# OLD-NEW COLONIAL TENDENCIES IN SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY: EMPATHY IN WARTIME

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Taking autoethnographic and reflexive approaches as a background, this article reflects on the tendency of a number of Western Anglophone academic writings to impose a patronising perspective on, and indeed try to silence, commentary on Ukraine concerning the ongoing Russian invasion. This line of argumentation has become known as *"westplaining"*, and it seems to have taken the place of the old "orientalism". Such interventions neglect or elide the variety of regional perspectives and their entangled histories, embodied experiences and emotional contexts that are all too germane to those of us who have been doing fieldwork in Ukraine for years now. Such a regrettable imposition of ill-equipped *"westplaining"* thinking results in a presentation of a distanced, patronising, sometimes partisan and too-commonly facile view of the complexity of current events. Through ostensibly disinterested and compassionate appeals to listen to the "western" perspective first, the local insiders' voices are effectively silenced. In contrast, I discuss the importance of emotional testimonies and active empathy in social anthropology as responses to collective evil and violence, and as one possible way to overcome the borders that intellectual colonialism creates within the academic community.

KEYWORDS: Ukraine, war, empathy, emotional testimony, insider's perspective, colonialism, westplaining

*In eternal memory of my friends Mykola Fetisov, Vyacheslav Zaitsev, and Serhiy Dovhan',*
*perished on a frontline of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2022-2023*

I live *here* and *now*, and for the moment it is to *this* audience that I wish to tell a story, to explain and to oppose something that is being produced *here* and has adverse effects *there*. Of course, it is very uncertain whether we ever reach the audience we speak to; it is equally uncertain whether whom we think we speak for will actually recognize or accept it.
[original emphasis]

(Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*)

WAR EXPERIENCES, EMOTIONAL TESTIMONIES, AND AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY

I am writing the core of this paper during April-June 2022, living at my friend's house in Warsaw, and trying not to consider myself a "war refugee". However, I had to flee Ukraine on 20 March 2022, leaving my mother and my pet cat in Kyiv, because there was no possibility to get the medicine I must consume regularly there; being in Kyiv under siege, with Russian troops in its suburbs, we lacked the basics. The spring of 2022 has been the darkest time both for me and for many of my friends who had to flee, leaving behind their relatives, damaged flats, burning cities and ruptured lives (Buyskykh 2022). We still cry when we discuss this exodus between us, Ukrainians, where no one accuses us of being "too emotional".

I think, though, that Ukrainians have every right to express themselves emotionally, including in scholarly writings, where we embed our lived experiences of war into knowledge production. We need to speak openly from the point we are at now. And there is some naivety in the proposition that we can, or should, write about the war without emotions, where we are not presenting our experience, but a distanced, sanitised, representation. Emotions shape the surfaces of individual and collective bodies (Ahmed 2014, 4), however, and deep emotional pain shapes my body now to the extent that sometimes I cannot breathe. As we have known since Marcel Mauss published his groundbreaking paper "Techniques of the Body", we as anthropologists learn not only through mental activity but crucially in combination with our bodies and through our bodies, grounded in our bodily senses (Mauss [1935] 1973).

I experience shortness of breath every time I receive news from the frontline that another friend of mine, with whom I had shared part of my youth, has been killed by Russian invaders. I feel pain in my chest every time I speak to my friends who live in the South and East of Ukraine, experiencing constant shelling and bombing. One year later, making the last changes to this paper, after another sleepless night back in Kyiv filled with the sounds of air alerts and explosions caused by missiles that follow so soon after, I am inundated with tears as I read of Southern Ukrainian villages, with people and animals, fertile soils, natural preserves, and archaeological sites, being flooded after the Russian army detonated Nova Khakovka's vital dam on 6 June 2023. I have a persistent lump in my throat at not being able to go to my father's grave in a village cemetery in Mykolaivs'ka oblast', Southern Ukraine, now severely damaged by Russian shelling and bombing. And yet, I have hope, which soothes my soul and makes my sore body move on in search of a future — for myself, my people, and my country. This hope is grounded in my sense that *respect for an emotional testimony should be perceived as a deeper, embodied form of knowing which contributes to more insightful and contextualised knowledge production in anthropology*.

Denying emotion does not necessarily lead to clearer research. Here I want to speak from a personal, emotional perspective, using the tool of auto-ethnography,

and what I hope to meet is empathy. I rely on a methodological approach, proposed by James Davies and Dimitrina Spencer, which recognises the researcher's emotion not as antithetical to thought or reason, but as a source of insight that can complement more traditional methods of anthropological research (Davies 2010, 1-14). I also ground myself in Judith Okely's in-depth elaborations on the crucial role of emotions in the anthropological epistemic tradition, the importance of autobiography, participatory experience, and embodied knowledge in anthropology (Okely 1992, 2007, 2019). I ask for the horror I have witnessed and for the pain I have been experiencing with my soul and body to be considered within a moral space that is as valid as the distanced and more theoretically-framed responses on the war in Ukraine by "experts" from the Anglosphere who do not necessarily possess the considerable expertise or experience of the region, its languages, its history or its peoples that such commentary would necessitate.

In this vein, I have chosen to respond to several anthropological publications on the "Focaal blog", written immediately after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine: one essay by David Harvey (Harvey 2022) and two by Chris Hann. Hann's first essay was written in 2014 during the initial stage of the Russian invasion (Hann 2014a), with his second one coming out after 24 February 2022 (Hann 2022). I also speak to two essays by Don Kalb (Kalb 2022a; 2022b). It is important to underline that none of these scholars have published significant research on Ukraine, and none have conducted fieldwork there. Neither do they seem to possess any demonstrable knowledge of the Ukrainian language, nor are they apparently familiar with the kind of local, multi-layered perspectives and the long and diverse history of Ukraine. And yet, they have felt empowered to express their opinions on Ukraine, without citing or acknowledging the perspectives of "local" scholars, instead relying on views from nowhere. To their credit, Hann and Kalb consistently condemn the Russian aggression in Ukraine. However, their writings contain a number of serious shortcomings and specious assumptions regarding Ukraine, its history, and the nature of the ongoing war that remain relatively unchallenged. Several critical responses have, though, already appeared on the "Focaal blog" (Hall 2022; Dunn 2022) and elsewhere (Bošković 2022). I see my contribution as one such response.

## FACING THE EVIL, AND EMPATHY AS A POSSIBLE RESPONSE

Between 2015 and 2018 I conducted fieldwork in the north-western and eastern borderlands of Poland, researching inter-confessional relationships, pilgrimages, memory, sense of belonging, and silences that resulted from the violence of the Second World War and the repressive policies of communism. Working with the consequences of multilayered trauma, I embraced two important insights: first, that it is

crucial to elaborate empathy for other people's life-experiences, and thereby develop understanding. Second, that there are events in life when there are no shades, no place for statements like "this is all very complicated and ambiguous". There is however *good* and there is *evil*, a dichotomy as ancient as humanity is. By "evil" I mean a profound immorality, an absence of ethics and blind ignorance. I echo Plato's idea, developed in his early dialogues, particularly in the *Protagoras*, that a profound, deliberate ignorance becomes a bedrock for wrong actions and feeds evil. Today we cannot allow scientific discourse to make us ignorant of the ethical stance required in conducting research and providing commentary on the world.

The most profound research on the concept of "evil" in social sciences and humanities was conducted by Hannah Arendt, whose thoughts on the origins and nature of evil emerged from her attempts to comprehend the horrors of totalitarianism, Nazi ideology, and the concentration camps. Arendt uses the term "radical evil" to describe the horrors of the Holocaust, borrowing from Kant and elaborating it further (Arendt 1962, IX, 459). Arendt believed that what she described as the "banality of evil" results from the failure of humans to fully experience our unifying human qualities, such as thought, will and empathy. When human beings are able to experience and express these qualities it may help prevent the emergence of "radical evil", such as that which arose in Nazi Germany. Since the Nuremberg prosecutions of Nazi criminals for "crimes against humanity" established the principle of a higher duty to one another, one is left frankly bereft by the ongoing global failure of empathy to be an antidote to a recurrent tendency to dehumanise one another through wars for example in Ukraine, Georgia, Chechnya, Congo, Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen and the Balkan wars, to name but a few in the last decades.

Moral evil is a fundamentally human phenomenon, embedded in our moral worlds and shaping ethical systems — fields of enquiry from which anthropology has no moral right to distance itself today. Thomas Csordas speaks of moral evil as a "malevolent destructiveness", distinguishing between active and passive evil at the collective (genocide, environmental degradation) and interpersonal (murder, abandonment) levels (Csordas 2019, 41-42). Following Csordas, I understand the Russian invasion and occupation of sovereign Ukrainian territory, and the subsequent propagandising and targeting of the civilian population, to be acts of genocide, of human and environmental destruction. As such, I consider them to be instances of active, collective evil. But this is not just my subjective, scholarly perception. According to the UN declaration on genocide,[1] all the crimes Russia is unequivocally committing in Ukraine are genocide, as international law defines it.

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1    Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide: https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocity-crimes/Doc.1_Convention%20on%20the%20Prevention%20and%20Punishment%20of%20the%20Crime%20of%20Genocide.pdf

The massacres that the Russian army have committed in Bucha, Irpin, Boro-dyanka, Makariv, Hostomel, all suburbs of Kyiv, during this occupation (end of February 2022 – end of March 2022) are embodying a collective evil. The Russian army has also committed numerous atrocities in many other Ukrainian cities: Mar-iupol, Chernihiv, Kharkiv, Sumy, Okhtyrka, Popasna, Volnovakha, Izium, Kherson, Bakhmut (van den Berg, Stephanie and Deutsch, Anthony 2023).[2] These include the violent deaths of civilians, the rape of women and children, the torture of people and their pets, the looting of their houses, the theft of jewellery from dead bodies and its sale in the territory of Belarus — all of these are crimes against humanity, and must be condemned as evil acts. The missile attacks targeting schools, museums, thea-tres, hospitals, and sacred buildings (churches, synagogues, mosques, prayer houses), where people took shelter in basements, are evil. The suffering of the children I saw vomiting on an evacuation train to L'viv at the end of March 2022, because their stomachs were unable to absorb food after weeks of hunger and dehydration, follow-ing the Russian blockade of their hometown of Mariupol, is evil. The mass graves of civilians tortured to death in contemporary Europe, the region that survived the unbelievable human catastrophe of two world wars in the last century, are evil. The forcible deportation of seven million refugees,[3] eight million internally displaced persons,[4] and more than one million Ukrainians to Russia by the Russian military through filtration camps (Tsui 2022), is evil. What strikes me is that academics and intellectuals in the Western Anglosphere world do not seem to be as shocked by these facts as they might be. I simply cannot capture the moral significance of these actions and their perpetrators by calling them "wrong" or "very bad". I see this in the category of "evil". Here, rote condemnation ("we don't support Putin", "we are against war") by individual scholars or academic organisations is insufficient. In such an unbearable situation, anthropology has the right to engage, to intervene, and to be a moral science that recognises moral challenges (Csordas 2013).

Indeed, the new wave of Russia's invasion of Ukraine has provoked unprecedent-ed attention. Scholars, professional associations, universities and research institu-tions have all issued supportive statements condemning Russian aggression and the violence against Ukraine. Public intellectuals (Ukraine's cause 2022) and academics

2   The ongoing documentation of Russia's war crimes in Ukraine: https://war.ukraine.ua/russia-war-crimes/ ; https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/05/22/world/europe/ukraine-war-crimes.html ; https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/03/ukraine-apparent-war-crimes-russia-controlled-areas ; https://ukraine.un.org/en/224744-un-human-rights-ukraine-released-reports-treatment-prisoners-war-and-overall-human-rights (accessed 20.06.2023)

3   https://www.statista.com/statistics/1293403/cee-ukrainian-refugees-by-country (accessed 28.06.2022)

4   https://www.minre.gov.ua/news/kilkist-vnutrishno-peremishchenyh-osib-vpo-v-ukrayini-perevysh-chyla-8-mln-lyudey-zvidky-y-kudy (accessed 01.07.2022)

(Wanner 2022) followed Adam Michnik's empathic statement, written on the first day of war, when he declared: "We must say it loud and clear — *we are all Ukrainians now* [emphasis added]. In Warsaw and in Paris, in Berlin and in Prague, in London and in Budapest, one thing must be said loudly: today, Ukrainians are not only fighting for themselves; they are fighting 'for our freedom and yours'" (Michnik 2022).[5] However, not all of the texts that emerged from the West as a response to the war in Ukraine are properly empathic, deep or contextualised, and not enough of them encompass embodied knowledge about certain areas of life in Ukraine. On the contrary, there are texts about the war that reveal high levels of ignorance, patronising attitudes and intellectual arrogance towards Ukraine with unreflective, colonial statements. When I read them, I think mostly about *the failure of empathy* and understanding.

*Empathy* has always been a central analytical and reflective category in the phenomenological tradition. Since Edmund Husserl, phenomenologists recognise that human empathy allows access to other people's "lifeworlds" and experiences (including in the emotional spectrum) with awareness of and respect for the Other. Anthropologists embrace empathy as a key tool in fieldwork research when we try to step into the shoes of the other person and see the world through the eyes of someone else. I see empathy as the ability to come to an understanding of or sense another person's perspective, feelings, needs, or intentions, even when one does not share the same life experiences. Empathy can be an emotional response to people and events, an expression of solidarity, of imaginative co-feeling, where we can conjure up a sense of how someone else must be feeling and have that insight register within us not only as a form of social cognition (Throop and Zahavi 2020), but also in the deeper registers of our own bodily sensorium.

To experience another's suffering in my presence and not to have an emotional response, a sensorial and intuitive turning of my attention towards this person, or this event, resounds with an absence of ethics, indeed of basic humanity. As humans we are social beings, and to be able to witness human suffering without a deeper response speaks to our deficiencies, not to our intellectual acumen. Co-feeling is thus an ethical response to the human condition in its fragility. To insist on a distinction between thought and feeling, while logical, is not humane, certainly not for humanistic intellectuals.

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5    Michnik was referring to the famous slogan widely used during the "Solidarity" period in Poland. Its history goes back to the Polish anti-imperial resistance, when Polish soldiers, exiled from the partitioned Poland, fought in various independence movements around the world. It is held that this slogan was first seen during the Polish anti-imperial demonstration, held in Warsaw on 25 January 1831. It was most probably authored by Joachim Lelewel.

This ethical implication of human suffering is a launching point for an empathic understanding of geopolitical instability, such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Empathic discernment can contextualise the floods of reports of those life-threatening or life-ending events as propaganda.[6] It can also act a call to "turn towards", to know, to respond with more than intellect, to respond with heart and attention to the point of recognising the Other in their need to be witnessed to. In other words, co-feeling is its own form of intelligence and intelligibility. As anthropologists who rely on empathy as a way into the lives of others, we can transcend empathy per se into a deeper form of witnessing through an existential grounding in our shared, if unequally distributed, sense of justice in this world. While other humanities or the political sciences may be oriented to subsist on the theoretical plane of analysis, anthropologists are decidedly empirical. They are emotionally open, for instance, to empathising with people threatened by or experiencing violence, where empathy addresses the very moment of another person's suffering. It is the possibility of being with someone else in the world that implies a deeper moral dimension; co-engaging, establishing solidarity.

A mistake that intellectuals often make is that we rely on the reading of honoured elders to discern an intellectual niche from which to speak with reflected authority, rather than relying on our deeper insights to read the world in order to know how to respond. More subtly, we lack the imperative to realise that a response is *required*. Lack of empathy can then lead to unreflective thinking and insensitive, and frankly ignorant, perceptions of a different kind of life that other people live, even when they are under fire.

As images of Ukrainian citizens fleeing west to safety from the Russian colonial invasion flooded the world's screens, commentators struggled to make sense of the import of these fragments of reports they were witnessing. One national broadcaster in Ireland at the time, Ryan Tubridy, said on live radio: "I kept thinking: 'They all look like us. They look like our neighbours. That could be anyone I work with or who I buy things off […] or I could be related to. It just feels so real'".[7] What Tubridy inadvertently articulated was the double tragedy that the previous victims of Russia's imperial ambitions, the Syrians, did not look like the white, Catholic Irish when they came to Ireland. Their plight was culturally more recognisable as a "Third World" issue from an invisibly foreign country. More poignantly though, Ukrainians do look like other Europeans, but before the full-scale invasion we were just as invisible. Yet we are also, it seems, "European" enough. If Syrians are the cultural "other", we

6    Russian information about the invasion not only lacks credibility but is orchestrated to further a campaign of lies that identifies Ukraine with neo-Nazism as a basis for invasion, war crimes and the incitement to genocide. At no point, therefore, can I ethically entertain any calls for room in my claim for empathy to include any Russians who claim to have a state-manufactured 'grievance' with sovereign Ukraine.

7    https://www.thejournal.ie/ryan-tubridy-2-6076248-May2023/ (accessed 15.06.2023)

are the cultural "in-between", the "domestic others", residents of the "former 'white' colony of Russian and Soviet empires", as Vitaly Chernetsky aptly framed it (Spivak et al. 2006, 834). The complex history that has created the nation-state known as Ukraine is almost entirely absent from modern Western thought, even though at the basic level of the grain produced in this region, Ukraine accounts for as much one third of the world's needs.[8] There is a certain historical lacuna where basic knowledge of the role of Ukraine in the formation of modern Europe is utterly and stubbornly absent from Western minds.[9] All people see is people "who look like them". But we are still not one of them. In the face of such gaps in knowledge, understanding and empathy, anthropologists should have a powerful role to play.

Today, Western intellectual thinking dominates when about it comes to the war in Ukraine. Scholars from Ukraine have been petrified since 24 February 2022, when the war woke us up with a series of shelling all over the country. For weeks and months, many of my colleagues were struggling for their lives, hiding in bomb shelters, basements, bathrooms of their flats, or inside the metro stations in Kyiv and Kharkiv, adjusting to a new horrible reality, trying to ensure food and medicine supplies, escaping their permanent places of residence while under attack from missiles, saving their family members and pets, risking their lives, or being forced to flee the country. Doing routine academic work has become almost impossible under the conditions of war.[10] Meanwhile we are often referred to as "local" or "native" scholars — not to mention regular categorisations as "post-communist" or "Eastern European" due to the existent hierarchies of knowledge and power relations in academia — while we cope with the constant political, economic and social fluctuations in our states-in-transition. Some are even physically endangered, captured or tortured.[11]

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8    https://www.bbc.com/news/world-61759692# (accessed 10.06.2023)

9    What Timothy Snyder is currently working hard to popularise is the history of Ukraine for Western audiences, placing it in a world-historical context: https://online.yale.edu/courses/making-modern-ukraine (accessed 15.06.2023)

10   When thinking about the most recent series of wars in Europe, before Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014, the Balkan wars come to mind: from the ten-day war in Slovenia for its independence to the insurgency in Macedonia in 2001. It took years for scholars from the former Yugoslav republics, now all independent states, to distance themselves, reflect and respond academically to this series of wars (Maček 2009). Therefore, local scholars' understandings of the Balkans and the consequences of those wars were strongly overshadowed by Western academic characterisations of these events, which were often produced quickly and without a similarly deep knowledge of the region, its history or its people (Mishkova 2018).

11   For example, on 27 January 27 2016, Dr Ihor Kozlovskyi, head of the Centre for Religious Studies and International Spiritual Relations, who worked as an associate professor at the Department of Philosophy of the Donetsk National Technical University (2011-2015), was captured by the militants of

I reflect here on tendencies in writings produced in Western academia, which result in denying the citizens of Ukraine their subjectivity and the state its sovereignty with regard to the ongoing Russian invasion. I consider these tendencies to be a dangerous phenomenon, resulting in ignorant opinions from the "West" towards the "East". "Western" voices speak from a centre to a periphery of their own imagination, while "Eastern" voices represent a resistant, embodied knowledge that is unjustly orientalised. Those "Eastern" voices from within speak back, but do not speak down, to potential "Western" allies. I highlight the importance of *active empathy* as one possible way to overcome the boundaries that this intellectual colonialism creates in academia. By active empathy, I mean an engagement that is equal parts intellectual, psychological and emotional: "Sympathy is seeing someone's pain, whereas empathy is relating and feeling it" (Anderson 2022, 257).

I worry that esteemed academics have platforms that allow their voices to be easily amplified, and even more easily allowing them to amplify Russian propaganda that has been laundered as "anthropological knowledge". I am concerned that other Western scholars are not quicker to condemn such views as serving a dark turn in modern European history, and furthering cooperation with contemporary colonising forces is an infernal return of the bad habit of being on the wrong side of history. And make no mistake, this is the history of Europe being written before our eyes, in rough draft, at the expanding edge with the unfinished project of EU expansion on one side, and the anachronistically evil Russian colonial apparatus on the other. History will not judge propagandists lightly, and neither should our discipline.

I address this paper to those amplified voices; white, male, Anglophone. I ground this response to propaganda in European examples because I want scholars and intellectuals at every level of influence to focus on the reality that this evil has come to them too. Saying nothing is providing support to someone; who do you wish to support? It is not even enough to merely document the downfall of a country, a people, and a set of values that can guarantee my home country a future out of the shadow of a failed empire of evil. Empathy, then, entails more than just silent witness, timid condemnation of war, commentary behind a paywall, or whispered rebuttals of elder statesmen for alarming solecisms. Empathy can embrace a call to public awareness, to tell a story that can be heard, understood and can change minds and hearts. Anthropologists have a record of being counted in the public sphere (González 2004), and it is time to meet the moment again. Let us begin with our humanity, then, our capacity to emote and empathise, and deploy our intellects ethically and imaginatively to the task of speaking truth and discerning threats. Let us be heard as we stand

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the so-called terrorist organisation "Donetsk People's Republic" because of his pro-Ukrainian position and was subjected to torture and kept in a prison until 27 December 2017, when he was released and brought to Kyiv. Unfortunately, he passed away on 6 September 2023.

for something or someone in this world, something other than our own careers, someone other than ourselves.

## HIERARCHIES OF KNOWLEDGE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A "LOCAL" SCHOLAR

The division between "the Western" and "the other" academia is less a matter of geographical distances than an epistemic question related to the colonial histories of anthropology. Decolonising the academic tradition of dividing scholars into "indigenous", "local" or "native" on the one hand, and "global experts" on the other, seems like an unachievable dream. Many of us would love to find ourselves in an academic world that is not dominated by Western-centric vision and that actually encourages a variety of perspectives. But the reality is different.

Debates about how to decolonise anthropology started prior to the post-structuralist turn of the 1970s with attention to the inner perspective, emotions, empathy, and what Kirsten Hastrup calls "reflexivity" (Hastrup 1995, 49-51). Talal Asad's collection *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (Asad 1973), was one of the first and the most powerful re-examinations of the relationships between anthropology and colonialism. In order to decolonise perceptions of the "other", Glenn H. Jordan argued that the new cultural anthropology that emerged in the mid- to late 1980s needed to incorporate reflexive and interpretive techniques in addition to radical innovations (Jordan 1991, 42). One of the most vocal calls for the decolonisation of anthropology has been the "anthropology of liberation" addressed by Faye V. Harrison and her strong position for radical and critical perspectives in anthropology that should focus on the empowerment of the cultures being studied (Harrison 1991, 1-11). Contributing to the same volume, Edmund T. Gordon argued that a decolonised anthropology would have to be reinvented outside of the West (Gordon 1991, 152). In their iconic volume *Writing Culture*, James Clifford and George Marcus opened an important conversation on decentring the West and shifting power relations in academia (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Later, in his essay "Feeling Historical," Clifford reflected on the historic origins of anthropology embedded in the discipline's role in building empires, even though many anthropologists believed they were advocating for indigenous cultures (Clifford 2012, 419). He describes the present historical moment as "a contradictory, inescapably ambivalent, conjuncture: simultaneously post- and neo-colonial" (Clifford 2012, 421). A decade later, in 2022, his insightful description of the current historical moment, remains highly relevant.

If we look attentively at all the work that has been done, we see that the research that claimed to decolonise anthropology almost exclusively concerned relations between Western European states, former metropolises, and the Asian, African and

Pacific states, erstwhile Western colonies. This scholarship also addressed relationships between Western anthropologists with their research assistants, or fieldworkers, too-often demoted to the rank of "local" or "native" scholars, or "indigenous ethnographers". However, little has been said about the other scars of inequality that colonialism caused. I am referring to the colonial approach towards Eastern Europe, which Larry Wolf called "the paradox of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion, Europe but not Europe" (Wolf 1994, 7). Serbian feminist and philosopher Marina Blagojević stressed that the indefiniteness of Central and Eastern Europe and its vague state-in-transition may be related to the notion of the semi-periphery and how the regions' inhabitants are perceived as "non-'White' whites, non-European Europeans" (Blagojević 2009, 27).

Ukraine has been clamped down and held between two colonial discourses, one of lingering Western Cold War supremacy and the other of resurgent Russian imperialism. This is revealed in the perception of Ukraine exclusively through the prism of the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and Russia, which is a very limited perspective regarding Ukraine's diverse history connected to Polish, Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, Romanian and Russian political entities, and extant heterogeneous cultural, religious, and ethnic backgrounds. Historian Andrii Portnov emphasises the country's diversity as a "crucial source of political pluralism." He stresses that "even in the face of the invasion, diversity did not prove to be a weakness: religious and linguistic differences did not undermine the unity of the country" (Portnov 2022). This issue is not acknowledged in a line of thought that limits perceptions of Ukraine only through the Russian neo-colonial prism.

Todd Prince has recently argued that most of Western scholarship, with a strong focus on Russia, has "overlooked" the trauma inflicted on Ukraine — as well as the Caucasus and Central Asian states — by Russian imperialism and colonialism (Prince 2023). But why did it take a full-scale war to make Ukraine visible, even recognisable? It should have been recognised at least in 2014 after the annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in Donbas. And while some Western European cases of former colonies that gained their independence are recognised, as in the case of Ireland, which has both an early and a late colonial experience, the Eastern European colonial and post-colonial experiences are far less acknowledged on the global Western-centric scale. Even the fact that the Western world firmly believed that Ukraine could withstand Russia's aggression for only three days before surrender would be inevitable suggests, as I argue, that Ukraine has not been seen as a sovereign subject or a viable modern nation-state. Only a small number of specialists who have studied Ukraine for decades and military historians understood its ability, will, and existential need to fight for freedom.

When Alexander Fiut encourages academics "to break the conspiracy of silence concerning Russia's colonial practices," he suggests that they should be analysed not only in relation to Poland, but "also with reference to other nations that still remain in the grip of the former Soviet Empire" (Fiut 2014, 35). While decolonising their methodological approaches and theoretical frames concerning Western imperial legacies (e.g. British, French or Belgian), anthropologists are not as yet skilled at seeing the same inappropriateness when it comes to the Russian (Neo)empire. Olesya Khromeychuk addresses exactly these issues in her lecture "Where is Ukraine on the mental map of the academic community? " (Khromeychuk 2022). Indeed, some Western anthropologists are simply not ready to recognise many states, including Ukraine, that have long stood in the shadow of Russia in the academic knowledge they produce.

Almost twenty years ago an anthropologist from Poland, Michał Buchowski, entered into a debate with Chris Hann that developed into a vigorous discussion on "hierarchies of knowledge". Starting in 2004, Buchowski published his article "Hierarchies of Knowledge in Central-Eastern European Anthropology", where he exhibited his vision of colonial practices in academia and the self-perception of the "Western" scholars as those who are "better" than their colleagues from the "East" (Buchowski 2004). Buchowski criticised Western researchers for their use of Central-Eastern European scholarship mostly as a source of ethnographic data and not as a font of theoretical inspirations. Similarly, he condemned the superior attitude of Western scholars towards their Eastern colleagues as "natives" in a way that failed to consider them as equal (Buchowski 2004, 10).

A response written by Chris Hann, where he admitted that there were hierarchies, argued that these hierarchies existed because of the "lesser" quality of "local" scholars' work; "If […] other "local scholars" wish to be as widely read as some of the outsiders who write about CEE, then they need to put in the field time and write monographs of equivalent depth and sophistication" (Hann 2005, 195). The main idea he pursued was that no matter how educated and trained scholars from Central-Eastern Europe are, they should fit the Western frame, and "pull themselves up" to the level of their Western colleagues. Otherwise, their demands for recognition are nothing more than complaints without the grounds to claim an equal place "on the market". Hann also claimed that to become "true" anthropologists, we should go to the West first, to learn how to tackle research, and then do studies at home. Buchowski responded by advocating for a Central-Eastern European anthropology, opining that such neoliberal terms as "market", "competition", "rivalry" indeed frame some Western anthropological thinking, but still had not invaded academia in Central-Eastern Europe. Buchowski also said that in Western studies on Central-Eastern Europe, "one can hardly find anthropological ideas, much less theories, produced by local anthropologists and that Western scholars refer almost solely to

other 'Westerners' as theoretically entitled" (Buchowski 2005, 200). In a later article (Buchowski 2012) Buchowski argued that "in a hierarchical order of scholars and knowledge, post-socialist anthropologists are often perceived as relics of the communist past: folklorists; theoretically-backward empiricists; and nationalists. These images replicate Cold War stereotypes, ignore long-lasting paradigm shifts as well as actual practices triggered by the transnationalisation of scholarship" (Buchowski 2012, 20). This is not to mention the obvious multicultural skills of many intellectuals from Central-Eastern Europe that include mastering multiple languages and having a (admittedly imposed) common world language to draw on when thinking beyond their "parochial" sovereignty. In a subsequent publication, Chris Hann noted that we could speak of a "new academic Cold War" between disciplinary traditions of the academic East and West. In his view "anthropology/ethnography throughout Eastern Europe nowadays is a field of internecine skirmishing, whingeing and ressentiments" (Hann 2014b, 46). Nonetheless, this argument did not encompass any attempt to give due weight to the perspectives of anthropologists from Central-Eastern Europe, connected as they are with the economic, social, and cultural contexts in which they live.

In the special issue of the journal "Cargo" (2014), dedicated to rethinking the anthropology of Central-Eastern Europe,[12] Agnieszka Pasieka, an anthropologist from Poland, whose academic career developed in the West, stressed that Buchowski's observations were still valid. She underlined that the existing division in academia manifests itself "in the perception of some academics as 'local scholars'— as those who can barely illuminate local specificities — and others as 'global experts', capable of shedding light on universal phenomena and concerns" (Pasieka 2014, 52-53). She stressed that "local" scholars are often evaluated by "global experts" not from the point of view of their anthropological sensitivity, education, training and fieldwork experience, "but rather from their 'insiders' perspective or even the 'national lenses' through which they supposedly view the world" (Pasieka 2014, 52).

Sadly, I experience the continuity of colonial hierarchical thinking, instead of any real acknowledgments of the insider's experience and expertise. Moreover, the Russian war in Ukraine sharpens these ruptures, deepens the divisions in academia, and makes the hierarchies in academia more explicit. As Darya Tsymbaliuk, an anthropologist from Ukraine working in the UK, writes, the invasion of Ukraine causes academics "to question the epistemic authority of scholarly knowledge production, when it keeps a safe distance from the wreck of reality" (Tsymbalyuk 2022). Thus, analysis is surrendered to a facile "westplaining".

12   http://www.cargojournal.org/index.php/cargo/issue/view/1/showToc

"Westplaining" seems to have replaced Said's notion of orientalism (Kazharski 2022), particularly in reaction to commentary on Ukraine by established Western intellectuals — be they German intellectuals (Krieg in der Ukraine 2022), American realists (Walt 2022) or cultural anthropologists and historians (Harvey 2022; Kalb 2022a, 2022b; Fitzpatrick 2022) — that reveal a patronising and privileged position when expressing their opinions and claims about "backward" Eastern Europeans who are not "able" to understand the situation in their countries and lack basic knowledge about their region. It can also mean perceiving the world exclusively "through" and "by" the West. The latter can be seen, for example, in the facile accusation against the USA and NATO of seeking the Russian invasion (Artiukh 2022a).

Many "local" scholars from Central-Eastern Europe, as well as some of their Western colleagues, tend to find such commentary useless and even harmful, as it introduces false assumptions and projections into public opinion and media coverage. In doing so, "westplaining" strengthens existing boundaries in academia and creates new ones. Taras Bilous, the editor of the left-wing Ukrainian magazine "Commons" wrote a "letter to the left in the West" shortly after the war began, on 25 February, when Kyiv was under Russian siege. In his piece, he criticised the fact that actual people in Eastern Europe and their political ideas — as well as aggressive Russian imperial chauvinism — do not seem to exist for left-wing intellectuals in the West, who are instead obsessed with "NATO imperialism". He wrote, "a large part of the Western Left should honestly admit that it completely fucked up in formulating its response to the 'Ukrainian crisis'" (Bilous 2022). There has also been a considerable critical response from Ukrainian sociologist Oksana Dutchak (2022), anthropologists from Ukraine Volodymyr Artiukh (2022b) and Taras Fedirko (2022), both currently living in the UK, Polish journalists and publicists (Troost 2022; Smoleński, Dutkiewicz 2022) who also condemn the false logic of "westplaining" Ukraine.

## THE FAILURE OF ANTHROPOLOGISTS' MORAL IMAGINATION: SEEKING "RUSSIA'S PERSPECTIVE"

Writing about the Western condemnation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Hann claims that: "there is little or no attempt to representation [sic] of the Russian perspective" (2022). However, what kind of perspective he means remains unarticulated, even by Hann himself. The "Russian perspective" we hear from Russian sources and officials is a mixture of imperialism, lies, justified violence, and alternative facts in the surrealist mirror. In early April 2022, for instance, a Kremlin media outlet "RIA Novosti" published a piece written by pro-Kremlin analyst Timofei Sergeitsev, entitled "What Russia should do with Ukraine", in which one finds justification for the war by calling for the destruction of the Ukrainian identity, language, state and

people. Sergeitsev even claims that the word "Ukraine" is synonymous with Nazism and should not be allowed to exist, therefore the entire Ukrainian people and the country should be erased.[13] There are no illusions: Russia does speak; its "perspective" is very vocal; and it is expressed in documented cases of bombing, shooting, rocketing, shelling, raping and killing civilians, kidnapping children, stealing, and causing famine in the occupied territories of the Ukrainian South.

Unfortunately, this "Russian perspective" is neither seen nor heard in Hann's essay. It is also absent from other essays by Western intellectuals and scholars commenting on the war, such as Sheila Fitzpatrick's text, where she cares about "ostracizing Russia" and "anti-Russian rhetoric", but shows no empathy towards the Ukrainian perspective (Fitzpatrick 2022). A response has been written by Ukrainian historian Vitalii Mykhailovskyi, refuting such concerns (Mykhailovskyi 2022). However, despite their existence, voices and insider perspectives from Ukraine are still marginal on a global scale (see in particular Cherepanyn 2022; Dostlieva and Dostliev 2022; Gomza 2022a, 2022b; Hrytsak 2022; Kasianov 2022; Kulchytskyi 2022; Kulyk 2022; Radynskyi 2022).

Historian Tymothy Snyder was one of the first influential Western scholars (and perhaps the most eloquent) openly calling things as they are when he declared that "the war in Ukraine is a colonial war" (Snyder 2022a). When Putin denies the very existence of the Ukrainian state by identifying it as Terra Nullius, it is colonial erasure. When the Russian army steals everything, from grain and seeds to toilets and kitchen sinks, it is colonial erasure. When Russian soldiers rob Ukrainian ethnographic, archaeological and art collections from the museums of Mariupol, Melitopol, Berdyansk, Kherson, and remove cultural and historical artefacts to Russia, it is colonial erasure of the existence and the right of a people to exist. When the Russian army destroys architectural, religious, and historical sites, it is colonial erasure.[14] When the Russian authorities claim that they want to "liberate the Russian-speaking people" and "their own people" (*"svoich"*) in Ukraine, it is colonial erasure. Snyder, taking into account Ukrainian historical and cultural contexts, sees the whole multi-layered tragedy of the ongoing war in its historical background. He urges other scholars to join him in calling things as they are and name the anticipated genocide of the Ukrainian people, inspired by Putin who "has long fantasised about a world without Ukrainians" — a fantasy that he is now attempting to realise through the Russian army (Snyder 2022b).

13 http://web.archive.org/web/20220403060102/https://ria.ru/20220403/ukraina-1781469605.html (accessed 16.06.2022) English translation and analysis provided by CBC News journalist Chris Brown: https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/kremlin-editorial-ukraine-identity-1.6407921 (accessed 16.06.2022)

14 The Ministry of Culture of Ukraine keeps records of the damaged, destroyed and stolen cultural, historical and religious objects: https://culturecrimes.mkip.gov.ua/ (accessed 19.08.2022)

As scholars, we have to understand the nature of fear, despair, obedience, violence, and imperialism in Russian society and among ordinary people that have allowed the war in Ukraine to happen. Russian soldiers are committing war crimes on the ground. This is also their "voice"/"opinion"/"perspective". Should it be "represented", as Hann proposes? Whose opinion and which opinion does he wish us to hear?

## A MISREADING OF UKRAINIAN-RUSSIAN HISTORY

The essays written by David Harvey, Chris Hann, and Don Kalb erroneously assert a one-sided critique of the war as essentially provoked by NATO, along with a misreading of Ukrainian-Russian relationships. Hann claims, for instance, that back in his school days, he "looked at the map and pointed out that USSR militarism was limited to neighbouring "allies" in Eastern Europe, whereas NATO members seemed to think they had the right and duty to be active on the world stage, from Suez to Vietnam […]" (Hann 2014a). This echoes David Harvey's opinion that "up until 1991, the Cold War provided a fairly constant background to the functioning of the world order" (Harvey 2022). It is important to note that both scholars write from the perspective of "their" West, and sadly do not develop any empathy for how life was lived on the other side of the "Iron Curtain". Following the colonial approach, Harvey constantly refers to Ukraine in regional terms, "*the* Ukraine", denying Ukrainian statehood and referring to a geographical territory (Mellen 2019) that lacks sovereignty and defined borders. As Derek Hall notes in his response to Harvey's essay:

> Harvey lists many wars […] since 1945 but omits Russia's invasions of Georgia in 2008 and of Ukraine in 2014-15 and the Russian proxy war in Ukraine's Donbas region. Putin's conservative ultra-nationalism, his denial of the existence of the Ukrainian nation, his ludicrous statements about the threat Ukraine poses to Russia, and his claims that Ukraine, a country with a Jewish President, is run by "neo-Nazis" are all ignored. (Hall 2022)

I would also mention the second war in Chechnya that brought Putin to power, and add that Harvey fails to condemn Russia's war in Ukraine. Instead, what one finds are *"the Ukraine conflict"* and *"recent events in the Ukraine"*, terms that are more agitprop than analysis and that mask the war that Russia has started and continues to wage in Ukraine. Similarly, "the turmoil", "events", "proxy war", "crisis", "the conflict" or "the situation in Ukraine", are all linguistic substitutes for the Russian invasion, which is an illegal occupation of the territory of a sovereign state, and for an ongoing war that has become inconvenient for some in the West. When everyone

became tired because of this uncomfortable and unresolved problem, when they became used to a frozen war that seemed to be far away, the "Ukrainian problem" began to disappear from television screens. The war in Ukraine has been muted, even though more than 14,400 Ukrainians have been killed since the Russian army occupied Crimea in 2014 and armed a separatist movement in Donbas.[15] In this way, the collective West, including parts of Western academia, convinced Putin of his complete impunity.

Elizabeth Cullen Dunn rightly points out that "Harvey ignores the politics of the USSR's successor states as well as regional economic dynamics. It is Russian neo-imperialism, not Western actions, that motivates the Russian invasion of Ukraine" (Dunn 2022). Here we have the ideology of *"russkiy mir"* (the ethnic and cultural "Russian world") being used to attack Ukraine under the guise of the idea of "defend[ing] the Russian-speaking population" (Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group 2021). Russia has done the same in Transnistria, Georgia and Chechnya. When occupying Crimea and invading Donbas, Putin's *casus belli* was that Russia was "returning originally Russian lands" and "defending the Russian-speaking population". This concept of "Russianness" is rooted in a nineteenth-century imperial concept of the Russian nation that reduces Ukrainian and Belarusian identities to variants of Russian identity rather than distinct national identities. This denial elides the existence of Ukrainian and Belarusian languages, cultures, nations and states. The use of this concept in official Russian rhetoric implies the negation of an independent Ukrainian nationality and statehood.

Hann writes about the closeness of Russians and Ukrainians, claiming that "the interwoven Slav history make[s] the Ukrainian case very different" from the case of the Baltic states which have been accepted into the EU and NATO (Hann 2014a). However, despite the apparent closeness of two "'fraternal' nations based on history", the substantial number of mixed marriages during the Soviet era, a large Ukrainian diaspora in Russia, and the Russian language as a lingua franca inherited from the pre-Soviet imperial times, the issue is not as simple as describing it in terms of "closeness" or "fraternity" (Wanner 2014). The "fraternity" thesis on which Hann bases his sense of Ukraine's closeness to Russia, and therefore its lack of nationhood and right to a sovereign state, needs to be problematised and challenged in at least three ways.

First, because of this war, we need new terminology as well as a more complex set of research lenses, because our historical and anthropological concepts of ethnicity and nationalism currently fall short when applied to the Russian war in Ukraine. My

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15 United Nations Human Rights. Conflict-related civilian casualties in Ukraine. 27 January 2022: https://ukraine.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/Conflict-related%20civilian%20casualties%20as%20of%2031%20December%202021%20%28rev%2027%20January%202022%29%20corr%20EN_0.pdf (accessed 24.06.2023)

acquaintances of Ukrainian, Jewish, Polish, Russian, and Hungarian ethnic origin are now defending Ukraine in the Ukrainian Armed Forces, enacting a Ukrainian political identity and allegiance to a Ukrainian state under attack. Being Ukrainian in Ukraine does not mean to be of Ukrainian origin. But it does mean having certain values, including the centrality of freedom and peaceful coexistence of many nations. One can clearly see that the ideology of the Russian government is to destroy Ukraine, and this means all nationalities and citizens of Ukraine: Ukrainians, Russians, Jews, Poles, Crimean Tatars, Romanians, Moldovans, Roma, Hungarians, Slovaks, Belarusians, Bulgarians, Albanians, Gagauz, Greeks, and other nationalities that have lived in Ukraine for centuries and are now part of the Ukrainian political nation. I recall here Volodymyr Kulyk who argued that since the Maidan revolution, the growing identification with Ukraine has brought about a change in what it means to be Ukrainian: in addition to ethnic dimensions, the politics of Ukrainian nationality rests on strong civic associations (Kulyk 2018, 120-121, 134-135).

Second, I argue that a "fraternity of Russians and Ukrainians" is a rather grand Russian propaganda claim that is not supported by anthropological scholarship. Similarly, the specious assertion that, as Russian speakers, Ukrainians are politically loyal to Russia and thus favourable to Russian territorial claims have been refuted by ethnographic studies. This claim does not reflect the lived reality of Ukrainians today. The very first days of the war have finally shown how simplistic and far-fetched these ideologically-induced ideas are. There are no millions of Ukrainians collaborating with the Russian occupiers and bringing them bread and salt, as some unfamiliar with Ukraine might have expected. Instead, the Russians have encountered strong local resistance and partisanship (such as *Zhovta strichka*, "The yellow ribbon"[16]) and a brave, determined Ukrainian army.

Third, such ahistorical claims about "the fraternity" of Russians and Ukrainians made by Putin, the Russian government, and in some cases, vox-popped Russian citizens, can be explained by post-Soviet Russia's difficulties in finding a new, non-imperial version of its identity and therefore, its democratic future. Mykola Ryabchuk argued, for example, that a historically-rooted, Russian, hegemonic view of Ukrainians as "younger brothers", who should be "patronised and censured" for "improper behaviour", has long dominated the political, cultural, and religious discourse in the two countries' relationships. Since the fall of the Russian Empire and throughout the Soviet era, Ukraine and Ukrainians have been perceived only as part of Russia, that is, as being underdeveloped and making the wrong choices. Ryabchuk argues that Russian-Ukrainian relations cannot be normalised until Russians learn to see Ukrainians as neither "good" nor "bad" but simply different, with their own culture and political perspective

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16   https://m.facebook.com/yellowribbonUA (accessed 25.04.2022)

(Ryabchuk 2016). In order to begin to see Ukraine in a different way, Russian society must first see itself in a new way, completely deconstructing its historical and cultural identity based on imperial legacies and building a new one on a different basis, one which has yet to be found.

This article is not the place for a broader discussion of the multilayered and complicated Russian-Ukrainian history and the role of Russian imperialism in it. However, I will refer to some episodes in the larger Russian-Ukrainian history which, from the Ukrainian perspective, provide important provenance for continuing Russian imperial policy. First, The Rape (Slaughter) of Baturyn (ukr. *Baturynska Rizanyna*) was a part of "punishing" military actions of the Russian Imperial Army against the Ukrainian Hetman Ivan Mazepa and the Cossack state during the Great Northern War (1700–1721). In November 1708, the Russian army under Alexander Menshikov entered the town of Baturyn, defeated the garrison of the citadel, slaughtered the entire civilian population, and razed the town to the ground. Many of the inhabitants hid in churches, where they were burned to death by Menshikov's troops. According to archaeological excavations in Baturyn in 1995–1997 and 2000–2010, the highest number of civilian casualties was recorded in the Church of the Life-Giving Trinity, where the women of the town hid with their children. The number of victims varies between 13,000 and 15,000 people (including 6,000–7,500 who were mainly women, children, and elderly) (Kovalenko 2009, 52).

The Rape of Baturyn is not the only brutal episode in a long history of Russian imperial destruction of Ukraine; The Valuev Circular (Russian: *Valuievs'kyi tsyrkuliar*) of 1863 declared that the "Little Russian language" (the Ukrainian language) had never existed (the Russian imperial government officially referred to Ukrainians as *Malorosy*, or "Little Russians"). Equally, the Ems Ukaz Decree (Russian: *Emskiy ukaz*), issued by Emperor Alexander II of Russia in 1876, prohibited the use of the Ukrainian language in print. More recently, the Holodomor, the manmade famine of 1932–1933, was orchestrated by the Soviet regime using methods inherited from the Russian colonial apparatus. It caused the deaths of more than 3.5 million people in the territory of Soviet Ukraine.[17] In the late 1930s, the NKVD murdered the most prominent representatives of the Ukrainian cultural and intellectual elite in what is known as "The Executed Renaissance" (Ukranian: *Rozstriliane Vidrodzhennia*), during a systematic slaughter of up to ten thousand people from fifty-eight nations in Sandarmokh, Karelia (modern Russia). Such repressions destroyed for decades the development of Ukrainian social sciences, humanities, culture and literature, and eradicated for too long any hope for a better future. Putin is currently trying to repeat Russian imperial and Soviet methods of destroying Ukraine. His invasion of Ukraine is nothing new, just another chapter in the long book of Ukrainian subjugation. Therefore the "fraternity" thesis is another

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17    https://www.idss.org.ua/golodomor/html/holodomor (accessed 20.06.2023)

myth, coined by Russian propaganda and successfully sold to a West largely ignorant of Ukrainian history.

David Harvey writes that the people of the USSR were not consulted when the Soviet Union was dissolved into successor states: "the Soviet Union was dismembered into independent republics without much popular consultation" (Harvey 2022), and he is factually incorrect and shows a basic lack of literacy regarding modern Eastern European history. There was a huge wave of mobilisation, with millions of people demanding independence for their nation-states. The people's chain across the Baltic, connecting Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, was an overwhelming symbol of the people's wish to separate from the Soviet Union. Ukraine was no different. On the anniversary of the Ukrainian People's Republic's declaration of independence on 22 January 1918, a huge human chain (Ukrainian: *Lantsiuh Jednosti*) was organised from Kyiv to Ivano-Frankivs'k through L'viv, in which almost a million people participated, showing their desire to be separated from the USSR and to live in an independent Ukraine. On 1 December 1991 there was a pan-Ukrainian referendum in which 92.3% of the population — including my diverse family and the then almost entirely Russian-speaking Crimea and Donbas — voted "yes" to independence. The failure to recognise this historical fact highlights the ongoing invisibility of Ukraine on the European and global stages, as it was during the Soviet era and in the years after the fall of the USSR (Klumbytė 2022, 6). It is now time for recognition.

What Harvey and Hann also crucially miss is that the Baltic States, Belarus, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Ukraine gained their independence after the fall of the empires in 1918. Ukraine declared its independence from Russia through the Fourth Universal of the Ukrainian Central Council in Kyiv on 22 January 1918, a political, governmental act that proclaimed the independence of the Ukrainian People's Republic, which existed until late 1920, when the fledgling state lost its territory to the Bolsheviks. In fact, all the above-mentioned new, and therefore weak and still-unstable, states were invaded by the Bolsheviks and failed. However, these states had incontestably existed and contributed to the tradition of statehood called upon in anticipation of the faltering Soviet Union of the late 1980s, providing an essential point of reference in 1991 when these Soviet republics declared their desire to return to an independent mode of existence.

For his part, Don Kalb writes: "There is no doubt, this *is* Putin's war", and stresses that this is a "'proxy war' between Russia and NATO". He decides how Ukrainians should feel about this war, arguing that "Ukrainians continue to heroically play their part and to actively imagine, and being made to imagine, that it is a war for their 'sovereignty and freedom'" (Kalb 2022b). However, from the Ukrainian perspective, it is indeed a war for freedom and independence from Russia on all levels: economic, cultural, political and existential. As Ivan Gomza pointedly argues, "the imperial

nature of the war is often unnoticed by the Western general public", including by anthropologists such as Kalb and Hann (Gomza 2022a).

In Hann's view, Ukraine is not the subject of its own history and politics, but merely an object dependent on Russia: "If we truly cared about a transparent liberal democracy within the boundaries of this sovereign state, we should long ago have made it clear that in no circumstances would Kiev [sic] be able to accede to NATO, the EU, or any other Western association until identical forms of integration had been negotiated with Moscow" (Hann 2014a). One would expect an anthropologist whose research agenda covers Eastern Europe to spell the names of Ukrainian cities correctly: *Kyiv*, not Kiev. When will academics finally abandon the colonial discourse that dictated a Russian language hegemony in the administrative and geographic names of former Soviet republics? Today, it is hard to imagine anyone referring to Kolkata as "Calcutta" or Mumbai as "Bombay". It would rightly be seen as a sign of imperialism and disrespect for Indian statehood and linguistic sovereignty. What prevents Western academics from extending the same respect to Ukraine? Re-evaluating and recognising our tacit acceptance of colonial nomenclature should lead to a moment of rethinking of academic language to derussify our analysis and commentary. It would not be too much to ask for similar decolonising projects to feed into European values and international law. Academia now needs new tools and lenses, more empathetic, more engaged and more focused on local contexts that need champions more than they need intellectual "westsplanations" which parrot Russian talking points in Russian terms.

## THE WAY FORWARD

The world as the Ukrainian people knew it has been destroyed. For my friends and me, this war has already brought so much loss and grief. I cannot shake off the feeling that the world closes its eyes in horror when acts of genocide happen. Since 24 February 2022, when the explosive sounds of our air defence systems shooting down Russian missiles woke me up in my apartment in Kyiv, I felt nauseous. I just could not digest the fact that humanity had learned nothing from its many experiences of war over the last century. The evil inflicted on Ukraine by the Russian army is such that all our mechanisms of justice seem inadequate. The very word "evil" describes the limits of malevolence we can bear, not only as Ukraine, Europe, or the Western world, but we as humanity. Wars and other humanitarian catastrophes are not unique to Ukraine, so there are shared struggles in many countries for a more just and humane future, struggles that can begin with empathy for human suffering, leading to what the Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg recently called "cathedral thinking" for the world (Thunberg 2019).

Following Michnik's declaration that "We are all Ukrainians now", there are scholars who empathise and care about strangers, who show deep sensitivity and turn empathy into active, engaged action. Many of my friends and colleagues from Poland do this constantly, by bringing humanitarian aid to Ukraine since March 2022. They empathise with Ukraine as researchers, translators, and volunteers. Anthropologists Catherine Wanner and Nancy Ries showed empathy as early as the end of February 2022 by creating the Hot Spot series "Russia's War in Ukraine" at *culanth.org*, bringing the voices of Ukrainian scholars to the surface (Ries and Wanner 2022). Historian Timothy Snyder continues to write about the colonial nature of the Russian invasion, coming to L'viv to give public lectures, meet Ukrainian soldiers and conduct field research. Anthropologist Fiona Murphy and documentary filmmaker Maria Loftus together with the Irish Refugee Integration Network, made a short film "Ordinary Treasures: Objects from Home", which empathically tells the stories of people in Ireland, who have had to escape the war or other forms of violence in their home countries, including Ukraine.[18]

By recognising Michnik's statement, that other people around the world care about fighting for freedom and defending the values of democracy, values which are so fragile, then we must ask how can we help others to acknowledge this new social fact. There is an Irish saying *Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann na daoine*, which literally means "Under the shadow of each other, people survive". In a broader sense it means that "we exist in each other's shelter" (Brennan and Dolan 2022, 333). Those were exactly the words the Irish government used to refer to the Ukrainian nation and other suffering peoples in March 2022, when it lifted visa requirements, opened Irish borders and accepted an unprecedented wave of Ukrainian refugees into Ireland.[19] In January-April 2023, I was honoured to be part of the storytelling project "The Inner Light" initiated by the Irish Red Cross, Irish writers from the Fighting Words community and Ukrainian Action in Ireland (Buyskykh 2023). The project aimed to show solidarity with Ukrainians and to bring to the surface the voices of those who were in Ireland having fled the war, making their experiences and perspectives visible, vocal, and accessible to Irish society and to the broader English-speaking world.[20]

The Polish people, being geographically the closest to Ukraine, also responded without hesitation, sheltering millions of Ukrainians in the first weeks of the full-scale invasion. Perhaps this kind of empathy derives from our common history and

18   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kAa3eWbU4DM (accessed 22.06.2023)

19   https://m.facebook.com/ExplosiveLiving/videos/ar-sc%C3%A1th-a-ch%C3%A9ile-a-mhaireann-na-daoine-meaning-we-live-in-each-others-shelter-f/489842485957844/ (accessed 1.03.2023)

20   https://www.innerlight.ie/ (accessed 20.06.2023)

common anti-imperial resistance to Russia. One could assume that Irish empathy is also rooted in the social memory of its own anti-colonial and anti-imperial struggle, and the understanding of a colonised nation fighting for its sovereignty. However, I see here a global empathy for the values of a free democratic world where life is the biggest value, and where life is now under threat.

This is a new challenge for all of us, including those in academia. These are precisely the times to show sensitivity in dealing not only with loved ones, but also with strangers, "others", who are Ukrainians now. And if decolonised and recentred, then anthropology has huge potential to become a means of healing in this uneasy process. Anti-colonial, anti-imperial historically-rooted empathy oriented towards social justice can become a new way of thinking and acting, recentring knowledge, changing hierarchies and improving communication.

The liberal democracies of the free world may not survive if Russia is allowed to continue its atrocities in Ukraine and its sponsorship of vassal states and satraps in Belarus, Transnistria, Abkhazia, Southern Osetia, the "LPR" and the "DPR". If the world allows this to happen, then it means that the world is allowing this great evil to remain unpunished. As Anne Applebaum warns, in the hypothetical case of a Russian victory, the tactics of mass violence, massacre, and destruction that have been applied all over Ukraine would be added to the Russian arsenal of mass disinformation, global energy and food crises to create instability for years to come. "And, yes," she writes, "if we accept that outcome, autocrats from Minsk to Caracas to Beijing will take note: *Genocide is now allowed*" [original emphasis] (Applebaum 2022).

Truth is indeed a casualty when one relies on global generalisations and neglects the palette of regional and local contexts. The above-mentioned essays on the "Focaal blog" are written in terms of grand political theories and global narratives. They neglect the value and the main advantage of social anthropology: the focus on minute but important details, the capacity to see a bigger picture from the smaller context, the ability to see global things from the concrete bottom-up local cases, and the attention to the community and individual everyday life, which has become drastically different for Ukrainians since the beginning of the war. As anthropologists, we do care, we do reflect, we do empathise with local communities and contexts; at least we may. In commenting on the unbearable magnitude of the human tragedy we are witnessing, anthropologists should rely on the lived, multiple and changing experiences of people and communities more than on grand political and economic theories. That message was addressed during the panel dis-

cussion "The Geopolitics of Small Things", organised by the University of Bremen in May 2022[21] and June 2023.[22] I wish we could have had more of these discussions.

*Here* and *now* we have to think about a number of questions: How is our discipline being affected by the Russian war in Ukraine? Will anthropology be decolonised, overcoming its divisions and barriers between "local / native scholars" and "global experts"? To what extent will we confront our own ideologically-constructed assumptions and categories, that serve to prevent us from seeing the suffering in our midst? What exactly is the place of empathy with and for others in contemporary anthropology? I think about the "anthropology of the good" in this instance, which empathises with the "suffering subject" and recognises all experiences and insights within but also beyond suffering (Robbins 2013). I argue that the "anthropology of the good" should become a core methodological approach in current anthropology, especially concerning wars, violent conflicts and refugee crises. It would transform anthropology into something more humanised, more engaged with human experiences, more oriented to the micro-scale of human life, and more contextualised within the local dimensions. As Tim Ingold has stated, "anthropology is philosophy with the people in" (Ingold 1992, 696). I suggest that this call be read as an appeal for an anthropology with empathy put back in for those people.

In respect to Todorova's emotional and powerful argument, I am rather uncertain whether I will ever reach the audience I am addressing here, and it is also uncertain whether this audience will be able to understand, recognise or accept what I am suggesting. Nonetheless, I am convinced that the changes in anthropology I am proposing should come, and we have the responsibility to make them happen. What Ukrainians truly need, what the world desperately needs, and what anthropology undoubtedly needs, is a discerning universal empathy based on our shared humanity.

I hope my voice will be heard.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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21  https://www.uni-bremen.de/kultur/profil/aktuelles/detailansicht/the-geopolitics-of-small-things (accessed 02.06.2022)

22  https://www.uni-bremen.de/en/university/campus/calendar/event?tx_cal_controller%5Bday%5D=6&tx_cal_controller%5Bmonth%5D=6&tx_cal_controller%5Btype%5D=tx_cal_phpicalendar&tx_cal_controller%5Buid%5D=14389&tx_cal_controller%5Bview%5D=event&tx_cal_controller%5Byear%5D=2023&cHash=3acfe6c55ec0e3e2ba3ebc1d2cb074b0 (accessed 07.06.2023)

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