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War Endangers Holocaust Researchers and Educators in Ukraine — and Their Work



United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

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Now wielding a weapon instead of a word processor, a Ukrainian scholar due to start a fellowship at the Museum in early March had to indefinitely postpone his trip after Russia invaded his country.

Mykhaylo Tyaglyy said goodbye to his family, who left Ukraine for Poland on their way to Israel, and is serving with the Ukrainian army. His new responsibilities must take priority over his academic work, said Vadim Altskan, senior project director in International Archival Programs at the Museum.

“He’s not going to sit and write; he’s going to defend his country, which is heartbreaking,” said Altskan, who was stunned by how fast “he got a uniform and a machine gun” to transition into the military.



Participants in the 2019 annual Holocaust Studies Summer Program in Kyiv, organized by the Museum for scholars from across Ukraine, tour Babyn Yar, site of one of the largest massacres of the Holocaust. —Anton Skyba/US Holocaust Memorial Museum

The Museum has extended Tyaglyy's fellowship, hoping he can come to Washington, DC, in the future to write about his research on an understudied topic, persecution against Romani people. The Nazis and their collaborators targeted Roma for forced labor and mass murder at the same time they were committing genocide against the Jews.

Delaying efforts to uncover and share the truth about what happened to the Roma community, which is not as well documented as other parts of this history, is just one example of the war's impact on the Museum's work in Ukraine. The country, then part of the Soviet Union, was home to one of Europe's largest pre-World War II Jewish populations and is where Nazi Germany's systematic mass murder of Jews started. At least 1.5 million Jews were killed in Ukraine.

Natalya Lazar, program manager of the Museum's Initiative on Ukrainian-Jewish Shared History and the Holocaust in Ukraine, said that all of the Museum's network there — more than 150 scholars, researchers, educators, university faculty members, nongovernmental organizations, and activists in many cities — have had to halt their work.

“It’s people who are at risk, first and foremost,” Lazar said. “The country and its existence with the ongoing war is in danger, and Holocaust studies and Jewish studies, and our partners are in danger,” Lazar said. “None of our colleagues can continue their daily work. Nobody can teach these days. ... They’re all adapting their lives to the needs of the country at war.”

The majority of people in the Museum's network remain in the country. Some are helping refugees, translating for international volunteers, fundraising, and delivering food, medicine, and water for those in need, including Holocaust survivors who live there, she said. “Right now, the priority is surviving.”

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Other colleagues have joined territorial defense units and the Ukrainian army.

The Costs of Pausing Scholarship

That means scholarship is on hold. For example, one scholar was to publish his book this fall on Jewish life in the south of Ukraine, a subject about

which there is very little else available in Ukrainian or any other language. Another scholar was writing a manuscript about sexual violence and experiences of Jewish women during the Holocaust in Ukraine. She had to leave the country out of concern for the safety of her young child.

The Russian invasion also delayed publication of a translation into Ukrainian of a German-language book on anti-Jewish violence in 1941 in western Ukraine.

An important part of Ukrainian scholars' work, educating the international community about Ukrainian-Jewish history and its relevance to current events, has never seemed more urgent as the Russian government misuses the Holocaust to justify its invasion and destruction. Their efforts help inform a Ukrainian information campaign to counteract Russian propaganda.

Embracing Academic Freedom

The Museum's work in Ukraine began after the fall of the Soviet Union more than 30 years ago and safeguards almost 14 million pages copied from more than 20 archives in Ukraine. Staff of the Museum's National Institute for Holocaust Documentation are working harder than ever to make them digitally accessible to all who wish to study them.

Building the Museum's human network in Ukraine intensified in 2013, with the Piotr and Basheva Polsky Memorial Initiative for the Study of Ukrainian Jewry. Under this initiative, the Museum develops Ukrainian-language educational resources and academic publications, and partners with Ukrainian universities to prepare faculty to teach about the Holocaust. The goal is to promote the study and teaching of Jewish and Holocaust history.

Since 1991, the fields of Jewish and Holocaust studies have bloomed in Ukraine at a grassroots level without major state funding, said Lazar, who joined the Museum's Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies in 2015. She stays in touch with participants who attended annual Holocaust studies summer programs in Kyiv, co-organized by the Museum with two partners, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv and the Ukrainian Center for Holocaust Studies.

She fosters networking among Ukrainian scholars and researchers based in the United States. For example, a University of North Carolina at Greensboro history professor recently collaborated with Ukrainian colleagues from Rivne on an online commemorative event about the Tuchyn Ghetto Uprising.

A new generation of Ukrainian scholars and public activists are not afraid to discuss controversial aspects of their country's past, Lazar said. Ukrainian scholars now study Jewish and Holocaust history and preservation of Jewish cultural heritage in their communities after decades of neglect and silence in the Soviet Union. But that progress is now under threat.

Most of the Ukrainian colleagues she has heard from are saying, "we have to hold on, and we have to win."

"If Russians take over ... these people will not be able to teach about the Holocaust and Jewish history," Lazar said. "They will not be able to do their research in a free academic environment."

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Elizabeth Kaldeck Smith

Apr 1, 2022



There is so much to learn from this informative, well done article.



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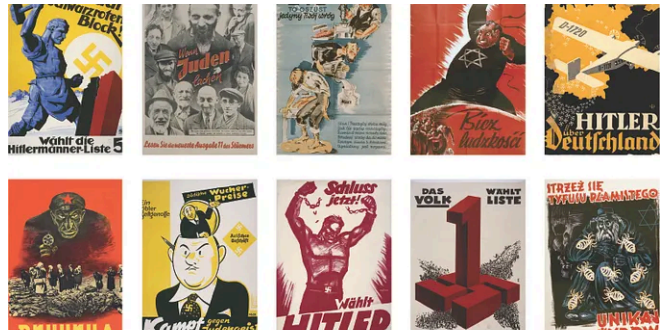


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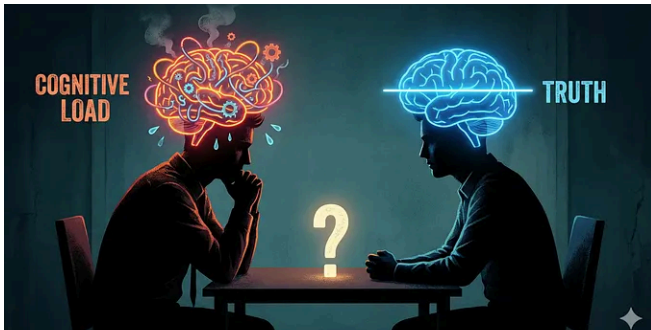
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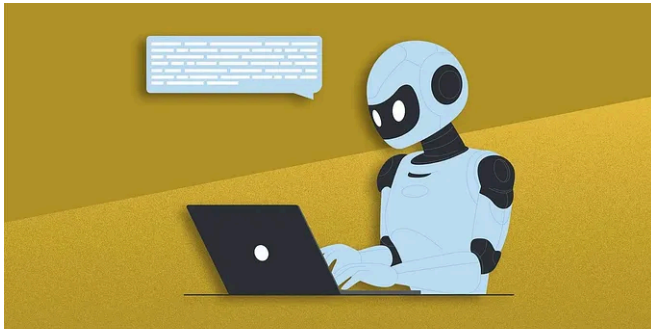
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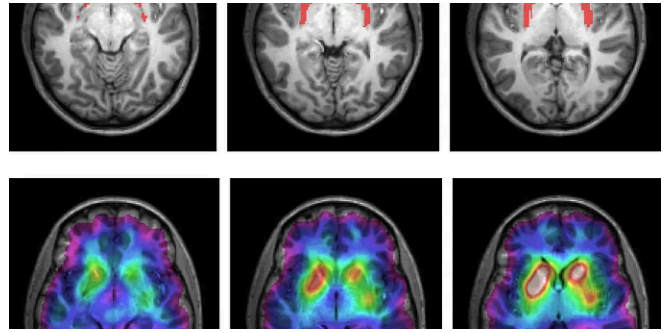


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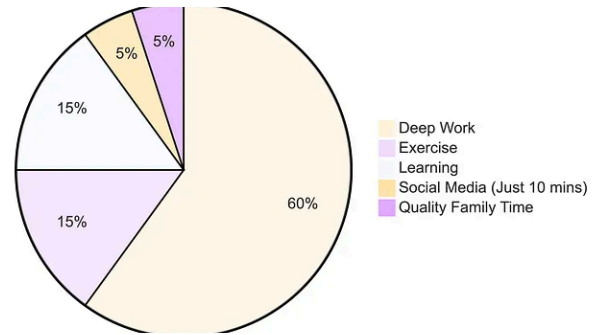


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