Minsk 17 February 1960
No. 7N

Sir,

In answer to your letter MUS/BC/12/R 1 of 22 May 1959, I have the honour to enclose herewith the report on the application in the Byelorussian SSR of the 1954 Hague Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict.

Enclosure: Report

I have the honour to be,

Sir,

Your obedient Servant,

G. Kiselev
Chairman of the Commission of the Byelorussian SSR for Unesco


The Byelorussian SSR possesses a great number of cultural monuments (historical, archaeological, architectural and artistic) of scientific and historical value.

Conscious of the importance which the preservation of the cultural heritage has for all peoples of the world, the Byelorussian people reverently protects the cultural and artistic treasures created by their forebears through the ages. In the very first days of the establishment of the Soviet régime, special decrees were issued with that end in view. On 24 December 1923, the Government of the Byelorussian SSR promulgated a decree providing for the registration, inventory and preservation of artistic, historical, social and natural monuments in the possession of institutions, associations or private persons.

In 1925, a special commission was set up at the Institute of Byelorussian Culture (reorganized in 1929 as the Byelorussian Academy of Sciences) whose tasks included the systematic location, inspection and inventory of monuments, and the adoption of the necessary steps for their protection.

On the basis of the documentation assembled by the commission, the Council of People's Commissars of the Byelorussian SSR promulgated a decree on 5 June 1926,
whereby 99 artistic, historical, social and natural monuments, including 55 architectural monuments, were scheduled as State property. The work of locating and inspecting other cultural monuments was interrupted by the Second World War.

During the wartime years when Byelorussia was temporarily occupied, the Nazi invaders caused tremendous damage to cultural monuments, partially or totally destroying nearly 1,000 of them, including such outstanding architectural monuments as the Twelfth century Church of the Annunciation in Vitebsk, the Eighteenth to Nineteenth century Paskevich Palace in Gomel, and the Twelfth century Kalozhskaya Church in Grodno.

Total destruction also befell practically all of the Republic's museums, with their unique works of art, incunabula, manuscripts, archaeological collections and other valuable documents (historical, cultural, archival) illustrative of the age-long history of the Byelorussian people, creators of cultural and artistic values representing a major contribution to the world's cultural heritage. The victims included the Museum of the Revolution, the History Museum and the Picture Gallery in Minsk, the History Museum and the Picture Gallery named after the artist Pen in Vitebsk, and museums in the towns of Mogilev, Gomel and Orsha. The valuable collections belonging to these museums were ransacked or destroyed.

During the post-war years, and side by side with its efforts to revive the national economy, the Government of the Byelorussian SSR, treating the protection of cultural monuments and other cultural property as a matter of utmost importance, set about restoring the historical, architectural and artistic monuments which had been ravaged by the Nazis, and erecting new ones. A special commission was set up to locate and inventory the Republic's cultural monuments, and on the basis of the documentation submitted by it, the Council of Ministers approved the lists covering over 1,000 cultural monuments placed under State protection. In 1949, a decree was adopted and regulations laid down for improving the protection of these monuments.

Most of the scheduled monuments have been reconstructed or restored, including such well-known ones as the Eleventh century St. Sophia Cathedral and the Twelfth century Church of the Saviour and St. Euphrosyne in Polotsk, the Twelfth century Kalozhskaya Church and the Fourteenth century Old Castle in Grodno, the former Radziwill Castle and the Sixteenth century Farny Church in Nesvizh, the former Paskevich Palace (Eighteenth to Nineteenth century) in Gomel, the Twelfth century Kamenets Tower in the Brest Region, the monument at Kobrin to commemorate the first Russian victory over Napoleon's army during the Patriotic War of 1812, and the chapel erected in Lesnaya village (Mogilev Region) to commemorate the Russian victory over the Swedes in 1708. The former homes of the great Russian generals Suvcrov and Bagration have also been restored, and they now house war history museums. A memorial museum has also been organized in the commemorative chapel at Lesnaya.

Much work has been done in erecting monuments in honour of the heroes of the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945, and in immortalizing the glory of the Russian troops at Brest by opening a museum in the Brest fortress, under the general theme of "The heroic defence of the Brest fortress".
The work of protecting the Republic's cultural monuments is carried out by the executive committees of the regional, town, district and village soviets of workers' deputies, which are annually allotted the necessary funds from the local budgets for the protection, upkeep and restoration of the monuments. Approximately 10,000,000 roubles have been spent for this purpose since the war, restoration and conservation work being effected to safeguard cultural property from damage.

The responsibility for protecting historical, archaeological and artistic monuments and supervising their maintenance rests with the Ministry of Culture, while the State Committee for Construction and Architecture of the Council of Ministers is responsible for protecting architectural monuments in accordance with the relevant regulations.

In addition, the Byelorussian Academy of Sciences has a Scientific Methods Council which deals with the protection of cultural monuments, and which directs the work of protecting and studying cultural monuments along the lines indicated.

Similarly, the necessary steps are taken in the Republic for the protection of museum objects illustrative of the material and spiritual life of the people, and museum buildings have been constructed or extended accordingly in Minsk, Brest, Pinsk, Grodno, Vitebsk and elsewhere. In Minsk, a special building is being erected for the State Museum of the Byelorussian SSR, as a storehouse of objects relating to national life.

Apart from devoting great attention to the protection of cultural monuments and cultural treasures in museums and depositories, systematic efforts are made to bring them to the notice of the public by means of guides, handbooks, posters, albums, pamphlets, art postcards and excursions, as well as through the medium of lectures, press articles, radio and television broadcasts, etc. Stress is laid, in these latter, on the great cultural and historical significance and venerability of the historical and artistic monuments created by our ancestors throughout the centuries.

In short, it is the constant concern of the Government and people of the Byelorussian SSR to provide for the protection of cultural monuments and other cultural property.

(Translated from the Russian)