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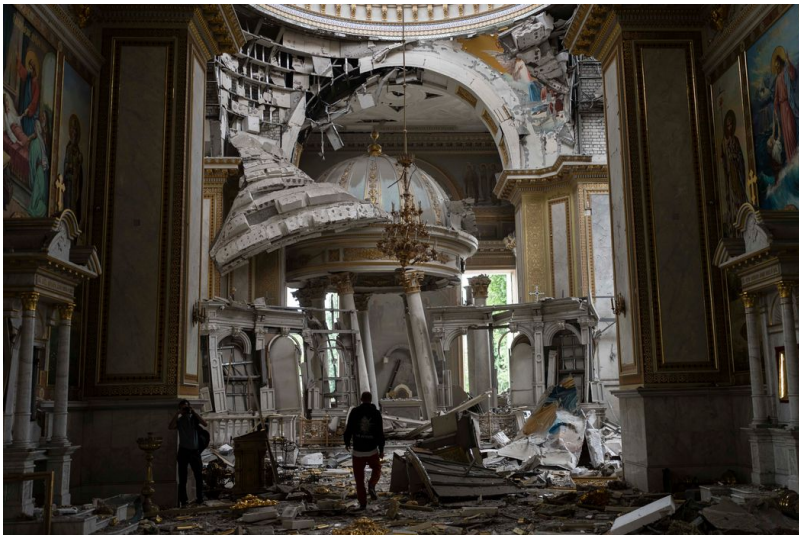
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Expel Russia From Unesco

In the face of Putin's continuing destruction of Ukraine's cultural heritage—including the recent bombardment of Odesa's historic center—the organization must take decisive action at its session this month.

By Konstantin Akinsha

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Interior of Odesa's Transfiguration Cathedral following Russian missile attacks PHOTO: JAE C. HONG/ASSOCIATED PRESS

On Sunday, Unesco's World Heritage Committee began a two-week session in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, devoted to reviewing the state of conservation of 260 sites on the agency's "World Heritage List," 55 of which are also on its "World Heritage in Danger" list.

In the latter group is the historic center of Odesa, Ukraine, which was listed in January after having been the target of Russian missile attacks last year. Explaining the decision, Audrey Azoulay, the organization's director-general, wrote: "Odesa, a free city, a world city, a legendary port that has left its mark on cinema, literature and the arts, is thus placed under the reinforced protection of the international community. While the war continues, this inscription embodies our collective determination to ensure that this city, which has always surmounted global upheavals, is preserved from further destruction."

Ukrainians applauded Unesco's decision, hoping that this "reinforced protection" would spare the historic center. They were mistaken. When the city was bombed again in July, it was the target.

Russia, a Unesco member, has a delegation in Riyadh because it is on the World Heritage Committee. This is a travesty. For its deliberate targeting of Ukraine's cultural heritage, Russia needs to be expelled from Unesco.

The first attack on Odesa's historic center occurred on July 20, when Russian missiles damaged the Archaeological Museum and the Literature Museum, a 19th-century neoclassical palace that houses a rich collection of manuscripts and documents connected to the literary life of the city. This was followed on July 23 by the most ruinous bombardment of the city center so far.

Odesa's main Russian Orthodox church, the Transfiguration Cathedral, was damaged beyond repair. Destroyed by the city's Soviet rulers in 1936, in 2011 it was rebuilt as it had been. A video made by the first rescue workers who entered the burning building went viral on Ukrainian Telegram channels. One who filmed the flames devouring the interior can be heard repeating in shock, "My God, there is no cathedral anymore."

The cathedral attack was widely covered by the international media, but it was not the only landmark struck that night. At least 25 historic buildings were hit. The most stunning example is the House of Scientists, which was heavily damaged. The former palace of Count Mikhail Tolstoy and erected in the 1830s, it still contained the original stucco ceiling ornaments, wood paneling, mosaic parquet, and some original furniture. Thus it had the unforgettable aura of Odesa's 19th-century palaces, remaining a unique witness of that time.

Others included such architectural monuments as the stately early 19th-century palace of Count Potocki, the oldest in the city and home to the National Art Museum; the neo-classical Maritime Museum; the Manuk Bey mansion, where in 1848 Nikolai Gogol lived during his stay in Odesa; the mansion of Baron Arist Mass, constructed in 1849-50; the neoclassical house of Giacomo Porro, the Portuguese consul, constructed in 1883-84; the apartment house of Count Anatoliy Gagarin, erected at the end of the 19th century in a neo-Baroque style; and the ornate apartment house of Merchant Zabludovsky, known as the "Marshmallow House," construction of which was completed in 1919. This martyrology of Odesa architecture could be continued.

Fortunately, as of this writing, some of the most important architectural monuments of Odesa are still intact. I'm thinking of the grand building of the Opera and Ballet Theatre, constructed in 1887 in the style of Viennese neo-baroque, or the monument to the Duke of Richelieu, an important early governor of the city. This stands at the entrance to a semicircular square formed by the facades of buildings erected between 1826 and 1830 and now used for government offices. And it looks out on another architectural wonder, the Potemkin Steps (begun in 1837), a nearly 500-foot ceremonial stairway that forms the formal entrance to the city from the sea and was immortalized in the Sergei Eisenstein film "Battleship Potemkin" (1925).

Unesco included the historic center of Odesa on its World Heritage in Danger list because it is an exceptional open-air architectural museum, "an outstanding 'time capsule' of 19th-century urban planning," as the organization says on its website. But neither that nor international condemnation of the Russian attacks stopped the bombardments. On Aug. 14, Russian missiles and Iranian-made drones targeted the historical center of Odesa again, damaging numerous buildings, including more historical monuments.

Nor is Odesa alone. On the morning of Aug. 3, in the city of Kherson—liberated by Ukrainian forces in November 2022 and since that time under nonstop bombardments—a Russian missile exploded in the Cathedral of St. Catherine, sparking a fire that caused further damage to its interior. Then there is the systematic looting of art museums in Mariupol, Melitopol and Kherson.

This isn't collateral damage. It's the deliberate targeting of Ukraine's cultural heritage to eradicate its identity as a nation. Repeated appeals by Ukrainian officials, and those of other countries starting as far back as February 2022, to suspend Russian membership fell on the deaf ears of Unesco officials.

But with the most recent attacks on the historic center of Odesa, they can no longer continue in this vein. If Unesco hopes to retain any credibility as a custodian of cultural heritage, it must expel Russia. Now.

—Mr. Akinsha is an art historian who most recently organized the traveling exhibition "Modernism in Ukraine, 1900-1930s."