

Milena Mierzejewska–Wasilewska, PhD

Polish Army Museum, Warsaw, Poland

No Borders for Responsibility: The Polish Army Museum in the Era of War and Crisis

The contemporary world is becoming an arena of constant tensions, political transformations, and, regrettably, brutal armed conflicts. War, which until recently seemed distant to many countries and nations, has returned to Europe and other continents with renewed force, bringing devastation not only to people but also to cultural heritage.

In this dramatic context, the role of museums and museum professionals becomes particularly significant: we are the guardians of memory, culture, and history.

We carry a profound sense of responsibility as museum workers in a turbulent world—one in which the sound of air raid sirens increasingly drowns out the voices of the past preserved in our collections; a world in which museums, traditionally spaces of memory, dialogue, and identity, are increasingly exposed to threats.

We cannot overlook the symbolic and ethical dimension of the museum profession. Our work - often quiet, methodical, and meticulous - becomes, in moments of crisis, a manifestation of opposition to barbarity. By protecting monuments, we safeguard not only material objects but also identity, diversity, and memory itself.

A museum professional thus becomes far more than a curator of collections; they become a guardian of the narratives that bind communities together. The etymology of the word “curator,” derived from the Latin *curare* - to care for, to guard - reminds us of this responsibility.

I would therefore like to invite you to reflect on the role of museum workers in the face of armed conflicts - not only as employees of cultural institutions but also as custodians of heritage. In this paper, I will discuss the challenges posed by the contemporary international situation, the measures undertaken by the Polish Army Museum in Warsaw, and the ways in which each of us - regardless of our location - can and should respond to cultural crises brought about by war.

In recent years, the world has witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of armed conflicts, with devastating consequences not only for human lives but also for cultural assets.

The war in Syria resulted in the destruction of Palmyra, one of the most significant monuments of world heritage. In Iraq, following the 2003 invasion, the National Museum in Baghdad was looted in what the United Nations has described as “the greatest cultural catastrophe since the Second World War.”

And today, just a few hundred kilometers from Poland’s eastern border, the war in Ukraine has been ongoing for more than three years. According to UNESCO data, hundreds of museums, libraries, and monuments have been damaged or destroyed. In many cases, we are witnessing the deliberate annihilation of cultural heritage, used as a tool of cultural and ideological warfare.

A museum in times of war occupies a unique position. On one hand, it is vulnerable to physical destruction - bombings, plundering, fires. On the other, it becomes a powerful symbol of survival,

resistance, and national identity. In such circumstances, a museum ceases to be merely a cultural institution; it transforms into a spiritual refuge for an entire nation engulfed in war.

This is why museum workers in conflict zones often undertake heroic efforts.

Staff of the Historical Museum in Kharkiv hid artifacts in basements and documented the destruction while risking their lives. In Syria, conservators concealed monuments from Aleppo and Homs in their own homes.

It is the courage, creativity, and determination of museum workers that frequently determines what will survive for future generations. However, in practice, protecting cultural heritage requires not only courage and legal safeguards but also preventive and logistical measures: evacuation of collections, preparation of digital inventories, securing archives, and organizing deposits.

At the Polish Army Museum - one of the largest museums in Poland, founded in 1920, shortly after the country regained independence - we feel a particular responsibility for our heritage. Our collections comprise more than 300,000 artifacts: armor, cold and firearms, uniforms, banners, military decorations and insignia, documents, military vehicles, and heavy equipment such as tanks, artillery pieces, and aircraft displayed outdoors. The museum plays an important educational and patriotic role, presenting the history of the Polish Army and its contribution to the struggle for national freedom.

Preparation for crisis situations must begin in times of peace. In the face of the growing threats of recent years, our museum has undertaken a series of measures, including:

- drafting evacuation plans,
- providing staff training in the protection of collections in emergencies,
- documenting and digitizing collections,
- fostering cooperation between institutions at both the national and international levels.

More than a year ago, a retired colonel, formerly the chief of staff of one of Poland's military brigades, joined our museum team. He immediately began developing updated evacuation plans in response to the ongoing war in Ukraine. Together with the museum's management, it was decided that the exhibitions in our main building contained the most valuable and historically significant artifacts; therefore, a comprehensive evacuation plan for these collections was prepared.

The resulting *Instructions for Preparing Collections for Evacuation at the Polish Army Museum in Warsaw in Case of Threat* describes various categories of potential threats - both within the museum and in its immediate vicinity - including failures, damage or destruction of technical infrastructure, fires, extreme weather events, as well as threats posed by visitors, staff, or potential armed conflicts. The document identifies specific threat zones, evacuation routes, and the number and types of technical resources required for evacuation. It details procedures for packing, transporting, and securing collections, addressing risks associated with each stage of the process and setting technical requirements to ensure safety.

Particular emphasis is placed on methods of protecting collections both during evacuation and at temporary storage sites. Museum staff responsible for evacuation have been divided into teams with clearly assigned tasks, including conservation and documentation specialists. Each team has

a designated leader, and all members receive training to ensure operational continuity in case of personnel shortages.

The *Instruction* also defines procedures for notifying directors, managers, and key personnel responsible for evacuation activities, as well as principles of cooperation with external services and institutions. A variant evacuation plan in the event of an armed conflict has been included, assuming early identification of the threat to allow for appropriate preparations and the safeguarding of artifacts.

Following its publication, all museum employees were given time to review the *Instruction* and submit comments. Several theoretical and practical training sessions were subsequently conducted, including exercises in packing artifacts into transport crates and moving them to designated storage facilities.

The next stage involves the selection and preparation of artifacts currently in storage for potential evacuation. The Polish Army Museum was among the first institutions in Poland to purchase standardized transport crates in multiple sizes for this purpose.

Numerous documents complement the evacuation *Instruction*, including the *Registration Instructions* for securing registration records, a schedule for the implementation of monument protection plans, and a training improvement program.

Digitization efforts have also intensified, with backup copies stored securely to ensure that, even if physical artifacts are destroyed, their documentation - and thus their historical and cultural significance - survives.

As Poland's experience during the Second World War demonstrates, even artifacts that survive but are looted require meticulous documentation for their recovery. Poland's Ministry of Culture and National Heritage operates a dedicated unit tasked with locating and recovering looted cultural property from international markets and archives, relying heavily on such documentation to prove ownership and secure restitution.

In conclusion, I would like to propose several concrete measures that every museum - regardless of size - or cultural worker can adopt. We cannot stop missiles, but we can, and must, protect what is intangible: memory, culture, and meaning.

As museum professionals, we serve the future. Our mission should therefore encompass:

1. inventorying and documenting collections - both digitally and photographically,
2. developing crisis scenarios for war, fire, flooding, and cyberattacks,
3. training staff, volunteers, and students in emergency preparedness,
4. building networks of support at local, national, and international levels,
5. sharing knowledge - because solidarity and information are our most effective tools of defense.

In times of war, a museum worker becomes not only a specialist but also a witness to history. Our work - often carried out quietly, in the shadow of dramatic events - plays a fundamental role in preserving humanity's heritage.

Every saved artifact, every protected sculpture or manuscript, represents not merely an object but a fragment of memory, identity, and hope. In a world torn by conflict, a museum is not a luxury. It is a refuge.

And the museum worker is a guardian.