

CULTURE IS DEFENCE

Trust, Identity, and Cognitive Warfare in Russia's War on Ukraine



Dr Magnus Hjort

A bombed museum wing, a censored archive, a viral “history lesson” turned propaganda clip: since 2022, culture has become a front in Russia’s war on Ukraine. What drives this weaponization of memory and heritage? Where do we draw the line between commemoration and manipulation, resilience and myth-making? And what role can cultural institutions play in recovery when debates fixate on grids, governance, and grants?

We put these questions to Dr. Magnus Hjort, Director General of Sweden’s Psychological Defence Agency – on culture as a target in hybrid warfare and how cultural resilience and trusted institutions help democracies withstand cognitive warfare.

You lead Sweden's Psychological Defence Agency, an institution built to protect a society's information space. Why does culture belong in that conversation, alongside cyber defence and disinformation monitoring?

The purpose of Psychological Defence is to safeguard the open and democratic society, the free formation of opinion and Sweden's freedom and independence. Psychological Defence is the collective ability of society to resist foreign malign information influence activities directed at Sweden. This deliberate way to harm a free and democratic society, to influence our minds and behaviors, is part of the Cognitive Warfare that we see today.

Culture is a vital part of society and works on many different levels. Based on our history and heritage, culture is alive and changing all the time. It gives us dignity, and it is to a large extent something that makes us human. And therefore it's worth defending and it has great value in building our resilience.

Historically we have seen how culture becomes a target in war. For example, the systematic destruction of cultural sites that the Taliban in Afghanistan did just over 20 years ago. We saw it during the wars in the 1990's in Yugoslavia, and we see it in Russia's war on Ukraine. UNESCO reports that as of 29 July 2026, 545 cultural sites have been confirmed as damaged: 281 buildings of historical and/or artistic interest, 156 religious sites, 43 museums, 33 monuments, 22 libraries, 5 archaeological sites, 5 archives. The attacks on Ukraine's cultural heritage are, I believe, systematic and an essential part of the warfare that Russia is directing against the country.

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So, war in Sweden would, very likely, bring attacks on our cultural heritage. Buildings, monuments and objects that we hold dear, that are important to our history and our identity, will become targets. And not only with conventional kinetic methods, but also by using propaganda and disinformation targeting narratives of the cultural heritage. Attacking culture and history is part of modern hybrid warfare.

Russia often weaponizes history and memory recycling old narratives to sow division today. Can you give concrete examples of how this works, and why cultural institutions are a target rather than just collateral damage?

Five years ago, Vladimir Putin wrote: “To have a better understanding of the present and look into the future, we need to turn to history.” (“On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”. 12 July 2021.)

What Putin was saying here was basically: “I will use history, as I see fit, in order to construct today’s narratives so that I can shape the future the way I want it.”

To me this sounds a lot like what George Orwell once wrote, more than 75 years ago, in his book 1984: “Who controls the past, controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.”

History is being used by the Kremlin to motivate aggression and war, to erase culture and languages, to weaken our defenses, to rewrite past events to suit their agenda. History is being used to legitimize the former empires of Russia and the Soviet Union and their interest spheres, as well as present day Russian imperialistic ambitions.

“Who controls the past, controls the future.”

One example is the falsifications regarding what happened in Katyn and nearby places in the Soviet Union in 1940. The mass graves were discovered by Nazi Germany in April 1943 and at that time, the Allies went along with the Soviet line, that it was German forces who had murdered these 22,000 Poles. But after denying it for decades, the Kremlin in 1990 admitted that it was Soviet intelligence forces who had shot 22,000 Poles. As recently as 2010, the Russian parliament condemned this war crime, but today other winds are blowing. In April 2023, Russian state media published that the Russian intelligence service had found unique archival material proving German guilt. In actual fact it was the same fabrications that were published in the 1940s, which were now again being used as proof that it was the Germans who did this. It’s about freeing themselves and getting rid of the Soviet guilt of World War II atrocities and Stalin’s crimes in order to be able to reestablish an empire.

This also applies to Russian narratives of the Soviet actions against the Baltic countries during the Second World War. When the Baltic countries, quite reasonably, speak about an occupation, Russia calls this “a liberation”.

In this way history is very much used to convince the Russian population, but also pro-Russian groups in the West, that the Soviet aggression during World War II was justified, and done in accordance with international law. To get away with this, Russia needs to control academia, museums, libraries and archives. However, history must never be allowed to turn into a tool for authoritarian regimes to rewrite the past in order to dictate the future. History and cultural legacy should be open for transparent and free debate as the universal knowledge develops through new findings and research.

Ukraine has had to build resilience under real wartime pressure. What is one lesson from Ukraine's experience that you think applies far beyond the cultural sector – to municipalities, civil society, or business, for example?

As stated earlier, culture and cultural heritage are an important part of building resilience and bringing people together in the most difficult of times, and this is something that Ukraine has taken to heart. When U2 comes to Kyiv and holds a small concert in a shelter that is actually a metro station, it contributes to building resilience. I think it says a lot about what culture means to us, both in everyday life and in the most difficult of situations.

Culture can also bring a sense of relief, almost normality in a situation that would horrify most. Cultural experiences also play an important role in the healing process of people, both for military staff and for civilians. Cultural institutions have taken on a new role in Ukrainian society, not only as guardians of legacy but also as venues for citizens, by displaying contemporary exhibitions, opening up archives and offering possibilities for people to meet and experience things together.

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Another example is the deliberate choice of most Ukrainians to unite in a very special way, that is to only speak Ukrainian instead of using the Russian language. It is a profound statement marking both resistance and resilience that strengthens the connection between individuals, and hence the cohesion in society. In Sweden, this example would perhaps not be directly applicable, but the lesson we can learn from Ukraine is that the real strength of a society must be built both by individuals and civil society together with the public and private sectors.

In connection to this, I wish to mention another thing related to normality: it is important, as much as possible, to make sure that everyday necessities are being restored after being attacked. Communication systems, heating, housing etc. – everything we humans need to get by, to believe that we can actually overcome this horrific ordeal. Strategic communication has proven absolutely vital to create an understanding of the situation, both within the country, and perhaps, even more so outside the country. The support that the West has provided, which I see as an absolute moral obligation, has been and is crucial for Ukraine.

Technical innovation and ingenuity have obviously played a great part when it comes to developing Ukrainian defence capabilities.

Overall, the achievements by the Ukrainian people are impressive, by all accounts.

In an age of hybrid warfare, trust has become one of the most contested resources. What does a culturally resilient, trustworthy institution actually do differently?

When we have trust, it becomes an enabler of communication, and understanding that is absolutely vital for defending our democracies and creating resilient communities. An institution that upholds trust, whether it be government, media, academia, or a museum etc, stands a much better chance of getting across with information and creating understanding and commitment among people and in society as a whole.

Culture is an untamed force that is intimately tied to the core of being human. That is, our creation of music, art, theatre, film, dance, literature, memories, traditions, etc. – creations of expressions and experiences that carry over time and space. In a war, this will be attacked. We need to protect our right to our own cultural heritage and identity. But at the same time, culture needs to be a living part of our resistance in the ordeal that war entails. This means that we need to safeguard cultural heritage but also think about how our cultural institutions will be able to operate in a war. Because we will need culture more than ever in such a situation.

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About Dr Magnus Hjort and “Cultural Guardians”

Dr Magnus Hjort was appointed in April 2021 by the Swedish Government to lead the establishment of the Swedish Psychological Defence Agency and served as Deputy Director General and head of the agency's Capability Building Department from 1 January 2022. In October 2022 he was appointed Acting Director General and as of September 2023 Director General. His previous positions include Senior Analyst at the Swedish Defence University, Deputy Chief of Staff at the Swedish Council for Higher Education, Deputy Director General at the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, Head of Strategic Analysis Unit at the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency and Head of Research and Strategic Analysis at the Swedish Emergency Management Agency.

He has a Ph.D. from Stockholm University in History with a research focus on the Cold War and Security and Military History. Among his published works is the doctoral thesis from 2004 “Nationens livsfråga”. Propaganda och upplysning i försvarets tjänst 1944–1963. (The Essential Issue of the Nation. Propaganda and Information in the Service of Swedish Defence 1944-1963). Dr Hjort is a member of The Swedish Royal Academy of War Sciences. Copyright picture: Trygghetsspodden

This interview was co-produced by the German Platform for the Reconstruction of Ukraine and OBMIN Foundation as part of Cultural Guardians: A Cross-Border Cultural Heritage Program. Cultural Guardians starts from Dr Hjort's argument here: culture is not ornament, it is defence. The program brings Ukrainian professionals from museums, monument preservation and archives with partners in Poland and Germany. Ukrainians train in handling conflict-laden history and collections at risk; German and Polish colleagues learn from Ukrainian experience keeping institutions running under attack. The exchange runs both ways by design and outlasts the program, as a standing Ukrainian-Polish-German network of people who know each other's institutions first-hand.

On 18 September 2026, the conversation continues in person: Dr Hjort joins a public debate on culture vs disinformation at the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, part of Cultural Guardians.