

What are Universities for? The Role of the University in War

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On 24 February 2022, a full-scale international war returned to Europe for the first time since the Second World War. In such circumstances, what is the university for? Ukraine has been subject to air, land, and sea attacks and in the midst of these its higher education institutions have been threatened, destroyed, or forced to adapt. Of its 625 higher education institutions, 43 have been displaced, 11 fully destroyed, and 400 damaged (*THE*, 13 April 2026). The challenges faced by individuals and institutions are not only specific to their time and place but also have their parallels in the historic experiences of universities in Europe since 1914. Our forthcoming edited book, *The Role of the University in War*, juxtaposes the experiences and responses of individuals, institutions, and higher education networks across a century in Europe to explore commonalities and comparisons. The profound crisis of war cuts to the heart of the university's position in society, the extent to which knowledge and expertise can and should be mobilised, the role of the university in the communities they serve, and their role in rebuilding society.

In the summer of 2022, the University of Hull twinned with Mariupol State University which was forced to relocate to Kyiv. Our initial support centred on equipment – library and IT equipment – followed by joint British Council funded research with displaced Ukrainian communities in Hull and regionally. The rebuilding, resilience, and mobilisation in higher education in Ukraine in war prompted our thinking of what a university is for. There is a language of crisis that we commonly use to describe higher education in the United Kingdom, particularly as it pertains to the Humanities, a lesser crisis than the life-and-death situation in Ukraine, but one that nonetheless has called into question our shared purpose and our working conditions. This paper examines the development of our relationship with our Ukrainian higher education partners, our work with Ukrainian communities, our evolving understanding of the role of the university in wars in Europe since 1914, with examples of our own research on the University of Hull in the Second World War (Macleod) and displaced intellectuals (Wynne) from wartime Europe who came to Hull and who participated in wartime intelligence and postwar public knowledge. It will provide an overview of the edited collection in development.

Jenny Macleod is Senior Lecturer in 20th Century History at the University of Hull. Catherine Wynne is Professor of Victorian and Early Twentieth-Century Literature and Visual Cultures at the University of Hull. Macleod is the co-founder of the International Society for First World War Studies which celebrates its 25th anniversary in 2026. Her research focuses on the memory and commemoration of war, particularly in relationship to Britishness. Her publications include *Gallipoli* (Oxford University Press, 2015). Wynne published the first biography of the British war artist Lady Butler, *Lady Butler: War Artist and Traveller, 1846-1933*. Wynne specialises in the Victorian literary and visual conceptions of war and the experience of the Irish soldier in the British army from the Victorians to the post First World War. She has recently delivered invited lectures in these areas at the National Army Museum, London, and at West Cork History Festival. Wynne is the University of Hull's academic lead for our Ukrainian partnership. Together, Macleod and Wynne are editing a book, *The Role of the University in War* (forthcoming).

History of Universities Seminar

Convened by Miles Taylor (Humboldt University of Berlin, Germany), Ku-ming (Kevin) Chang (Academia Sinica, Taiwan), and Heike Jöns (Loughborough University, United Kingdom) in collaboration with the ICHU. Hosted by the Humboldt University of Berlin on Zoom: <https://www.histgeog-uni.net/history-of-universities-seminar-2026-27/>.