation of new narratives. Today, museum workers have the mission not only to preserve artifacts but also to support dialogue on how history can become a source of strength for the future.

Our responsibility is not to ignore these issues, as a critical approach to history gives us a chance to build a better future.

2. Let's look at the past anew.

To build an even better Ukraine—during and after the current war imposed by Russia—Ukrainian museums must rethink how we deal with the past and what museums should offer to foster debate about the future of Ukraine and the Ukrainian nation.

Ukraine is a rich and diverse country, where people have different experiences and histories: being Ukrainian, like other nations, does not mean being monolithic. Cultural and regional diversity enriches us and allows us to move forward as one people. This horrific war was not necessary for us to realize this fundamental truth, but it adds an important element to how we understand ourselves as Ukrainians and why we want to preserve this nation.

Today, it is essential for Ukrainians to know why we are fighting and not merely dwell on the past. This knowledge is grounded in a foundation of history and culture, which has the power to unite us, support us in difficult times, and guide us into the future. Ukrainian museums need deep rethinking, as some of them have not adapted to modern needs even after 30 years of independence—new approaches in exhibits, interactive displays, and tours that engage diverse audiences in dialogue are needed.

The war with Russia has become a harsh but necessary impetus for preserving national heritage. This is not only a fight for freedom but also a process of internal self-awareness that allows us to realize our identity and cultural heritage. Museums today must become platforms for dialogue about our regional, cultural, and national diversity. They should not just display exhibits but create a space for self-reflection, where every Ukrainian—regardless of ethnic origin—can understand their belonging to a united nation.

Museums must also respond to challenges arising from destruction and looting during the war. This requires museum workers not only to preserve artifacts but also to actively rethink narratives related to our history and culture, turning these artifacts into a source of strength and support for modern society.

History has always shaped national self-consciousness, and today museums are moderators between the past and the present. They act not only as keepers of the

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past but as spaces where we can review and rethink our national achievements and defeats. By overcoming the Soviet past, they help us acknowledge our mistakes so that we can build a better future based on justice, diversity, and dignity.

Ukrainian museums must be united by one narrative: we have always aspired to freedom and independence. They must show that despite our country's multinational nature, the aspiration for freedom has always united us. Museums are spaces for dialogue and self-discovery, filled with objective stories, especially about regional diversity. Today, museums must preserve artifacts and facilitate understanding of historical processes to help Ukrainians better understand themselves and their contribution to world history.

3. Decolonizing museums is essential for our self-understanding.

Ukraine has a centuries-old cultural history. However, the periods when Ukrainians could freely live their identity and reflect on how they wanted to live were brief.

Ukrainians share a common trait with many peoples who have experienced both enrichment and subjugation by other nations—whether from the South, East, West, or North. Whether we like it or not, this has become part of our history and culture. However, we must understand where this influence helps us move forward and build a free and open society and where it complicates building our future.

For these reasons, people around the world have discussed the need for decolonization in conquered nations for decades. Ukraine exemplifies this necessity: today, Russia openly declares its goal to destroy Ukrainian identity and culture.

During Tsarist and Soviet times, Russia imposed its understanding of history and culture on Ukraine. During World War II, Nazi Germany sought to eliminate the Ukrainian nation and turn Ukraine into an agricultural colony. Poland and Ukraine share a common history that has sometimes been complex and painful for both sides. The Crimean Tatars on the Crimean Peninsula constantly faced threats to their identity.

Empires have always feared the identity of conquered peoples, as it forms the foundation of their strength. The war has accelerated derussification and decolonization processes in Ukraine, which have become essential for restoring and rethinking our national identity. Decolonization today is not only a political but also a cultural process, aimed at returning Ukraine its history, language, and cultural uniqueness. Ukrainian museums, as platforms for communication, must become hubs for this dialogue, creating space for a critical view of our past.

Every nation has its unique history and culture, and rethinking this heritage is an act of self-recognition that helps to free from a colonial past. In museums, this process is realized through new approaches to exhibition formation, where Ukrainian history is no longer viewed from an imperial narrative perspective. This is a crucial step in resisting aggressors' attempts to rewrite history, as during wartime, the fight for

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identity is also a fight for cultural heritage and the right to be oneself and speak about one's past without distortions.

Decolonization involves understanding the methods by which the empire “divided and ruled,” reinforcing internal conflicts between regions and peoples to maintain control. Restoring historical justice involves not only rejecting colonial symbols but also honestly analyzing those complex chapters that were often silenced or distorted. This requires courage and objectivity in approaching our history, including the challenging topics of Ukrainian-Polish, Ukrainian-Jewish, and other relationships. Museums can become spaces for discussing these aspects, helping to overcome historical trauma and form a shared vision for the future.

Liberating museums from colonial narratives will promote not only deeper self-understanding but also help build an independent national memory. Engaging communities in creating exhibitions, organizing educational activities, and research projects will give every Ukrainian a sense of connection to their history. This will allow museums to become vital centers of public dialogue, where every voice matters.

Decolonizing museums in Ukraine has a long journey, as its primary goal is to help Ukrainians understand their place in world history, to restore and preserve their cultural heritage. This is not merely about rejecting foreign narratives but about forming a new vision of the future, where history is not a means of control but a source of strength, unity, and inspiration for our society.

4. Decolonization of museums begins with tough questions to ourselves.

We can learn from other nations what it means to professionally decolonize museums. What has been placed in museums—and what has not—is inherently a reflection of what those who made decisions considered important. Thus, museum exhibits inevitably demonstrate the thinking of predecessors and, accordingly, will reflect our thinking on what we want to convey to future generations of Ukrainians. A characteristic feature of totalitarian regimes is that they try to replace everything they do not want their subjected people to know with what supports their thinking—be it the Nazis concerning what they called “degenerate art” or the communists regarding “bourgeois art.” And, of course, they tried to destroy everything that did not support their version of history.

Today in Ukraine, we must first understand that our museums are filled with objects reflecting these parts of our history, along with explanations following previous narratives: objects were selected because they, real or imagined, supported colonial narratives. Explanations were given according to the official way of explaining these narratives. The biographies of those who created these artifacts were written as previous leaders wanted.

Now we face the question: how do we, our generation, want to handle this legacy?

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Rethinking totalitarian heritage in Ukrainian museums is an important step in the decolonization process. Instead of destroying or hiding evidence of the past, we must find a way to integrate these elements into new narratives showing how propaganda and totalitarian systems influenced all spheres of society. Many collections in our museums hold items that once served colonial narratives. However, they may have different meanings today—through the lens of critical analysis.

Museums have a unique opportunity to help society understand and rethink a difficult past. Every artifact can show not only the imperial context but also the Ukrainian everyday life that was distorted by ideological influences. For example, printed materials, postcards, newspapers, posters, books, and everyday objects reflect the daily life, propaganda, and ideological tendencies of that time. It is essential not to oversimplify these exhibits into colonial tools but to show them in a broader context, analyzing them as part of social life.

Key steps in the decolonization process may include:

1. Rethinking collections. We need to critically review museum items that previously supported imperial myths and show them from a different angle, emphasizing Ukrainians' role in resisting totalitarianism.
2. Restoring the national context. Biographies of Ukrainian artists, scientists, and activists whose lives and works were distorted or suppressed by the empire need to be reviewed with emphasis on their real contribution to culture and national identity.
3. Expanding the historical narrative. Stories of resistance and cultural resilience during times of oppression should be included to present a full picture of the past.
4. Dialogue with the present. Museums can become spaces to discuss how past lessons impact our current path to independence.

Thoroughly revisiting the past allows us to create an approach grounded in new values. Rethinking totalitarian heritage is not just about changing exhibit explanations but also about revising the principles of museum work. This will enable museums to play an active role in shaping national consciousness, where every artifact is an opportunity for the nation's study and healing, not for silence.

5. Decolonization includes learning to live with our past.

In a free and open society, there is no official doctrine on how to view our heritage. Different people and groups have their own ways of seeing this heritage—sometimes simply adding new shades to our shared understanding, sometimes highlighting different perceptions and interpretations. These discussions can be painful and cause conflict, especially when the topic is relevant today.

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These discussions and conflicts take specific shape when it comes to what and how a museum should show. It may seem simple: “Let’s just get rid of what we don’t like today.” But that would be a fundamental mistake because it would not allow Ukrainians to form their own opinion and thus emancipate from the colonial elements of our past.

It is essential to openly acknowledge that part of Ukrainians, having lived under Soviet occupation for almost 70 years, adapted to the totalitarian regime, adjusting to new realities. Some built careers, others tried to survive, but generations of Ukrainians managed to preserve their national identity, language, and elements of material culture, even under the pressure of propaganda.

The decolonization process requires us not only to free ourselves from colonial narratives but also to develop a critical attitude towards information sources, independent thinking, and analytical skills. Learning to live with the past does not mean rejecting it but rethinking how it shapes our present and future.

This approach includes:

1. Recognizing the complexity of history—its diversity and ambiguity.
2. Critically rethinking events—deeply reconsidering the past through different viewpoints.
3. Working through historical trauma—finding new meanings and ways of healing through awareness of historical realities.
4. Engaging the community in dialogue—this will help society rethink historical narratives and challenges.

Museums, as part of public space, can play an essential role in this process, presenting exhibits with different viewpoints and creating spaces for discussions where different interpretations can coexist. Interactive programs that allow comparisons of narratives reveal complex pages of history, showing how imperial ideologies influenced Ukrainian society, particularly through propaganda.

Rejecting a single official interpretation does not mean abandoning national memory—it is an opportunity to enrich the narrative and recognize different aspects of historical experience. The complexity of our heritage requires an honest approach, where museums become not only places of artifact preservation but platforms for discussing who we are and what we envision for our future.

6. Openly discuss how we want to decolonize our museums.

Inclusive discussion about what and how to display in museums requires transparent analysis in each case and open discussion on how we want to build museums for future generations—including acknowledging that future generations will look not only at our past but also at what we did in our lifetime.

It’s not about simply discarding what we don’t like in museums today. In most cases, it’s much more complicated, yet also far more interesting—to reflect on how we want

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to explain this artifact, what it represents, why it was chosen for the museum, and what we can learn from it today. It's about juxtaposing these objects with our interpretation and, through this dialogue, allowing us to move forward. It's about reflecting on the personal history of those who created these artifacts and, once again, reflecting on the extent to which they could live that identity that guided them. Moving away from academic presentation of material and creating a symbiosis with modernity can revive museum space, attract more young people, and give new meaning to cultural heritage. However, often discussions about changes are not productive enough due to a lack of personnel, supporters of old approaches, and those who don't understand the need for change. Museums need new, creative, and skilled professionals who strive to create a museum that meets the challenges of today.

Decolonizing museums involves a critical analysis of how we present history, what we preserve, and how we interpret it. Here are some key aspects worth discussing in this context:

1. Re-evaluating exhibits—Museum collections are filled with artifacts, often collected during colonial or Soviet times, that supported imperial ideas or repressive narratives. It is worth rethinking which objects are central and can be reinterpreted in a new context.
2. Rewriting texts and interpretations—Often, explanations for exhibits were created according to colonial or Soviet views. These texts need rewriting, emphasizing the Ukrainian perspective based on modern research.
3. Expanding cultural representation—Decolonizing museums also means expanding narratives, including forgotten or silenced stories: these could be minority voices, experiences of resistance, folk traditions.
4. Community role—Decolonization should not be exclusively a scientific or political matter; the community must participate in the process, discussing what they would like to see in museums. This can be organized through public discussions and interactive programs.
5. Contemporary art as a means of rethinking—Contemporary art practices can raise questions about national identity and colonial heritage, fostering critical rethinking and reflection on the past.
6. The need for resources—Decolonization requires material and personnel resources for restructuring museum collections, conducting new research, updating exhibits, and interactive programs.
7. Preserving complex history—Instead of completely removing certain artifacts, museums can keep them with new explanations that highlight the context and complexity of history.

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Thus, open dialogue about decolonizing museums allows for a multifaceted, critical understanding of history, which will foster awareness of the richness of Ukrainian culture and strengthen national identity.

7. Decolonization is living with complexity.

Museums should avoid simple answers. Just as the absence of acknowledgment or even denial of the Ukrainian identity of artists did not reflect the complexity of our history, so it will not reflect the complexity of our past if we label every artist, poet, or engineer whose work is preserved in museums purely as Ukrainian. On the contrary, part of the richness of our history and culture lies in the fact that we, as a nation, have been shaped by the principle of “out of many—one,” as the founders of the United States put it.

Museums should critically examine this fundamental concept of an open society and include this principle of accepting complexity as part of our identity in the future presentation of their collections.

Museums will invite the public to reflect together on this complexity and how best to integrate it into our museums.

It is essential not to renounce complex historical heritage and not to hand it over to the contemporary Russian Federation, which actively monopolizes Soviet achievements. Soviet does not equal Russian, and Ukraine must preserve its contribution to the past, especially in the context of technical progress and the victory over Nazism. In the West, Russia has already succeeded in establishing itself as the sole victor of World War II on behalf of the entire USSR—this must not be allowed in other historical aspects.

Decolonizing museums should not be about rejecting or erasing the past but rethinking it deeply. Embracing complexity helps to understand that national identity is not a uniform story but a multi-layered identity shaped through the interaction of various cultures and peoples. This is why museums should move away from a single, centralized narrative and provide space for different voices: national, regional, ethnic minorities, and various social groups. This includes rethinking the role of Ukrainian culture at the intersection with other traditions and influences that, despite colonial attempts to displace them, enriched national identity.

Museums, integrating multiple voices of history, have the potential to be spaces for discussions where every voice matters. Rethinking colonial heritage must include the idea of unity formed through dialogue and even conflicts, which unite Ukrainians in a shared national history. This process needs to show that the interaction of different cultures, such as Ukrainian with Jewish, Polish, or Crimean Tatar, was an integral part of Ukraine’s formation, not just a result of external pressure.

Openness and community involvement in decolonization is a key aspect. Engaging the public, for instance, through interactive programs, public discussions, and

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collaboration with local communities, will allow museums to consider different perspectives. Such interactive programs and exhibitions should allow citizens to participate in shaping the narrative and assess the complex heritage we pass on to future generations.

Decolonization is about living with complexity, accepting both the challenging moments of our past and its heroic aspects.

8. Decolonization means living with unresolved conflicts.

Regarding our own history, our neighbors, and our beliefs, Ukrainian museums must also deal with situations where we cannot agree on important issues. As a result of our shared history, as well as after this horrific war, we must find a way to live with Russia and the fact that many Ukrainians have diverse family histories. This will be challenging for many. Museums have a responsibility to help address this challenge. Our shared history with Poland will remain an important topic for both societies and museums in both countries. We are not obliged to agree on every aspect of how we interpret this shared history. Often it is enough to simply listen to the other side and at least understand where and why the interpretations differ. For example, Poland and Germany have just agreed on a joint history textbook, as France and Germany previously did, allowing students to compare different perceptions and form their own conclusions.

Museums will provide space for such open discussions without always requiring a consensus.

The study of Ukrainian history and culture should be mandatory at all levels of education, and museums should play a key role in this process. Museum spaces can become platforms for open discussions of difficult aspects of the past without requiring shared conclusions. This will allow visitors to develop critical thinking, reflect on events, and seek their own answers.

At the same time, it is crucial to understand that Ukraine is not the “little brother” of any country but a European state with established traditions and a unique culture. In the context of decolonization, museums can strengthen this message, revealing the depth of Ukrainian identity and demonstrating the multifaceted nature of our historical experience. This is especially relevant in the complex relations with Russia, where museums can offer reflective exhibits that demonstrate the complexity of our relations, resisting narratives that seek to simplify or distort reality.

For Ukraine, it is also important to continue dialogue with neighboring countries, like Poland, with whom there are many shared historical chapters. This can take the form of joint projects or exhibitions exploring different interpretations of complex historical events. Involving the public and educational institutions in this interaction will allow museums to step beyond the traditional format and promote dialogue that builds neighborly relations on mutual understanding.

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Regarding Russia, it should be understood that dialogue is possible only under certain conditions—when crimes are investigated and criminals are brought to justice. Ukrainian museums must not only document current events but also create spaces that will allow future generations to better understand and appreciate their experience. History must be shown in full, with all its complexities and contradictions, so that future generations can draw conclusions and appreciate the richness of the past.

9. Learning from others.

Ukrainian museums must find their own way to address modern challenges, but at the same time, we can learn from others, as we are not the first nor the only ones undergoing a transformation of cultural policy. Post-Soviet societies in Europe face similar challenges, and their experience can be a source of inspiration for us. For instance, museums in the Baltic countries, such as Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, demonstrate successful examples of integrating Soviet heritage into the national narrative without losing their identity. They develop approaches that help turn complex and conflicting topics into meaningful and positive discussions that engage society in rethinking its history.

In the United States, we can find museums that integrate various, often conflicting, narratives, such as those involving Native Americans, African Americans, and white Americans. They show the importance of finding common ground between different stories and representing them in museum exhibits to create space for dialogue. This approach can teach Ukrainian museums how to present different perspectives on historical events without oversimplifying the complexity of the topic, instead creating multi-faceted narratives.

Africa and Asia also show successful examples of innovative museums that represent colonial and postcolonial history, art, and culture. These museums work on creating new narratives that take into account the legacy of the colonial era and its impact on modern societies. They teach how to combine different historical periods and create a new, critical perspective on the past. This inspires Ukrainian museums not to shy away from difficult or controversial aspects of history but to find ways to creatively reinterpret them.

None of these examples are entirely applicable to Ukraine, as our historical context has its unique aspects. However, we can learn something from each of them, borrow valuable ideas, adapt them to our conditions, and thus find our own way forward. Learning from other countries does not mean blindly copying their experience—it is an opportunity to take what already works and create new approaches that fit our realities.

Ukrainian museums can also be more actively involved in international cooperation networks. Joint conferences, exhibition exchanges, and partnership projects with

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museums from other countries will not only allow us to borrow new ideas but also help other countries better understand the specific situation in Ukraine, our challenges, and how we are addressing them. This will help build a global cultural exchange network where Ukrainian museums can tell their story to the world, demonstrating our struggle for sovereignty and cultural identity.

Museums should also take into account different aspects of the Soviet legacy, particularly the differences between those who were under Soviet rule from 1922 and those who joined later, such as after 1939. The methods and duration of the terror varied, affecting perceptions of Soviet power and the level of resource exploitation. Ukraine, for example, received only 9% of its contribution to the metropolitan budget, while the Baltic countries received 15%. This influenced not only the development of infrastructure but also the self-respect and integrity of society, and these differences should also be reflected in museum narratives.

Museums need to consider the needs of the community and society, using the best global examples while developing their unique approach. The transformation of museum work should take place through a deep understanding of our history and the integration of international experience. This combination will allow us to develop new approaches to museum work that will meet the current and future challenges of Ukrainian society.

10. Explaining our colonial experience beyond Ukraine.

Despite the intensifying global dialogue about colonialism and decolonization, it is surprising that neither the colonial war Russia is waging nor Ukraine's need to carry out its own decolonization has received sufficient attention in this international discourse.

In discussions in other parts of Europe or the United States, colonialism is often seen as something that happened outside of Europe. The Ukrainian nation during World War II, like other Eastern European peoples, was to be destroyed as a result of Nazi Germany's brutal colonial policy. The Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and today's Russian Federation have been and remain a colonial power with colonial ambitions. For the future of Ukraine and the Ukrainian people, it is essential that those outside Ukraine understand that Ukraine is a victim of colonialism and that those fighting against colonialism and its consequences should support Ukraine in its struggle. Museums will use their international networks to expand understanding of Ukraine's struggle for sovereignty and identity.

It is essential to emphasize, when communicating with the global West, the unique aspects of Russian and Soviet colonialism concerning Ukraine. Unlike classical empires, which often claim the role of "civilizers" for their former colonies, the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union systematically denied, devalued, and displaced Ukrainian identity, culture, and intellectual heritage. Scientific, cultural, and

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social ideas largely came to Ukrainian lands from the West, where Ukraine actively followed global progressive trends and sometimes even led them, influencing the broader European context. In this process, museums can become powerful tools that not only preserve the past but shape the historical projection of the future.

Forming an international discourse on the colonial nature of Russian aggression is key to amplifying the Ukrainian voice on the world stage. However, within our society, this topic also needs systematic discussion and educational work. The reactions to street renaming or the dismantling of imperial monuments are examples of a complex public debate around colonial heritage.

Explaining Ukraine's colonial experience on the global stage helps the international community understand our challenges. The uniqueness of Ukraine's colonial experience—from the Russian Empire, Poland, and Austria to the Soviet Union—has shaped national identity and created complex realities we need to explain to the world. Museums can act as mediators in this process, engaging in international dialogue and dispelling stereotypes and prejudices that have accumulated around Ukrainian history.

The colonial nature of the current Russia-Ukraine war demonstrates Russia's desire not only to seize Ukrainian lands but also to impose its culture, language, and narratives. This aspect needs to be conveyed to the international community because this is a war for the existence of the Ukrainian political nation, identity, and right to self-determination.

By creating exhibitions and international partnerships, Ukrainian museums can and should convey to the global community that Ukraine's current struggle is part of the global movement against colonialism.

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