

# Russia turns to looting Ukraine's art to attack national identity

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National Art Museum of Ukraine in 2019

Morgan Aikele- Russian forces in Ukraine recently committed what many experts are referring to as the "single biggest collective art heist" since the Nazis marched across Europe in World War II. In downtown Kherson, dozens of soldiers with several trucks and military vehicles carried out the highly organized mission. Tens of thousands of paintings and other artifacts, all significant to Ukrainian culture, were stolen. But why? Is Russia hoping to sell the art? No. Rather, experts argue, this is Russia's latest means of debasing Ukrainian national identity.

Identity, in a geopolitical sense, refers to how people view the place in which they live, and the sense of attachment they feel to that place. [National identity](#) thus signifies the attachments that people feel to their nation. In the wake of Russia's invasion into Ukraine, Ukrainian citizens have fought to retain their land, their sovereignty, and their culture, all of which contribute to a strong sense of national identity. However, one of the justifications cited most often by Putin and the Kremlin for the invasion into Ukraine is that Ukraine is not itself a sovereign nation with a unique identity. Rather, Putin and Russian state media purport that in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine and other former Soviet republics were illegitimately made into independent states. This background helps to put this art heist into context. Experts and organizations that track stolen art note that the large scale of the theft indicates that Russian troops aren't just being opportunistic—over 30 museums have been robbed or vandalized. Nor is Russia seeking to make money on the black market—art has been loaded hastily

and carelessly into trucks. Instead, experts indicate that these instances result in a concerted, "[broadside attack on Ukrainian pride, culture and identity](#)." Against the background of Putin's claims that Ukraine is not its own, separate nation, stealing these artifacts removes important pieces of culture and history for Ukrainian citizens. If successful in wearing down Ukrainians' sense of national attachment, the Kremlin can only hope that this will lead to a weakened resistance in Ukraine.

The scope of this event can be better understood via the concept of [nationalism](#). Closely related to national identity, nationalism takes the shared attachment to a particular nation and uses it to justify a political action. In this case, any degradation of Ukraine's unique identity feeds into Putin's narrative that Ukraine belongs with Russia, and that the invasion is therefore justifiable.

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