
Ukrainian Libraries at a Time of Political Unrest: Observations from a Ten-Day Journey

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ABSTRACT

A partnership between Ukraine's National University of Kyiv Mohyla-Academy and Emporia State University in the United States enabled the author to visit Ukraine in 2011 to tour libraries and talk with librarians. Ukrainian librarians are embracing intellectual freedom, but the vestiges of the Soviet legacy can still be seen in aspects ranging from closed stacks to the lack of technology in libraries. This paper discusses the author's experiences and observations and how, almost twenty-five years after the country's independence, Ukrainian libraries continue to develop in ways to enhance the lives and support open information for Ukrainians. It also examines why, even in the wake of recent political upheavals when the country is again facing questions and an uncertain future, hope can still be found in a library.

INTRODUCTION

The beautiful St. Michael's monastery and cathedral in Kiev is an unusual, striking blue, with towering golden domes that shine under the clear Ukrainian sky. The worn paintings on the walls leading to the entrance give testimony to its age and place in Ukrainian history. As a visitor to this monastery, I imagined millions of Ukrainian feet over the centuries walking the same path I now walked. I was surprised to learn that the ancient-looking cathedral was actually a carefully constructed replica that was not even fifteen years old.

The original building was destroyed, our tour guide explained, by the Soviets in the 1930s during one of their many assaults against Ukrainians. When Ukraine became independent in 1991, the people decided they wanted the cathedral of Kiev's guardian saint back, so the country lovingly and carefully rebuilt the structure; the cathedral emerged from the Soviet

rubble in 1999 just as though, as our guide poignantly stated, it had never been gone at all. More than twenty years after its independence, Ukraine and its libraries are still emerging from this same rubble.

As a student in Emporia State University's School of Library and Information Management (SLIM) program, I visited Ukraine during the summer of 2011. SLIM's Martha Kruse Furber Fund paid for about a dozen Emporia students and our professor to have the unique opportunity, over a ten-day period, to tour libraries and visit with Ukrainian librarians. Before venturing to Ukraine and after we returned home, we engaged in a special class on international librarianship that was designed by Professor John Sheridan to help us understand and absorb this unique experience. We stayed primarily in beautiful Kiev, with a few days in the charming western city of Lviv, close to the border of Poland.

The partnership between Emporia State University (ESU) and Ukraine's National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy made it possible for us to visit a variety of libraries, including four large national facilities: Vernadsky National Library, National Parliamentary Library, National Library of Ukraine for Children—all in Kiev—and Lviv's Stefnyk National Scientific Library. Our well-planned visit gave us a short though powerful glimpse into Ukrainian libraries and life, and we received an expansively warm welcome from gracious Ukrainian librarians. It was a singularly remarkable experience, a rare tour of libraries into which few people from the Western world have ever set foot, and it brought me closer to the pulse of international librarianship and changed the course of my career.

Travels in Asia and Africa had, I thought, prepared me for the experience of being in a decidedly unfamiliar country. But I was not ready for Ukraine. The days were blisteringly hot, and while bright flowers and plants thrived everywhere in the endless sunlight, I wilted. People on the streets neither smiled at each other nor made eye contact. The streets themselves were vast and without any discernible crosswalks or safety features for pedestrians. The Kiev Metro was at times breathtakingly beautiful, but at other times I felt as though I had descended an escalator into the claustrophobic center of the earth. The elegant though indecipherable Cyrillic alphabet added to the exotic feel of everything around me and my own awareness that I was very much a foreigner in a foreign land.

But this detached traveler's feeling did not follow me off the streets and into the libraries. Since we did not speak Ukrainian, we could only communicate with the librarians through our translator, and there were certain library features that were distinctly Ukrainian and strange to my American eyes. In spite of this, however, the libraries felt comfortable and familiar, and the dedication and passion that the Ukrainian librarians obviously felt for their work and their collections revealed them as professionally kindred spirits.

CLOSED STACKS IN AN OPEN SOCIETY

I found on the streets and in the libraries that Ukraine is a pleasing blend of old and new, and that Ukrainian librarians are finding their own balance between tradition and innovation. Visiting Ukraine even twenty years after the fall of the Soviet Union was like looking at a double-exposed photograph: Soviet life is no longer firmly outlined, but one can see the shadowy traces of what once had been. The closed stacks and vast reading rooms often found in Soviet research libraries (Kimmage, 1988a) continue to be part of the tradition of library service in Ukraine. A handful of books are often available in the reading rooms for library users (or "readers," as they are called in Ukraine) to help themselves to, but most books are kept in extensive depositories where only the librarian is permitted. The atmosphere of these often exquisite reading rooms, with their rows of desks and lamps, is hushed, somber, and entirely alluring to book lovers (fig. 1). As aesthetically pleasing as reading rooms are, however, the practice of closed stacks and book depositories, with reader requests for information going through the librarian, at the least slows down and perhaps stifles entirely the equal and private access that is necessary for intellectual freedom.

After visiting Russia in 1987, Dennis Kimmage posed the question of whether open stacks would be permitted to flourish in countries that, while now operating under the easing of government control over information as part of *glasnost*, were also still very much under the power of the Communist Party (Kimmage, 1988a, 1988b). The question now, more than twenty years after Ukraine's independence, may be the converse: can closed stacks exist in an open society? Closed library stacks in research libraries became a crucial part of the highly controlled and monitored Soviet society (Kimmage, 1988a); all requests to view information came to the librarian, and the librarian was responsible for deciding who accessed what (Kasinec, 2001). This immediately appears like an outrageous violation of intellectual freedom to a North American librarian, and this high level of control was certainly vital to Soviet indoctrination. By acting as information intermediaries, however, Soviet librarians also attempted to provide what they felt was the appropriate context for information, something they believed was a fundamental facet of librarianship (Ryan, 1981). The library was seen not only as a politically important institution but also as an institution central to education for the people; librarians consequently strove to be educators and not just disseminators of information (Tyulina, 1982).

Ukrainian librarians do not follow the Soviet belief of libraries serving a particular political ideology, but this sense of being guardian educators seems to still be part of their accepted professional identity. The Ukrainian librarians we spoke with were justifiably proud of the lack of censorship, the integrity and accuracy of the information housed in libraries, and the



Figure 1. Ivan Franko National University of Lviv Library, Ukraine. Courtesy of the author.

comprehensively equal access given to all Ukrainian readers. Information no longer changes at the whim of the government, and anyone can access it, but closed stacks and requests for material going through the librarian limits the very freedom that Ukrainian readers are beginning to enjoy.

Nadia Zilper's 1991 article "The Consequences of Glasnost" states of glasnost's unexpected momentum that "to reveal just a little bit of the truth has proved to be impossible" (p. 46). This statement can be broadened to include libraries because, I believe, it is impossible to have just a little bit of information freedom, including providing just a few open stacks among mostly closed ones. As Ukraine moves increasingly toward a culture of government transparency, toward equal and private access to information, and toward an open model of librarianship, with the librarian acting as steward rather than guardian, Ukrainian libraries will open up more stacks—they will *have to* open up more stacks—in order to nurture a free society, in addition to maintaining the library's position in that society.

Some of this culture of guardianship may also change as young library students graduate and enter the profession. When Ukraine emerged into independence and so many questions concerned how, and if, libraries would survive in the new country, the international community wondered what would happen to the professional standards of librarianship. This

concern was valid because the Soviet regime, howsoever repressive, placed a high level of prestige on librarianship, and libraries in the newly independent Ukraine now faced unprecedented financial and organizational obstacles (Benz, 2009).

My classmates and I visited with library science students during our time in Lviv. These students were uniformly young; many of them had probably been toddlers at the time of Ukrainian independence, if they had been born at all. Their older counterparts that we met were reservedly professional, experienced, and informed, as well as warm hosts. The students, in contrast, were bright, energetic, full of questions, funny, and spoke good English—thus we could speak directly with them. They were entirely charming, and by any standard, these students in Lviv have to be among the best that could be drawn to our profession. Older Ukrainian librarians may be satisfied with the librarian acting as information intermediary, but I cannot imagine these younger Ukrainians, who have grown up with information at their fingertips, supporting this system as it exists today.

LIBRARIES AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

My short visit helped me to realize, however, that the issue is more complex than simply a matter of closed versus open stacks or the differing librarianship philosophies of guardianship and stewardship. Many of the libraries my classmates and I visited had collections containing rare or old material that could not be replaced if damaged or stolen. Some of the libraries had also experienced losses of parts of their collections to either the Nazis or the Soviets, and while these regimes belong to the past, theft in contemporary Ukraine continues to be a worry for librarians (Benz, 2009). Part of this worry may be rooted in the cost of replacing stolen materials, but beyond any financial considerations of library collections, the materials represent a country's cultural identity. Arien Mack's 1994 article "The East and Central European Journal Donation Project" quotes Ukrainian librarian Tatjana Gladkova, who says that "a library is the memory of a nation." After decades of having this memory violated through falsification and theft, it is no wonder that Ukrainian librarians are protective of their collections and remain comfortably in the guardianship role.

The sum of library collections is greater than its individual parts, and a lost book is more than a financial loss and a hole in a cohesive and well-cared-for collection. Having open shelves may seem to unduly expose the collections to the risk of damage or theft, but users increasingly expect to interact directly with information; therefore Ukrainian librarians must now operate in a tricky hybrid environment of protecting their collections while also facilitating access. We witnessed one solution to this conundrum at the National Parliamentary Library, where librarians create electronic copies of rare books. These digital copies eliminate the concerns sur-

rounding the vulnerability of a rare collection and make them available to infinitely more readers—an excellent example of the use of technological innovation to enhance freedom of access while at the same time protecting invaluable collections and Ukraine's national identity.

The Parliamentary Library suffered tremendous losses due to looting and burning by Nazi troops as they retreated from the advancing Soviets in 1943. During the recent Euromaidan protests in Kiev—a wave of demonstrations and civil unrest demanding closer ties with the European Union that began on November 21, 2013, in Kiev's Maidan Nezalezhnosti, or Independence Square—when the clashes between protestors and government troops were directly in front of the library, the librarians inside refused to risk the loss of any of the country's cultural heritage and thus remained there throughout the unrest, both to protect the building and its collections and to help operate the temporary hospital in it that the International Red Cross set up. Ukrainian librarians remained politically neutral during the conflict—a point they stressed throughout; they were not supporting a specific side but rather were entirely focused on saving both lives and their collections. And they achieved both of these goals. The Ukrainian Library Association's (ULA) vice president, Valentyna Pashkova, stated in an announcement to the IFLA: "Maidan activists together with librarians defended the National Parliamentary Library and stayed in the library building day and night. As a result of their efforts, the National Parliamentary Library of Ukraine is safe, as are the library collections and librarians" (2014, n.p.).

THE CARD-CATALOG QUESTION

Ukrainian librarians also continue to find their own technology balance in print card catalogs. When Susan Benz visited Ukraine as a Fulbright scholar during 2007–2008, she observed in libraries what my classmates and I also did in 2011: namely, cabinets of card catalogs lining the hallways. She raised the concern that continues to resonate today: the duplication of effort in maintaining both print and digital catalogs. I learned during my visit that users may be able to search only a small portion of the card-catalog online; therefore they must also travel to the libraries themselves in order to access the entire catalog, but even then, they may be able to use it only by relying heavily upon the guidance of librarians.

This situation may be yet another remnant of Soviet tradition in present-day Ukraine because Soviet card catalogs were never available in their entirety to patrons, and Soviet librarians retained firm control in part by serving as intermediaries between readers and the catalogs (Kasinec, 2001). By maintaining print catalogs and limiting the availability of electronic-catalog information, Ukrainian librarians seem still to be acting as information guardians rather than its stewards. But again, as I learned with many things in Ukraine, the situation is more complex than that.

Cumbersome, vulnerable, possibly incomplete, and certainly available only onsite, print card catalogs consume librarians' precious time and reduce their ability to assist users' access to the collections. The problem is that Ukrainian readers want both print and electronic catalogs (Benz, 2009), so more than being a case of keeping their inherited tradition as information guardians, print card catalogs reflect, I think, that Ukrainian librarians are responding directly to the wants and needs of their users. In other words, if Ukrainian library users do indeed want and need print card catalogs in order to interact with their libraries, then librarians are listening to and responding directly to them instead of serving a government agenda or an inherited ideal of librarianship. As Ukrainian librarians emerge from their Soviet librarianship legacy, this is a remarkable step forward.

TECHNOLOGY ACCESS AT LIBRARIES

A reluctance to develop digital catalogs might also reflect an overall reluctance to wholeheartedly embrace technology in libraries. Soviet libraries had already lagged far behind the West in technology when the Soviet Union broke apart (Kimmage, 1988b), and now unfortunately, post-independence, my classmates and I observed few public computers in the libraries we visited. While almost all of the Ukrainian librarians we met during our visit said that more technology was needed in their libraries, there still seemed to be a feeling that technology is peripheral to information.

Wi-Fi was available in some libraries, but as marvelous as it is, it is still not an adequate replacement for computer labs because many readers cannot afford the luxury of personal computers. Our librarian tour guide at the National Library of Ukraine for Children offered some insight into the dearth of computers when she explained that the purpose of a children's library was first and foremost to lead the child to the book. This particular building, which was fairly ordinary-looking on the outside, is, on the inside, an enchanting fairyland of a library, with a theater, a dance club for teens, a story-time room, and highly trained librarians; this was also the only library we visited that permitted books to be checked out and taken home. But as an indication of this overarching philosophy to lead the child to the book, the library has very few computers, and the few it does have are reserved exclusively for research.

The Ukrainian people, on the other hand, have adopted technology in every aspect of their lives. I saw an older man playing a traditional Ukrainian stringed instrument known as a bandura. Delighted by his bright white hair and the sunny day, I circled all around trying to snap a photo. But he kept turning from the bandura to pick up his cell phone, making it nearly impossible to get a picture. During the Euromaidan protests, technology was widely used both to organize and control the protestors, as well as by the protestors to keep the outside world informed about what was

going on. Young protest medic Olesya Zhukovska famously tweeted “I am dying” after being shot in the neck (Associated Press, 2014); fortunately, she survived, as did the photo of her clutching her bloodied neck with one hand and her cell phone with the other.

Whether in times of peace or upheaval, Ukrainians of all ages and in all aspects of life use technology, but an estimated 75 percent of them lack regular access to the internet (“Bibliomist—Global Libraries Ukraine,” n.d.). To be without access to technology, or to lack the skills necessary to use technology, is to miss opportunities in which the rest of the developed world can easily engage. This is why technology access at libraries is essential. Technology is no longer peripheral to information, and a library that is relevant in the modern world promotes both print and digital literacy. Equal access to technology and technology education is essential not only for improving the lives of individuals but also for maintaining government transparency and nurturing a democratic society in which information is created, accessed, and shared freely.

THE LIBRARY ELECTRONIC ACCESS PROJECT AND BIBLIOMIST

Technology is expensive, however, and while Ukraine has emerged strongly from its initial struggle for independence, libraries are still underfunded (“Bibliomist—Global Libraries Ukraine,” n.d.). Our tour guide at the National Library of Ukraine for Children explained how some children’s libraries around the country were closing due to lack of funds; libraries simply may not have the financial option of providing technology when there are so many of the print needs of their readers that must be addressed and that fall within the sphere of traditional, expected library services. The burden of funding for technology is being lifted to a certain degree by two projects: the US Embassy’s Library Electronic Access Project (LEAP), and a program called Bibliomist, which is funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

The LEAP project has opened 147 free internet centers in public libraries across Ukraine, and its grants not only provide computer equipment, software, and internet access but also, importantly, training for librarians so that they can assist users in finding and evaluating digital information (“Library Electronic Access Project,” n.d.). My classmates and I observed LEAP computer labs in some of the research libraries we visited, and the US Embassy also provides some computers at the National Library of Ukraine for Children and pays for wireless network service in several others.

The LEAP technology centers contribute to democracy in Ukraine by promoting the culture of government transparency and accountability through the facilitation of programs that provide citizens with e-information on local government regulations and budgets, as well as helping them to stay informed about changes in government programs, such as those concerning pensions. Happily, local governments and businesses are re-

sponding to the value of the centers and the innovative work of Ukrainian librarians with additional funding for more equipment and facility renovations. Whether computers are used for technology training for teenagers, to allow young readers to chat with favorite authors, or for people to stay informed about events in their local and national governments, LEAP is a success story, fostering more success for Ukrainian readers and libraries in both cities and villages (“Library Electronic Access Project,” n.d.).

Bibliomist was created by a partnership among the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, IREX, and the ULA. This program has helped Ukraine to revive 10 percent of its libraries and has brought critical attention to and energized many more (Chuvakova, 2014). Like LEAP, Bibliomist focuses on getting technology into libraries so that all Ukrainians can access digital information in addition to learning the skills necessary for school and work; it also teaches technology skills to librarians so that they can provide better guidance to digital information seekers and continue to enhance their roles as digital leaders (“What is Bibliomist?” n.d.).

Ukrainian librarians raise awareness of the need and place for libraries in the ongoing development of modern Ukraine by promoting Bibliomist-sponsored projects, such as: hosting open meetings to discuss city planning (“Ukrainian Library and Civil Society Create Platform,” 2013); hosting a weekly “Skype with the Mayor” session to provide all citizens with the opportunity to have a voice in addressing local problems (“Skype Your Mayor,” 2013); and librarians partnering with a local agricultural club to help members find digital information on such topics as how to start a small business and trading information with farmers in other regions (“Library Helps Ukraine Strawberry Producers,” 2013). Through programs like these, Bibliomist and Ukrainian librarians are creating better lives for Ukrainians through facilitating participatory government and fostering opportunities for better professional and educational prospects as well as providing a platform to share their uniquely Ukrainian voices with others around the world.

Bibliomist also focuses on the development of the relationship between the ULA and government bodies that fund libraries (“Bibliomist—Global Libraries Ukraine,” n.d.). Since libraries were vital to the success of the Soviet system (Ryan, 1981), librarians under the Soviets did not have to worry about having adequate funds to run them (Tyulina, 1982). But this changed when Ukraine gained its independence in 1991, and librarians in post-Soviet bloc countries, who were used to operating under the Soviet system of librarianship, suddenly had to justify their existence (Kimmage, 1988b) and, in its logical extension, their share of limited government funds. In all countries the competition for government funds is fierce, thus the Bibliomist program trains librarians to be advocates for libraries in order to secure the funding necessary to continue their important work—work that often is being done *only* by libraries. The ultimate goal of

Bibliomist is for Ukrainian libraries to stabilize into being financially self-sustaining through librarian advocacy and partnership within the ULA and with the government's funding bodies so that the responsibility for, and ownership of, libraries resides firmly with the Ukrainians themselves ("Bibliomist—Global Libraries Ukraine," n.d.).

A country's independence may be declared on a certain day in history, but the actual accomplishment of independence comes afterwards in the vigilant cultivation of that ideal. The librarians and library students we visited during our time in Ukraine envision a bright future for their country's libraries, but even more, they embody an inspiring example of this vigilant upholding of the ideal of independence. The country and its people are fighting for the freedoms that the librarians were so proud of when we visited: freedom of access to information, freedom from censorship, and having an open and transparent government. In a reflection of what is happening with Ukraine's constitution and government, libraries continue to evolve into what the country needs and wants. The world watched the Euromaidan protests spread across Ukraine during 2013–2014; unfortunately, the country's libraries are still vulnerable and, depending on Russia's intentions, are at risk to retrogress from information transparency and freedom to opaqueness and government restrictions. For a country that is both very old and very new, this is a vital conflict that shall determine its future.

People are by nature information seekers and classifiers, but libraries emerge from more than our need to organize and store information; libraries are built on a foundation of human ideals, and during the Euromaidan protests, these ideals were again realized in a library. The protestors created a community of necessity, including kitchens, hospitals, clothing distribution centers, and a single library. This community created in the National Parliamentary Library was then a library distilled to its very essence: being entirely by the people and for the people, it was a library that, amid the chaos, destruction, and pain, signified that life was different before and could be different again.

Throughout the world, the value of a library is more than the value of the information contained within, and this is true of the Euromaidan-protests library and, as well, of all Ukrainian libraries. A library's true value, especially in difficult times, comes from the ideals that it represents: equality, community, shared knowledge, and the recognition and respect of humanity. In opposition to the darkness of political upheaval and an unknown future, may all Ukrainian libraries continue to shine forth the ideals of freedom and humanity.

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