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Russia was ‘Doomed to Expand [its] Aggression’ Against Ukraine: Cultural Property Criminals’ Responses to the Invasion and Occupation of the Donbas Since 20th February 2014

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how Russia’s invasion and occupation of Ukraine has affected cultural property crime and how cultural property criminals have responded to those practical, social, political and economic changes. To do so, this online ethnography draws on netnographic data from 184 artefact-hunters across Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, Greece, Germany, Belgium, the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada, two artefact-dealers and one violent political operator, whose discussions spanned 19 online communities. It examines the legal fictions and legal nihilism of antiquities looters; the criminal operations of antiquities looters and antiquities traffickers in the occupied territories of Ukraine; the international networks of artefact-hunters that facilitate the trading of equipment and antiquities, plus the movement of the artefact-hunters themselves and the conduct of their criminal operations. Thereby, it documents the pollution of Western markets with tainted cultural goods from the occupied territories of Ukraine and elsewhere in Eastern Europe and the contribution of Western consumers to the conflict economy.


KEYWORDS

Antiquities looting; antiquities trafficking; cultural property crime; legal nihilism; occupied territories; online trafficking; online social organisation; Russia; Russia’s invasion of Ukraine; Ukraine

The Problem

Antiquities looting has caused a cultural catastrophe in Ukraine¹ and across Eastern Europe.² Across the Donbas, there is archaeological evidence³ and ethnographic evidence of looting and trafficking – and developments in looting and trafficking – in connection with the war.

In light of this multi-factor crisis, this study uses online ethnography – non-participant observation of public conversations and actions among communities online – to explore how Russia’s invasion and occupation of Ukraine has affected cultural property crime and how cultural property criminals have responded to those practical, social, political and economic changes. It uses netnographic data in the form of texts and images from anonymised and coded sources: 184 artefact-hunters – 80 in Ukraine, 30 in Russia, five

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in Belarus, one in Greece, one in Germany, one in Belgium, nine in the United Kingdom, 53 in the United States, one in Canada, three unlocated; two artefact-dealers – one in Russia, one unlocated; and one violent political operator in Ukraine. Their discussions spanned 19 online communities – five for Ukraine, seven for Russia, three for the United Kingdom, three for the United States, one international.

Sourcing and Anonymisation

Sourcing

As in other studies,⁴ almost all of the data in this study is absolutely open. All of the authors of the open-source data have chosen to publish all of that data and subsequently not to delete any of it. And they are conscious of their own criminality. For instance, Russia-originating, Belarus-resident BYAH002 explained to USAH020 and other foreign members of USOC001 that not just using a metal-detector to hunt for artefacts, but conducting any unlicensed hunt for artefacts was ‘very restricted’ in Russia and ‘completely forbidden’ in Belarus and he was constructing his own home-made, hand-built metal-detector to minimise the risk of being caught. Indeed, looting communities persistently share tried-and-tested methods for preventing prosecution or conviction when they have published self-identifying and self-incriminating evidence of crimes that they have committed or even when they have been caught in the act of committing those crimes.

Yet, they are equally conscious of their not-guaranteed-yet-everyday freedom of speech about their crimes. This freedom is affirmed by prosecutions of artefact-hunters for political crime, on the basis of comments that they have made in communities of cultural property criminals, yet not property crime. This is despite other comments that they have made in the same places. It is similarly affirmed by prosecutions for property crime, that are only launched when they have committed political crime that is not approved by the state. Tellingly, some online communities in the currently-occupied territories of Luhansk oblast have ‘stopped publishing any information’ since the intensification of the invasion.⁵

On top of publication of self-identifying and self-incriminating evidence in the course of hunting, digging, trading and collecting, online claims are often confirmed or disproved by online conversations among offline acquaintances. The true identities of online personas can sometimes be documented or queried as well. Occasionally, claims and counter-claims are corroborated by action by online platforms in response to cynical complaints by rival artefact-hunters, or by investigative journalism or forensic investigation in response to denunciations by rival artefact-hunters.

For instance, for unknown reasons, one man denounced another man, from an artefact-hunting couple, to the police. Then, when the prosecution failed because RUAH025’s self-published videos of artefact-hunting did not constitute forensic evidence, the persecutor maliciously triggered the withdrawal of the monetisation of their videos on YouTube channel, RUOC005 (according to RUAH025).

Similarly, when a Viking sword was looted in Ukraine and smuggled through Belarus and Russia towards Estonia for delivery to Lithuania, the looter, UAAH041, and his operation were outed by a fellow member of online forum UAOC005, UAAH040. They later publicly clashed over the auctioning of forgeries, since UAAH041 had threatened UAAH040 with exposure as a forger, so they may have been long-running rivals.

Anonymisation

Still, on the precautionary principle, authors of open-source data have been anonymised by their country of residence, such as UA for Ukraine, RU for Russia and UN for unknown; their relevant status, such as AD for artefact-dealer, AH for artefact-hunter and VPO for violent political operator; and a distinguishing number. Meanwhile, venues of open-source data have been anonymised by their geographical focus; their status as online communities with OC; and a distinguishing number. Accordingly, the artefact-hunter in Ukraine who published the earliest-cited content would be UAAH001 (even if they had relocated from Russia and settled in the occupied territories of Ukraine), the artefact-dealer in Russia who published the earliest-cited content would be RUAD001 and an online community that was focused on Ukraine could be UAOC001. To avoid obscuring the participation of women through the process of anonymisation, the small minority who are involved are identified as female when they are cited individually. Texts have been paraphrased and images have been edited to obscure their source.

A Context of Loss

While some have continued to disagree (e.g. UAAH014 in Luhansk oblast; UAAH029 and UAAH032 in Donetsk oblast), before and since the invasion and occupation of areas of the Donbas, Donbas-based UAAH003 relayed testimony from other artefact-hunters, which he testified was corroborated by his own experience, that whole areas of Donetsk oblast had been almost emptied of finds of modern militaria. Likewise, Donetsk oblast-based UAAH012 observed that the historic sites that he had targeted had already been practically emptied by other artefact-hunters. Luhansk oblast-based UAAH064 complained that there were few finds left in some places, while UAAH065 complained that finds were becoming rarer everywhere; UAAH054 complained that some historic sites were empty, while UAAH068 complained that fields and forests had been emptied.

Archaeological objects were being removed and, although their availability and quality are decreasing, they still are being removed from the Donbas. Looted antiquities range from extremely rare, medieval silver alloy adornments for horse harnesses (which were being trafficked online by an artefact-hunter in the Donbas who was caught, as recorded by RUOC003's administrator, RUAH013); to an eighteenth-century gold coin with a starting price of around EUR 480 (as auctioned by Luhansk oblast-based UAAH037); to a medieval (Khazar) amulet (as displayed by UAAH069); to ubiquitous, aesthetically-unpleasing, commercially low-value fragments of horse harnesses that are derided as 'horse meat' even by those who loot and collect them.

Every type of feature and landscape is targeted intentionally, including the most monumental sites, where the illegal nature of the targeting cannot be denied. For instance, UAAH036 explicitly intended to loot antiquities 'around the [kurgan burial] mounds', while UAAH053 targeted the ancient and historic settlements that had been excavated around Mariupol and that had been the source of the artefacts that were displayed in the museum. When UAAH053 planned to target a historic environment, he noted that the local agribusiness charged a fee for access to the land (so effectively engaged in racketeering, since they were extracting that fee for the opportunity to engage in criminal activity).

Legal Fictions of Illegal Activities

Legal Fictions of Antiquities Looters

Treasure-hunters and antiquities traders play language games and legal games with their activity and governments' status, in order to encourage looting and collecting and to problematise policing. For instance, a Donbas-based artefact-hunter, UAAH007 observed that antiquities dealers in Ukraine disingenuously identified themselves as private museums.

When USAH011 asked members of USOC003 about metal-detecting in Russia, administrator USAH012 pointed out that there were members in Russia who posted photos of their finds. USAH014 pointed out that they were finds from digging into archaeological deposits inland, not merely scavenging decontextualised objects on beaches.

Despite USAH011 and RUAH018's detailed summaries of the strict law, USAH014 encouraged USAH011 to target archaeological sites like historic villas on private land where his unlicensed extraction would not be monitored. USAH014 revealed that he knew that the law was strictly prohibitive, as he had discussed the law with a Russian archaeologist. However, USAH014 disregarded it, because his friend, who had metal-detected legally for the archaeologist in return for the opportunity to metal-detect illegally in the company of the archaeologist as well, had not been stopped by the police.

USAH011 stated that he had had the same experience as a partner to Russian diggers who were friends or friends of friends, yet was concerned about being caught in possession of metal-detectors and/or finds. Then, he revealed that he had extracted and kept 'lots' anyway.

RUAH018 presented the typical artefact-hunters' interpretation of the law to give the false impression that their activity was legal, yet still observed that 'the trick to artefact-hunting in Russia' was 'to go to remote locations', 'to keep away from police' and 'to throw finds away' if you were about to be caught. According to RUAH018, 'many newcomers gave up' after the introduction of the new law, but many newcomers and all of the old-timers would not even stop publishing self-incriminating evidence 'until they were caught with dirty antiquities, a dirty shovel and a metal detector'.

Legal Fictions of Antiquities Dealers

One antiquities dealer in Western Europe, UNAD001, was a friend of numerous artefact-hunters across Eastern Europe and beyond, including at least seven in Ukraine, at least three in Russia and at least one from Russia in Western Europe. However, during the period of this research, several connections were hidden or deleted and several profiles were edited or deleted, including one of an artefact-hunter who was in occupied Luhansk and one of an artefact-hunter who had been in occupied Donetsk but had become an internally-displaced person.

The still-identifiable contacts in the free territories of Ukraine included UAAH080, UAAH079 and UAAH078. At least one of those, UAAH078, supported the Ukrainian ultranationalist movement and paramilitary organisation, Right Sector.

The still-identifiable contacts in Russia included RUAH029 and RUAH030. RUAH029 had hunted for artefacts in the free territories of Ukraine as well as in Russia. RUAH030 was

born in Luhansk; created a looting YouTube channel, which was registered in Russia, days after the invasion; was resident in Russia; and had been serving in the invading forces since the intensification of the invasion.

The still-identifiable contact in Belarus was BYAH005. He had hunted for artefacts in Spain as well as Ukraine and supported the occupying administration of the Donetsk People's Republic.

The still-identifiable contact from Russia in Western Europe was female DEAH001. She had been in Western Europe since before the invasion; identified herself as a 'female treasure-hunter'; and had hunted for artefacts in Germany and Italy as well as Russia.

UAAH079, UAAH078 and female DEAH001 characterised themselves as 'digital creators'. This appears to be an extension of the disingenuous claim to have faked all of the self-incriminating evidence of looting and trafficking that is posted online.

In light of these contacts, it is particularly notable that the antiquities dealer, UNAD001, falsely asserted that metal-detecting was 'allowed without permission' in territories that were 'not under central government control', which were marked in red on a map and which included Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk. As the war persisted and the threat of an expansion of the occupation loomed, the dealer gloated that the red zones were growing, getting larger by the day.

Legal Realities

Regardless of these numerous and various legal fictions, all of the state laws and para-state decrees are clear. Unlicensed 'searching for and/or removal of archaeological objects [Поиск и (или) изъятие археологических предметов]' is prohibited under the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation that has been asserted in occupied and annexed Crimea,⁶ the Criminal Code of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR or DNR) that has been asserted in occupied Donetsk⁷ and the Criminal Code of the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR or LNR) that has been asserted in occupied Luhansk,⁸ as well as prohibited (in different yet equivalent words) under the criminal code of the legal authorities of Ukraine since long before the war,⁹ indeed since the time of the Soviet Union.¹⁰ For instance, as in free Ukraine, where the issuance of permits is overseen by a qualification council on the issue of qualification documents (which includes representatives of the Institute of Archaeology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, another Institute within the Academy, a relevant cultural-historical reserve or museum, a public institution of higher education with a specialisation in archaeology and a public association for archaeologists' interests), so in occupied Luhansk, there is an official Procedure for Issuance, Suspension and Termination of Validity of Permits ([Open Letters or] Open Sheets) for Work to Identify and Study Objects of Archaeological Heritage, which is overseen by the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Youth of the occupying administration.

Likewise, national and regional legislation and policy in the markets of Western Europe and North America, such as Regulation (EU) 2019/880 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 April 2019 on the introduction and the import of cultural goods, are clear. Still, at least at the time of writing, only export of cultural goods to Russia and Belarus had even recently become subject to any form of sanctions, embargo or exceptional restrictions. Import of cultural goods from Ukraine, Russia or Belarus was not subject to exceptional restrictions, except for increased tariffs on the import into the United

Kingdom of cultural goods from Russia and Belarus. By definition, that only increases the cost for buyers or reduces the profit margin for sellers. It does not prohibit such trading entirely, to account for the increased risk of supply by looting and other forms of theft from the occupied territories of Ukraine – or simply to punish the aggressor states, despite the role of cultural property crime specifically and cultural heritage generally in Russia’s genocide.¹¹ And, evidently, such trading is an everyday matter for cultural property criminals in the occupied territories of Ukraine with direct clients or end-users in the single market of the European Union and other markets of Ukraine’s allies.

The Rule of Law and Legal Nihilism: ‘The Best Deal with a Gangster is No Deal’

In this context, perceptions of state functioning and the rule of law may reveal their own inconsistencies and, thereby, the genuine differences between countries. For instance, in a discussion of the reburial of human remains of missing persons, UAAH009 – who later characterised his location as Ukraine, Russia, as if one was a province of the other – asked about reburial of illegally-disturbed human remains of missing persons. He highlighted the possibility of laundering the disinterment of those remains through officially-approved recovery operations. Female UAAH010 replied that ‘only stubborn-headedness, cheekiness and cunning could achieve anything in our country’. However, her model of stubborn-headedness, cheekiness and cunning was to follow the law and engage in an established bureaucratic procedure with functioning legal guarantees.

This can be seen in discussions of policing of illegal extraction of archaeological goods as well. For instance, while Russian nationalists denigrate Ukrainian society, several months before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, a Russian citizen who later migrated to the occupied territories of Donetsk oblast, RUAH012, had complained about the unpleasant surprise of intervention by law enforcement agents in Ukraine, which he had not faced in Russia. (There was also some voluntary migration in the other direction, by artefact-hunters from the occupied territories of Ukraine who migrated to Russia, e.g. RUAH017, who had been resident in Donetsk oblast; UAAH028’s godfather, who migrated to Russia and whose godson made a point of the fact that he had taken his metal-detector with him.) There is other testimony to policing of looting. For instance, UAAH011 warned that an acquaintance had been caught and punished. And it does appear that the rule of cultural property law is stronger in Ukraine than in Russia.

Although law and public opinion is against cultural property crime (as evidenced by testimony from looters about intervention by citizens),¹² ultimately, there were and are few risks to participation in cultural property crime in Russia or in Ukraine. At least in Ukraine, maybe fewer than three per cent of smuggling attempts are detected; maybe around 10–15 per cent of detected attempts are prosecuted; and, while it is difficult to disambiguate the scale of a criminal sector from the intensity of its policing and the difficulty of its prosecution, cultural property offences may constitute only six per cent of convictions. Though, to put that in perspective, firearms and ammunition offences may constitute only five per cent.¹³

The rarity of risk is known by criminals. For instance, UAAH015 believed that artefact-hunting was prohibited in Russia, not in Ukraine. Donetsk oblast-based UAAH002



Figure 1. An artefact-hunter, either crossing the border between Ukraine and Russia to engage in transnational looting or crossing the border between Russia and Ukraine to engage in transnational trafficking; edited to prevent facial identification, then published online by UAAH002; edited by the foreign co-author to prevent reverse image-searching.

(Figure 1), who also engaged in transnational looting by cycling between Ukraine and Russia with his metal-detector in his backpack, testified that he never declared any assets and was never questioned on either side of the border. This fosters a pervasive sense of legal nihilism – a disbelief in law as a system.

Moreover, the abandonment of citizens by the state fosters a rejection of the law as an instrument of state power. RUAH018, who was an internal and international freight forwarder, characterised the Russian government as a gangster that did not even provide protection in return for extortion and stated that ‘the best deal with such a gangster is no deal’.

Not Just in a War Zone, but in a Hot Zone of Active Conflict

There appear to be cycles of caution and relaxation among artefact-hunters. Years before the invasion, when discussing the law and ethics of artefact-hunting, Donbas-based UAAH006 said that they would need to be more careful when artefact-hunting and possibly to establish groups who would operate invisibly at night. Similarly,

UAAH007 noted that it was not only ethically responsible for artefact-hunters to fill in the holes that they had dug out, but also practically beneficial, as they needed to cover the traces of their crimes anyway. Yet UAAH005 stated that they had dug, were digging and would continue to dig regardless. Indeed, UAAH004 queried the phrasing of the revised law and argued that it actually legalised all of their previously criminal activities.

Supposedly, when Russia launched its war in the Donbas, ‘the “black diggers” from the Azov region disappeared [“чёрные копатели” из Приазовья исчезли]’.¹⁴ It is likely that there have been changes in the demographics and targets of artefact-hunting tourism. For example, UAAH024 and UAAH023 recognised that they would not have dared to pass through checkpoints with their metal-detectors. Even within the Donbas, some Ukrainian artefact-hunters queried (e.g. UAAH039) or warned against artefact-hunting during violence (e.g. UAAH051 in Donetsk oblast; UAAH039 in Luhansk oblast) and others testified that they and/or their acquaintances had stopped (e.g. UAAH025 and UAAH044 in Donetsk oblast). Indeed, as noted, there was tentative evidence of the migration of some artefact-hunters (like others) from the occupied territories of Ukraine to Russia (e.g. RUAH017; UAAH028’s godfather).

Yet, during the outbreak of the crisis, UAAH014 had stated that he preferred to target sites in eastern Ukraine, as they had been dug less, so they were still productive. Within weeks of the invasion, just weeks before the outbreak of unrest in Mariupol, UAAH016 was encouraging other members of UAOC003 to buy metal-detectors from Russia before customs points were closed. Through the first months of the invasion, even during the Battle of Mariupol, UAAH018 and other members of UAOC003 carried on hunting for artefacts. Elsewhere in Donetsk oblast, despite fighting in the vicinity, UAAH017 started to dig.

One way or another, innumerable looters, such as UAAH035 and UAAH034, who partnered in occupied/endangered Luhansk oblast through UAOC001, other members of UAOC001 and members of other communities such as UAOC004 continued to dig and sell in and around the occupied territories and combat zones during the war – and to delete legally, commercially and/or politically-problematic posts. UAAH058 targeted an abandoned farm, despite warnings from UAAH057 that it was near positions of the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

Some artefact-hunters made a point of the fact that they continued (e.g. UAAH038 in Luhansk oblast; UAAH043 in the territory that had been occupied by the Donetsk People’s Republic; UAAH047 in Donetsk oblast; UAAH052), despite their fear (e.g. UAAH017 in the Donbas) or in order to distract themselves from the violence (e.g. UAAH019 in the Donbas; UAAH003). UAAH029, who was resident in Donetsk oblast, admitted that the war had disrupted he and his (at least two regular) partners’ activity. But he insisted that they would not stop and, showing that they had been extracting historic silver jewellery and coins, invited others to join them.

Internal and international metal-detecting tourism continued as well. During the consolidation of the occupation, UAAH026 recommended the continued concealment of metal-detectors during transport between territories, as some artefact-hunters had been caught. After the occupation had been consolidated, UAAH029 stated that reactions to possession of a metal-detector varied from guard to guard and recommended the disassembly of the device before crossing checkpoints. UAAH030 reassured other

artefact-hunters that he had been able to openly transfer a metal-detector through a checkpoint for the occupying administration of the Luhansk People's Republic. Later, UAAH056 stated that there were no problems, not even any questions, at checkpoints when transporting a metal-detector between the occupied territories of Luhansk oblast and the free territories of Ukraine. Contrarily, UAAH045 stated that there were frequently questions and occasionally confiscations at checkpoints of the free territories and UAAH045, UAAH066 and UAAH067 stated that there were no problems, not even any questions, at customs posts of the Russian Federation.

In fact, as a result of the productivity of the sites, the psychological impact of the crisis, financial need and criminal opportunity, there is archaeological evidence of 'significant intensification of illegal excavations [значительной активизации нелегальных раскопок]' in Luhansk oblast.¹⁵ Even before the invasion, UAAH008 had testified that art forgeries were being trafficked online – for example, by fixing new canvas counterfeits to old wooden boards. This will have continued and capitalised on the market for cultural goods from the conflict zone.

Artefact-Hunting and Mental Health

Inevitably, there has been a crisis in mental health across Ukraine. As a striking example of the interaction between conflict, ideology, psychology and artefact-hunting, UAAH003, who lived in the territory that had been occupied by the Donetsk People's Republic, had been suffering mentally from the death and destruction around him, the suffering of his family, the poor conditions that they were living in and the cognitive dissonance of seeing life go on as normal for metal-detectorists in the free territories of Ukraine. So, he disassembled and stashed his metal-detector within the body of his car and took his family to visit his relatives, while he metal-detected for a week. He regretted his wasted efforts to hide his metal-detector, because neither the DPR checkpoints nor the Ukrainian checkpoint had soldiers who would have known that he was going equipped to steal antiquities. So, he did not bother to hide it on his return, carrying numerous historic coins. UAAH027 mockingly reminded him that he had previously declared that he was willing to sacrifice everything, including artefact-hunting, to realise the accession of Donetsk oblast to Russia.

Cultural Differences in Artefact-Hunting Activity

There was tentative evidence of cultural differences in artefact-hunting activity. During the arrangement of a cross-border looting operation that involved looters from the occupied territories of Ukraine, RUAH014 ruled that kurgans could not be targeted and explained that Cossacks prohibited their targeting, because they were physical embodiments of Cossack existence. RUAH015 observed that Cossacks were less interested in treasure-hunting for profit than others, as they were trying to accumulate material evidence of their community's history, in the face of its extraction and export by non-Cossacks.

These principles of the 'free' Cossack community (as defined by self-identification) have become part of the law enforcement functions of the 'service' Cossack organisations (as defined by state incorporation),¹⁶ which operate as government-organised non-governmental organisations (GONGOs).¹⁷ Since long before the invasion, they have

served as the protectors and enforcers of the state,¹⁸ including state property.¹⁹ Since years before the invasion, they have been engaged – first voluntarily employed, like a neighbourhood watch, then officially employed – as community stewards, specifically to protect archaeological sites.²⁰ They are also used to promote patriotism through other exploitations of cultural heritage, such as ‘white’ digging of sites of twentieth-century conflict archaeology to recover the bodies and possessions of missing persons.²¹

This evidence also indicates that this non-Cossack line of criminal business at least operated as a functional equivalent to ethnic cleansing. If non-Cossack looters and traffickers even partly targeted Cossack-associated material culture to cleanse the territory of physical embodiments of Cossack existence (as well as partly to profit regardless of its consequences), then the criminal business would simultaneously operate as a material component of ethnic cleansing. Then, the looting and trafficking would be acts of political violence in and of themselves – and the trafficked goods would constitute conflict antiquities.

A(n In)famous Looter in Luhansk Oblast

One well-known looter, UAAH054, who long operated in the free territories of Luhansk oblast, is a good example of bad behaviour, not only because he was a prolific looter, but also because he was a prolific poster. He posted detailed texts and revealing images in Facebook groups and group conversations on smartphone app channels such as Viber, as well as online forums. His life and work have also been highly reflective of one strand of interactions between crime and violence.

UAAH054 hunted for artefacts between ten and eleven months of the year, even in the rain and through snow at temperatures of minus fifteen Celsius. His digging partners and at least three of his acquaintances, UAAH062, UAAH061 and UAAH063 did as well. He recommended using a tractor to break up frozen ground. He stopped in the depths of winter when the snow was too deep, in February in milder years or from late January to early March in worse years. At least five of his acquaintances, UAAH049, UAAH046, UAAH050, female UAAH059 and UAAH060 did as well.

UAAH054 dug irregularly, but as often as possible – sometimes only twice a month, yet sometimes four days in a row, day and night. He travelled up to 130 kilometres from wherever he was based, by car and motorbike, to target sites that ranged from forests, to swamps, lakes and ravines; he covered up to 10 kilometres on foot while artefact-hunting; and sometimes targeted sites that he, his partners and others had targeted repeatedly. He appeared to have gone artefact-hunting in Russia and Kazakhstan as well as Ukraine. UAAH054 and an acquaintance, UAAH046, noted that the activity sometimes induced a meditative-trance state. UAAH048, celebrated his – and the community’s – healthy fanaticism.

UAAH054 found some non-metallic objects, such as ceramic vessels, bone combs and necklace beads, but, unsurprisingly, overwhelmingly metallic objects. These included bronze axes; bronze tweezers; Scythian arrowheads, spearheads, knives and swords; various personal adornments, such as belt buckles, bracelets and pendants, from various cultures; various tools, such as spindles, from various cultures and related instruments, such as Scythian and Khazar horse harnesses and harness plaques; Alan/Sarmatian figurines, Abbasid coins, Khazar coins, Mongol coins, Tatar coins, Tatar horse harnesses, rings, necklaces and other adornments, bronze bells, silver jewellery with Christian



Figure 2. Self-incriminating evidence of looting in Ukraine; published online by UAAH054; edited by the foreign co-author to prevent reverse image-searching.



Figure 3. Self-incriminating evidence of looting in the European Union; published online by UAAH054; edited by the foreign co-author to prevent reverse image-searching.

symbols, Soviet coins, Soviet bayonets, Soviet bullets (sometimes multiple kilos of such bullets in one day) and Soviet mortars (Figure 2). Occasionally, collectors would visit to pick up rare finds of high quality that he had dug up.

UAAH054 was armed with a pistol and various knives and one of his acquaintances, UAAH046, noted that at least his partners were armed as well. UAAH055 judged that they only gave a false sense of protection, but UAAH054 pointed out that he had grown up in the lawless 1990s and claimed that he had used his weapons (as weapons, not merely as warnings or symbols).

UAAH054 is a Russian nationalist Ukrainian citizen. So, he is not a refugee from Russia's programme of genocide, but he is an escapee from the reality of Russia's invasion. When Russia intensified its invasion of Ukraine, when he was at risk of being harmed in the attacks of the aggressor that he supported or being enlisted to fight against it, he exploited family connections and fled through the occupied territories and the Russian Federation to the European Union, where he has continued to hunt for artefacts (Figure 3).²²

Artefact-Hunting in and Artefact-Trafficking from Occupied Territories

Between March 2020 and June 2020, amid the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, the checkpoints between the free territories and the occupied territories were closed by the Ukrainian state as well as by the occupying administrations of the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic. Afterwards, they were reopened by the Ukrainian state, yet left closed by the occupying administrations, except near Olenivka for the DPR and near Stanytsia Luhanska for the LPR, reducing up to 2,000,000 crossings per month to fewer than 50,000.²³ As relayed to the local co-author by a regular visitor to the antiques market in Luhansk, by December 2021, the supply of archaeological goods had collapsed to almost nothing, as artefact-hunters were too scared of the risk of being shot by Russia's armed forces or its proxy forces or being blown up by a land mine. So, there was not a complete cut, but there was a significant constriction, in both extraction and transfer of looted antiquities from the occupied territories.

Supply Webs and Support Networks Beyond Eastern Europe

Supply webs of metal-detector manufacturers/dealers, artefact-hunters, antiquities dealers and antiquities collectors criss-cross Western powers and Eastern Europe. Some business connections are recent, such as the design-and-manufacturing partnership between metal-detector enterprises in Ukraine and the United States, as noted by USAH053. However, metal-detectors are not treated as dual-use goods under exceptional restrictions and there is no indication of voluntary restrictions on export markets by manufacturers and dealers outside Eastern Europe. As documented in photographs by their end-users, some of the metal-detectors of Ukraine-aligned enterprises have ended up as mine-detectors in the hands of Russia-aligned fighters, such as UAVPO001 (Figure 4).

Some connections are longstanding. For instance, USAH017 had imported at least hundreds of looted antiquities, such as coins, adornments, instruments and weapons, from Russia and Ukraine – and elsewhere across Europe and Western Asia, from Spain to Cyprus and Turkey, including finds that had been ‘chipped by the metal-detectorist’s shovel’ – to the United States over the course of the previous 15 years.

Some connections are highly personalised. For instance, some artefact-hunters in Western powers know who is meant by casual mentions of ‘R[...] in Ukraine’ (e.g. USAH008, USAH009, USAH006 and USAH007 in USOC003); ‘V[...] in Ukraine’ (e.g. UKAH002 in UKOC003); or even simply ‘a guy ... in Ukraine’ who makes or exports a particular piece of equipment (e.g. UKAH003 in UKOC003).

Some connections go beyond friendly but nonetheless straightforward business. For instance, USOC003 member USAH050 spoke admiringly of his metal-detector dealer in the United States, who was donating army surplus bagsful of camouflage military gear to Ukraine.



Figure 4. Metal-detectors alongside mines and mine components; published online by UAVPO001, a fighter for the Donetsk People’s Republic who served as a propagandist for the Russian Federation; edited by the foreign co-author to prevent reverse image-searching.

Furthermore, personal connections and support networks of artefact-hunters – and metal-detector manufacturers/dealers, such as USOC003 member UAAH013 – criss-cross Western powers and Eastern Europe through online communities in market countries as well as source countries. These communities encompass members who are non-visitors (in other words, exclusively virtual contacts), occasional visitors, temporary residents, permanent residents, immigrant members of diasporas (naturalised citizens) and minority members of diasporas (born citizens) from the other region (including the counter-current of migrant workers from Western powers in Eastern Europe), as well as everyday members from the online community's focal region. They also span other communities. Law enforcement agent USAH013, who had hunted for artefacts in Russia tens of times in the space of a few years, advised other members of USOC003 to make contact with artefact-hunters in Russia through online forums for hunters and fishers. Wherever they connect, they may function as bridges for information, contact and cooperation, from supply of equipment to trading of antiquities. This may be seen from activity in a few fundamentally national, functionally international forums outside the region.

Members in, from or Visiting Russia or Belarus

For instance, already before (in some cases, since long before) the invasion,

- female RUAH002 was a member of USOC001;
- pro-Ukraine RUAH003, was a member of USOC003;
- female RUAH004 was a member of USOC001, who split her time between Russia and the United States;
- RUAH005 was a member of USOC003;
- RUAH006 was a member of USOC001;
- RUAH007 was a member of USOC003;
- RUAH008 was a member of USOC001;
- BYAH001 was a member of USOC001;
- RUAH010 was a member of USOC001;
- RUAH009 was a member of USOC003;
- RUAH011 was a member of USOC001, who 'usually' sold finds such as coins, rings, arrowheads, axes, crosses and icons through USOC001 and other platforms and 'did not [usually] collect' at all;
- RUAH001 was a member of USOC001; and
- RUAH019 was a member of USOC003.

At the same time,

- USOC003 member GRAH001 had emigrated from Russia to Greece, though he was still an intermittent visitor to Russia, where he had bought his metal-detector and begun his artefact-hunting;
- Estonian-origin, Russian-identifying USOC003 member USAH001 had emigrated from the Soviet Union to the United States, though he was still an intermittent visitor to Northern Europe and Eastern Europe, who advertised his and his digging partners' unlicensed extraction of legally-protected goods in Ukraine and Russia as

well as Estonia (plus potentially-illegal extraction of archaeological goods in the United Kingdom and the United States); and

- USOC001 member USAH004 had emigrated from Russia to the United States, though he was still an intermittent visitor to Russia, where he continued to hunt for artefacts, while he also hunted for artefacts in the United Kingdom and he was active in USOC001 until immediately before the intensification of the invasion.

Meanwhile, air freight transporter – cargo pilot – USOC003 member USAH003 had been intermittently travelling between the United States and Russia and hunting for artefacts in Russia as well as the United States.

Following the invasion,

- Russia-originating, Belarus-resident BYAH002 became a member of USOC001;
- BYAH003 became a member of USOC001;
- RUAH018 became a member of USOC003 and USOC001 and, at some point, he had been a member of UKOC001, which then had fewer than a thousand members and RUOC001, which probably then had fewer than a hundred members; RUAH021 became a member of USOC003;
- RUAH022 became a member of USOC003;
- RUAH023 became a member of USOC003, who posted photos of a muddy offroad vehicle, two digging partners, muddy coins in front of a metal-detector, a muddy historic silver coin in a muddy hand, a clean historic silver coin in a clean hand and dozens of coins, adornments and instruments on a sheet;
- RUAH027 became a member of USOC003; and
- RUAH028 became a member of USOC001.

At the same time,

- RUAH020, who was already an experienced metal-detectorist and had been a member of USOC003 since before the invasion, emigrated from the United States to Russia;
- RUAH024, who had been hunting for artefacts for 20 years, emigrated from Italy to Russia, then became a member of USOC003;
- RUAH026 emigrated from the United States to Russia, then became a member of USOC003; and
- BYAH004, who had been hunting for artefacts for 30 years, emigrated from Australia to Belarus after the invasion, then became a member of USOC001.

Naturally, there were other transnational bonds. For instance, USAH002's wife was a Ukrainian-origin, Russian-identifying, immigrant member of the diaspora (whose citizenship was misstated by her husband and corrected by RUAH003); CAAH001's sister-in-law was a Russian immigrant.

There were other transnational connections and potential insights into criminal business, too, offline as well as online. Though his perception is inevitably tentative, immediately after the invasion, USOC001 member USAH019 had sold his first two metal-detectors to a Russian who could not speak English and who purportedly gave the impression of

being a serious criminal (which may have been imagined by USAH019, but may have been inferred from indicators such as prison tattoos or interactions between the buyer and any associates).

Members in, from or Visiting Ukraine

Before the war,

- Ukrainian-origin, Russian-identifying UAAH001 was a member of USOC003;
- UAAH072 was a member of USOC001;
- UAAH022 was a member of USOC001;
- one minority member of the Ukrainian diaspora, USAH010, was a member of USOC001; meanwhile,
- another minority member of the Ukrainian diaspora, USAH036, was a member of USOC003.

Following the invasion,

- UAAH031 became a member of USOC001;
- UAAH033 became a member of USOC003;
- Russian-speaking, Ukrainian-identifying UAAH042 became a member of USOC003; and, seemingly after the invasion,
- an immigrant member of the Ukrainian diaspora, UKAH001, emigrated from Ukraine to the United Kingdom and became a member of UKOC003.

Meanwhile, USOC003 member USAH015, who had a digging partner in the United States who was an immigrant member of the diaspora from Ukraine, went to Ukraine to hunt for artefacts with his digging partner and his digging partners' friends.

After the intensification of the invasion,

- according to USAH027's public review of the private membership list, at least 14 immediately-locatable, Ukraine-based artefact-hunters were members of USOC001;
- Russian-speaking, Ukrainian-identifying UKAH007 became a member of UKOC003; and
- UKAH009 became a member of UKOC003.

Again, there were other transnational connections and potential insights into criminal business, offline as well as online. For instance, a metal-detecting school in the United States, which is run by USAH022, has a guide to metal-detecting in Ukraine, which was shared with members of USOC003 by USAH033. USAH022's guide misrepresents the law, though that widespread misunderstanding might partly explain why it promoted Ukraine as one of the most popular targets for militaria-collectors and one of the most productive targets for ancient coins.

Attitudes of International Communities

It was impossible to confirm the balance of opinion in online forums outside the region, since they moved public discussions of politics and religion into private sections and deleted political and religious posts. For instance, USOC003 administrator USAH012 deleted posts by pro-Ukraine USAH015 and non-aligned USAH033. USOC001 administrator USAH046 threatened to delete posts, before he shut down an entire discussion.

Nonetheless, it was possible to infer trends towards support for Ukraine, for instance, from expressions of sympathy for members of USOC003 in Ukraine and Ukrainians in general, yet not ones in Russia or Russians in general, by USAH031, USAH026, USAH021, USAH038, UAAH070, USAH025, USAH029, USAH034, USAH024, USAH032, USAH042 and USAH012; and expressions of sympathy for members of USOC001 in Ukraine and Ukrainians in general, yet not ones in Russia or Russians in general, by USAH028, USAH035, USAH037, USAH030, USAH040, USAH041, who was involved in countering Russia's cyberwarfare against Ukraine, USAH043, USAH039, USAH044, USAH052 and USAH051. These included officially apolitical, undeleted wishes for harm to Russian president Vladimir Putin by USAH038, USAH023, USAH032 and USAH039; wishes for victory for Ukraine by USAH029, USAH034, UAAH070 and, tellingly, USOC001 moderator USAH035; celebrations of international armament of Ukraine by USAH029, UAAH070, USAH034, USAH042 and USAH047; and, tellingly, wishes for international intervention on the side of Ukraine by USOC003 administrator USAH012.

Furthermore, it was possible to identify outright opposition from characterisations of the Revolution of Dignity as a 'coup', which had installed a NATO 'puppet regime' that was a threat to Russia, by UNAH003 in USOC001. It was also possible to infer potential opposition from rejections of 'elite propaganda' by USAH045, USAH049 and USAH048 in USOC003. However, even those may have shown distrust of the dominant narrative in their own societies rather than support for the actions of the Russian Federation, as demonstrated by UAAH070 in USOC003, who distrusted the news yet supported Ukraine.

Examples of Support Through Networks

Long before the invasion, air freight transporter USAH003, who knew that it would be a significant problem if someone was caught exporting a historic icon from Russia to the United States, had asked if it would be an equally significant problem if someone was caught extracting a metal-detected find in Russia or exporting such a find to the United States. No members of USOC003 answered publicly.

Still before the invasion, on an individual level, USAH005 had provided information on a brand and model of metal-detector through USOC001 to RUAH001, who had translated and shared the information with a 'very grateful' online community of artefact-hunters in Russia, RUOC007. On an organisational level, RUAH010 had reached out to members of USOC001 on behalf of RUOC004 to establish a dialogue between the two communities.

Following the invasion, on an individual level, USOC001 member BYAH002 designed and produced a home-made, hand-built metal-detector, with feedback from members such as BEAH001, UNAH001 and UNAH002 and thanks for guidance from members such as USAH018, who had also discussed home-made, hand-built metal-detectors with BYAH002 in USOC002. Similarly, before he had emigrated from the United States to

Russia, within a month of announcing the move, RUAH020 had already found a digging partner in Russia who gave technical advice, RUAH018, through online forum USOC003. After he had emigrated, RUAH020 shared the business card of a metal-detector dealer in Russia with members of USOC003.

Meanwhile, on an organisational level, RUAH021 invited members of USOC003 to participate in a rally that was being organised by RUOC006, which would involve dozens of artefact-hunters from across Russia and senior members of the artefact-hunting community in the United States; and explicitly hoped that such international cooperation, with metal-detectors instead of guns in hand, would foster intercommunal understanding, peace and friendship. Similarly, RUAH022 reached out to USOC003 on behalf of RUOC002.

Following the intensification of the invasion, Russian-speaking, Ukrainian-identifying UKAH007 and his adult son, who were already experienced metal-detectorists who had trained themselves through volunteer archaeology as well as artefact-hunting, advertised their finds with a wink, sought digging partners among members of UKOC003 and were immediately invited to partner with UKAH008. Considering that it is almost absolutely prohibited for men of their age to leave the free territories of Ukraine, it is probable that UKAH007, UKAH007's adult son and UKAH009 emigrated illegally. It is possible that they escaped from the occupied territories of Ukraine through Russia and circumnavigated Europe until they could enter the refugee flow to Western Europe, as UAAH054 was confirmed to have done.

Discussion

Looting as Precarious Economy and Online Social Organisation as Political Manipulation

Russian-speaking, Ukrainian-identifying UAAH042, who was resident in the free territories of Ukraine, had been hunting for artefacts since before the invasion and had been finding archaeological goods such as Roman and Ottoman gold and silver coins and adornments. USAH016 judged that UAAH042's finds were exceptional. Yet UAAH042 complained that he had 'to sell almost everything for almost nothing', because of the financial crisis that he was suffering as a consequence of the war, and it was difficult to export coins, because there was a significant risk that they would be intercepted by customs.

Immediately before the intensification of the invasion, UAAH071 and UAAH073 became members of UAOC002. They both worked in artefact-hunting media like photo-based phlogging and video-based vlogging. For instance, the day before the intensification of the invasion, UAAH071 shared a video that showed finds of coins by metal-detecting plus the fabrication of an archaeological source for a forged sword in the process. It had been sourced from UKAH005 in INOC001, which was a Facebook group of Russian-speaking artefact-hunters in the Eastern European-Central Asian diasporas across the EU (and, latterly, the UK outside the EU as well) and which was administered by a Russian-speaking, UK-located account with a Polish profile, UKAH006. It had originally been posted by UKAH004 in UKOC002. Such social media may have become a significant element of the group's activity, as content-producers can generate a revenue stream from around the world from the *process* of artefact-hunting, thereby hedging against the uncertainties of the *productivity* – and, at times of armed conflict, the *possibility* – of artefact-hunting.²⁴

After the intensification of the invasion, no accounts with male profiles joined UAOC002, yet several more accounts with female profiles, UAAH074, UAAH075, UAAH076 and UAAH077, who were presented as working in audio-visual and/or digital media that did not focus on artefact-hunting, became members. Likewise, only 30 accounts with male profiles joined INOC001, yet 677 accounts with female profiles plus two with male names yet female photos became members. Notably, both sets of accounts with female profiles increased the size of their community by almost half (five on top of twelve in UAOC002 and 677 or 679 on top of 1,398 in INOC001). As documented in other online communities for artefact-hunters,²⁵ this is evidence of the systematic seeding of fake accounts. In the case of UAOC002, those accounts may have been fabricated as deceptive commercial profiles (sock puppets), simply to obscure the identities of the regular members when trading. However, in the case of INOC001, there appears to have been another logic to the manipulation. Based on the number, nature and timing of these accounts, in a social network that had existed and expanded slowly since before the invasion, then expanded rapidly after the intensification of the invasion, these accounts appear to have become members of this social network to influence opinion, either through this social network or with the false authenticity that was gained by pretending to be an authentic account with a real life.

From the very beginning of the invasion, many artefact-hunters, such as UAAH021, like other citizens of Ukraine and other former subjects of the Soviet Union (including the political analysts whom they cited),²⁶ had been quite conscious that Russia was ‘doomed to expand [its] aggression’ against Ukraine from the annexation of Crimea and the occupation of Donetsk and Luhansk, to the attempted subjugation of the rest of the country and installation of a puppet regime. Already then, UAAH020 suspected that at least some of the pro-Russia accounts, such as RUAH016, were sock puppet accounts for Russian trolls who were trying to instil ‘depression’ in Ukrainian communities online.

Looting and Trafficking as Everyday Practices

As has been shown here and elsewhere,²⁷ despite queries in Western markets about whether antiquities looting was persisting amid war or looted antiquities were reaching Western markets, (resident and visiting) looters and traffickers in Eastern Europe have been discussing and demonstrating what they have been doing and how. It should not be surprising. After all, looting and trafficking are everyday practices.

For instance, USAH011, who had also looted antiquities in Armenia, had smuggled his illegally-extracted historic coins from Russia to the United States by air by hiding them in his Russian wife’s purse and was prepared to bribe his way out if necessary, as he had done before. His wife had legally-protected heirlooms as well.

RUAH018 observed that ancient coins and modern fakes from Eastern Europe were reaching Western markets, as evidenced by online markets (which doubters studiously avoided studying). USAH014 advised transnational looters from the United States to launder their finds by arranging deals with dealers in Russia to launder transactions on online platforms, whereafter those finds would be mailed out as pieces from historic collections. The very first eBay dealer who was contacted by USAH014, RUAD001,

reaffirmed that ‘there is a ban, but still everyone sells, they simply describe antiquities as souvenirs on export documentation’.

Furthermore, Russia-focused freight forwarder RUAH018, who ‘did not buy or sell’, only ‘dig and keep’, frequently warned about the risk of embezzlement by postal workers. He bemoaned that one of the most senior customs officials had lost his job, yet escaped any other punishment. He also bemoaned that, although some efforts at lustration had begun, the customs service remained one of the most corrupt state agencies in the country.

This is a notorious example of a broader problem. Unfortunately, even the most secure, most scrutinised institutions – which are active in the fight against the illicit trafficking of cultural goods – in the wealthiest, most secure countries struggle to prevent embezzlement.²⁸

All of these unsurprising facts need to be accepted and addressed, or Western markets will continue to be polluted with tainted cultural goods, wherein the profits not only feed petty criminals and thereby sustain the economy of an aggressor, but also feed corrupt officials and violent political operators and thereby sustain the aggression.

Progress will require engaged law enforcement agencies and judicial institutions, plus effective criminal justice processes, to reduce looting and trafficking. It will also require more extensive public education, beyond the existing reach of civil society organisations such as the All-Ukrainian Association of Archaeologists in Ukraine and the ‘Amator’ Movement in Defence of Archaeological Heritage in Russia, to reduce the appeal of cultural property criminality and the tolerance of citizens. Plus, it will require sustainable cultural heritage economies, to create a greater material incentive for protection than destruction.²⁹

However, beyond such traditional – and still essential – demands, it must be recognised that there is a much broader – and much deeper – need for sustainable economies with diverse modes of flexible labour, so that workers who require or prioritise personal freedom ahead of financial stability and/or financial security can piece together rewarding legal livelihoods without resort to criminal activities. There is also a need for good governance, so that citizens do not feel a need to evade or a desire to reject (or indeed a desire to mirror) bad governance by disregarding social norms and legal limits. Underpinning all of these efforts, there is a need for investigation into and analysis of the social, economic and political systems within which looting and trafficking persist and thrive, to generate forensic intelligence for, social acceptance of and social pressure for cultural property policing, thereby to enable good cultural property governance.

Notes

1. Gershkovich, *Keepers of Illegal Antiquities*; Gershkovich, *Embezzlement and Destruction*; his name has been transliterated as it was by him at the time of his publications; since then, it has also been transliterated as Gershkovych and Hershkovych.
2. Hardy, *Black Archaeology*.
3. Telizhenko, *Monitoring Archaeological Sites*; Telizhenko, *The Situation*; Telizhenko, *Looting and Destruction*.
4. e.g. Hardy, *Black Archaeology*; Hardy, *Treasure-hunters even from Sweden*; Hardy, *It Is Not Against*; Hardy and Telizhenko, *This Is All*.

5. Shydlovskiy, Telizhenko and Ivakin, *Archaeological Monitoring*, 172.
6. e.g. Rossiiskaya Federatsiya, *Federal Law*.
7. e.g. DNR, *Criminal Code*.
8. e.g. LNR, *Criminal Code*.
9. e.g. Verkhovna Rada Ukrayini, *Law on Protection*.
10. e.g. SSSR, *Instructions on the Procedure*.
11. Azarov, Koval, Nuridzhanian and Venher, *Understanding Russia's Actions*.
12. Hardy and Telizhenko, *This Is All*.
13. Bazyaruk, *Criminological characteristics: 70; 70; 63 – chart 1*.
14. Litvinova, *Treasure Hunters*.
15. Telizhenko, *The Situation*; Bakalchuk, *Current Challenges and Problems*.
16. Arnold, *The Role of Cossacks*.
17. Arnold, *As Ukraine Crisis Simmers*.
18. Galeotti, *The Cossacks*.
19. Vserossiikoye Kazachye Obshchestvo, *Creation of the VsKO*.
20. Obrazovanie i Pravoslavie, *In Defence of History*.
21. Arnold, *The Role of Cossacks*.
22. For comparable cases elsewhere, see Hardy, *Trafficking by Forced Migrants*.
23. BBC Ukrayina, *Donetsk, Pirate Version*.
24. Cf. ATHAR Project, *Cross Platforming Allows Traffickers*.
25. Cf. Hardy, *Illegal Finders of Antiquities*.
26. e.g. Krashennnikov, *Analysis of the Development*.
27. Hardy and Telizhenko, *This Is All*.
28. e.g. Rayner, Alberge and Corless, *British Museum Was Told*.
29. e.g. Hardy, 'Black Archaeology'.

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