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In Search of Sanctuary: The Charities Helping Ukrainian and Russian Academics to Escape

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A bust of Ukraine's national poet Taras Shevchenko in the city of Borodyanka near Kyiv. **Celestino Arce Lavin / ZUMA Press Wire / TASS**

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 sparked the largest displacement of people since World War II. While most fled from Ukraine, many people fled Russia or from neighboring Belarus. Among them were hundreds of academics and researchers in science and the arts, the brightest scholars of their respective nations.

Western governments helped many Ukrainian scholars to continue their work in safe countries. Russian scholars, while not direct victims of the war, have been unable to practice freely since many university rectors signed a letter endorsing the war. Without government support, fleeing Russian academics have turned to charities, and friends and family in the West.

The Moscow Times examined some of the charities helping academics who are no longer safe in their own countries, headquartered in the U.K., the U.S., and Germany.

British charity The Council for At-Risk Academics (Cara) announced in September that record numbers of Ukrainian and Russian academics had been rescued in the last 19 months.

Cara assists academics facing persecution and conflict in their countries. Many rescued academics later reached fame, like Max Born, a Nobel-prize-winning German-Jewish physicist, and philosopher Karl Popper.

The charity is experiencing the highest number of applications in its 90-year history.

Successful applicants to Cara receive help fleeing their home countries, as well as visa support from host universities in the U.K.

Cara helped 30 Ukrainian academics directly since February 2022. A further 170 were sponsored via Researchers at Risk, a 13-million-pound ($15.9 million) British government fellowship, currently exclusive to Ukrainians.

Dr. Nadiia Lolina is one of them. She was an accomplished researcher at KROK University, Kyiv. After leaving her husband and parents, Lolina traveled to Latvia during mass evacuations in March 2022.

At the time, Lolina was undergoing cancer treatment, and avoiding the stress of daily rocket attacks was a priority. Facing homelessness in Riga, she moved to London with a Homes for Ukraine visa. Around 200,000 Ukrainians have moved to the U.K. since the start of the war.

“Cara simply allowed me to continue living with purpose in a peaceful place. I’m in a safe city, with tolerable payment, and I do something useful for science,” she told The Moscow Times.

Lolina was placed at London’s School of Advanced Studies. She specializes in urban culture and urban spaces, which she hopes will be useful for rebuilding Ukraine after the war is over.

Speaking from Kyiv, where she had returned for an operation, Lolina told The Moscow Times she was grateful for the change in pace after the “wildness” of the war, and for the chance to continue her research in a safe city. The night before this interview was conducted, 20 Russian rockets fell on the Ukrainian capital and its suburbs.

Ukrainian economist Oleksandra and her 12-year-old daughter were also helped by Cara. After evacuating from Kyiv, she became a visiting researcher at the London School of Economics.

Due to martial law in Ukraine, the majority of the relocated Ukrainian academics are women, sometimes accompanied by small children.

In Russia, teachers disclosing anti-war views risk being denounced by colleagues, or recorded by students. Denunciation is once again part of life in Russia; a study quoted in The Washington Post identified 5,500 recent cases.

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One incident concerns history professor Mikhail Belousov, who was fired from St. Petersburg State University in June. Belousov made comments deemed to have "discredited the Russian army" in a closed Telegram group. Seven of Belousov's students were also expelled for making fun of a classmate who was killed in Ukraine. Belousov ended up in court.

Russian academics facing legal action do not qualify for U.K. government schemes like Researchers at Risk, but they have been helped by charities.

Cara has rescued 10 Russian academics who criticized the war. Dr. B B (name changed) is a prominent academic who signed anti-war petitions After witnessing the arrests of colleagues, he fled with his wife to a neighboring country, securing a university placement in the U.K.

Representatives of Cara declined to speak to The Moscow Times.

Expanding government support for persecuted academics is under debate in the British Parliament. In a speech on Sept. 12, Julian Lewis, MP, said the scheme to host Ukrainian researchers should be opened to more countries.

In Germany, the Phillip Schwartz Initiative serves "researchers who are demonstrably at risk, irrespective of discipline and country of origin." Universities in the scheme receive 20,000 euros ($21,000) per candidate. Funds come from Germany's Federal Foreign Office and at least eight private trusts. It runs alongside EU-funded programs like the MSCA4Ukraine consortium, which is only available to Ukrainians.

In February, MSCA4Ukraine announced that 124 Ukrainian researchers had been placed at universities in 21 European countries.

At first glance, Ukrainian scholars seem well-served by both charities and governments in Britain and mainland Europe. Yet while academics already on the programs are safe, both Researchers at Risk and MSCA4Ukraine are now closed to new applicants.

Related article: Russia to Quit European Standards System for Higher Education

As the war progresses, academics at universities in western Ukraine, who were comparatively safe at the beginning of the invasion, may find themselves in need of support — yet ineligible for programs that helped their predecessors. The ending of government-funded visa schemes like Homes for Ukraine may put more pressure on the charities that remain.

Across the Atlantic, Harvard University's Davis Center is home to Scholars without Borders, helping uprooted academics from Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia. Director Alexandra Vacroux tells The Moscow Times that the charity helps people wherever they have ended up.

"Let's say the rector of an Uzbek university is looking for legal scholars," she explains, "We can identify legal scholars now in Uzbekistan, and tell them who to contact. Then it's up to the scholar to reach out and connect."

Scholars without Borders acknowledges that Ukrainians have the foremost need for support.

“Ukrainian scholars have very different needs to Russian or Belarusian scholars,” Vacroux told The Moscow Times. “Many Ukrainians are still affiliated with their home institutions, but these have been destroyed, damaged, or internally displaced by the war.”

“[Displaced] Russian and Belarusian scholars find themselves cut off from their home institutions, without an academic affiliation to access literature and journals, receive salaries and grants, and sometimes, to publish.”

According to Vacroux, Scholars Without Borders has made contact with 3,000 academics, 1,000 of whom are contributing to the network or receiving funds. Of this number, around 30 are thought to have achieved staff positions “mostly at Central Asian universities.”

Vacroux told The Moscow Times that keeping tabs on everyone is difficult.

“Many people have moved across several countries since leaving home, and some have returned. The largest clusters of scholars are in Georgia and Armenia; Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Israel and Germany.”

Other academics are relying on their own networks. Before the war, Ilya Kukulin was an eminent Russian literary critic, teaching at Moscow’s Higher School of Economics. He and his wife Maria Mayofis attended anti-war rallies in Moscow before emigrating in March 2022.

“We made our departure early on because there were rumors of a state of emergency,” Kukulin told The Moscow Times.

Ilya and Maria spent two months living in Armenia, and a further three in Latvia. Their call for help was answered by friends in America. The Kukulins were offered temporary positions at Amherst College, Massachusetts. Both academics had lived and taught in America before.

“This is my life, this is our life, it’s not bad,” Ilya tells The Moscow Times. “It's not very optimistic, because I do not know what to do further. But we have some hope to fulfill our academic plans. Our life is continuing.”

Kukulin says it has been harder for academics without prior teaching experience in the West to leave Russia without changing professions. He believes one other person has left his former department since the war started.

“He was a historian, he edited an encyclopedia and delivered popular lectures on YouTube. He now lives in a small town in Germany, surviving from a temporary stipend from Scholars at Risk and looking for jobs.”

Kukulin suggests that resignations were higher in other faculties at the Higher School of Economics. Yet problems began before the war. The faculty of Constitutional Law disbanded in 2020 when staff refused to accept Putin’s “so-called Constitutional reforms.”

Academia does not take place in a vacuum. Many researchers who kept their positions in Russian scientific and technical universities are now driving the war forward.

Kaliningrad State Technical University now lists “solving problems relating to the defense capability of Russia” as a research aim, while St. Petersburg State Technical University is partnered with NPO Spetsmaterialov, a company making body armor for Russia’s Defense Ministry. And one Moscow college has rolled out a degree in mechatronics and robotics. Undergraduates can now specialize in unmanned aerial vehicles, or drones.

Speaking to The Moscow Times from leafy Amherst College, Ilya Kukulin has mixed feelings about those who stayed behind.

“Some colleagues in Russia consider us as traitors. Some people remain our friends, we are in communication,” he said. “And some, frankly, are absolutely desperate. Some are just trying to survive, some are using some tactics of hidden resistance. I could speak of relative degrees of optimism or despair — but among people who do not support the war, there are no optimists in Russia.”

He adds: “It’s a different feeling, being a permanent teacher at some more-or-less respectable institution, to when you’re an emigre without any ground under your legs. But I'm grateful to our colleagues here who supported us…financially, and morally. I don’t compare ourselves with Ukrainian refugees. They are in much harder situations.”

While Scholars Without Borders is a new charity, Cara and the Phillip Schwartz Initiative have their roots in the 1930s, a time when Europe felt the creeping threat of fascism.

Philanthropists of that era argued that the Nazi regime would use its intelligentsia to serve its ends unless these individuals were offered a way out.

Gustav Born, son of physicist Max Born, was one of the last living links to the first researchers saved by Cara.

“I want people not to forget things like this, the suppression of a country by a gang of murderous crooks and the victimization of people of good nature and good intention. It could happen again," he told the BBC in 2013.

Alexandra Vacroux told The Moscow Times: “In general, helping academics is not seen as an urgent problem, even though failing to do so may mean that many excellent specialists will stop contributing to the sciences and humanities. Our goal is to ensure that the knowledge and intellectual capital represented by all these scholars is not dissipated as a result of war.”

She added: “We hope to help as many of them as possible, be they anthropologists or zoologists.”

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