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## **UKRAINE: Odesa Transfiguration Cathedral: international uproar about Putin's missile strike (II)**

*The interior of Transfiguration Cathedral, the largest church building of Odesa, was damaged by a Russian missile that hit the altar on July 23.*

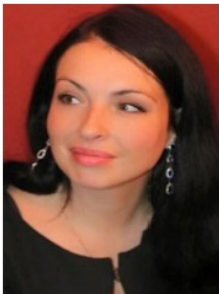
**UKRAINE: Odesa Transfiguration Cathedral: international uproar**

# about Putin's missile strike (II)

*The world condemned the criminal Russian missile strike. It should now help Ukraine to rebuild the historical church, UNESCO said.*

*See Part I [HERE](#) and see pictures of the damages [HERE](#).*

By Dr Ievgenia Gidulianova and Willy Fautré



Bitter Winter (09.01.2023) – 23 July 2023 was a Black Sunday for the city of Odesa and for Ukraine. When Ukrainians and the rest of world woke up, they discovered with horror and anger that the heart of the UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Orthodox Transfiguration Cathedral had been severely damaged by a Russian missile strike. Voices were quickly raised to condemn and protest against this new war crime and UNESCO quickly sent a fact-finding mission to Odessa.

## *An international uproar*

**British Ambassador to Ukraine Melinda Simmons** noted that there were no military facilities in the center of Odesa.

“It’s just a beautiful Ukrainian city, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, through whose ports vital food is exported around the world,” Simmons said.

**U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine, Bridget Brink** said: “Russia

continues to attack civilians and infrastructure in Odesa. It is a World Heritage Site and a port vital to global food security.” said U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Bridget Brink.

She stressed that Russia’s unjustified war against Ukraine and its people entails terrible consequences. In particular, the ambassador mentioned the destroyed Transfiguration Cathedral, which was recreated at the beginning of this century after it was blown up by order of Stalin in the 30s of the last century.

**EU High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell** called the night strike on Odesa another Russian war crime and tweeted: “Russia’s relentless missile terror against UNESCO-protected Odesa is yet another war crime by the Kremlin, which has also destroyed the main Orthodox cathedral, a World Heritage Site. Russia has already damaged hundreds of cultural sites in an attempt to destroy Ukraine.”

**UN Secretary-General António Guterres** strongly condemned the Russian missile attack on Odesa, which killed two people and damaged the Transfiguration Cathedral, as well as several other historical buildings in the historic center of the city. A statement about this event, attributable to Stéphane Dujarric, Spokesman for the Secretary-General, was published on the official website of the organization on Sunday 23 July.

The statement called the shelling of the cathedral and other historical monuments “an attack on the territory protected by the World Heritage Convention, in violation of the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict,” which occurred “in addition to the horrific civilian casualties that war brings.”

The UN spokesman noted that since the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, UNESCO has confirmed damage to at least 270 cultural sites in Ukraine, including 116

religious sites. The UN Secretary-General calls on the Russian Federation to immediately stop attacks on objects protected by “widely ratified international normative documents”, Ukraine’s civilian infrastructure and its civilians, Dujarric said.

**The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)** also issued a statement strongly condemning the new Russian attacks on World Heritage sites in Odessa.

“This outrageous destruction marks an escalation of violence against Ukraine’s cultural heritage. I strongly condemn this attack on culture and call on the Russian Federation to take constructive action to fulfill its obligations under international law, including the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and the 1972 World Heritage Convention,” said UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay.

These attacks contradict recent statements by the Russian authorities about the precautions taken to preserve World Heritage sites in Ukraine, including their buffer zones.

The deliberate destruction of cultural objects can be equated with a war crime, which is also recognized by the United Nations Security Council, of which the Russian Federation is a permanent member, in Resolution 2347 (2017).

**The Russian Defense Ministry** confirmed the attack on the city but denied that the target of the strike was the Transfiguration Cathedral, the most damaged religious site. The agency claims that it fired only at “places of preparation of terrorist attacks against the Russian Federation”, and “planning strikes with high-precision weapons” deliberately excluded the defeat of civilian targets. The temple, according to the Russian military, was damaged due to “illiterate actions of Ukrainian air defense operators.” At the same time, Russia during the war repeatedly struck civilian targets with

high-precision weapons – and each time categorically denied it, even when its responsibility was absolutely obvious.

Several Ukrainian organizations, including the **Academic Religious Studies Workshop and the Institute for Religious Freedom** monitor the destruction of religious sites due to Russia's war on Ukraine. According to their data, around 500 religious buildings, religious educational institutions and shrines in Ukraine have been badly damaged or destroyed. Most of the Orthodox buildings belong to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC).

***“We ask for international assistance for the restoration of the Transfiguration Cathedral”***

The Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine calls on the international community to assist in the restoration of cultural heritage monuments and is preparing appropriate appeals to the UNESCO World Heritage Committee and the Second Protocol to the Hague Convention.

On 9 August 2023, UNESCO presented the preliminary results of its expert mission, the purpose of which was to assess the damage caused to the cultural heritage of Odessa. Of the 52 cultural monuments reported by the Ukrainian authorities to have been damaged in Russian attacks, UNESCO experts were able to inspect the 10 most affected sites.

Most of them, including the Transfiguration Cathedral, the House of Scientists and the Literary Museum, were assessed by experts as “severely damaged”. Experts also noted that some other historic buildings have become more vulnerable as a result of the fighting and, therefore, are at risk of significant damage in the event of new attacks, which may be accompanied by blast waves and vibrations.

Representatives of the International Council for the Preservation of Historical and Cultural Monuments (ICOMOS) and the International Centre for the Preservation and Restoration

of Cultural Property participated in the mission. Among their tasks was the identification of threats to the integrity of cultural objects as well as the implementation of urgent measures aimed at preserving them and protecting them from further damage.

The detailed results of the mission will be collected in a report to be published in December at a meeting of the parties to the 1954 Hague Convention. It will provide more detailed information on the extent of damage, as well as on measures for the protection and restoration of cultural heritage sites in Odessa, proposed by UNESCO experts. But UNESCO has already mobilized urgent funding for the first restoration work. UNESCO reports that additional funds were allocated from the Fund for the Preservation of Heritage in Emergency Situations – USD 169,000 – in order to immediately carry out work on the protection of cultural monuments and assess the damage.

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Photo: Jae C. Hong/ dpa/ AP

[Further reading about FORB in Ukraine on HRWF website](#)

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